

## UTOPIA – CHRISTIAN, SECULAR OR ESTHETIC? COETZEE’S NOVELS *THE CHILDHOOD OF JESUS* AND *SCHOOLDAYS OF JESUS*

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### Abstract

This article addresses, in its first part, the many critics who have difficulty in making sense of Coetzee’s two novels *The Childhood of Jesus* and *Schooldays of Jesus*, offering clues for an understanding of Coetzee’s utopian thought experiment within the framework of secularized utopian and Christian ideals. The second part links the utopian elements with esthetic and esoteric conceptions in the history of art (Johann Sebastian Bach, archaic cultures, and the revival of neo-mysticism among artists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century), proposing an understanding of their implications (or their obsolescence) in contemporary art.

**Keywords:** Coetzee; Utopia; Esthetics; Numerology; Neo-mysticism

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## Introduction

Coetzee's novels *The Childhood of Jesus* (2013) and *Schooldays of Jesus* (2016) have disappointed many of his readers and critics and startled even some of his admirers, who struggled to find the analogies with the story of Jesus Christ. At first, a synthesis of the plot will help us to pinpoint the perplexities and the focus of criticism. Then our argument will elaborate Jan Wilm's suggestion that Coetzee's novels might be linked to an artistic tradition related to mystic and ecstatic practices, which will help us, in a third step, to comment on the strong and innovative impact that mystical and esoteric inspirations had on artists in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as well as on the fading of this important undercurrent in the aftermath of the Second World War and in contemporary literature and criticism. Let us start with a short outline of the two plots.

*The Childhood of Jesus* begins in a new equalitarian universe, where a man named Simón and a boy named David arrive as newcomers, after crossing the ocean of forgetfulness – forgetting the past seems to be a requirement for fitting into the new reality. They receive new names and begin to adapt to their new lives in Novilla, the utopian “New Town” or “No Town”. Simón is not the boy's biological father but became his caretaker after the boy was separated from his mother during the journey and lost the letter which bore his previous name. Like all the other migrants to Novilla, they learn the city's language, Spanish, in some sort of arrival camp, and later become acquainted with the well-meaning simplicity of this peaceful Utopia, in which everybody is equally well fed, well housed and provided with appropriate employment (J. M. Coetzee *Childhood* 2013, 6). All citizens of Novilla are free to choose their employment and develop their talents – within a very limited range of options. Equally limited are the kindly emotions, which do not (or very rarely) include effusive manifestations of love and sympathy. One of the first examples of this good-natured reticence is Ana, the lady from the hosting Center who takes them in while the key to their apartment cannot be found but does not let them inside her home. Instead, they have to build a makeshift shed in the courtyard (J. M. Coetzee *Childhood* 6–8). Benevolence and goodwill have replaced entirely the more passionate peaks, and irrational motions have been eliminated to such an extent that Simon wonders if “the price of forgetting is not too high” (J. M. Coetzee *Childhood* 60), while his lady friend Elena, who reluctantly granted him a moment of sex – with the comment: “you see, this doesn't advance us, does it?” (J. M. Coetzee *Childhood* 60) – continues arguing in favor of goodness, kind guardianship, and friendship.

Nevertheless, it is quite admirable how dutifully Simon takes care of David, although their relation proves difficult at times and the boy resists David's educational effort and his affection; David frequently points out that he is not Simón's biological son as if he tried to remember his “real” origin. While Simon succeeds in blending in more and more with the bland austerity and hard work of Novilla, feeling only occasional inklings for superfluous desires (like eroticism or more complex love than goodwill and caring, irony and entertainment),

David's imagination and insistent fantasies cause others to stigmatize him as an outsider. David has an unusual way of intuitively picking up quite complex poetical and musical objects. For example, he sings an entire strophe of Goethe's *Erlkönig* in German and declares that he likes this language (which he thinks to be English, much better than Spanish, and that he wants to be a magician (J. M. Coetzee *Childhood* 67). Or he "reads" *Don Quixote* by reimagining the story without conforming to the normal way of recognizing correctly the letters, words and sentences. His intuitive understanding and expression differ from the conventional language and everyday habits of Novillan society. Simon tries hard to make his son fit in, but he too has some intuitive residues in his nature, as when he finds with instinctive certainty the perfect foster mother for David, Inês. They meet her by accident, during an excursion to a lake, and she accepts her new task with the simplicity of a fairy tale figure. Although she understands the boy's rebellious nature as little as Simón does, she is a devoted mother and gives in willingly to most of David's capricious whims. In no time, David's erratic behavior and distinctive otherness become so unwelcome at his school that the authorities are about to send him to a special institution. Inês and Simón decide to flee and drive through the night until they arrive at a remote town called Estrella.

The second novel, *The Schooldays of Jesus* is set in Estrella, which offers an asylum for David's need of freedom and his urge to spin his child-like imagination. The more rural and natural environment of Estrella seems to apply the laws in a much looser form, leaving a margin for sophisticated alternative institutions, like the Academies of Music and of Dance – the latter which will soon be the school where David can thrive.

Through the guidance of three kindly sisters, Inês and Simón receive the necessary funds allowing David's education at the Academy of Dance, an alternative order to which he adapts perfectly, sharing his teachers' striving for a kind of excellence and perfection based on musical harmony and movement – quite different from the peaceful, but monotonous *humilitas* of normal life in Estrella. That his teachers are named Ana Magdalena and Sebastián Arroyo (Bach, in German) is certainly not accidental. However, even Estrella has a sober and pragmatic order, and the intuitive and passionate responses fostered in the Arroyo's environment of music, rhythm and dance will soon become an unwelcome disturbance. Magdalena's talent for dance and rhythm is a spiritual inclination towards the obscurely unnamable, whose flip side is the kind of passion which reaches beyond the rational limits. The yearning of her soul and heart leads to passionate love and adultery with Dimitry, the guardian of the building – a love that ends with Magdalena's murder - after which the citizens of Estrella close the Academy of Dance as a potential danger to society.

### **The critics' perplexity with Coetzee's allegories**

It is not quite easy to see how the allegories woven around the childhood and youth of the Christ might fit into Coetzee's fictional utopia. The evocative names

of Bible figures and saints - Simon, David, and Inês - suggest that these three people may be a new holy family. However, Coetzee engages them in an adventure which twists far away from the canonical narrative of the New Testament. One of the Christian elements that come to the reader's mind is a vague analogy between the characters' journey to Estrella and the flight into Egypt (Matthew 2:13-23), although the atmosphere in Coetzee's novel has lost the charm of the gospel and places the reader in a not altogether pleasant practice of humbleness and brotherly love that smacks of goodwill shops and soup kitchens.

This unpleasant drabness of Coetzee's two utopian communities may be one of the reasons for the perplexed reactions and the mostly negative rejection these novels have received on behalf of the critics. Duncan White, writing in *The Telegraph*, was one of the few critics who enjoyed his perplexity:

“Confession: I have never understood how [magicians] saw the woman in half,” John Updike wrote in a 1972 review. “And I do not understand Vladimir Nabokov’s new novel *Transparent Things*.” *The Childhood of Jesus* was similarly received two years ago. But, like Updike, the reviewers who couldn’t make head or tail of Coetzee’s odd book stressed that their bafflement was more of a confession than a complaint. To borrow from Chris Rea, the refrain was: “I don’t know what it is – but I love it.” (White 2016)

Other reviewers enjoyed it less:

I tried for a long time to force some sort of meaning into the “mesmerizing allegorical tale” that its blurb suggests *The Schooldays of Jesus* to be. (Preston 2016)

Although *The Childhood of Jesus* and *The Schooldays of Jesus* are presented as allegories, they never yield any interesting allegorical meaning. The result is a story that suggests more profundity than it ever incarnates. (Charles 2017)

Leo Robson’s *TLS* review concludes on a negative note:

But *The Schooldays of Jesus* isn’t a disappointment only by the standard of his previous novels: it undermines itself from within. The novel of ideas that bends narrative and character in order to propound a point of view is one of the great Enlightenment forms. (Robson 2016)

If these books are so confusing to experienced readers, it may be useful to connect them with the leitmotifs and horizons of Utopian literature, which often criticizes, implicitly or explicitly, the inflated expectations of happiness that cause people to write Utopian fictions in the first place. Coetzee’s *Novilla* is no exception to this ironic rule. The bafflement seems to arise from the blandness of what used to be an ideal, the lack of rhetorical pathos presenting what used to be

an *objet de désir*, the pedestrian normality lurking around virtues. Coetzee does not try to convince his readers of the desirableness of his Utopia; he rather tries to imagine what happens to ideals (Christian, Pagan, or modern-contemporary) when they become a daily reality of rules, norms, and laws; and whether such a Utopia leaves any space for creators of ideals and utopian projects.

It may be helpful to begin with a rehearsal of the utopian quality of the Christian virtues which have shaped Western Civilization over the last two millennia. In AD 590, Pope Gregory released a list of seven deadly sins to which correspond seven virtues; the latter are chastity, temperance, charity, diligence, patience, kindness, and humility (*Encyclopaedia Britannica* 2020). They stem in part from the four “natural” virtues, considered to be the legacy of the old pagan ethic, which formulated the basic positive features of humanity: prudence, temperance, fortitude, and justice. To them, the Church Fathers added the three “theological” virtues: faith, hope and love, considered to be more specifically Christian virtues and special gifts from God. We would like to argue that they are more utopian, idealistic and spiritual than the pagan virtues, and require being sustained by an imagination capable of conjuring up a totally different realm. The Christian Church Fathers did not agree with the realistic worldview of Greek and Roman civilizations, which knew only Eros and dealt with it as an ambiguous passion linked to life, procreation, and death<sup>1</sup>. Christianity refined this primary passion into an array of sublime (and sublimated) notions, which reduce the sexual and sensitive components of Eros and transform the erotic drive into more subtle feelings like *agape* and *caritas*: the love of God for man which mankind should imitate and return to God and humans. (Liddell and Scott 1900, 6) The practice of this kind of love presupposes a tuning down of passionate drives. Moreover, the observance of chastity and the idea of humans practicing divine love introduces an ambiguity and a dilemma into the Christian narrative.

After centuries of didactic rehearsals of the dichotomies of good and evil, chastity and lust in the Christian exempla and saintly legends, martyr dramas and the compilation of the Lives of the Saints (Voragine 1963), the emerging vernacular poetry of the troubadours, the *Lais* and narrative poems like Bérout’s *Tristan* (Bérout 1974), began again to explore this almost impossible sublimation of the passions of the flesh by the higher passion of the spirit (Holzermayr 1984, p. 87–138).

It seems to be this Christian dilemma which Coetzee explores in his two Jesus novels, staging in the foreground the core notions and concepts that have shaped Christianity over the centuries: “goodwill” and “benevolence,” and relegating to the background the more demanding erotic passions, without which Jesus could not have achieved his mission (or pardoned Magdalena!), nor the Saints pulled off their most admirable actions. The way these ideals reign in Novilla is simultaneously endearing and utterly sobering. Sometimes we are touched (Simón’s care for David is at moments truly admirable), sometimes almost disgusted by the shabby, profane practice of the ideal of *agape* and *caritas*, in a stale bureaucratic key, which has already been pointed out in Ana’s and Elena’s sober gestures. Both David and Simón introduce the (unwelcome) urge for something more exciting, interesting

and subtle – David in the form of musical talent and poetical imagination, his passionate love for El Rey, an old horse that dies (J. M. Coetzee *Childhood* 197–200), or in his inclinations for unusual characters like Señor Daga, a seductive and slightly bohemian figure, who stimulates David's thirst for adventure (*Childhood* 179–84). Simón is not a mere conformist either, but feels, as already mentioned above, a (repressed) thirst for more subtle affection and love (*Childhood* 58–65; 136–43), a certain nostalgia of irony (*Childhood* 118 s.) and a momentary impulse for invention and improvement, for example, when he proposes to build a crane in order “to liberate us from a life of bestial labour” (*Childhood* 113). He clearly resents the creaturely life of redundant *humilitas*, and even argues with his colleague Alvaro that he would rather “sweat [...] for the sake of some higher cause,” rebelling against the “way [of life] of the bacterium” (*Childhood* 109).

However, Novillians are very prudent and reluctant to give in to that kind of nostalgia and passion – which they consider as an old, overcome way of thinking and feeling (J. M. Coetzee *Childhood* 63) – and they seem to thrive without major upheavals like wars, extreme poverty or violence, which for the reader, who lives in a world of conflict and war, should be an enviable achievement, even if their *caritas* and *agape* have lost the charm of ideals and are practiced in a more mechanical, impersonal way.

The Novillian peacefulness of citizens who do not seem to suffer from enormous divides between classes or other unjust social differences includes Coetzee's two novels in the horizon of classic utopian literature, from Plato's *Republic* (Plato 1977, 1214–22)<sup>2</sup> to Thomas More's *Utopia* (More et al. 2008).<sup>3</sup> The latter imagines a fictional society based on rational principles which assure equality and industriousness – features which are present in Coetzee's Novilla, although industriousness is not driven to great refinement. What we do not find in Coetzee's novels are the more scholarly, philosophical topics about democratic principles, about the distribution of property shared by all equally, about the legal system or the control of violence and war, nor do we find in Novilla the slaves or the cosmic religion which More grants the habitants of his Utopia (More et al. 88–97). In Coetzee's novel, philosophical argument is reduced to the most naïve schoolroom version – an example of which we find in the rehearsal of Plato's doctrine of the unity of the idea and the chain of ever more diverse imitations (Plato 1216). The teacher at the Institute (the only place where Novillians can spend their spare time in search for improvement) conducts her lesson as follows: “We are asking ourselves what unity is behind all diversity, what it is that makes all tables tables and all chairs chairs” (J. M. Coetzee *Childhood* 120). Novillians learn these lessons with the naïve seriousness of fairy tale heroes, although in Simón's eyes these parables and legends seem stripped of enchantment and bring us closer to Kafka's naively serious figures, as for example, Karl Rossmann's ingenuity, in the first chapter of *America* (Kafka 2003).

Coetzee's titles do not really evoke the classic utopias, but rather episodes of real-life experiences. In fact, they are more reminiscent of the famous 19<sup>th</sup> century essays by David Friedrich Strauss, *The Life of Jesus* (Strauss 1860) and

Ernest Renan's *La Vie de Jesus* (Renan 1864) - paradigmatic publications in their time, which emerged from the impulse to interpret the sacred scriptures against the backdrop of the historical reality from which the Christian myth emerged. The historical point of view contributed to the process of secularization under way since the French Revolution. This perspective was completely new and perplexing in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when readers and listeners strongly objected to Strauss' and Renan's supposedly blasphemous perception which drew the holy figures of the scriptures closer to the profane endeavors and contemporary imagination. Coetzee's novels seem to prolong this perspective, projecting into the future a possible outcome of the atheistic worldview, they create fictions of an imaginary society that has overcome most of the inequalities of the cosmopolitan culture of industrialized societies<sup>4</sup>.

Exactly like Strauss' Christ, little David is no longer a holy symbol that deserves our pious awe, but just another figure of myth, of fiction or historical narrative. In Strauss' and Renan's time, this historical perspective caused a negative sensation and even a storm of indignation in public opinion, which forced Renan into retirement from the Collège de France after his first lecture on *The Life of Jesus*.

No such indignant passions move Coetzee's reader today. The main reason for this indifference is the remoteness of the biblical narrative, both from Coetzee's fictional reality and from the minds of today's readers— as mentioned before, the names of the holy family and the core concepts of the Christian dogma appear in such a bland and atheistic context that they are hardly recognizable. However, we will see that Coetzee's fiction gravitates around one of the most important ideas of Christian faith, a now totally secularized fraternal love and concern for one's neighbor. He shows that this important ideal, when put into daily practice, loses the charm of the ineffable.

One of the critics, Jan Wilm, has noticed the faint Christian echoes that still ring in *Novilla* and has connected them with Samuel Beckett's play about the absence of God:

Jesus isn't God, Jesus is Godot. In the world of Samuel Beckett's play the titular Godot is the expected absentee. In 2013, J. M. Coetzee—who has frequently written on the heels of Beckett—published a novel called *The Childhood of Jesus*, where Jesus, both as an exalted religious figure and as a fictional character of that name, is neither present nor expected; instead, Jesus remains a symbolically charged absence. (Wilm 2017)

However, the atmosphere in Coetzee's novel is not quite the same as in Beckett's play. It rather resembles a secular version of Franciscan simplicity, of a life stripped of superfluous goods and desires, as preached by Augustine (Alexander 2008, 218) and incorporated into the social teachings of the Christian churches (Troeltsch 1949). Saint Francis relied on physical work and poverty as the best ways to honor and keep alive the word of Christ (Le Goff 2003, 44). What is so unsettling in *Novilla* is that the Christian-utopian ideals have become so normal

that nobody needs to believe in them with that fervent faith that animates the writings of the Fathers of the Church, nor is there need for monasteries or cults. Simón, like everybody else, puts into practice the rules of hard work – he finds work at the docks, as *estibador*, a longshoreman (J. M. Coetzee *Childhood* 11–15) –, simple community life without sophisticated entertainment. It is probably the lack of transcendent ideals that makes it so difficult to identify analogies with the Christian myth. Critics have good reasons to be puzzled with the lack of obvious references to religion in the completely atheistic *Novilla* and *Estrella*. What is left of it is nothing more than the stale taste of constant fraternal love, sharing and caring, the routine of community centers of catechism, the touching sadness of Christian ideals reduced to educational norms in Christian boarding schools or the depressing transformation of exciting ideas into profane dogmas of a bureaucratic State.

Among the fictional inhabitants of Coetzee's utopian country, there is absolutely no awareness of Christianity or mysticism, nor is there any other kind of religion or cult. However, for readers familiar with the Judaico-Christian tradition, it is impossible not to look for relations between the explicit Christian reference in the titles – the name and the story of Jesus – and the profane, atheistic atmosphere that reigns in *Novilla* and *Estrella*. And this pressure exerted on our imagination by the titles brings back to our memory the faint and forgotten reminiscences of religious education.

By conforming to the rules of the country that offered him a new existence, Simon has, in many ways, tried to conform to the norms of pedestrian sobriety which seem to be one of the virtues of citizenship for most of the other inhabitants of *Novilla* – particularly so when he is driven by the well-meaning concern to educate David properly. His experience in *Novilla* makes him increasingly aware that stranger longings tend to be frustrated, and that they can become stigmatizing. He knows that fostering whims (and, in the second novel, David's unusual talent for rhythm and dance) is a risk in such a homogeneous society, and that, once roused and developed, David's rebellious otherness will make him an outsider. He knows that such talent requires a great potential of intensity and mastership to sustain this different dimension<sup>5</sup>.

In other words, Simon is not merely pedestrian; however, much he tries to conform to the range of realistic possibilities, he does feel, again and again, vague longings for something else – something more loving, erotic and intangible. And this openness makes him gradually understand (against his own and Inês's will) David's perplexing strangeness. In both Simón's and David's deeper desires, the reminiscences of ecstatic otherness are gradually trickling back into the desacralized universe, but they remain repressed and almost dormant, surfacing as subtle ironies whose humor the reader has to reconstruct with some effort. The name Helena and its homonym Elena, for example, evoke the famous myths about beauty and passion leading to the Trojan war, a reminiscence which gives an ironic twist to Elena's spinster-like dismissal of useless sexual passions, and her rejection of Simón's erotic demands as "old way of thinking," which she explains



away with the following rationale: “if tomorrow you were offered all the passion you wanted – passion by the bucketful – you would promptly find something new to miss, to lack.” (Coetzee *Childhood* 63). Later she chides Simón: “You can cling to your memories, [...] but then don’t come complaining to me.” (*Childhood* 143)

Nothing is left of the Trojan Elders’ understanding of the strange reasons of mankind moved by passion in Homer: beholding the beauty of Helena passing by is reason enough for them (Homer 1999, 158). Novillians, by contrast, refuse to praise erotic beauty. Their rational prudence is perfectly right to suspect danger in erotic fantasies – David’s schooldays experience will show that quite clearly with the episode in which David’s friend Dimitry kills Ana Magdalena – in a gruesome *dénouement* to their adulterous passion.

Let us close the considerations about the first novel by pointing out the potentially more ecstatic desires which appear in the form of Simón’s frustrated longing for a grander erotic relationship, something that is more than sex and friendship, and in his search for beauty or irony and whatever finer distinctions life can offer.

One of the interesting effects of Coetzee’s kaleidoscopic narrative technique is that the absence of religious or ironic meaning within the fictional characters’ perspectives does not prevent the reader from picking up very ironic connotations when the apparent naiveté of the Novillians meets the readers’ cultural and literary background.

Simón is dedicated to the difficult task of educating David, and understands the boy’s rebellious inclinations, which intensify his own dilemmas. When the authorities try to restrain David’s willful intuitions in order to hold fantasy and magic at bay, Simón muses whether it is good to commit to the drill of “The man-made rules. Two plus two equaling four and so forth.” And he defends David for not accepting these rules: “Why should he, when a voice inside him says the teacher’s way is not the true way?” (*Childhood* 248). Taking into consideration Eugenio’s objections that “the boy should do the sums the way his teacher tells him”, Simón ponders: “Most of the time, Eugenio, I think the child simply doesn’t understand numbers, the way a cat or dog doesn’t understand them. But now and then I have to ask myself: Is there anyone on earth to whom numbers are more real?” (*Childhood* 248).

The question of the real and the true, the harmonious and beautiful, will fully emerge at the Academy of Dance in the following novel, *The Schooldays of Jesus*. Nevertheless, this other way of feeling and thinking (or of thinking through feeling) has already been present in David’s mind from the very beginning, and been a source of conflict with his father Simón, who tried to conform to Novilla’s temperance and to shield his son from the more Dostoievskian passions. Coetzee introduces the theme of David’s affinity with music and lyric poetry at the very beginning of the first novel. It surfaces in a brief passage in which the boy is singing and reciting by heart Goethe’s most famous poem, *Der Erlkönig* – in German, which he supposes to be English and now chooses as the language he would like to speak:

Wer reitet so spät durch Nacht/*Dampf* und Wind?  
 Es ist der Vater mit seinem Kind;  
 Er hat den Knaben wohl in dem Arm,  
 Er faßt ihn sicher, er hält ihn warm. / *Er füttert ihn Zucker, er küsst ihm warm.*  
 (J. M. Coetzee, 2013, 67)<sup>6</sup>

Who rides there so late through the night/fog dark and drear?  
 The father it is, with his infant so dear;  
 He holdeth the boy tightly clasp'd in his arm,  
 He holdeth him safely, he keepeth him warm. / *He feeds him sugar and kisses him warm.* (Goethe 2009, 99)

Is it really necessary to ask, as Edmund Gordon (2012) has, why David changes a couple of Goethe's words and commits some grammatical errors? Or is it not true that such errors become irrelevant when we listen to somebody singing a song with all his soul and passion? In such a living experience, we can somehow forget the exact meaning of each single word. We can take in the whole thing – lyrics and music welded together in rhythm and melody, careless of exact schoolmasterish meanings (Gordon) – and we are somehow taken into a universe where there is no need for asking questions or giving reasons: “The rose is without ‘why’; it blooms simply because it blooms. It pays no attention to itself, nor does it ask whether anyone sees it” (Silesius 1949, 36)<sup>7</sup> – the wisdom contained in this famous verse by the German mystic and poet Angelus Silesius dismisses all the reasons a sophisticated critic may ask for. Not only Coetzee, “the sole author of his own stories and sole source of his own truths – needs never ask” such questions (Gordon); anybody who fondly listens to beautiful chanting will immediately forget to ask for the meaning of the words spoken. Silesius' poem captures a specific form of lyric or mystic wisdom, which Señor Arroyo will share with Simón in the second novel of the trilogy.

Coetzee's two novels may be a legacy of musings about the ever-diminishing space that contemporary society allows for the mystical nucleus of myth and poetry. Most people today have no idea that the very words “myth”, and the “Muses” and “Music” stem from the Sanscrit “muo”, which had the double meaning: “to keep one's eyes shut – see differently” and “to keep one's mouth shut – speak differently” (Nagy 1994, 30–32, 66). It is not difficult to see that this is the attitude that distinguishes prophets, shamans and sages in archaic societies, and what distinguishes the masters of music and dance in the town to which the family flees at the end of the first novel: Estrella is a more welcoming place for thought-and-soulful attitudes. They are alive in the musical genius of Señor Arroyo, alias Bach, in the graceful dancer Ana Magdalena, his wife, and in their students. Their theories – derided by Coetzee's critics as naïve “gibberish” – are the isolated remnants of those subtle theories which intrigued philosophers like Friedrich Hölderlin (Hölderlin 1994, 849–921; Kathrin H. Rosenfield 2010, 169–89) and Walter Benjamin (Benjamin 1980, 91–104), or historians of religion like Gershom Sholem (Sholem 1960) and Martin Buber (Buber and Groiser 2013) at the beginning of the twentieth century (Kathrin H. Rosenfield 2020).

### The esoteric and neo-mystical background for Coetzee's novels in 20<sup>th</sup> century art

In *The Schooldays of Jesus*, the marvelous and miraculous ingredients and spiritual raptures reappear – although Estrella remains as secular a universe as Novilla. Inês and Simón find work at a farm, where Roberta, another employee, introduces them to three kindly sisters who take David under their protection (*Schooldays* 2016, 37 ss.) This triad with the more than symbolic names Consuelo, Valentina, and Alma creates a fairy tale atmosphere which promises a host of unexpected possibilities, as well as understanding, affection and material plenitude. Their names announce a thorough affinity with David's spiritual quest, and their predisposition to counsel and help him valiantly in developing his gifts. They advise Simón and Inês to send him to the Academy of Dance and provide the means to pay the school fees, freeing David from the coercion and control of the State's more rigid education system.

At the Academy of Dance the family are met by a tall, slim lady dressed in black, who explains that the Academy “is not a regular school”, but an “academy devoted to the training of the soul through music and dance” (*Schooldays* 43). Ana Magdalena, the tall, slim lady, is the dance instructor and Mr. Juan Sebastián Arroyo, a musician and composer, is her husband. Their teachings seem to be complementary crafts, and both are imposing figures with an awe-inspiring aura. When Ana Magdalena asks: “David – that is your name?” the boy, for once, does not rebel nor deny his name and filiation with Simón. “But no: the boy raises his face to her like a flower opening” (*Schooldays* 44) – a tiny miracle which announces other alchemic magic to come.

On leaving after the first visit, they meet Dmitri, the Museum guard who also looks after the Academy. Dmitri's praise of Ana Magdalena and his insinuating familiarity with David make Simón feel uneasy (*Schooldays* 46). And he is not sure he likes Ana Magdalena's vague esoteric theories about “noble metals” and numbers, whose harmonies will “train the soul [...] in the direction of the good” (*Schooldays* 44). However hard he tries to understand them rationally, he considers them “claptrap” and “mystical rubbish”, as the reader learns later (*Schooldays* 100). But he warms to David's immediate response, docile openness and quite evident talent for dance, rhythm and the esoteric numbers around which the Arroyos formulate their artistic principles. The boy will soon be a most welcome student in the Arroyos' establishment, where he is happy and thrives.

It sometimes appears that Simón and Inês could not agree more with the critics who are lost in this “mesmerizing allegorical tale” or find that Coetzee's “story suggests more profundity than it ever incarnates,” if we are to believe Simón's dismissive talk about “claptrap” quoted above. However, there is more to Simón than such rational certainties. He cannot help being *intuitively* impressed with the strange elegance of Ana Magdalena's movements, with the almost otherworldly beauty of her body and gestures, and with the harmonious effects her teaching and presence produce in David's and the other students' development.

He very much appreciates the new freedom which engages David's intuitive gifts in liberating activity. The Academy provides not only esoteric teachings of dance and rhythmical correspondence which create elevating connections between the worldly bodies and the stars. It also organizes outings to a nearby lake, where children and teachers let go of their clothes and expose themselves with utmost ease to the sun and the nature. Simón and Inês, taken by surprise by this trip of which they had not been informed, are alarmed and follow the group – an initiative which offers Simón not only the occasion to see how well treated, healthy and happy the whole little community is, but he also finds a moment to talk to Ana Magdalena and Señor Arroyo – both stark naked, gracefully tanned and at ease. Señor Arroyo does not engage in polite small talk, but stands majestically silent; after a while, he praises David for not being “afraid of adventures – adventures of the mind” and praises Simón's successful education of his foster son: “You have done well, he says, ‘You are the one, are you not, who has taken responsibility for raising him. So he tells me’” (*Schooldays* 95). After this pleasing and unexpected praise, Simón asks for explanations about the meaning of numbers and stars in their teachings and the unusual distinctions between “ant arithmetic” and “noble numbers,” the relations between numbers and stars, and whether the children “will ever get to study proper mathematics” – a host of anguished questions to which Sr. Arroyo answers: “You address me as if I were the sage of Estrella, the man with all the answers. I am not (*Schooldays* 96 s.). And after long musings about the unknowable he continues:

Yes, the stars... We continue to be puzzled by the stars, even old men like you and me. *Who are they? What do they say to us? What are the laws by which they live?* For a child it is easier. The child does not need to think, for the child can dance. While we stand paralyzed, gazing on the gap that yawns between us and the stars – *What an abyss!* How will we ever cross it? – the child simply dances across. (*Schooldays* 97)

Having taken in the praise, Señor Arroyo's wisdom and the summer happiness of the students gathering naked around Ana Magdalena by the lakeshore, Simón returns to Inês, who had stayed behind in the car and observed Simón, suspecting that naked Ana Magdalena has roused his desire. Simón rejects this suspicion with two insights which show his deeper intuitive self and his ability to connect with the other lyrical and poetic logic<sup>8</sup> of the Arroyos. He explains to her that being naked is not being erotic, but something that puts body and mind at ease: “One slips back into being an animal. Animals are not naked, they are simply themselves” (*Schooldays* 100).

Even if Simón's rational self considers the Arroyos' numerological doctrines and principles as claptrap and rubbish, he is open to their poetic wisdom. Another moment of simplicity and depth between Sr. Arroyo and Simón occurs towards the end of the novel, when Simón tries to convince Arroyo to reopen the Academy after Ana Magdalena's murder. Simón, pained by the feeling that David makes fun of him and his efforts, receives the following explanation:

‘Señor Simón, since you are frank with me, I will be frank with you. You say your son derides you. That is not in fact true. He loves and admires you, even if he does not always obey you. [...] What he does hold against you is that, though you act as his father, you do not know who he is.’

[...] Let me rephrase what I said to you when last we met, [...]

‘We have, each of us, had the experience of arriving in a new land and being allotted a new identity. We live, each of us, under a name that is not our own. But we soon get used to it, to this new invented life.

‘Your son is an exception. He feels with unusual intensity the falsity of his new life. He has not yielded to the pressure to forget. What he remembers I cannot say, but it includes what he believes to be his true name. [...] Perhaps it is best that his secret be kept secret.’ (*Schooldays* 217 s.)

Señor Arroyo’s wisdom about the deeper strata of the human soul would have had a positive ring for mystics like Angelus Silésius and Martin Buber, and his message of its openness to nature and otherworldly dimensions would have made perfect sense for poets like Friedrich Hölderlin, Stefan George or Rainer Maria Rilke, and even for a rationalist like R. Musil. The bodily presence and dance raptures which reign at the Academy of Dance, as well as the kabbalistic doctrine of numbers and rhythmic correspondence, are the remnants of the today almost forgotten complex of mystical experience, which were vital to Johann Sebastian Bach and still had considerable importance at the beginning of the last century.

Jan Wilm touches this point obliquely when he says that

*The Schooldays of Jesus* can be read both in dialogue with Coetzee’s earlier book and with a larger artistic tradition extending back to the work of Kafka and Dostoyevsky, and the music and life of Johann Sebastian Bach. (Wilm)

The name Coetzee chose for his music and dance instructors at the Academy of Dance - Ana Magdalena and Juan Sebastian Arroyo - can very easily be translated into German as Johann Sebastian Bach and his wife Anna Magdalena. Bach is known for his belief in mystical conceptions which connect musical notes and numbers. For centuries, these connections were understood and intuitively felt by alchemists, poets and occultists as strong ties to otherworldly realities, the stars, God’s infinite Creation, the transcendent Beyond. This esoteric numerology points back to the original meaning of the ancient Greek term *mathesis*, referring to the acquisition of insights into the order of the universe, the learning of one’s place in the often obscure correlations of the world – be it through techniques of divination or calculations with stars and numbers. The pre-scientific wisdom and knowledge of sages and magi very gradually shed their mythical forms of expression and, after centuries, developed into the increasingly mathematical sciences of the Ionian physicists (Vernant 1981, I, 124–206; II 95–125). Pythagorean theories (articulated in particular by Philolaus and Archytas) (Huffman 2016) <sup>9</sup> in ancient Greece conceived of nature as a harmony arising out of numbers, and included rhythm, music and dance in that cosmic harmony. Coetzee is certainly aware of the numerological and mystical conceptions that

underpinned Bach's compositions, judging from his eloquent account of the spell exerted on him by Bach, whose music spoke to him in a lifechanging "revelation:"

I was mooring around our back garden [...] when from the house next door I heard music. As long as the music lasted I was frozen, I dared not breathe, I was being spoken to by music as music had never spoken to me before. What I was listening to was a recording of Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*, played on the harpsichord. (J. M Coetzee *Stranger Shores* 2001, 8)

Coetzee's essay describes in detail how his whole disposition, which had been educated to appreciate shallow American entertainment music, changed with this musical rapture, revealing another, more dense and difficult form of artistic expression. It is probably not an exaggeration to compare this experience to the harmony of the "noble numbers" taught by Ana Magdalena, even if Coetzee refers to it more soberly in his essay "What is a classic" as that which tends to be "turgid," "somber" and "marred by signs of 'labor and effort'" (J. M Coetzee *Stranger Shores* 11).

Ana Magdalena and Señor Arroyo are presented in the novel as true Masters of music and dance, who work and teach in accordance with age-old traditions. They quite literally live the Greek verb *chorein*, which expresses the ancient idea of music, singing and dance as imitation of the order of the universe (for example in Sophocles' tragedy *Oedipus Rex*, where the Chorus asks in dismay whether it makes sense to "join in the sacred dance" when Jocasta and the king do not believe in oracles (Sophocles 1994, v.893 s.). The couple are mediators who connect their students and audience with esoteric skills and the potential of "labor and effort" which bring humanity closer to the "Stranger Shores" of intuitive revelation, and to the dangers of a passionate life – a life of erotic and artistic impulses which will make Ana Magdalena the victim of an incomprehensible act of murderous lust at the hands of Dmitri, her secret lover.

In the first novel, Simón asked whether "the price of forgetting [all that] is not too high" (*Childhood* 60), referring to Elena's antierotic principles, and her condemnation of the "old way of thinking" and desiring higher and more refined forms of sublime love and erotic quest – both in the bodily and the spiritual dimensions. At the end of the second novel, the authorities, the population and even the three kindly sisters think it wise to withdraw their children from the Academy of Dance in order to shield them from the dangerous passions fostered by artistic skills and esoteric intuitions.

Coetzee's novels draw on the analogy that links mystical and religious feelings with the artistic sensitivity and the creative-erotic drive. A century ago, this analogy led to a sacralization of art and aesthetics as a compensation for the apparent demise of religion. In Novilla and Estrella, utopian towns in which there is no trace of religion, what is at stake is the demise of art – the kind of art that refuses to be consumed as entertainment, the art of the "Masters".

## Conclusion

Our reflection about Coetzee's modulations around Utopias, and around historical and esthetic narratives, has highlighted the strong presence of neo-mystical elements in the novels. Let us conclude with a brief reflection about the neo-mystical tradition in the quest of art and art criticism over the last centuries, and particularly in the beginning of the twentieth century, i.e. in the historical tradition with which Coetzee feels affinities.

The blending of religious faith, mystical intensity and artistic strife which Coetzee attributes to the Masters of music and dance, refers to a tradition that was vital from Greek antiquity to the time of Bach. Interrupted by new paradigms in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the same blending resurfaced around 1900 in a multitude of neo-mystical movements, esoteric, aesthetic and educational programs, gathering around spiritual, intellectual and artistic leaders and charismatic figures. Their spell gripped the cultivated European middle and upper classes in the *fin de siècle* and still have some faint resonance in institutions or education systems like the Waldorf Schools.

In those last decades before the First World War, historians of religion like Martin Buber and Gershom Sholem wrote on the role of mystical experience and institutionalized religion (Buber and Groiser; Sholem), while poets and thinkers like Stefan George, Robert Musil or Walter Benjamin found in Friedrich Hölderlin's long-forgotten poetry and philosophical fragments new impulses for their own neo-mystical leanings and highly scholarly reflections about intuitive forms of knowledge.

What has become totally incomprehensible for Coetzee's critics today was still a matter of passionate investigation a century ago, when important philosophers and art critics struggled in describing the peculiar "other" form of feeling-and-thought which is as incompatible with rational thought as it should be complementary.

The waning of serious mystical practice and the loss of the subtle vocabulary related to the experience of soul and the inner workings of the mind and the spirit were welcomed as intellectual progress. Only a few artists and literary critics like Walter Benjamin and Musil regretted the all too quick dismissal of a more serious engagement with mysticism. In spite of his immense sympathy for the surrealists, Benjamin put in doubt that dreams and drugs were the only or the most privileged access to the deeper layers of human experience, and suggested that a transformation of religious inspiration into "profane inspiration" might be a better way for real change:

The true, creative overcoming of religious inspiration [...] lies in a profane inspiration, a materialistic, anthropological inspiration, to which hashish, opium and whatever else may be ways of introduction. (But they are dangerous, and religions are stricter and more demanding) (Benjamin 1980, 297)

Musil frequently writes in his diary about the importance of getting better acquainted with the traditions that fostered ecstatic experience, mystical contemplation and intuitive responses as opposed to rational argument. The novelist highlights the importance of a more precise knowledge and “portrayal of the mystics [...] because rationalism and mysticism is the decisive polarity of our time. We have to read the mystics [...]” (Musil and Frisé 1976, T1 129), but he kept his distance from the vague esoteric fashion of his age, which drew on mystical contemplation and loosely associated mystical elements with astrology and numerology, incorporating these hybrid associations into music and dance practices, visual arts, architecture and education.

However, a hundred years later, almost nothing is left of both Benjamin’s and Musil’s understanding of the deeper ecstatic experiences, and their strife for a “godless mysticism” which then was one of the artistic and intellectual *objets de désir* of the 1900s<sup>10</sup>. Mysticism had become a topic for specialized academic studies and even Musil’s eloquent essays on the “other condition” are ignored outside the domain of specific Musil criticism. Literary scholars and art critics mostly prefer to avoid the slippery limit between deep wisdom and ridiculous charlatanism. Consequently, it is not surprising that Coetzee’s reviewers did not perceive the analogies between the Academy of Dance and the esoteric atmosphere reigning in the art world and the culture in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Mme. Helena Blavatsky’s Theosophy<sup>11</sup> had a strong impact on wide artistic and social circles (Friedland and Zellman 2006, 50 s., 378, 389). Henry and William James followed the esoteric teachings of the new dance pedagogy<sup>12</sup> in search of a cure for their neurasthenia and chronic ailments. Similarly, many artists were drawn to Rudolf Steiner’s and Dalcroze’s eurhythmic search for the healing of the mind and the body through rhythmic harmonies: Laban and Bartheniew, Gurdjieff and Olga Ivanovna Lazovitch (the Montenegrin princess who became a disciple of Gurdjieff before marrying Frank Lloyd Wright) are only some of them. They found inspiration in Theosophy and eurhythmic dogmas derived from strange numerologies and number mysticisms. Even Frank Lloyd Wright felt compelled by Solomon Guggenheim’s artistic adviser to incorporate into his designs for the Guggenheim Museum the esoteric theories of Hilla Rebay, who believed in the cosmic correspondences inherent in monumental buildings like pyramids and ziggurats, or in geometric shapes like spheres and spirals – esoteric ideas spawned by her frequentation of Kandinsky, Steiner and Blavatsky’s theosophical teachings (Friedland and Zellman 378–80).

The fact that none of these analogies – and only the reference of the name Arroyo to Bach - has been perceived or considered worth mentioning by Coetzee’s critics, might indicate that the demise of a certain kind of artistic tradition is well under way, if not concluded. This brings us back to the question raised in the title of this essay: Coetzee’s fiction seems to ask what reference systems are there left in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to direct our imagination and put order into our ideas, desires and hopes. The fact that religious, political and aesthetic ideas have such a vague and almost unrecognizable presence in these novels



seems to indicate that something has weakened (if not abolished) the belief of Coetzee's readers and critics in the traditional vectors which used to capture the imagination, guiding loose ideas towards well defined projects like the almost religious aesthetic endeavors of artists and artistic associations in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Ana Magdalena's murder highlights the dangerous flip side of aesthetic-erotic passions, and the drabness of Novilla may be the only possible response to such dangers. This raises another question with which we would like to close this essay, because it would demand a longer sociological approach: is Novilla not an allegory of what remains completely utopian and unrealized in the countless well-meaning, but very abstract and vague, ideas swirling in our media about democratic equality, gender emancipation and social justice?

### Notes

1. Cf. Sophocles' hymn to Eros in *Antigone* (Sophocles, vv. 781-800), in which Aphrodite is praised as a goddess who has her throne among the foundational deities of the underworld. In this hymn, the potential of refinement of the erotic passions is hinted at, but not as developed as in the Christian doctrine: after all, without love, it would be impossible to imagine reconciliation.
2. Plato's *Republic* expresses aversion against agitated meters, rhythm and melodious instruments which might bring upheavals to the soul – a theme which will appear at the end of the second novel, when the habitants decide to close the Academy of Dance after Dimitry's murder of Ana Magdalena, which seems to confirm Plato's theory. These are the neoplatonic elements that have been incorporated into the Christian faith.
3. Published in Latin in 1516, *Utopia* is a fictional philosophical dialogue discussing a totally different society. One of the interlocutors is a sailor who landed on the island Utopia and lived there for some time with the Utopians.
4. For scholarly works about the history of secularization, cf. Hans Blumenberg: *Säkularisierung und Selbstbehauptung*. Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1974. Horst Dreier: *Staat ohne Gott. Religion in der säkularen Moderne*. Beck, München 2018.
5. Let us just hint at the fact that, in this reading, Simon's attitude is almost a parody of what it means to be a really creative artist (as opposed to a communicator or entertainer) in contemporary society.
6. The novel quotes - with a few alterations, (which we added in *italics*) from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Der Erlkönig*, online: [https://germanstories.vcu.edu/goethe/erl\\_dual.html](https://germanstories.vcu.edu/goethe/erl_dual.html). Apart from the alterations of words, David's rendering also commits faults changing the grammatical cases (dative – accusative) of the pronouns. However grave these errors may be from the point of view of grammar, they do not have enormous relevance for who loves listening to Goethe's poem and Schubert's lyrics.
7. “Die Ros ist ohn warum; sie blühet weil sie blühet, Sie acht nicht ihrer selbst, fragt nicht, ob man sie siehet”. S. Silesius (1624 –1677) belonged to the Franciscans Order. His poetry explores themes of mystical vision and understanding through contemplation.
8. “Poetic logic” or poetic thinking are terms used by Friedrich Hölderlin, when he points out that artistic and religious thought are not without logic, nor irrational, but have their own all-embracing logic and “mode of procedure” (Verfahrungsart). Cf. Hölderlin, 1994, Anmerkungen zum Oedipus, 849 s.

9. Philolaus thought in terms of limiting and unlimited elements and his primary example of harmonia of limiters and unlimiters is a musical scale, in which the continuum of sound is limited according to whole number ratios, so that the octave, fifth, and fourth are defined by the ratios 2 : 1, 3 : 2 and 4 : 3, respectively.
10. Let us mention only a few of the most important names discussed in Uwe Spörl's *Gottlose Mystik in der deutschen Literatur um die Jahrhundertwende*, Paderborn, Schönigh, 1997: Friedrich Nietzsche and Ludwig Wittgenstein, Maurice de Maeterlinck and Martin Buber, Rudolf Steiner, Fritz Mauthner and Hugo von Hofmannsthal.
11. Helena Blavatsky, a Russian immigrant established Theosophy as a religion in the United States during the late nineteenth century; it draws its beliefs predominantly from Blavatsky's writings.
12. Cf. Emile Jacques-Dalcroze, 1865 – 1950, born in Vienna, Dalcroze moved to Geneva, where he worked as composer and founder of eurhythmics. His school hosted many of the famous modern dancers and dance-educators, like Rudolf Laban and Mary Wigman. Cf. Bachmann, Marie-Laure. *Dalcroze Today: an education through and into music*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993.

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