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J.M. Coetzee's Jesus Trilogy as Meta-Utopia

Abstract: The present article argues that J.M. Coetzee's fictions *The Childhood of Jesus* (2013), *The Schooldays of Jesus* (2016) and *The Death of Jesus* (2019) have a typical form of meta-utopia in the context of Coetzee's living during apartheid censorship and his affinity for the Russian writer Fyodor Dostoyevsky and for the radical conditions in which the Russian literature was written during the Soviet regime and Nicholas II's reign. Furthermore, the article uses the morphology of the utopian genre identified by Corin Braga as a method of analysis to underline the complexity of a meta-utopian structure where eutopia, dystopia, utopia and antiutopia are present in the same narrative world.

Keywords: J.M. Coetzee; Jesus Trilogy; Morphology of the Utopian Genre; Meta-Utopia; Edith Clowes; Corin Braga.

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J.M. Coetzee's Trilogy *The Childhood of Jesus* (2013), *The Schooldays of Jesus* (2016) and *The Death of Jesus* (2019) is often analyzed as a dystopia or utopia or as having nothing in common with the utopian genre. However, the answer could be found mid-way. Given that Coetzee is known for his metanarrative predisposition, the universe of the Jesus trilogy discusses the nature of the utopian genre, including of utopias and dystopias, without being entirely suitable for either of the categories.

The perplexity in the act of reading comes from the difficulty to categorize, given the fact that the text seems to fit in so numerous interpretations of so many valid perspectives, that the very act of naming a few brings anxiety. In this study, I am going to examine the discourse about the utopian genre inherent to Coetzee's trilogy using the taxonomy developed by Corin Braga in *Pour une morphologie du genre utopique* (2018) in order to highlight its meta-utopian characteristics. Consequently, the main arguments will concentrate on examining the relationship of the fictional world with reality, the application of Mikhail Bakhtin's chronotope, the institutions of authority and, last but not least,

the position towards imagination. Overall, this article does not organize all forms of utopia or ideas that are approached in the novel, but rather points out representative forms of utopia, respectively dystopia, eutopia, o-utopia and anti-utopia, in order to reveal the structure of the novel as a meta-utopia.

To begin with, Braga succeeds in bringing clarifications with regard to the manifold definitions of utopian types and genre by organizing its elements according to their position towards reality understood as the worldview of the author or *mundus / imago mundi*. Following the principle of “electrolysis”, *imago mundi* would be the point zero. To the left and to the right of the axis there will be virtual hypostases: positives for eutopia and outopia, negatives for dystopia and antiutopia; probable and possible for dystopia and eutopia; impossible for antiutopia and outopia. Using graphic signs, the terms are explained as it follows:

les eutopies projettent dans l'«ailleurs» spatial ou temporel des topies positives possibles et realistes, les outopies – des topies positives impossibles et fantastiques, les dystopies – des topies negatives possibles et realistes, et les antiutopies – des topies negatives impossibles et fantastiques (...) les quatre varietes: + outopie; ± eutopie; ± dystopie; – antiutopie.¹

The trilogy as such questions its place into eutopia or dystopia developing antiutopian features and a mirror to outopia into this postmodernist dialogue. Moreover, Braga's morphology of the utopian genre² will unfold as an efficient instrument in the study of meta-utopia.

Secondly, meta-utopia is a concept developed by Edith W. Clowes³ on the subject of Russian 70's and 80's novels that unfortunately became accessible to the readers only in the late '80s due to political censorship. Not only are the three novels texts about utopia on a simple level, but J. M. Coetzee is fond of Feodor Dostoyevsky's works⁴ as well, especially *Notes from Underground* (a milestone in Russian Dystopia Fiction) and *The Karamazov Brothers* (even directly quoted in the novel because, for instance, a character's name is Dimitri, he is involved in a crime, Alyosha as a character name is also present especially in his role of getting along well with children, etc.).

Furthermore, Coetzee, similar to the Russian authors,⁵ lived in an authoritarian political ecosystem, namely, the apartheid era in South Africa⁶. In that case, meta-utopia, “with its penetrating insight into Utopian modes of thinking, is a powerful stimulus to those seeking social and political alternatives to a long-standing authoritarian culture.”⁷

Significantly, Clowes even anticipates the development of Coetzee's work when she underlines the similarities between New Historicism and Russian Meta-utopia, namely the play with the boundary between document and fiction “dissenting views hinted at but not fully articulated, hidden under the armor of a firmly embedded ideological interest”⁸ in the novel *Foe* (1986).

Notably, some common features that J.M. Coetzee's Jesus Trilogy shares with meta-utopia could be stipulated: They are both forms of “didactic” and “ludic” art⁹. On the one hand, the act of education has always been a presence in Coetzee's works

as several scholars have approached the subject, for instance, Michael Bell in *Open secrets. Literature, Education and Authority from J.J. Rousseau to J.M. Coetzee* (2007), and Aparna Mishra Tarc in *Pedagogy in the works of J.M. Coetzee. The Affect of Literature* (2020), where a special chapter is dedicated to *The Childhood of Jesus*, in which the didactic act is presented with a reciprocity from adult to child, and from the child towards the adult. Finally, the only adult that lets himself be taught by the child, David, is his reluctant protector, Simón.

In Tarc's analysis, the reader is also taken into account when the two characters discuss Don Quixote's imaginary author, Benengeli: "the narrator pokes at the reader to question [...] canonical understandings of authorship, in terms of the actual novel but also our educated understanding of what an author is and does and can do to our 'real' engagements with the world"¹⁰. What can be added is that the relationship of Simón and David can often be recounted as the relationship between the reader and the book, which, in the end, leaves Simón in the impossibility of grasping a kind of lesson or message from the existence of David, likewise the reader is invited to meditate alone on the act of reading the novels.

On the other hand, the ludic component of Coetzee's fictions can be identified in the way he architected the relationship with the reader. Originally, the graphic form of the novel was intended to be a hoax for the reader: the novels should have a cover with no title, while the title would have been included on the last page, but out of editorial concerns the author gave up his game. The fact that the name of Jesus from the titles is never actually mentioned in

the novels, the incongruences of the usual parts of a narration, the lack of a proper introduction or conclusion in the fictional world and the instability in the cause-effect relationship are just a few of the ludic elements contained in the trilogy.

Equally important is linguistic play: the first two parts were simultaneously published in the language of the writing (English) and in translation (Spanish), the third one appeared first in Spanish, while Spanish is the language the characters are forced to learn in order to live in the new world¹¹. Together with the characters, the reader struggles with the necessity of learning Spanish too, since here and there some words appear in Spanish.

Moreover, the fiction suggests "the validity of 'play' as a way of functioning in society, as a way of negotiating between otherwise intransigent social dogmas"¹². This can be grasped in one of the defining features of the fictional world of Jesus novels by rejecting "play", imagination and dreams for its inhabitants, positioning the reader in front of the abuses of rationality and universalism. In a word, Coetzee's trilogy shows "a skepticism about all rigid, unitary ideological systems and a love of linguistic and narrative play as a vehicle for increased consciousness of the effects of ideological fixation"¹³.

Braga meticulously investigated and organized utopias in a logically structured manner preventing the known overlaps in the definitions of the theories about utopian genre. As a result, he exposed the "world-making"¹⁴ paradigm within the utopian genre. Meta-utopian writers cannot build their fictions outside this paradigm based on the fact that they meet with the theorist in a common postmodernist

position. To clarify, meta-utopian works “envision Utopia in the plural as ‘Utopias’”¹⁵, which implies the use of specific dialectic laws and binary system in the same text to construct a new way of perceiving meaning.¹⁶

Another argument for Coetzee’s trilogy framing among meta-utopias would be the presence within the fictional world of all four categories identified by Braga in the morphology of the utopian genre: the very thesis of the novel, the existence of a world where all references to the past are forgotten, from the perspective of the majority of the characters is an eutopia. Even though amnesia is a real psychological effect, oblivion of the entire past for a group or a society could be seen in the speculative degree of probability or possibility¹⁷.

From a literary point of view, in *The Karamazov Brothers* by F.M. Dostoyevsky, there is a scene significant of the issue: Staretz Zosima tells the story of how he decided to become a monk. While being in the army, after he refused to fight in a duel and apologized to the opponent, he became famous in the community. One night, he received a mysterious visitor. A rich benefactor from the community who confesses to the young man that fourteen years ago he killed a widow out of jealousy and arranged the crime scene so that it would point one of the servants, which eventually happened. He wanted to confess his crime in front of the society based on his remorse and restlessness, which he succeeded on his birthday. After the event, he got ill and everybody believed that he was delusional. In the end, he died and the community was either reluctant to Zosima as the man got ill after visiting him, or curious about their discussions.¹⁸

In *The good story. Exchanges on truth, fiction and psychotherapy* (2015), J.M. Coetzee has a dialogue with psychotherapist Arabella Kurtz that goes around this plot, which is very common in various works of fiction (Thomas Hardy, Hawthorne, etc.). Their subject explores the constraints of telling a story where the repressed never returns. According to Coetzee, “the belief that we are not free to make up our own past must be based on faith in the justness of the universe”¹⁹. As a result, a story of a man like the mysterious visitor of Father Zosima who lives happily ever after “cannot be told because it lacks justness”²⁰.

In contrast, Coetzee argues that in reality there are people for whom what is inconvenient have been forgotten and they are living undisturbed by that particular past. Therefore, the author is revealing his *imago mundi*. The point zero, in Braga’s schema, would be that, for Coetzee, in reality, a man can live happily without remembering his crime, while, in telling a story, such a plot is almost impossible. Actually, in the novels he explores both possibilities showing their weak points, unacceptable practices for a utopist:

It is of no use to argue that the countless instances we have of the repressed returning to haunt us prove that the repressed always returns, since by definition we don’t hear of cases where the repressed does not return. It is hard, perhaps impossible, to make a novel that is recognisably a novel out of the life of someone who is from beginning to end comfortably sustained by fictions. We make a novel only by exposing those fictions.²¹

Under those circumstances, in the Jesus novels the author is playing with the link between justice and the freedom to “ignore aspects of the past in the name of personal growth” in what he defines as Dostoyevskyan territory: “If there is no God, where is the sense in it all?”²²

For the majority of the characters, life without remembering anything from the past is an ideal world, without the burdens of personal or collective history. In a word, an eutopia. For them, the repressed never returns, they never agonize about who they really are, but slide comfortably through life, wrapped in the stories they have been told about themselves, actually without any stories at all as the novels lack much from the usual narrativity. At some point, Simón observes that there is no news channel at the radio, but soon finds out that there is nothing interesting to be told, there are no ups and downs.

For instance, Elena, a friend of Simón, criticizes his predisposition to speculate sharing some general philosophy about the *good way of living* in the new world:

To my ear that is an old way of thinking. In the old way of thinking, no matter how much you may have, there is always something missing. The name you choose to give this something-more that is missing is passion. Yet I am willing to bet that if tomorrow you were offered all the passion you wanted – passion by the bucketful – you would promptly find something new to miss, to lack. This endless dissatisfaction, this yearning for the something-more that is missing, is a way of thinking we are well rid of, in my opinion. Nothing is missing. The

nothing that you think is missing is an illusion. You are living by an illusion.²³

However, in a world where all share the same “illusion”, anyone slightly different like Simón or David even if they are willing to adapt to the new way as the man or reluctant as the child, a collision of illusions appears. One may remember the characterization of the Karamazov family as very passionate and sensualist, the two misfits in Jesus’ novels appear to be in the minority, so that such a self-sufficient world is not an entirely good place for the protagonists as opposed to the rest of the community.

The elements of dystopia would be defined by the various ways of constraints and freedom limitations. First, language control could be exemplified by the condition to leave the Belstar camp, namely, to learn Spanish²⁴ or when the boy is playing by inventing his own language, the attempt is harshly criticized and discouraged. Similarly, name control consists in attributing a new Spanish name to the newcomers. At the same time, by mysterious means they do not remember their real names, actually the very fact that the child knows that David is not his original name is admonished.

Second, education control is a system of repudiation from community of the children who think differently. They are sent away from their parents into a special boarding school with a view to be re-educated.

Third, think control is not expressed overtly as an interdiction, but the community tries to bring anyone to its general worldview. It is manifesting through the discouragement of new ideas or of any kind of development: for instance, when

working on the docks, Simón proposed to his fellows that they should use technology such as pumps and trucks in order to discharge the grains, they rebel such an idea as being a masquerade reasoning for laziness, for their distancing from *the thing itself* that gives them satisfaction from physically providing the food that keeps them alive. Moreover, any attempt to speculate, imagine or fantasize is rejected. In an apparent philosophical dialogue, the community is inherently intransigent and does not accept a different point of view, because they regard imagination as a sign of insecurity or trauma, finally as a kind of madness.

By the same token, there are institutions and authorities who guard the convention or state of oblivion. To enumerate: Belstar camp where people are taught Spanish, they are assigned names and an approximative age, and they receive pass books under the condition of learning the only language available. Centro de Reubicación Novilla (Centre of relocation) provides the newcomers a provisory house and a supervisor for their integration, Recién Llegados (The Newcomers bureau) assures a sum of money and clothes and sends the new people to work. Educational institutions have an insular approach based on the tendency to guarantee that everyone shares the same worldview, without a perspective towards differences or innovation.

In a word, they are actors of censorship. For instance, the institute offers free courses on a limited number of topics such as: Life drawing, Architectural Drawing, Bookkeeping, Calculus, Beginner's Spanish (twelve sections), Intermediate Spanish (five sections), Advanced Spanish, Spanish Composition, Spanish Conversation,

Calligraphy, Weaving, Basketwork, Flower Arranging, Pottery, Puppetry, Philosophy, Elements of Philosophy, Philosophy: Selected Topics, Philosophy of Labour, Philosophy and Everyday Life, Natural Philosophy. Hence, the majority of the courses does not imply imagination or creativity, but rather mathematics, memory or craftsmanship. Dumfounded by this selection, Simón asks himself why Spanish is the only language available, why there are not courses at least on Spanish Dialects, why there is no Spanish literature class or group.

Furthermore, the philosophy class he discussed with his friend, Eugenio, could suggest a parody to the Scientific Socialism and Dialectic Materialism which were compulsory in the Eastern Europe countries during Soviet Union. In addition to that, the conversation from the philosophy class has the subject of the epistemological nature of a chair in an intended Platonistic orientation and it is written in what can be called *wooden language* or *langue de bois* as French imported back the expression from Russia via Poland designating the misuse of abstract language in order to give the impression of communication without giving a specific information with a view to manipulate during the Soviet regime. In this case, the Platonistic reasoning specific for abstract concepts is applied on a concrete object, thus the effect of *unheimlich* and of a specific kind of dark humour is achieved:

'Did you work out what a chair is?' [...]' Look down. You are sitting on one.' [...]' *Sillicidad*,²⁵ offers Eugenio. 'Your chair' – he gestures towards the chair – 'embodies *sillicidad*, or partakes

of it, or realizes it, as our teacher likes to say. 'That is how you know it is a chair and not a table.' [...] The discussion grew more interesting after you left. We talked about infinity and the perils of infinity. What if, beyond the ideal chair, there is a yet more ideal chair, and so forth for ever and ever?²⁶

With this in mind, it can be argued that another form of dystopia is engaged in the fiction.

Additionally, David's expulsion from school and his transfer to the Special Learning Centre at Punto Arenas underline the intolerance of imagination in regular school system and community. The school teacher señor León, the school psychologist Señora Otxoa and the judge in the Office of education are leading the same position towards the child behavior: a disturbance for the regular class, a disobedient person, an intruder that should be expelled. In vain Simón and Inés showed that the boy is polite and well-behaved at home, his reluctance to authority is interpreted as a problem that should be treated isolated. His forwardness does not matter beyond the act of not following exact instructions.

In fact, even though David knows how to read, to write and to count, he chooses to invent stories, to play instead of obeying teacher's instructions, simply because he prefers playing instead of working in an ordered manner. Eventually the boy is forcedly taken from his protectors by the authorities to Punto Arenas, where he escapes from and runs with his family. As a result, the political system that works in Novilla values the community more than the emotional attachment of a family²⁷.

At the same time, one of the main arguments of the school psychologist is that David lacks the experience of the real. Señora Otxoa blames Inés and Simón for not giving him straight answers about the world, actually for telling him the complicated truth instead of giving him a sense of security, even though it would be a lie: "David has no anchor in his life. Hence his withdrawal and retreat into a fantasy world where he feels more in control. [...] Can you blame him if he feels frustrated and rebellious, and then retreats into a private world where he is free to make up his own answers?"²⁸

However, David's fictional world acts as an outopia in the structure of the novels, while some characters accede to his worldview. The phantastic world is enacted rather as a philosophical approach, than as an excess of imagination. The theory shares a similarity with Platon's sky of ideas except for the fact that instead of ideas, there are numbers that are floating in the universe. Incompatible with *mundus*, David's world is delivered in three stages: philosophical dialogue emerged from Simón's will to understand David's refuse to deal with numbers or calculations; the validation of David's preconceptions concerning numbers in Arroyo's Academy where his approach is complemented by the school's philosophy; and last but not least, David as a prophet of the numbers' mysticism, his death and followers. The appearances lead to the fact that the author is building a deliberately pale figure of Christ in the child.

First stage offers the reader an oblique approach to the numbers' outopia. David is finding himself in an apriorist understanding of the world he lives in. Although he knows arithmetic, he refuses to make

calculations, because for him numbers are like stars, they are individual entities. Between one number and another there is a space, an abyss. As a result, he is afraid to pass from one number to another provided that there is the peril of falling in an abyss. When trying to understand the way David perceives numbers, Simón is contemplating the following reasoning: "It is as if the numbers were islands floating in a great black sea of nothingness, and he were each time being asked to close his eyes and launch himself across the void. [...] From nowhere to somewhere: it seemed to demand a miracle each time."²⁹ The image could be met in Rafael Alberti's poem *The Angel of numbers (Virgenes con escuadras)*: "And the angel of numbers, / Pensive, flying/ From 1 to 2, from 2/ To 3, from 3 to 4."³⁰

From a meta-utopian perspective, each idea or number would be an island, a utopia, whilst, the reader is forced to pass from one to another in order to become aware of the diversity between them and the distance between ideas-numbers and reality. What seems a madness for Eugenio (community's perspective) raises questions to Simón: "But what if we are wrong and he is right? What if between one and two there is no bridge at all, only empty space? 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?"³¹ On the contrary, Eugenio develops the theory of good and bad infinities. Bad infinities refer to the possibility of a dream within a dream or a life as a prelude to another life, while, good infinities refer to the quality of numbers to be infinite, and

thus to fill up the entire space in the universe, so that, there is a form of security. Hence, the concept of *horror vacui* seems to be fundamental for the community. Once David and his arbitrary family start the journey from Novilla to Estrella to escape the judge's decision of having the child institutionalized, David's theory is perceived as less and less obsolete.

The stage of validation starts from the meeting with doctor Juan who believes that there are no random numbers, that every number has a signification. Unlike his position in the dialogue with Eugenio, at this instant, Simón is reluctant to this idea and opposes the nihilistic and Dostoyevskyan dilemma "Of course there are no random numbers under the eye of God. But we don't live under the eye of God. In the world we live in there are random numbers and random names and random events"³².

In Estrella, Simón and Inés find an academy of dance and music suitable for David's unusual approach. On the opening evening, Arroyo husbands give an insight into the philosophy of the academy, which is strikingly similar to David's preconceptions. They come to complete the child's predisposition.

If, in the case of Plato's dialogues, the man who wants to contemplate the concept of beauty is going to start from contemplating a beautiful woman. In the case of Ana Magdalena's utopia, the only things that remained from the past or the world that is in oblivion are the names of the primary numbers, in order to bring them back to reality, children have to dance, thus living among the remnants of the old world like in a resurrection³³ or commemoration.

The academy is "dedicated to guiding the souls of our students toward that

realm, to bringing them in accord with the great underlying movement of the universe, or, as we prefer to say, the dance of the universe"³⁴. Moreover, the teacher differentiates between the two types of understanding numbers presenting the space of the academy as a sanctuary outside the unwritten laws of the community, a space that is tolerated on account of the fact that the academy is considered an unharmed form of mysticism:

The numbers you have in mind, the numbers we use when we buy and sell, are not true numbers but simulacra. They are what I call ant numbers. Ants, as we know, have no memory. [...] Tonight, in the second part of the show, you will see our younger students playing the parts of ants, performing the ant operations that we call the lower arithmetic, the arithmetic we use in household accounts and so forth. [...] The laws they (*ants*) obey are the laws of addition and subtraction. That is all they do, day in and day out, during every waking hour: carry out their mechanical, twofold law. In our Academy we do not teach the law of the ant. [...] We do not want to turn your children into ants.³⁵

The academy is presented as the only place that encourages and protects forms of creativity and imagination by practicing a form of art that implies more than craftsmanship. Here, David's invented stories are listened to by both his teachers and his colleagues. He excels in the mystic dance and brings to life the most complicated numbers. He starts to remember more from the life before he passed the ocean like the

others, but his memories are interpreted as prophecies.

However, the excess of passion that was explored and accused in *The Karamazov Brothers* materializes itself in a crime, whose consequences are represented in opposition to Dostoyevsky's manner. If the presupposed criminal was thoroughly investigated in the novel by Dostoyevsky and the notion of guilt occupies a central position, Coetzee analyses post crime events in the tendency of Solovyov dialogues³⁶. In *The Schooldays of Jesus*, the criminal, Dimitri, confesses his crime and asks for a proper penalty. Notwithstanding the cruel facts³⁷, the judges find him a mitigating factor of being in a state of distress or temporary madness, he is sent to a special Clinic, from where he is soon rehabilitated in society without any public hesitation or condemnation. As Clowes suggested "murder must always be put in quotation marks in meta-utopian art"³⁸, that is why the community adopts the attitude of the monk that goes back to his prayers after he sinned without remorse. Ana Magdalena's murder announces the death of David as they were the only preachers of the philosophy of numbers in a community with a fixed system void of passions or imagination. The social behavior is of more importance than the criminal's guilt.

In spite of the great distress provoked by the death of señora Arroyo, his teacher, David becomes a dancing master and develops her philosophy of the numbers. At some point, he even runs to the orphanage, where he starts telling stories to the children (in a way, preaching) and playing football with them.

The children follow David and his numinous presence and the references to the

figure of Christ become more and more present in *The Death of Jesus*. David affirmed biblical quotes like “*Yo soy la verdad*” (I am the truth) or “I am who I am”. Correspondingly, the names of his protectors have biblical resonances like Simón (the old Simon) or Inés (the Virgin). Despite the references, the novel does not have religious or Christian connotations, but rather, the author is playing with the reader predisposition to interpret the “signs” as pertaining to the Bible semantics in order to underline the prescriptions of culture and language to the way the reader reads or the way the author writes. Another key point is his illness, a mysterious disease that consumes his blood whereas a new transport of blood never comes to save him; he is telling stories to the other children as long as he can, but finally dies. On the one hand, the disease is constructed as a transfiguration, a materialization of the Holy Eucharist³⁹. On the other hand, if Christology established that God’s mercy is infinite, so the holly blood that is given during the liturgy; David’s blood is finite and the miracle never happens; his predisposition towards gratuity remains the only link to a theological semantic.

In the last part of the novel, J.M. Coetzee realizes another crucial aspect of meta-utopia, the degeneration into anarchy. David’s followers, the orphans who used to listen to his stories, vandalize the city claiming that their deeds are in accordance with David’s preaching:

Bands of them have been racing from shop to shop, overturning displays, haranguing shopkeepers for charging too much. The just price! That is their cry. In one of the pet shops they broke

open the cages and set the animals loose – dogs, cats, rabbits, snakes, tortoises. Set the birds loose too. Left only the goldfish. The police had to be called in. All in the cause of the just price, all in the name of David. Some of them claim they have had mystic visions, visions in which David appeared to them and told them his bidding. He has left a huge mark behind. None of which surprises me. You know how David was.⁴⁰

Therefore, the last kind of utopia exemplified in this article was undermined through the depravation of the practices of the philosophy of numbers from pure dance and imagination to socially disorder or the fight against the ant numbers. By subverting any kind of utopia, anti-utopia as a critique of a specific utopia multiplies itself into the structure of the novels, being the element that subverts every idea⁴¹ and encourage a skeptical relativism as an opposition to any form of universalism as can be seen above.

According to Clowes, the chronotope of meta-utopia has specific features that “demythcize the dystopian border, the notion of the wall, by underscoring the sameness of conditions on both sides and by stressing characters’ sometimes comical lack of curiosity about the other side.”⁴² The places and the cities have no contours.

Travelling from Belstar to Novilla and, then, to Estrella employs a dynamic similar to David’s fear of passing from one number to another, from one star to the other or like in Rafael Alberti’s poem. Robert Pippin also surprised the imponderability of space and time when observing that “The setting might be our dystopian future, or

perhaps our utopian future."⁴³ In the light of meta-utopia, characters do not really try to escape, because "There is nowhere else to be but here."⁴⁴ Most of the time, different characters reach the extreme argument in answering David's question: they repeat to him that he has to accept that the world is what it is, that this is how things work, without attributing any final cause to anything. Time and space are neither realist nor utopian in a vast sense. The development of the characters is only superficial. In the case of David, during his illness, he almost returns to the age he was at the beginning of the novel. For this reason, a traditional form of novel such as *Bildungsroman* is subject to experiment supporting the fact that "In meta-utopian fiction popular taste arises as a major issue, precisely in connection with experimental art, both explicitly in dialogue between characters and implicitly in forms chosen and techniques used to educate the reader to a new style of interpretation."⁴⁵

The Jesus Trilogy subvert any kind of "easy optimism" particular to a realist novel. *The Death of Jesus* render the death of the child as a natural phenomenon with different meanings depending on the character's relationship with the child: the impossibility of receiving the boy's message, transfiguration into a play and a story, a victim of the health system, legend, myth, deity, cult. In the end,

it reveals a palpable acceptance of life, no matter how awful it has been made by Utopian schemes. And, indeed, we find here a strong resistance to the apathy and stagnation that result from the suppression of historical perspective and imaginative play. Meta-utopian writing reasserts the inevitable

relativism and interconnectedness of past, present, and future. It encourages the quest for insight into the relationship between the experience, process, and possibility that are all embedded in time.⁴⁶

In conclusion, *The Childhood of Jesus*, *The Schooldays of Jesus* and *The Death of Jesus* "meditate on the nature of all Utopias – and, indeed, a larger set of ideologies – as the constructs that they are: fictional but vital to the formulation of social identity"⁴⁷. Moreover, the trilogy gives account of Coetzee's *imago mundi* in a dialectic manner. According to the author, an ideal society would be "one in which, for each of us, our fiction (our fantasy) of ourself goes unchallenged; and where some grand Leibnizian presiding force sees to it that all the billions of personal fictions interlock seamlessly, so that none of us need stay awake at night wondering anxiously whether the world we inhabit is real."⁴⁸ At the same time, he consciously addresses himself the question of "whether we really want to move in a society in which everyone around us feels empowered (a term I use cautiously) to 'be who they want to be' by acting (acting out) the personal myths (the 'poetic' truths) they have constructed for themselves."⁴⁹ In the trilogy, Coetzee builds such a world with all the implications for the great multitude of personal fictions in their formidable dynamic and frictions. After all, Coetzee answers his question by writing a story that situates the reader in the middle of the dilemma, in the nature of the question.

Consequently, Braga's morphology of the utopian genre as a method of analysis underlines the complexity of the structure of such a narrative in relation to the real as a

point of reference. The multiplied presence of eutopia, dystopia, outopia and antiutopia in the same text destabilizes the reader, but also invites to skeptical rendering of any fixed system and engenders preconceptions of cultural objects and language prescription. Furthermore, the novels embody the fact that “All utopian discourses are potentially reversible.”⁵⁰ Indeed, when

Derek Attridge insisted that Coetzee’s fictions should not be allegorically interpreted⁵¹, in the case of the Jesus novels, I would argue that the meta-utopian structure is playing with all kinds of allegories, ideas, systems and utopias. This very fact enriches the reader with a broader dynamic perspective of the world, in spite of the apathy that accompanies such an approach.

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NOTES

1. Corin Braga, *Pour une morphologie du genre utopique*, Paris, Garnier, 2018, p. 626.
2. The study is encyclopedic in treating representative utopias from Thomas Morus until present times.

3. Edith W. Clowes, *Russian Experimental Fiction. Resisting Ideology after Utopia*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1993.
4. Not to mention, his novel *The Master of Petersburg* (1994) which has the Russian author as its protagonist.
5. The fictions analyzed in Clowes' study: *The Radiant Future* (1981), *The Yawning Heights* (1979) by Alexander Zinoviev; *The Ugly Swans* (1972) by Strugatsky Brothers; *A Potshot at Mirages* (1987) by Vladimir Tendriakov; *The Island of Crimea* (1984) by Vasilii Askėnov; *Rabbits and Boa Constructors* (1989) by Fazil Iskander; *Moscow 2042* (1987) by Vladimir Voinovich; *The New Robinsons* (1989) by Liudmila Petrushevskaja; *The Deserter* (1989) by Alexander Kabakov.
6. Communism, Nazism, Apartheid have in common the aggressiveness of cultural and ideological control policies or the practice of intensive censorship. (On this subject: J.M. Coetzee, *Giving Offence. Essays on Censorship*, University of Chicago, 1996; J.M. Coetzee, edited by David Attwell, *Doubling the point: Essays and interviews*, Harvard University Press, 1992; Mihaela Mihai *Political Memory and the Aesthetics of Care: The Art of Complicity and Resistance*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2022)
7. Edith W. Clowes, *Russian Experimental Fiction. Resisting Ideology after Utopia*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1993, p. 15.
8. Edith W. Clowes, *op. cit.*, p. 217.
9. Edith W. Clowes, *op. cit.*, p. 10.
10. Aparna Mishra Tarc, *Pedagogy in the works of J.M. Coetzee. The Affect of Literature*, Taylor & Francis, New York, 2020, p. 109.
11. Collin Marshall, *J.M. Coetzee's War Against Global English*, New Yorker, 8 December 2022, <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/j-m-coetzees-war-against-global-english>. A quote from one of Coetzee's discourses is necessary: "I do not like the way in which it crushes the minor languages that it finds in its path. I don't like its universalist pretensions, by which I mean its uninterrogated belief that the world is as it seems to be in the mirror of the English language. I don't like the arrogance that this situation breeds in its native speakers. Therefore, I do what little I can to resist the hegemony of the English language."
12. Edith W. Clowes, *op. cit.*, p. 10.
13. *Ibidem*.
14. Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*, Hackett Publishing, 1978.
15. Edith W. Clowes, *op. cit.*, p. 10.
16. In addition, Braga's morphology offers a theoretical instrument not only for scholars dealing with utopia studies, but also, for writers who engage in writing a meta-utopia.
17. To explain the degree of possibility, in the Forward to *Drugs and the mind* by Robert S. de Ropp (1957), Dr. Nathan S. Kline warned about the danger of tranquilizing oneself by overprescription of psychopharmacological drugs for people without a disease which could lead to the control of emotional status, mental functioning, and will to act: "mankind is perfectly capable of tranquilizing itself into oblivion" (p. ix); this dystopian scenario was often dramatized in novels and movies such as *The Invasion* (2007, directed by Oliver Hirschbiegel) or *Equals* (2015, directed by Drake Doremus). Whilst there is research in this field, so far, medications reached the stage to change experience, they are still useless in actual changing people.
18. F.M. Dostoyevsky, *The Karamazov Brothers*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1994, p. 377-391.
19. J.M. Coetzee and Arabella Kurtz, *The good story. Exchanges on truth, fiction and psychotherapy*, New York, Viking. Penguin Random House LLC, e-book version, 2015, chapter four.
20. *Ibidem*.
21. *Ibidem*, chapter eleven.
22. *Ibidem*, chapter four.
23. J.M. Coetzee, *The Childhood of Jesus*, Melbourne, The Text Publishing Company, e-book version, 2013, chapter eight.

24. Coetzee admitted that he arbitrarily chose the language of the world he created calling it as the language of the afterlife as a revolt against the implications that even in the afterlife we have to imagine it within the English language limitations, similarly to this, Gabriel Garcia Lorca brought the idea that Spanish would be the language of angels, actually, locators of the haven or the afterlife. In addition, in *The Schooldays of Jesus* there is a quote from Rafael Alberti's volume *Sobre los ángeles (Concerning the angels)*, San Francisco, City Lights Books, 1995), the last verse from the poem "Los ángeles colegiales": "And wandering stars are children ignorant of arithmetic." (p. 124). In this way, the language of the characters of the novel is the language of Alberti's poems dedicated to angels.
25. Simplicity.
26. J.M. Coetzee, *The Childhood of Jesus*, *op. cit.*, chapter fifteen.
27. The same ratio is given to society in the subchapter "Degrees of Association. Family" from *Utopianism for a Dying Planet. Life after Consumerism* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2022) by Gregory Claeys. In his proposal, the importance of society over family in the social structure plays a cardinal role in the eco-utopia project, presenting it as a natural consequence from the utopian genre history. In *The Childhood of Jesus*, the society versus family reasoning is an ideal for the community, but a dystopia for the child.
28. J.M. Coetzee, *The Childhood of Jesus*, *op. cit.*, chapter twenty-four.
29. *Ibidem*, chapter twenty-eight.
30. Rafael Alberti, *Concerning the angels (Sobre los ángeles)*, San Francisco, City Lights Books, 1995, p. 35.
31. J.M. Coetzee, *The Childhood of Jesus*, *op. cit.*, chapter twenty-eight.
32. *Ibidem*, chapter thirty.
33. "As music enters us and moves us in dance, so the numbers cease to be mere ideas, mere phantoms, and become real." In J.M. Coetzee, *The Schooldays of Jesus*, London, Harvill Secker, e-book version, 2016, chapter seven.
34. J.M. Coetzee, *The Schooldays of Jesus*, London, Harvill Secker, 2016, chapter seven.
35. *Ibidem*.
36. Vladimir Soloviev, *War, progress, and the end of history, including a short story of the Anti-Christ. Three discussions by Vladimir Soloviev*, London, University of London Press, 1915. A meaningful parable from the book tells the story of two monks who commit sins; one of them returns to his life as if nothing has happened, he resumes to his prayers and lives quietly in peace like Coetzee's character Dimitri, whilst, the other one spends his days in a terrible state of distress regretting his deeds and despairing. In Soloviev's text is discussed the preferable moral condition of this context.
37. Dimitri killed brutally his presupposed lover, Ana Magdalena Arroyo.
38. Edith W. Clowes, *op. cit.*, p. 67.
39. A Christian sacrament commemorating the Last Supper by consecrating bread and wine, that are believed to be the body and the blood of Christ.
40. J.M. Coetzee, *The Death of Jesus*, Melbourne, Text Publishing Company, e-book, 2019, chapter twenty-three.
41. The fixation toward an idea was also accused by Dostoyevsky in *The Karamazov Brothers* related to Aliosha's choice to become a monk "To this I must add that he was already to some extent a youth of our times – in other words, naturally honest, insisting on truth, seeking it and believing in it, and, once believing, demanding instant commitment to it with all the strength of his soul and wanting to rush off and perform great deeds, sacrificing all, if necessary even life itself. Although unfortunately these youths do not understand that the sacrifice of life is in most cases perhaps the easiest of all sacrifices, and that to dedicate, for example, five or six years of their exuberant youth to hard, painstaking study and the acquisition of knowledge for the sole purpose of enhancing tenfold their inherent capacity to serve just that cherished truth, that great work which they are committed to accomplish – such a sacrifice as this remains almost completely beyond the capabilities of many of them." (*op. cit.*, p. 33).
42. Edith W. Clowes, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

43. Robert Pippin, *Metaphysical Exile on J.M. Coetzee's Jesus Fictions*, United States of America, Oxford University Press, 2021, p. 61.
44. J.M. Coetzee, *The Childhood of Jesus*, *op. cit.*, chapter two.
45. Edith W. Clowes, *op. cit.*, p. 21.
46. *Ibidem*, p. 69.
47. *Ibidem*, p. 12.
48. J.M. Coetzee, *The Death of Jesus*, *op. cit.*, chapter eleven.
49. *Ibidem*, chapter two.
50. Corin Braga, ed., *Morfologia lumilor posibile. Utopie, antiutopie, science-fiction, fantasy (The Morphology of Possible Worlds. Utopias, antiutopias, science-fiction, fantasy)*, Bucharest, Tracus Arte, 2015, p. 35.
51. Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature*, New York, Routledge, 2017, p. 133.