

Metaphysical Exile: on J. M. Coetzee's Jesus Fiction, by Robert Pippin

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Book Review

Metaphysical Exile: On J. M. Coetzee's Jesus Fictions, by Robert Pippin. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021. Pp. xii + 137

1. How can philosophy and literature helpfully interact? The so-called 'Jesus fictions' of J. M. Coetzee raise the issue in acute form because they drive readers apart on the question of what these works are ultimately designed to show. That philosophy should essentially get out of the way, allowing literature to fulfil the tasks that philosophy considers itself primed for but fails conspicuously to perform? Or that literature can only assist in these tasks if it is informed by philosophy so that it is our appreciation of the two in creative conjunction that matters?

In *Metaphysical Exile*, Robert Pippin sides with the latter view. This is in the face of strong critical support for the former which can draw on apparently encouraging comments by Coetzee himself, as well as on the powerfully sceptical line that the fictions themselves seem to express—at least if we identify that line with the attitudes of the one character (Simón) through whom we get almost all our information.

So strong is this line, we can make the opening question more precise so as to capture the scale of the challenge faced by those, like Pippin, who would oppose it. How can philosophy make itself useful to literature, or find literature useful for its own purposes, when it takes as its object works of literature that seem studiously resistant to philosophy and that seem indeed to make philosophy the object of their animosity?

2. There are three 'Jesus fictions': *The Childhood of Jesus* (2013), *The Schooldays of Jesus* (2016) and *The Death of Jesus* (2019). They are rather mystifying books, but they unquestionably have that 'throb in the throat of the story' which Nabokov identifies as the key to the achievement of writers like Gogol and Kafka (1980, 254).

The fictions tell of the arrival in a new land of the middle-aged Simón and the child he has promised to look after, six-year-old David, neither of whom have any substantial memory of their past; how they navigate a new life in this new land and recognize a younger woman as a mother for David, Inés, who agrees to take on the role and grows into it; how their lives are radically changed on successive occasions **as they search** to secure a suitable education for the strong-willed David, who can seem as he grows up almost equally gifted and obtuse, moving from ordinary school to a special school to an Academy of Dance and an Academy of Music; how David's skill as a dancer flourishes under the inspiring teacher Ana Magdalena but brings him under the influence of the wandering worker Dmitri who is her lover and who eventually murders her; how the now ten-year-old David decides to leave his family for an orphanage where he almost immediately contracts a mysterious illness that hospitalizes and eventually kills him; and of how a kind of cult grows up around

David's memory, leaving Simón mystified even by the pathetically little he is left to remember David by.

Robert Pippin's *Metaphysical Exile* is a quite exceptionally thought-provoking and astute account of these fictions. Beautifully articulated and deeply informed, its value first and foremost is that of a set of lucid and searching commentaries on specific details and difficulties. Many of the philosophical, theological and literary allusions which form the texture of the books and which tug constantly and often uncomfortably at the flagging memory of the reader—allusions to Plato, the Bible, Augustine, Cervantes, Kleist, Nietzsche, Wittgenstein among many others—are chased down here and cogently explained.

What makes Pippin's book particularly illuminating is that he is fully alive to what flummoxed the many talented and insightful reviewers who had a go at the first of the Jesus fictions (Oates 2013, Miller 2013, Lo Dico 2013, Bellin 2013, Markovits 2013, Cummins 2013, Farago 2013). Their qualified complaints are remarkably similar: at the head, some variant of the charge that the books 'conspicuously fail' even to explain their titles (Bellin 2013). Pippin's commentaries acknowledge the difficulties placed before the reader and either resolve them or give good reason to suppose they are justifiable as being the kind of difficulties that launch a reader's profitable inquiry. Indeed, if the estimation of these fictions is changing now from bewilderment to considered praise, some of the credit for this must go to philosopher-commentators like Pippin and Stephen Mulhall (2017) whose confidence that this is 'great literature' and worth taking seriously by philosophers (Pippin 2021, 60) meant they began the work of preparing the ground so that we can start identifying and explaining what is of particular value here.

Pippin also offers an overarching account of what it is that the Jesus fictions are doing, one that focuses on the issue proclaimed in his title. In doing this, he offers a model of a certain way of making philosophy helpful to literature, to return to the general issue which got us underway. So it is on this issue that the rest of the review will focus rather than the fine detail of Pippin's commentaries, with the warm recommendation to any reader whose interest has brought them thus far to seek out their riches.

In what remains, I shall try to identify the main problem that we can usefully make Pippin's overarching account address (3), then present an alternative resolution and its historical precedent (4) so as to make the significance of what Pippin offers stand out more clearly (5), and finally look in a necessarily brief way at what may get side-lined by his overarching account (6) and why we might resist it (7).

3. The Jesus fictions are remarkable literary works but puzzling, even 'really weird' as the title of one review disarmingly proclaims (Farago 2013).

One issue is that their ingenuities of narrative device and plot construction come veiled in a prose style that seems strangely bland. This is mystifying in a writer wonderfully capable of the whole range from softest Wordsworthian lyricism to

sharpest Latinate severity, and it has worried and even disappointed discerning admirers (e.g. Oates 2013). But there may be a justification for this: the decrease in the sheer ebullience of Coetzee's language-use, here fallen away almost to nothing, leaves the smallest ripples to show up as rich and strange. There may be deep reason to make the style produce that effect, as we shall see; it is a most effective way of conveying the uncanny stasis of complete homelessness, unrelieved and apparently unrelievable by any action or passion.

Moreover, the Jesus fictions do offer many opportunities to hear the Coetzee music, if we listen out for it: wry, restrained, as gently pained as quietly amused, sharp with the bite of Beckett but without Beckett's early galumphing humour or later thousand-yard stare, where the word 'keen' is apt because it shows how 'chilly' and 'ardent' may combine in a coupling that it is Coetzee's peculiar art to bless.

But even if we are satisfied with such a rationale, it would not really explain why these books are—I think rightly—coming to be recognized as Coetzee's genuine problem works, more awkward and baffling even than the frantic inner voices of *In the Heart of the Country* or the high mortifications of *Disgrace* or the astringent reproaches of the Elizabeth Costello fictions.

What is most tricky about the Jesus fictions is that, as our sense of their *craft* becomes sharper with each encounter, our grasp of their *point* becomes weaker. Why present the story as allegorical but strip it of the transparency or 'emotional density' which make allegory work? (Joyce Carol Oates 2013 suggests pertinent examples in contrast: the transparency of allegory in Plato's *Cave*, *Pilgrim's Progress* and *Animal Farm*; the emotional, psychological and visceral density' of allegory in Coetzee's own earlier fiction.) Why play with fictional worlds in ways that could as easily be a modish derogation of the literary enterprise as a studied vindication of it? (Jason Farago 2013 decides for the latter but on evidence that could tilt things equally for the former.) Why be so attentive to theological tropes associated with Jesus and other biblical figures but ensure that, whenever the narrative threads run parallel with religious stories, they soon diverge or run out altogether? Why allude so richly to philosophy but seem as profoundly resistant to it? What point does it serve to develop these narrative devices in these ways?

In short: what is all this literary and creative ingenuity *for*?

4. To open us up to the possibility of ethical conversion, runs one answer, where understanding such serious literary works means denying us use of our rational faculties.

This resolution of what the Jesus fictions are up to is not only the most fully worked-out answer of any previously on offer but also the best authenticated. Its foremost proponent is Derek Attridge (2017), a long-term colleague of and commentator on Coetzee. Attridge supports his interpretation of this most guarded of authors with several pertinent quotations from Coetzee himself, where Coetzee speaks apparently in *propria persona* rather than under one of the variety of fictional or professional guises he tends to use when making pronouncements.

All depends on the idea that the ethical event of conversion is prerational. It is prerational because, as Coetzee himself puts it, ethics itself is 'more deeply founded within us than rationality itself'; rationality has a place, but only ever to rationalize, 'to articulate and give form to ethical impulses' long after those impulses themselves have done their work (Cavalieri 2009, 121). This is a view which Coetzee attributes explicitly to William Wordsworth but owes more perhaps to Emmanuel Levinas (1969) and Jacques Derrida (2008, 105-18), who revised Levinas in the direction Coetzee approves, enabling ethics to deal more inclusively with non-human animals.

With these claims in place, we have an explanation of why it makes sense to ensure that no allegorical reading will succeed, that no theological tropes ever seem fully convincing, that the philosophical allusions lead nowhere. These are all tactics which subserve an overall strategy: demonstrating the essential uselessness of attempts to rationalize literary fiction.

Not that this strategy need be reduced to its negative aspect. By ensuring that we only ever experience discomfort and disappointment as we flounder around using our rational faculties to search for a 'key' to the Jesus fictions, these books continually remind us to keep those faculties offline and to rely instead on prerational modes of awareness, which in turn open us up in our re-reading to the possibility of ethical conversion. We may well think this attitude is personified by the central character of Simón, who is persistently sceptical towards philosophy throughout the fictions.

Whatever we may think of its assumptions, this way of explaining matters certainly has the shape of a formidable answer to the problem set by the Jesus fictions. It seems to face up to their complex difficulties, to explain the point and purpose of their literary and creative ingenuities and to give a fully positive role to the overall strategy.

Philosophy is the big loser in all this, of course. It is a surprise but no consolation to recognise here the return of a familiar ghost, now much overlooked. F. R. Leavis happily called himself an 'anti-philosopher' (1982, 189) and delighted in pillorying philosophers as hopelessly lost before the fact of literature, insulated from its values and out of touch with its virtues, only able to watch as the great novels carry off the prizes for succeeding at the serious and necessary work he thought philosophy is supposed to achieve but only ever fails at: justifying ethical principles in ways that change how we see and do things by making us fully receptive to ethical insights and motivating us to act on them (1952; 1975; 1982, 186-208).

Attridge has also been heavily influenced by Derrida on these issues of philosophy's relations with literature (e.g. Attridge 1992) and he is explicit about this. But in relation to Coetzee, it is the consonance with Leavis that is really telling, not least given Coetzee's own well-documented self-distancing from the Leavis-heavy atmosphere he found in the English Department at the University of Cape Town on taking up his teaching post there in 1971 (see Kannemeyer 2012, 227; Hayes and Wilm 2017, 6).

If Attridge is right about the Jesus fictions and they really do join in this denigration of the philosophical enterprise to the advantage of literature, then there are only two relatively minor respects in which Coetzee's latest works differ from the Leavis programme, and both to Coetzee's credit.

One is their manner. Leavis is notorious for speaking directly in an irksomely high, sententious moral tone and Coetzee wisely frees himself from this, speaking only indirectly via Simón, the modest central narrative prop of the Jesus fictions. The other is their strategy. There is nothing in Leavis so cunning as Coetzee's use of philosophy against itself in the Jesus fictions—if that is indeed what Coetzee is directing the fictions to do— alluding so richly to philosophy throughout precisely so as to encourage us to reject it.

5. The proposal that Pippin offers stands out in total contrast. On his view, Coetzee is not resisting and supplanting philosophy in the Jesus fictions but employing it at the heart of his enterprise.

His grounds for thinking this are that the Jesus fictions represent an attempt to construct a fictional world in many respects like our own, but which share more openly than ours—or at least more obviously—the distinctive setting and conditions of philosophy itself. These are the setting and conditions of a radical exile that Pippin dubs 'metaphysical'.

'Metaphysical' exile works by contrast with what we normally think of as exile: a displacement that is temporary and relative to historical situations, having its causes in one set of historical events and its ending in another. Metaphysical exile, on the other hand, is permanent, ahistorical and absolute, something that is universally experienced (whether or not it is universally recognised). Pippin has a poignant phrase for what lies at the bottom of this radical homelessness: 'living in the expectation and need of something that cannot be provided' in (2021, 79). In Pippin's view, it is just such a condition of metaphysical exile into which Coetzee inserts his characters in the Jesus fictions: 'a world in which everyone is in exile, without memories of their homeland, and docilely accepting an unintelligible situation' (2021, 16).

And it is this same metaphysical exile which aptly describes the condition of philosophy, at least under a general conception of the subject which Pippin argues is shared by a great variety of thinkers—not just the usual suspects like Novalis, who are notorious for stating the theme outright, but Descartes, Hume, Kant, through to Nietzsche, Freud and Heidegger. In one way or another, Pippin finds all these thinkers setting out a certain expectation of philosophy: that it will find or create a purposive match between what the world makes available to us and how we believe we should live in it. Further, he finds each of these thinkers coming to some form of the realization that this match is not something that can be provided, and that philosophy has to function in awareness of this fact. It is in this sense that each may be said to share a conception of philosophy as being a radical state of 'metaphysical exile, permanent, ahistorical and absolute.

If Pippin is right, this consonance is not coincidental but lies at the heart of Coetzee's design: to make the characters of the Jesus fictions share in the condition of philosophy, the condition of metaphysical exile. So what shapes this literary fiction and its development at the fundamental level are the characteristic concerns of philosophy. Coetzee's aim thus becomes a way of establishing philosophy at the heart of literary fiction. So he is certainly not denying us use of our rational faculties, and with them philosophy, as if ethical thinking could proceed through prerational immediate contact with literary fiction alone. If anything, he is vindicating philosophy, presenting it as that which we must experience in creative conjunction with literature if ethical thinking is to thrive.

This way of explaining matters addresses some of the complex difficulties of the Jesus fictions, motivates many of their literary and creative ingenuities, and offers a positive explanation of the overall strategy. So Pippin's proposal can certainly rival the most fully worked-out and apparently best authenticated alternative, the interpretation Attridge adopts.

The contrast between these proposals is vivid and turns on philosophy: whether it is something which the Jesus fictions set out to supplant or to vindicate. I mentioned the character Simón as a significant support for the former view, but in the light of Pippin's worked-through alternative, this can seem premature and unconvincing. We should evidently avoid confusing the overall direction of the fictions (still less Coetzee's own position) with the scepticism towards philosophy that its central character shows throughout their course. And looking at the evidence again, it is harder to say whether that scepticism runs deep in Simón, or how seriously we are supposed to take it if it does. Simón's hostility seems directed more at a caricature of the way some philosophers arrive at and convey their ideas than at philosophy itself. Indeed, it may well be esteem for the overall enterprise which explains such tangible disappointment with some of its practitioners.

6. There are features of the Jesus fictions which Pippin's proposal side-lines, particularly those which are more salient to a literary critical than to a philosopher's perspective, though they may nevertheless turn out to have philosophical significance. The example to explore is one that bears on issues just raised.

Coetzee adopts a peculiar narrative frame to convey his Jesus fictions, one that shares elements of both personal and impersonal narration but lacks the privileges of either. The narrative is impersonal in being third personal, but instead of taking the opportunity to range freely over various relevant situations and characters, it remains rigidly tied to one person (Simón), giving us only what information is given to him. And instead of taking the opportunity to go deeply into the mind of this one individual, representing his thoughts and experiences from the inside, describing what happens from the perspective of being this person in this situation, it remains rigidly focused on what is outward, giving us only the information about Simón that might equally be given to others through what he says and does.

This is important if we are to overcome the kinds of challenge that the Jesus fictions set up for us—to avoid assuming that any character’s opinions are the author’s, and to be aware that what might be the presentation of a particular view might also be a criticism of it, or a parody of it, or an impression created to supply a plausible rationale. To do this, we need to be able to work out how we are given the information we are given, what confirms it, how we know it is accurate and not a lie or at least misleading, what we are not given, whether we are being systematically deprived of some information, and so on. And this is peculiarly difficult in the Jesus fictions, not only because the information we have is restricted to what is given to just one character, or because we are denied immediate access to that character’s inner life, but because there are subtle indications that this character, Simón, is much more complex and possibly untrustworthy than he appears.

The evidence is indirect, precisely because we are not granted immediate access to Simón’s inner life, but it does leak out, and it is particularly intriguing to see *where* it does so: when Simón is explaining matters of philosophical significance to David, particularly concerning animals (2013, 203; 2016, 228; 2019, 52), which is an interesting clue, given the peculiarly personal significance of this issue to Coetzee, but also concerning evil (2016, 10), on God (2103, 259), death (2013, 157), and the nature of our relation to the past (2013, 116).

These are topics where we would expect someone in the parental role to modify, translate, simplify for the benefit of a child. But Simón does far more than this, as becomes increasingly clear, consciously and knowingly twisting the argument, glossing over problems, hiding obvious responses.

David comes eventually to distrust Simón, and though this seems unfair if we remain at the surface of the Simón-centred narrative, it is a response that Coetzee has carefully prepared for and explained, making visible what is untrustworthy about Simón precisely where Simón regards others as unreliable: in engagement with philosophy, or more accurately with philosophizing.

7. Where, finally, do these considerations bring us?

Attridge’s proposal, based on the idea of a prerational form of immediate contact which eliminates philosophy and other rational relations altogether, seems not only unworkable and unmotivated but contested by the Jesus fictions themselves. That very scepticism towards philosophy which is manifest throughout in the central character Simón, together with the structural dependence of the fictions on allusions to a wealth of philosophical authors, texts, problems and allegories, keeps philosophy deeply in play. We cannot make sense of Simón’s scepticism about philosophy except as a form of philosophizing about philosophy.

But we can reject the proposal to eliminate philosophy without agreeing with Pippin that it is philosophy and its characteristic concerns which fundamentally shape the Jesus fictions. There is a middle course between so boldly vindicating philosophy and supplanting it altogether which is more likely to be the course pursued by the fictions.

The ground of disagreement is not whether Pippin is right to identify 'metaphysical exile' as a central theme in philosophy. I think it is, particularly in the development of more continental strands in modern philosophy (de Gaynesford 2007). And I agree that exile is indeed a central theme in the Jesus fictions. What I doubt is whether it is the same kind of exile—i.e. *metaphysical* exile—which is central to the fictions as well as to philosophy.

If that were the case, then the exile experienced by the characters in these fictions would have to be permanent, ahistorical, absolute and universal. But the exile which the fictions depict, though extreme, is not of this utterly radical sort. The exile that Simón experiences has a start in time (he is able to remember significant parts of his past), it is historical (its nature changes with changes he and others are responsible for), it is individual (the exile Simón experiences is quite different from that experienced by David or Inés or Dmitri) and it is relative to conditions (as conditions change, so does the kind of exile experienced by Simón and others).

This is important, I think, because it entails that the kind of exile experienced by characters in the Jesus fictions is fundamentally akin to that which afflicts immigrants across this present world who have been displaced in different ways by specific historical events, rather than to Pippin's very rarified condition which might be said to affect us all (e.g. as part of 'the human condition').

There is a price to pay for viewing the Jesus fictions as interested in 'immigrant' exile rather than Pippin's 'metaphysical' sort. First, we have to renounce his way of making philosophy and literature interact. If they are not talking about the same kind of exile, we cannot unify their focus at the fundamental level. Second, we have to acknowledge good grounds for exasperation with philosophy, of the sort manifested by Simón: what good is philosophy to us if it is focused on exile of the 'metaphysical' kind? But this frustration need not turn to the elimination of philosophy, and it might induce a call for fruitful change. That is one way of launching positive interaction between philosophy and literature and it seems thoroughly in keeping with the Jesus fictions, as I read them.

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