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"Let us keep going and see what comes up": The Poetics of Study in J. M. Coetzee's *The Childhood of Jesus*

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Abstract: This article argues that J. M. Coetzee's *The Childhood of Jesus* embodies a poetics of study. Noting Coetzee's sustained interest in educational thought, the article places Coetzee's enigmatic novel in dialogue with Giorgio Agamben's idea of study, which brings together the latter's foundational thinking on infancy, impotentiality (Agamben's term for the distinctly human capacity to withhold a certain potential), and the messianic. It shows how *The Childhood of Jesus* prompts its readers towards the experimentative pursuit of infinite possibilities for thought in the present moment, inviting a different mode of reading than the future-directed Derridean/Levinasian ethics of hospitality through which Coetzee's work is often read. In showing how Coetzee's late work resonates with Agamben's thought rather than Derrida's, the article highlights the emergence in Coetzee's fiction of a view of learning (and, analogously, of reading) that is characterized by irresponsibility and the idea of study with no presupposed end in sight—a dynamic that is quite distinct from an ethics of reading guided by responsibility towards a presupposed "other" to come.

Keywords: J. M. Coetzee, Giorgio Agamben, ethics of reading, education, potentiality

"I can read, only I don't want to" (146), says David, the young child around whom the plot revolves in J. M. Coetzee's *The Childhood of Jesus*. How might we understand the foregrounding of the child's education in this elusive novel, which, through its various circularities in pursu-

ing this theme and its refusal to submit to any single reading—forcing the reader (at least this one) to recognize herself as a resisting child—lends itself so well to thinking about the analogies between learning and reading? In this article, I show how the presence of the child character, Bartleby-like in his preferring not to do things by the book, is key to understanding the poetics of the novel. Reading *The Childhood of Jesus* in dialogue with Giorgio Agamben's meditations on infancy, impotentiality (Agamben's term for the distinctly human capacity not to actualize a certain potential), and the messianic, I find in the novel's oscillating rhythm and quest-like form a poetics of study, which offers an unexplored point of entry into the ongoing conversation on pedagogy and education in Coetzee's work. Importantly, this poetics of study suggests an ethics of reading quite different from the Derridean/Levinasian ethics of hospitality that has dominated the late reception of Coetzee's work. Ultimately, the difference condenses into the issue of whether reading is viewed as the responsibility to the distinctive (but finally ungraspable) otherness of the literary work, or rather as a form of freedom and irresponsibility, leaving open the potential for all directions of thought.

In his novels, Coetzee returns time and time again to scenes of teaching. The recurring perspective is that of the privileged subject trying unsuccessfully to pedagogically reach the (often resisting) other, all the while interrogating the ethical grounds of his or her own authority. Consider, for example, *Age of Iron*'s Mrs. Curren and her helplessness before the resisting township boys John and Bheki, *Foe*'s Susan Barton and her failed attempts to teach Friday to write, and *Disgrace*'s David Lurie and his exasperation at his uninspired students of William Wordsworth. The difficulties facing these teacher characters recall how Coetzee has described his own predicament of writing from a position of privilege and complicity within the unjust sociopolitical structures of apartheid South Africa and its aftermath. Indeed, in explorations of eroding authority and failed reciprocity, the question of pedagogy and the ethics of the other are intimately linked in Coetzee's oeuvre. Unsurprisingly, Coetzee's novels—particularly *Disgrace*—continue to inspire critical reflections on the ethics of the pedagogical relationship.[1] In her essay "Ethics and Politics in Tagore, Coetzee, and Certain Scenes

of Teaching," Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak considers *Disgrace* alongside her own recollections of teaching in rural India, finding analogies between the novel's relentless focalization through professor David Lurie and the risk of similarly one-sided perspectives in the context of subaltern teaching. Reading *Disgrace* as an invitation to counterfocalize—Spivak's term for imagining the unknowable other as subject—Spivak emphasizes the ethical importance of such imaginative impulses also in the pedagogical situation. Jarad Zimbler, also reflecting on *Disgrace* and postcolonial pedagogy, echoes Spivak's call to read—and teach—with attention to discontinuities between self and other; he highlights the need for the learner to be constituted as a subject and for the teacher, hence, to "question with care, and to invite the other to respond" (21).

Although Coetzee rarely stages the student as subject—a notable exception is the fictional childhood memoir *Boyhood* and its account of the young John's school years—he comes back to the dynamics of learning in and outside of his fiction. In the novels, Coetzee's focalizers are typically frustrated by the resistance—sometimes understood as ignorance—of the other-to-be-educated.[2] Judging from his comments on pedagogy and play in interviews and essays, Coetzee himself appears to embrace such resistance.[3] In *The Good Story: Exchanges on Truth, Fiction and Psychotherapy*, a series of dialogues with psychoanalyst Arabella Kurtz, Coetzee reflects on the obscure nature of certain students' "stubborn resistance" and "refusal to accept the teacher's critical authority" and on the inverse but equally puzzling "slavish" following of the teacher of other students (166). He suggests that ultimately, for real education to take place, the teacher "has to be resisted, followed, resisted and followed, transcended, and left behind" (169).

If Coetzee's work interrogates the ethics of the pedagogical relationship, it also inspires critical reflection on the politics of education. Reading *Disgrace* and empathizing with David Lurie's disillusionment at having to teach the soulless "Communications 101" in the place of English literature, Raphael Dalleo cautions against the decentering of the university teacher and the ensuing devaluation of knowledge, not by the radical and empowering Freirean pedagogy of the 1970s but by the instrumentality of neocapitalist governance. Coetzee

himself voices his misgivings about the increasing instrumentality of higher education in South Africa and beyond in similar terms: "All over the world, as governments retreat from their traditional duty to foster the common good and reconceive of themselves as mere managers of national economies, universities have been coming under pressure to turn themselves into training schools equipping young people with the skills required by a modern economy" (Foreword xi). As I will show, *The Childhood of Jesus* encourages further reflection on both the ethics and politics of education, in terms, unexpectedly, of Agamben's idea of impotentiality, a development of the Aristotelian notion of potentiality that emphasizes the unique human capability to resist or fulfil the realization of predetermined goals. And it is by highlighting the child—and the idea of infancy—that the novel propels the conversation on pedagogy in Coetzee's work in this unanticipated direction.

While the centrality of the child in Coetzee's work is not new—children are everywhere in his novels—the particular focus on the child and pedagogy in *The Childhood of Jesus* was prefigured, interestingly, in Coetzee's graduation ceremony speech given at the University of Witwatersrand in December 2012, a few months before the novel's publication. In his talk, Coetzee addressed the male graduates in particular, urging them to consider a career in teaching (a gesture which despite—or perhaps due to—its simple message caused a certain critical consternation). Coetzee pointed to the societal benefits of engaging more men in the traditionally female domain of South African primary education but also to the individual reward in the adult-child encounter, the "nakedness of experience" to be found in a classroom of young children: "It is not hard to make the case that it will be good for you, good for your soul, to be with small children. . . . Children can be exhausting, they can be irritating, but they are never anything but their full human selves" (Graduation). This idea that the adult may learn from the child in an educational situation returns in *The Childhood of Jesus*.

Indeed, *The Childhood of Jesus*, in its engagement with different schools of educational thought, echoes questions that Coetzee has been asking throughout his writerly career. In *The Good Story*, Coetzee reflects on rational discourse and symbolic play as alternative ways for the child

to learn to deal with the world, saying that he would "be sorry to see bright young souls turned into exemplary reasoning machines" (156). Educational concerns also appear in *Summertime*: in one of the "undated fragments" near the end of the novel, the character John Coetzee (who we are invited to read as Coetzee the writer) reveals that he "has been reading here and there in educational theory" (252). He then juxtaposes the Dutch Calvinist teachers of his early childhood and their Kuyperian emphasis on forming the child "as a craftsman forms a clay pot" (252)—educators that he had resisted as a child "as he resists them now" (253)—against the child-centred Montessori and Rudolf Steiner schools of thinking that, he realizes in hindsight, influenced his mother's parenting. This is a topic that he expects to return to, writing, in a note-to-self, "[*t*]*o be developed: his own, home-grown theory of education*" (255; emphasis in original). While *The Childhood of Jesus* is perhaps not the "*home-grown theory of education*" foreshadowed in *Summertime*, the trajectories of its protagonist-educator certainly amplify the character John's reflections—as well as, indeed, the experiences of the school boy in *Boyhood*.

The Childhood of Jesus casts the reader along with its protagonists, the teacher-character Simón and the five/six-year old boy David—the former the self-appointed guardian of the latter following a voyage at sea where the child has been separated from his parents—into the markedly vague setting of Novilla. Crucial for the operation of *The Childhood of Jesus* is that Simón's disorientation in Novilla is also the reader's; the novel is as elusive to the reader as its setting is to the principal character. Lacking worldly referents that would enable at least some degree of shared horizons between text and reader and allowing the reader to tacitly fill in inevitable gaps with her imagination, *The Childhood of Jesus* is characterized by what we might call a precise elusiveness; it ensures that no particulars offer the beginnings of a common frame of reference. For example, on the novel's first page, the protagonists find themselves at a resettlement centre, *Centro de Reubicación Novilla* (Coetzee 1). While the reader can translate the Spanish (unlike Simón who does not understand the meaning of *Reubicación* [Relocation]), the novel does not provide markers to privilege a certain understanding of the logic behind

this resettlement: Are we dealing with an afterlife, with a refugee crisis, or with the historical Jesus of Nazareth? There are several obstacles to the reader's assimilation of the novel's fictional world, such as the strange circumstance that all arrivals to Novilla have been "washed clean" of their memories (20). The lack of reference points excludes the possibility of dramatic irony, leaving the reader trying to make sense of the novel as lost as Simón, who is trying to make sense of the world into which he has been inserted; the predicament of both parties resembles how, in Coetzee's words, Beckett's characters are "thrown without explanation into an existence governed by obscure rules" (*Inner Workings* 171). Also contributing to the novel's inconclusiveness is the disparity of the ideas it engages with thematically, as shown by the diversity of the essays in Jennifer Rutherford and Anthony Uhlmann's edited volume *J. M. Coetzee's The Childhood of Jesus: The Ethics of Ideas and Things* (2017). As the editors point out in their introduction, the novel "is built around paradox and seemingly deliberately points its readers in several directions at once" (3).

Unlike the settings for Coetzee's earlier scenes of teaching, Novilla—a learning society of sorts, where the citizens attend evening classes for self-improvement—provides a distinctly egalitarian backdrop. Here, the intended learner is not the disadvantaged other but the child (and, eventually, the adult self). Yet the child's resistance to learning in the novel, which draws our attention to study as an indeterminate state—a restless shuttling between activity and passivity, between clarity and obscurity—is also instructive for our understanding of pedagogical encounters with the postcolonial other in Coetzee's work. Remarkably, the idea of study not only highlights how the novel's educational theme interacts with its quest-like narrative form; it also points to an ethics of reading quite different from the ethics of hospitality which has permeated the reception of Coetzee's novels since the publication in 2004 of Derek Attridge's companion volumes *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event* and *The Singularity of Literature*.[4] *The Childhood of Jesus* evinces a view of learning (and, by analogy, of reading) that is is characterized, ultimately, by irresponsibility—by the idea of study with no presupposed end in sight. Reading as irresponsible study, then, is quite

distinct from an ethics of reading guided by responsibility towards a presupposed "other" to come.

I. The Ethics of Hospitality and Waiting

In Attridge's seminal contributions to literary criticism in general, and to Coetzee scholarship in particular, he argues that Coetzee's novels call for a particular ethical response. He observes that "Coetzee's works both stage, and are, irrruptions of otherness into our familiar worlds" and that they ask, of their characters and of their readers: "what is our responsibility toward the other?" (*J. M. Coetzee* xii). Noting how Coetzee's novels resonate with Jacques Derrida's writing on hospitality (inspired by Emmanuel Levinas), Attridge carefully develops an ethics of reading throughout the two volumes, emphasizing the reader's responsibility to be responsive to a literary work in order for its singularity and otherness to be acknowledged. Indeed, the theme of an ethics based on hospitality to an unknown other runs as a common thread through many of Coetzee's novels—for example, the medical officer's desire to understand Michael K in *Life and Times of Michael K*, the Magistrate's attempts to know the barbarian girl in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, Mrs. Curren's trust in Verceuil in *Age of Iron*, David Lurie's opera composition and his response to the dogs at the clinic in *Disgrace*, and Dostoevsky's waiting for writerly inspiration in *The Master of Petersburg*. Attridge shows how such stagings of openness to alterity translate into analogous ethical demands on the reader. Reading *The Master of Petersburg*, for example, Attridge closely links the novel's "intractable questions of waiting, of expectation, of hospitality, of giving oneself to the future, to the other" to the reader's responsibility to try to "do justice to the real originality of a new novel" (*J. M. Coetzee* 122). Attridge places the idea of being open to that which is to come in the future at the centre of his ethics of reading, observing that "[b]oth Levinas and Derrida link the future indissociably to ethics, responsibility and alterity" (98). Also, importantly, Coetzee's own words on writing fiction as involving a feeling of "responsibility toward something that has not yet emerged, that lies somewhere at the end of the road" (*Doubling* 246) mirror and reinforce the emphasis on waiting and expectation that emerges from the novels.

Such an ethics of hospitality is a crucial dimension throughout Coetzee's oeuvre, and it reappears thematically in the early pages of *The Childhood of Jesus*. When Simón takes it upon himself to find David's lost mother, following the strange conviction that he will recognize her when he sees her (despite never having seen her before and not knowing her name), he mirrors the reader's anticipation of a meaning that has not yet been grasped; again, the reader's disorientation echoes the protagonist's. So, at the outset, the novel stages Simón waiting for the arrival of the unknown mother-to-be: "*I am girding my loins*, he tells himself. *I am girding my loins for the next chapter in this enterprise*. By the next chapter he means the quest for the boy's mother, the quest that he does not yet know where to commence. *I am concentrating my energies; I am making plans*" (Coetzee, *Childhood* 52; emphasis in original). In this "*girding* [of] *loins*," anticipating "*the next chapter*," we recognize the formula of hospitality to the unexpected outlined by Attridge. In fact, when Simón eventually encounters Inés, the woman whom he will persuade to assume the role of David's mother, what he demands of her is—literally—unconditional hospitality to the other:

> 'Please believe me—please take it on faith—this is not a simple matter. The boy is without mother. What that means I cannot explain to you because I cannot explain it to myself. Yet I promise you, if you will simply say Yes, without forethought, without afterthought, all will become clear to you, as clear as day, or so I believe. Therefore: will you accept this child as yours?' (Coetzee, *Childhood* 75)

In this passage, Simón's words are uncannily similar to Derrida's: "Let us say yes *to who or what turns up*, before any determination, before any anticipation, before any *identification*, whether or not it has to do with a foreigner, an immigrant, an invited guest, or an unexpected visitor, whether or not the new arrival is the citizen of another country, a human, animal, or divine creature, a living or dead thing, male or female" (*Of Hospitality* 77; emphasis in original). In this way, then, the idea of an ethics of hospitality—of being unconditionally open to an

other, or a meaning, that is yet to arrive—is explicitly evoked in *The Childhood of Jesus*.

II. "Pressing on"

However, at the same time the novel discourages the very idea of waiting for the arrival of a particular meaning, belief, or interpretation. Instead, it compels the reader towards an intensity of thought, to actively follow Simón in the latter's attempts to navigate and make sense of the bland yet enigmatic Novilla, with its rules lacking in logic, its food lacking in spices, and its people lacking in passion; it is unclear whether we are dealing with a utopia, a dystopia, or something else. Time and time again signs in the landscape appear to be clues to something that has been lost: "They strike a town named Laguna Verde (why?—there is no lagoon)" (Coetzee, *Childhood* 261). Wandering around Novilla, Simón deciphers signs but cannot pin down their meaning; his bewilderment alternates with fleeting moments of recognition, inciting in him a constant shuttling between activity and passivity.

As the boy's schooling is placed firmly at the centre of the plot, Simón's trouble orienting himself amongst Novillan topographies and bureaucracy is parallelled by a similar frustration in his more abstract quest into the world of educational philosophy. Initially of the opinion that the child "needs to face up to the real world" (168), he later changes his mind:

> 'There are two schools of thought, Eugenio, on the upbringing of children. One says that we should shape them like clay, forming them into virtuous citizens.The other says that we are children only once, that a happy childhood is the foundation of a happy later life. Inés belongs to the latter school; and, because she is his mother, because the bonds between a child and his mother are sacred, I follow her. Therefore no, I do not believe that more of the discipline of the schoolroom will be good for David.' (251)

Yet Simón is reluctant to assume any definitive stance, and the reader is prompted to follow him in his inconclusive explorations of tensions

that have marked educational thought since Plato's *Republic*, namely the need for forming young citizens to meet predetermined ends set against the merits of learning through free play. These divides are not entirely clear-cut, of course, and throughout the novel Simón oscillates uncertainly between these poles, reluctant to firmly commit to a specific pedagogical regime. Indeed, constantly present in Coetzee's writing on education, in *The Childhood of Jesus* and elsewhere, is the tension between authority and continuity on the one hand and resistance and renewal on the other.[5] The novel's exploration of this tension sends the reader off in different directions—actively trying but constantly failing to locate the novel's stance on pedagogy, authority, and resistance. Conflicting ideas on education are tested in Simón's own reflections and in his exchanges with Inés, Elena, and his co-workers at the dock, but the narrative consciousness does not invite us to privilege one over the other; the novel's inconclusiveness mirrors the inadequate maps Simón is provided with at various points; Novillan officials give directions to Simón to help him find his way around Novilla, but they are unclear sketches on scraps of paper, and he loses time by setting out on tracks that turn out to be the wrong ones. The reader's incessant process of re-interpretation—the testing and rejection of ideas—echoes the rhythm of Simón following obscure traces in the landscape of the novel:

> They press on. But either he has misread the map or the map itself is at fault, for after rising sharply and then plunging as steeply, the track terminates without warning at a brick wall and a rusty gate overgrown with ivy. Beside the gate is a weather-beaten painted sign. He pushes aside the ivy. '*La Residencia*,' he reads.
>
> 'What is a *residencia*?' asks the boy.
>
> 'A *residencia* is a house, a grand one. But this particular *residencia* may be nothing but a ruin.' (68)

Crucially, Simón, here and elsewhere in the novel, "press[es] on" rather than wait for an epiphany as earlier Coetzee protagonists often seem to do. But how are we to understand the "misreading" of maps, tracks terminating "without warning," encounters with something that may

actually be something else than what it appeared to be? Equally, how are we to understand, as Rutherford puts it so well, "the way *The Childhood of Jesus* glimmers and flashes with ideas, as if the entire lexicon of Western philosophy lies under the surface" (59)? Indeed, how are we to understand the novel's cultivation of an unsettled reader? (Even for a Coetzee novel, the reception of *The Childhood of Jesus* has been remarkably frustrated and inconclusive.[6])

I propose that this "pressing on" and the appearance of new opportunities for thought at each turn, staged and also reflected in my own experience of reading the novel, can be described as a poetics of study, a notion I derive from Agamben's (very brief) reflection on study in his *Idea of Prose*. While scholars have extensively and productively read Coetzee in critical dialogue with Agamben's thought, they have focused mainly on how the latter's biopolitical framework, with his concepts of *homo sacer*, "bare life," and the "state of exception," opens up ethico-political interrogations in novels such as *Life and Times of Michael K* and *Waiting for the Barbarians*, as well as on the resonances between Coetzee's and Agamben's respective thinking on the relation between human and non-human animals.[7] But, as I show below, Agamben's thought on study—bringing together his foundational thinking on infancy and potentiality—offers a fruitful (yet surprisingly unexplored) point of entry into both ethical and aesthetic aspects of Coetzee's work.[8] Moreover, the notion of study links Coetzee's pedagogical focus over the years to the poetics of this particular novel.

III. Agamben and the Incessant Shuttling of Study

My discussion of Agamben's approach to study draws on Tyson E. Lewis' rich extrapolation of Agamben's work on potentiality in his *On Study: Giorgio Agamben and Educational Potentiality* (2013), in which Lewis interrogates the standardising imperatives of a learning society in which "potentiality [is reduced to] a 'not yet' that actualizes itself in a 'must be'" (8).[9] Reading Agamben on impotentiality (which Agamben understands as the human capacity to withhold the actualization of a specific potentiality), Lewis proposes a philosophy of education predicated not on fulfilling one's "true potentiality" according to the

educational logic inherent to biocapitalism but rather on embracing the ontological indeterminacy of the human (11). In this view, freedom, and indeed redemption, lie precisely in the unfulfilled nature of each moment—the moment of "I can, I cannot," in which an individual may recognize "the contingency of a life to be *rather than* what it is" (Lewis 11; emphasis in original). Acknowledging that Agamben makes only a "passing gesture" towards education in his writing (11), Lewis argues that Agamben's emphasis on the "connections between study, im-potentiality, messianic time and . . . freedom" invite us to "think through the ontological, temporal, spatial, aesthetic and political dimensions of study" (15). As I will show, the connections between study, impotentiality, and messianic time are particularly helpful when approaching *The Childhood of Jesus*.

Here is Agamben on study:

> Study, in effect, is per se interminable. Those who are acquainted with long hours spent roaming among books, when every fragment . . . seems to open a new path, immediately left aside at the next encounter, or who have experienced the labyrinthine allusiveness of that "law of good neighbours" whereby Warburg arranged his library, know that not only can study have no rightful end, but [*sic*] does not even desire one. . . .
>
> The scholar . . . is always "stupid." But if on the one hand he is astonished and absorbed, if study is thus essentially a suffering and an undergoing, the messianic legacy it contains drives him, on the other hand, incessantly toward closure. This . . . shuttling between bewilderment and lucidity, discovery and loss, between agent and patient, is the rhythm of study. (*Idea of Prose* 64)

This passage on study can help us understand *The Childhood of Jesus* in several ways (aside from noting the image of the scholar as "stupid," a figure that may well spark recognition in bewildered readers of Coetzee's novel). The idea of study as a process of roaming along ever new paths, desiring "no rightful end," certainly resonates with the multiplicity of ideas evoked by the novel. This idea also resonates with the novel's

inconclusive structure, as its final pages feature the main characters setting off on a journey with no destination: "let us keep going and see what comes up" (Coetzee, *Childhood* 261). Moreover, as I discuss above, this is a novel that repeatedly sends not only its protagonists but also its reader off on unresolved quests in different directions, following the "labyrinthine allusiveness" of tentative philosophical ideas. *The Childhood of Jesus* clearly does not strive towards unity; on the contrary, it embraces its own disarray, and the reader, just like Simón, must soon abandon any desire for wholeness. Simón restlessly shuttles "between bewilderment and lucidity" as he approaches both Novilla and the more abstract realm of educational philosophy, following signs and gestures that could be interpreted in different ways, going back and forth, often uncertain in his response to what he encounters. A similar oscillation is experienced by the reader, who, in the absence of any reference to recognizable particulars, has no more knowledge of the novel's world than its protagonist; there is no dramatic irony to rely on for meaning. Agamben likens study to "the condition which Aristotle, contrasting it with the act, defines as 'potential'" and notes how potential is on the one hand passive, "a pure and virtually infinite undergoing," and on the other hand active, "an unstoppable drive to undertake, an urge to act" (*Idea* 64). Significantly, the rhythm thus achieved is markedly more restless, active, and inquisitive (although, paradoxically, less goal-oriented) than the mood of waiting that characterizes many of Coetzee's earlier novels.

A helpful way of understanding the difference between an ethics of reading based on Derrida's thinking on unconditional hospitality and one based on Agamben's concept of study is to briefly explore the two thinkers' respective conceptions of the messianic. In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida explains "undetermined mesianic [*sic*] hope" as the "eschatological relation to the to-come of an event . . . of an alterity that cannot be anticipated" (81), in which the anticipation of an arrival clearly relates the messianic to the future.[10] Agamben's understanding of messianic time, on the other hand, is focused not on the future but on the present. It can be traced back to Walter Benjamin's idea of weak messianic power as postulated in his "Theses on the Philosophy of

History": Benjamin critiques "homogenous empty time" (252), which he associates with "the historical progress of mankind," privileging instead "time filled by the presence of the now [*Jetztzeit*]" (252–53) stating that in each instant, each generation is endowed with the power to redeem past generations by recognizing images of the past as concerns of the present as the "true picture of the past flits by" (247). As Leland de la Durantaye explains,

> [t]o many, "messianic time" suggests indeterminate waiting for the Messiah to come, redeem mankind, and complete human history. For Agamben, however, "messianic time" means, as it did for Benjamin, the very opposite. This messianic time is not one of apocalypse, but of immediacy. . . . For Agamben, Benjamin's messianism, like his own, is an attempt to *grasp the potentialities of our present situation*. (376; emphasis added)

In this philosophical junction, *The Childhood of Jesus* tends towards Agamben's "[grasping] the potentialities of our present situation" rather than Derrida's "to-come"; this is the foundation of the novel's poetics of study. Helpfully, Lewis draws a direct line between Agamben's conception of messianic time and education when he suggests that studying, more than any other action, represents the messianic moment: "The temporality of weak utopianism is not simply the messianic time of the now, but also the temporality of perpetual study where the student holds judgment in suspension in order to touch the im-potentiality of thought itself—the weakness in thought that cannot be made into a form of knowledge" (107). In *The Childhood of Jesus*, the key to the mobilization of this messianic impulse, this privileging of the present over the future that is the "temporality of perpetual study," is the presence of the child.[11] For Simón's "urge to act" (recalling Agamben's words on study quoted above) is set off by the presence of the child but brought to a standstill—a state of waiting—when the child is removed from his presence. (We are reminded of Coetzee's words at Witwatersrand about the rewards to be found in the adult-child encounter.) This is addressed explicitly in the novel by Simón's friend Elena, who asks, "Instead of waiting to be transfigured, why not try to be like a child again?" (143).

Her implication is that being like a child is living in the present rather than awaiting what is to come.

In Agamben's work, these idea cluster around the notion of infancy, which elucidates how study is prompted by the child. In the section "The Idea of Infancy" in *Idea of Prose*, Agamben imagines a "neotenic infant" who, in the fashion of the peculiar axolotl salamander who prolongs its larval state throughout its lifespan, retains the potential "not to" develop as it grows into adulthood:

> The neotenic infant . . . would find himself in the condition of being able to pay attention precisely to what has not been written, to somatic possibilities that are arbitrary and uncodified; in his infantile totipotency, he would be ecstatically overwhelmed, cast out of himself, not like other living beings into a specific adventure or environment, but for the first time into a *world*. He would truly be listening to being. His voice still free from any genetic prescription, and having absolutely nothing to say or express, sole animal of his kind, he could, like Adam, *name* things in his language. In naming, man is tied to infancy, he is for ever linked to an openness that transcends every specific destiny and every genetic calling. (96–97; emphasis in original)

To Agamben, then, infancy signifies a condition of infinite and sustained openness and incompletion in which language is available but specific discourse not yet undertaken. It is a state of suspension between semiotics and semantics, signifiers and signified—an openness not directed towards an unknown other to come (à la Attridge) but simply as an indeterminate state. It is clear that Agamben conceives of infancy as a desirable state of strength ("infantile totipotency") and freedom (a "voice . . . free from . . . prescription,"); importantly, this state is available to the adult as well. In "pay[ing] attention precisely to what has not been written," an individual can access the possibility of the world being otherwise than it is. And the indeterminacy inherent in infancy, according to Agamben, is what distinguishes humans from other living beings, who are born into a specific and predetermined role. In other

words, the human, unlike non-human animals, is not compelled to follow a certain preprogrammed genetic code but, "for ever linked to an openness that transcends every specific destiny," can choose to actualize or not-actualize any given potential.[12] Here is Agamben again: "*Other living beings are capable only of their specific potentiality; they can only do this or that. But human beings are the animals who are capable of their own impotentiality. The greatness of human potentiality is measured by the abyss of human impotentiality*" (*Potentialities* 182; emphasis in original). It is precisely in this pervasive residue of infancy in each moment of the present, in the "abyss of human impotentiality," a potentiality that does not even invite fulfilment, that Agamben locates the "never setting openness" of the messianic (*Idea of Prose* 98). In his essay on infancy, Agamben writes that "somewhere inside of us, the careless neotenic child continues his royal game," and the play of this inner child "keeps ajar for us that never setting openness" (*Idea of Prose* 98). In this way, the intersection between study and infancy as the "never setting openness" that the child "inside of us" gives access to is also the hallmark of a "study that has no rightful end" (as Agamben has it in his essay on study). In other words, through perpetual study, the scholar (or the reader of *The Childhood of Jesus*) inhabits this state of infancy.[13]

The poetics of study that underlies *The Childhood of Jesus* can be understood, I suggest, as the embracing of impotentiality, which is fundamentally linked to infancy in Agamben's thought. This is striking especially in educational moments in the novel. Let us consider for a moment how impotentiality relates to education. When conceptualising impotentiality, Agamben makes use of Aristotle's distinction between generic and existing potentality.[14] To Aristotle, generic potentiality refers to the child's potential to learn something in order to become something other—for example, learning to swim. Existing potentiality, on the other hand, belongs to someone who already has a certain knowledge or ability, and who on the basis of this having can choose whether or not to actualise this potential. A poet, for example, can choose to write or not write (or, as *The Childhood of Jesus* shows, a child who is able to read can read or not read): "It is a potentiality that is not simply the potential to do this or that thing but potential to not-do, potential not to pass

into actuality" (Agamben, *Potentialities* 181–82). Educational discourse traditionally focuses on the actualisation of a generic potentiality—in other words, the possibility, inevitability, or duty for the child to learn something in order to become this or that. Lewis traces how Agamben, wary of predetermined ends, instead picks up the idea of existing or negative potentiality, always containing within itself the capability of impotentiality. For Agamben, it is within this "abyss of potentiality" that freedom can be found: "To be free is not simply to have the power to do this or that thing, nor is it simply to have the power to refuse to do this or that thing. To be free is . . . *to be capable of one's own impotentiality*" (182–83; emphasis in original).

Initially, Simón is intent precisely on teaching David to do "this or that thing," to actualise his potential (and we might recall Coetzee's concern with the increasing instrumentality of education). Football, linked in the novel to maturity, progress, and order, is a useful motif for thinking about the necessity of actualizing potential. "He has to start sometime," Simón's co-worker Alonso remarks when inviting David to come along to a football match (which he does, reluctantly) (Coetzee, *Childhood* 23); and when the children later join a football game in the park, "though they are really too young," they "[d]utifully . . . surge back and forth with the other players" (58), the game clearly a chore, the very opposite of freedom. This contrasts with the image of the children "[racing] ahead" (54), "glowing with health" (55), "flushed, sweating, bursting with life" (65) when they are free and unconstrained. Simón similarly asserts the necessity of actualising potential when trying to convince David to practise chess: "If one is blessed with a talent, one has a duty not to hide it," he tells the resisting boy (43). At this moment, early in the novel, it would seem that the child's choice to preserve his potentiality not to play chess goes against not only the spirit of Novilla but also Simón's own beliefs, for at the outset he very much approaches the child as a "not yet" to be fulfilled.

In a series of defining episodes, Simón attempts to educate his young charge, who proves singularly unwilling to accept basic laws of letters and numbers. "Naming numbers isn't the same as being clever with numbers," Simón points out to the know-it-all child who claims "I

can name them all" (149–50). But David stubbornly defends his own outlook where the stars are numbers, where numbers are places that you can visit, and where people risk falling in the gaps between numbers or between the pages of a book. It is difficult not to read David's frame of mind, in these moments, as instances of infancy—instances of actively embracing the state of openness between being exposed to signs and settling on their signification.

Notably, these moments of resistance speak to Simón too. Overwhelmed time and time again by David's doggedness, Simón wavers between wanting to lead his student towards learning and simply stopping before the child in moments of awe:

> Why is it that this child, so clever, so ready to make his way in the world, refuses to understand?
>
> . . .
>
> For the first time it occurs to him that this may be not just a clever child . . . but something else, something for which at this moment he lacks the word. He reaches out and gives the boy a light shake. 'That's enough,' he says. 'That's enough counting.'
>
> The boy gives a start. His eyes open, his face loses its rapt, distant look, and contorts. 'Don't touch me!' he screams in a strange high-pitched voice. 'You are making me forget! Why do you make me forget? I hate you!' (150–51)

Two things stand out in this passage. The first is Simón's incomprehension at David's "refusal to understand." Simón repeatedly asks himself why the child resists instruction. "For real reading," Simón tells the boy, "you have to submit to what is written on the page" (22). But David wants to read his own way, and in his full comprehension without compliance, he appears as opaque to Simón as Herman Melville's protagonist in "Bartleby, the Scrivener" does to his employer. (In terms of his resemblance to Bartleby, David has precursors among Coetzee's characters: Michael K in *Life and Times of Michael K* and Vercueil in *Age of Iron* are both ungraspable characters without a past, who seem immune to society's expectations.[15]) If Simón is merely bemused here, he will, just like Bartleby's employer, gradually become increasingly

frustrated, as will, eventually, the educational authorities and David's school teacher, Señor León. What these representatives of the learning society find so difficult to comprehend is the idea of the freedom of impotentiality—of understanding our "potential to not-do" (Agamben, *Potentialities* 180).

The second part worth noting in the above passage is the "something else" that Simón thinks he can detect in the child, which seems to strike an indeterminate chord of recognition—it is "something for which *at this moment* he lacks the word" (emphasis added). In the child's dramatic resistance to being made to forget, we are reminded that Simón, too, has "the memory of having a memory" (Coetzee, *Childhood* 98). This opening to infancy is repeated in a later exchange between David and Simón: "He looks into the boy's eyes. For the briefest of moments he sees something there. He has no name for it. *It is like*—that is what occurs to him in the moment. Like a fish that wriggles loose as you try to grasp it. But not like a fish—no, like *like a fish*. Or like *like like a fish*. On and on. Then the moment is over, and he is simply standing in silence, staring" (186–87; emphasis in original).

This moment of messianic openness, somehow "like *like like a fish*," strangely catalysed by Simón seeing David seeing and evoking a series of slightly different perspectives, recalls the discussion above of infancy as an ever-present state of indeterminacy. We understand that, also in Simón, the adult, "the careless neotenic child continues his royal game" (Agamben, *Idea of Prose* 98). Importantly, this moment also provides us with an image corresponding to the reader's attempt but failure to pin down the meaning of the intertextual and philosophical allusions in the novel.

As Simón continues in his endeavour to educate the boy, it becomes increasingly evident that this process is not about the child actualising his potential; rather, it is about the adult becoming aware of his own impotentiality and of the world's potential to be understood from different perspectives (and, analogously, of the novel's potential to be read in different ways). Perhaps we might locate here a way of understanding Coetzee's words at the Witwatersrand graduation ceremony that it is "good for [the] soul, to be with small children" as

the embracing of a state of openness and experimentation contained in the idea of infancy.

Yet another teaching episode shows Simón embracing the freedom of indeterminacy: when he undertakes to teach the boy to read, it is with the help of a library copy of *An Illustrated Children's Don Quixote*. Incidentally, this depicted copy of *Don Quixote* fittingly features its protagonists facing a winding road as its first illustration, suggesting the path of study ahead for its readers (and for the reader of *The Childhood of Jesus*, too). Unsurprisingly, David is greatly taken with the hero of the story, with whom he shares his belief in alternative versions of the real. Although Simón initially tries to dissuade the boy from believing in giants rather than windmills, he gradually adopts a less certain stance, leaving the possibilities of David's thinking open. When David asks whether Benengeli (the fictional Moorish chronicler of the adventures of Don Quixote whom Simón mistakenly believes to be the book's author) lives in the library, Simón does not immediately reject the idea: "I don't think so. It is not impossible, but I would say it is unlikely" (Coetzee, *Childhood* 154). In fact, by featuring *Don Quixote*—often seen as the first modern novel—as the text to initiate study with "no rightful end" (Agamben, *Idea of Prose* 64), *The Childhood of Jesus* comments on its own operation as a novel, inviting its readers to engage in study.

If Agamben's notion of study enables us to see how *The Childhood of Jesus* points towards infancy and impotentiality as messianic openings in the present, it also helps us understand the quest-like movements in the novel, with Simón constantly pursuing new avenues of thought. "The Idea of Study" provides several figures of the student, although only one of them tends to be noticed by interpreters of Agamben's work:

> But the latest, most exemplary embodiment of study in our culture is not the great philosopher nor the sainted doctor. It is rather the student, such as he appears in certain novels of Kafka or Walser. His prototype occurs in Melville's student who sits in a low-ceilinged room "in all things like a tomb," his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands. And his most extreme

> exemplar is Bartleby, the scrivener who has ceased to write. (Agamben, *Idea of Prose* 65)

"Melville's student" here is not Bartleby but Clarel, the protagonist of Melville's work of the same name—the theology student who, disillusioned by his loss of belief, sets out on a quest for spiritual meaning. So while Lewis' account of Agamben's idea of study draws heavily on impotentiality as represented by Bartleby, who comes to mind in David, the resisting child, this other figure of the scholar setting out on a quest is also important when considering Simón undertaking and undergoing the rhythms of study. As I suggest above, the driving force in this novel is precisely the movement of looking while not knowing what you are looking for. Interestingly, Agamben also reflects on the quest as a preamble to his discussion on infancy. Noting the impossibility of recovering experience in the pre-Cartesian sense, he argues that the quest "expresses the impossibility of uniting science and experience in a single subject" (*Infancy* 32). Unlike scientific experiment, which is "the construction of a sure road . . . to knowledge," the quest, says Agamben, "is the recognition that the absence of a road . . . is the only experience possible to man" (33). This "absence of a road" is also the experience of study. And so it makes sense that, in the novel's final pages, with Simón, Inés, David, and the dog Bolívar escaping from the educational authorities in a Rosinante-like "old rattletrap" of a car across the mountains, Simón is undeterred by the lack of a map and a clear road (Coetzee, *Childhood* 243). He simply says, "[l]et us keep going and see what turns up" (261). Because like the activity of study itself, *The Childhood of Jesus* not only has no ending, it "does not even desire one" (Agamben, *Idea of Prose* 64).

Just as it is a story that desires no end, *The Childhood of Jesus* is also a story that, despite its thematic engagement with the idea of hospitality, never invites its reader to wait for an arrival. Rather, the reader is forced to actively inhabit a state of impotentiality, pursuing the possibilities for thought that open up in the present moment; each trace in the novel to be understood "like *like like*" something else.[16] Being open to the slightly different opportunities for thought available in each moment

is a restlessly active state of experimentation that is very different from patiently following something that due to its resistance and irreducible otherness cannot be fathomed or represented. This is also how we might understand the back-and-forth rhythm of the novel. Furthermore, *The Childhood of Jesus* does not call for the "relinquishment of intellectual control" (Attridge, *Singularity* 24) or "helplessness in the face of what is coming" (26) that Attridge locates in his future-directed ethics of reading; quite the opposite, in fact. After all, when Simón ends up following the child, he embraces his capability of impotentiality and in so doing remains at the steering wheel, so to speak, simultaneously undergoing and undertaking study. *The Childhood of Jesus* gestures towards infancy, towards a state of freedom before any particular meaning has emerged. Never surrendering its potentiality to any given actualization, it thus offers itself to the reader as an invitation to perpetual study.

Reading *The Childhood of Jesus* with a focus on the freedom and resistance implicit in impotentiality allows us to articulate a dimension of Coetzee's poetics that—at the very least—complicates the prevailing scholarly emphasis on hospitality in Coetzee. This poetics of study, which accounts for both Coetzee's attention to pedagogy and the formal and thematic inconclusiveness of *The Childhood of Jesus*, is also visibly at work in the novel's sequel. Although *The Schooldays of Jesus* is more concerned with the salvation of the adult soul than with the education of the child, it reiterates the earlier novel's oscillating gestures between different schools of educational thought, culminating in a vivid manifestation of impotentiality on the very final page. The scene is the following: Simón, undertaking the stumbling steps of his first dance lesson, experiences how the music "begins to reveal a new structure, point by point, like a crystal growing in the air" (Coetzee, *Schooldays* 260), a gesture with no end in sight. A moment later, the novel's final sentence provides not a closing but a beginning to something unknown: "Arms extended, eyes closed, he shuffles in a slow circle. Over the horizon the first star begins to rise" (260). Undoubtedly, these suggestive images—a not-yet-crystallized form in motion and a rising star on the horizon—epitomize the poetics of indeterminacy and openness to new possibilities that should inspire future readings of Coetzee's work.[17]

Notes

1 Barnard provides a good summary of scenes of teaching in Coetzee in her prologue to *Approaches to Teaching Coetzee's Disgrace and Other Works*, "Why Not to Teach Coetzee." Also, Bell's chapter "The Lecturer, the Novelist, and the Limits of Persuasion" offers enlightening perspectives on Coetzee's work in terms of the limits of the teachable and the erosion of the authority of *Bildung* in contemporary culture.

2 Barnard makes the important point that "in Coetzee's fiction stupidity is never inherent or inert; it is a chosen or imposed condition and one with psychological, political and ethical resonances. In the case of characters like Michael K, or Friday, or the young comrade John, ignorance is resistance; an active passion to ignore" (35).

3 Regarding resistance to rules, see "Four Notes on Rugby" (1978), where Coetzee opposes "free play" to sport, the latter performing an "explicit, ideological function," the former "suspect, frivolous" (125). Similarly, in a conversation with Attwell, Coetzee reflects that "play is too readily slighted in comparison to work" and that "game-construction, which we associate with yet-to-be-socialized children, seems to me an essentially higher activity than socialized play, as typified by sport" (*Doubling* 103–04). In Coetzee criticism, the question of play has been addressed most notably in Hayes' *J. M. Coetzee and the Novel*. One aspect of Hayes' project is to explore the playfulness of Coetzee's work in relation to the novelistic form. Hayes addresses the concept of play in two places: the chapter on *Age of Iron*, which he places in dialogue with Coetzee's 1992 essay "Erasmus: Madness and Rivalry" and with *Don Quixote*, demonstrating Coetzee's novel's "jocoserious play with rules and boundaries" (133); and the chapter on *Michael K*, which he reads in dialogue with Derrida's notion of "playing the law/rules" (Hayes 85). See also's Moser's chapter on the poetics of play in Coetzee's writing.

4 Also noteworthy in this context are Helgesson, whose *Writing in Crisis* offers a Levinasian reading of Coetzee, and Marais, who reads Coetzee in dialogue with Levinas and Blanchot. In *Secretary of the Invisible*, Marais posits the quest for the lost child in Coetzee's work as a metaphor for an ultimately ungraspable alterity.

5 Arendt captures this tension in "The Crisis of Education" in *Between Past and Future*: "The problem of education in the modern world lies in the fact that by its very nature it cannot forgo either authority or tradition, and yet must proceed in a world that is neither structured by authority nor held together by tradition" (191). She continues, writing that "[e]ducation is the point at which we decide whether we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it and by the same token save it from that ruin, which, except for renewal, except for the coming of the new and young, would be inevitable" (193).

6 For example, Pippin asks: "*Why* are so many of the events and dialogue we read about in the novel always already a reflection of or an echo of or an allusion to

some literary or philosophical text?" ("What Does" 28; emphasis in original). See also Wilm, who notes how *The Childhood of Jesus* "draws attention to its ambiguities, for example through the mystifying relations to intertexts" (200), and Kellman, who argues that "*The Childhood of Jesus* (2013) is even more enigmatic than the rest of the author's challenging oeuvre" (458).

7 See for example Mills, Caton, Bartnik, Barney, and Restuccia.

8 Interestingly, this connection between Coetzee and Agamben brings to light the common dimensions of freedom, hope, and possibility in their respective work in a way analogous to that explored by Snoek in *Agamben's Joyful Kafka*. Against the general more pessimistic understanding of Kafka's influence on Agamben, Snoek argues that "Agamben uses Kafka not so much to support his dark political theories as to show a way out," in that they both point towards "a possibility or potential that lies enclosed within the current situation" (2).

9 A second book on Agamben and education was published in November 2018: Jasinski's *Giorgio Agamben: Education without Ends*.

10 The emphasis on the future comes across perhaps even more explicitly in *Ghostly Demarcations*, in which Derrida speaks of "messianic apprehension that strains forward toward the event of him who/that which is coming" (248–49).

11 Conversely, in earlier Coetzee novels, which conform rather to the poetics of waiting described above, the child is often figured as conspicuously absent. For a discussion of the absent child in Coetzee, see Marais' *Secretary of the Invisible*.

12 A beautiful image of human infancy is the passage is also found in the New Testament: "The foxes have holes, the birds of the air have nests. But the son of man hath not where to lay his head" (*The Bible*, Matthew 8.20). Pippin notes two instances in *The Childhood of Jesus* where Simón warns David about the consequences of not having "a place to lay [his] head" (i.e., not following the rules of language/human community) ("J. M. Coetzee's Novel" 16–17).

13 In Lewis' account, the state of infancy is the state of "'no longer' simply being paralyzed by the loss of a meaning-rich world and 'not yet' being gripped by new projects that give the studier a definitive orientation" (36).

14 Although I draw mainly on Lewis and his account of Agamben's philosophy, I am also indebted to Vloeberghs' explication of the interrelatedness of these concepts in "Babbling Redemption."

15 Several critics have noted Michael K's affinities with Melville's Bartleby: see Mills, Chesney, Monticelli, and Wilm. Wilm notes that Coetzee refers explicitly to Bartleby in his composition diary when writing *Life and Times of Michael K* in 1982: "Michaels is like that man in New York who said 'I prefer not to'" (162n22).

16 This condition approaches, I think, the mode of reading that Wilm calls "slow reading," which "does not ask what a text means[.] . . . [I]t does not primarily wish to get reading over with, but it wants to remain in reading" (45). It also relates to what Hayes refers to as a "creative [interpretative] 'anxiety'" (116)

generated in the reader by Coetzee's prose, which brings about "an alternative way of apprehending truth in literary narrative" (72).

17 Beyond the scope of this article, the poetics of study and impotentiality is also, I would venture, an exciting point of entry to earlier Coetzee novels. For example, *Waiting for the Barbarians* makes gestures towards infancy and study; the Magistrate, who is also a scholar trying to detect the ancient barbarian signs on the poplar slips, has recurring visions of children. The novel's final scene figures him watching children at play, making the following reflection: "This is not the scene I dreamed of. Like much else nowadays I leave it feeling stupid, like a man who lost his way long ago but presses on along a road that may lead nowhere" (170). Notice how the "feeling stupid" and "press[ing] on" with no end in sight both suggest the idea of study in similar ways to *The Childhood of Jesus*. Also, Attwell reveals that when Coetzee was writing *Michael K*, he was reading the theologian Rudolf Bultmann, making notes about the kairos of Jesus not meaning "not now but later" (146). It appears, then, that Coetzee has nurtured an interest in the notion of messianic time that approaches Agamben's idea of infancy as an ever-present state of possibility.

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