

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/reia20>

Criteria of Embarrassment: J.M. Coetzee's 'Jesus Trilogy' and the Legacy of Modernist Difficulty

Rick de Villiers

To cite this article: Rick de Villiers (2022) Criteria of Embarrassment: J.M. Coetzee's 'Jesus Trilogy' and the Legacy of Modernist Difficulty, English Studies in Africa, 65:1, 58-71, DOI: 10.1080/00138398.2022.2055859

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00138398.2022.2055859>



© 2022 The Author(s). Co-published by Unisa Press and Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 28 Apr 2022.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 275



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Criteria of Embarrassment: J.M. Coetzee’s ‘Jesus Trilogy’ and the Legacy of Modernist Difficulty

Rick de Villiers

This article takes as its starting point the divergent responses that J.M. Coetzee’s Jesus trilogy (*The Childhood of Jesus* [2013], *The Schooldays of Jesus* [2016] and *The Death of Jesus* [2019]) has drawn from reviewers and scholars respectively. Where reviewers have generally regarded these works’ difficulty as obstructive, scholars have taken their difficulty as both the justification and catalyst for sustained engagement. This divergence is explained, in part, as a consequence of the literacies developed by and in response to modernism – literacies which regarded difficulty as both the signature of the worthwhile artwork and as the criterion which justifies the special attention of specialized readers. If one aim of this article is to situate Coetzee and Coetzee studies within this tradition, a second aim is to ask whether the forms of attention garnered by his late trilogy are less an index of intrinsic challenges than of Coetzee’s reputation as a challenging writer. To do so is to worry the overready ascription of ‘Coetzeean’ difficulty – along with the modes of reading it tends to enlist – in order to reposition bewilderment, embarrassment and other ugly aesthetic-affects as generative for criticism.

Keywords: modernism, J.M. Coetzee, difficulty, embarrassment, gimmick, Jesus trilogy, affect

A letter of protest rounds up *Our Exagmination Round his Factification for Incamination* (1929), that immodestly plumping symposium on James Joyce’s modestly titled *Work in Progress*. Writing from his sickbed, one Vladimir Dixon owns to being laid low by high modernism. He has kept up with the novel’s serialization. He has tried his best to ‘onthorstand’ (193). But his ‘inhumility’ to grasp *Wakean* multivocality has resulted in feelings of inadequacy. The experience has been ‘disturd[ing]’, which is to say it has involved a measure of humiliation: readerly competence stands exposed, embarrassed. It’s a winking admission, of course. With portmanteaux aplenty, the letter is not a complaint but a tribute. And like the essays that

make up the rest of the collection – essays by Samuel Beckett, William Carlos Williams and other moderns who helped win an elect readership for *Finnegans Wake* ten years before publication – the letter is alive to all ‘implications’: alive to the significance of this revolutionary work of fiction, but also to the riddles, rhymes and textual gremlins within. If Dixon protests anything, it is the philistinism of those who see modernism’s difficulty as a gimmick.

In 2017, a collection of scholarly essays appeared that bears glancing comparison with *Our Exagmination*. Its focus is a single novel, its contributors are eminent readers, and its exposition of the already-published anticipates the yet-to-be published. *J.M. Coetzee’s ‘The Childhood of Jesus’: The Ethics of Ideas and Things* takes as its object the first novel in what would become the ‘Jesus trilogy’.¹ The collection had its genesis at a 2014 conference in Adelaide where scholars made sense of the latest ‘late Coetzee,’ which had appeared a year prior to widespread bafflement. Reviewers were confused not only by the novel’s content but also about its merits.² One reader expressed astonishment that it had seen the light of day; Coetzee, he felt, had been ‘extended a remarkable amount of credit’ (Bellin). Against this tide of general disorientation, the editors of the critical collection set themselves and their authors the task of supplying contexts and coordinates ‘necessary for a fuller understanding of the work’ (Rutherford and Uhlmann 2). They cede the oddness of the fiction and acknowledge its ‘puzzled reception’. But, unlike the reviewers, they take its difficulties and impediments as the mark of worthiness.³ It would seem that Coetzee has been extended a remarkable amount of critical credit, too.

Since the publication of the first Jesus novel, dozens of articles, book chapters and even monographs have shed light on the trilogy. While the unceasing expansion of Coetzee studies is not surprising in itself, it is at least unusual that a work in progress should gain such apparently definitive absorption into academic discourse. The ready buy-in is partly explained by the author’s fame, by his persistent cultural capital. And as with *Our Exagmination*, the cynic could see this buy-in as a shrewd shaping of the market in which the book to come rewards early interest and secures return investment. But a broader phenomenon might account for the sharply divergent reception of these novels by reviewers and scholars respectively. I mean the legacy of modernist difficulty.

In its long curriculum, modernist difficulty has gone from imperative, to shibboleth, to criterion for the special attention of specialized readers. This article aims to situate Coetzee along this continuum. In doing so, it asks whether the forms of attention garnered by his late trilogy are less an index of intrinsic challenges than of Coetzee’s reputation as a challenging writer. To ask this is to risk embarrassment but also to offer it as a mode of engagement. The risk splits between presumptuousness and the exposure of one’s own stupidity: doubt about these works might suggest tacit criticism of the critic who has been taken in by a fraudulent object, which criticism may stand as double-bluff for one’s failure to understand. But the risk is unavoidable if embarrassment is to serve as a generative response rather than a momentary awkwardness to be passed over *en route* to dispassionate close reading or ideological critique. In what follows, I address Coetzee’s indebtedness to modernism’s particular forms of literacy, the feelings of aesthetic mis-giving generated by his late fiction, and how an embarrassed reading might respond to such mis-giving without recourse to outright dismissal or wholehearted embrace.

The ABC/JMC of Reading: Modernist Literacy

This article takes its title from a concept in biblical hermeneutics. The ‘criterion of embarrassment’ applies to events described in the Gospels that simultaneously impede and assert their

authenticity.⁴ For instance, that Christ was first met by women after his resurrection challenges easy acceptance of the good news. Women were not ideal witnesses, or at least not witnesses the early church might have preferred. But it is precisely the implausibility that gives this encounter the ring of truth, that endows it with the ‘quiddity and quaintness of its own / Reality’ (Nabokov 54), in the words of *Pale Fire*’s John Shade. Whatever barriers it might raise, difficulty can sanction the doubtful article as genuine.

A certain criterion of embarrassment defines literary modernism, too. By this I don’t mean breaches of good form but rather the formal disruptions by which readers are made to feel bafflement. Such disruptions effect a kind of textual unsociability: the work refuses to play by the rules, to follow a cordial logic. This is because modern writers ‘*must* be difficult,’ at least according to T. S. Eliot’s (‘Metaphysical’ 381) famous injunction. They had to be ‘comprehensive,’ ‘allusive,’ ‘indirect,’ not to obscure meaning but to wrench it into place and achieve commensurability between their art and the dilemmas of modernity. With this creative duty came a critical onus. Readers were expected to become omnivorous, analytical, adept at reassembling ruins. Modernism duly supplied the primers: *How to Read*, *The ABC of Reading*, *A Survey of Modernist Poetry*, *The Criterion*. Shuttleing between edification and iconoclasm, between condescension and outright contempt, such works variously promised to jolt ‘lazy reading habits’ (Graves and Riding 5), to ‘allow [low-brow readers] to read ... with greater result’ (Pound 8), to ‘M[ake] no Compromise with the Public Taste’ (Anderson).⁵ If this vast and diffuse creative-critical apparatus promoted a literary ecumenism that nudged readers beyond their apparently parochial tastes, it was clearly not disinterested. Both the market for modernism and the means for its consumption were in the making.

In his ranging study of modernist difficulty, Leonard Diepeveen details how the modernists managed to habituate the public to textual thickness by offering new protocols of critical reflection. Directly opposed to earlier ‘appreciative’ schools of reading, ‘criticism’s routine activity became not to articulate affect, but to elucidate meanings that the art work obscured’ (Diepeveen 224). This tension is captured in William Empson’s memorable separation of the two types of ‘barking dogs’ (28) that make up critics. There are those who ‘merely relieve themselves against the flower of beauty’; then there are those ‘who afterwards scratch it up’. The modern critic, in Empson’s view, is not content to let beauty, irony or ambiguity go unexamined or unexplained. To be awestruck is to be dumbstruck, which is not a position that close reading tolerates. What was needed instead was something like cancelled negative capability. Irritation and uncertainty should not be suffered but turned towards deeper, more detached inquiry.

Modernism had thus lain the foundation for a type of literacy that treated difficulty’s discomfiting affects as part of a necessary if awkward phase in the act of reading. To respond in outrage, to treat as terminal one’s confusion, to rail against the emperor’s nakedness, was also to position oneself among the uninitiated. Such a stance is ridiculed in Dixon’s letter. He channels the indignation of critics who huffily ask: but what is it meant to mean? He adopts the faux-modesty (‘inhumility’ in a different sense) of those whose bafflement becomes grounds for dismissal. I remarked at the outset that there are superficial correspondences between *Our Exagmination* and *The Ethics of Ideas and Things*.⁶ More significant is the difference that a contribution like Dixon’s is today not only inconceivable but unnecessary. For a long time now, difficulty has not been in need of defenders. ‘However much experimental forms seem to thwart and evade the job of interpretation,’ David James (1) remarks in his introduction to *Modernism and Close Reading*, ‘they ceaselessly invite granular explication’. The modernist criterion of embarrassment doesn’t obstruct critical enterprise but valorizes it.

Coetzee grew up in this tradition, even if his undergraduate years at the University of Cape Town already belonged to a period of growing dissatisfaction with the apolitical tendencies of New Criticism (see Kannemeyer 90–91). By the time he returned to UCT as a lecturer in 1972, ideological critique had begun vying for priority – a shift which would soon be accelerated by his own theory-knowing novels. But as Simon During has argued, certain types of practical criticism and poststructuralism can both be seen ‘as heirs of, and moments in, modernism’ (235). Another similarity between close and suspicious forms of reading is the implicit assumption that the text is a site of obstruction (‘embarrassment’ in its etymological sense) which requires us to go beyond the manifest and arrive at the latent.

In Coetzee scholarship this mode of engagement takes on ethical urgency. In his preface to *J.M. Coetzee & The Ethics of Reading*, Derek Attridge intuits a connection between Coetzee’s ‘affinity with the modernist tradition’ (xi) and the ‘bafflement’ caused by his fiction. More recently in a study that aligns Coetzee with the Wittgensteinian difficulty embodied in Kafka, Joyce and Woolf, Karen Zumhagen-Yekplé regards *The Childhood of Jesus* as a ‘puzzle text’ that ‘demands’ ethical interpretation: ‘it deploys difficulty and obscurity in relation to the yearning at its centre for a grounded transfigurative movement toward living in the world in the right spirit’ (233). And in the first monograph on the Jesus trilogy, the philosopher Robert Pippin suggests that engaged reading can ‘only be measure[d] ... by seeing whether the student lives her life in a more thoughtful way’; the reader must thus ‘read the novels thoughtfully and faithfully, accepting its challenge’ (21). The authors’ unique positions notwithstanding, I take these examples as representative of the way in which Coetzee has nuanced close reading in the 21st century. Like the modernists, both his creative and critical works have cultivated careful and ‘slow’ forms of attention. But in the long shadow of the ethical turn, the author’s priming of his readership – the ‘JMC of Reading’ – has urged contiguity between textual and personal scrutiny, between a good reading and the good life. This is nowhere more directly communicated than in *Elizabeth Costello*:

[I]n our *truest reading*, as students, we searched the page for guidance, *guidance in perplexity*. We found it in Lawrence, or we found it in Eliot, the early Eliot: a different kind of guidance, perhaps, but guidance nevertheless in *how to live our lives*. ... If the humanities want to survive, surely it is those energies and that craving for guidance that they must respond to: a craving, that is, in the end, a quest for salvation. (126–27, my emphasis)

Costello’s phrase, ‘guidance in perplexity,’ invites inflected understanding. It suggests that the reader is in a state of confusion but guided through it by the moderns. At the same time, it contracts the existential dilemmas of the early 20th century and those of later generations: the moderns are our kindred in perplexity. Finally, Costello intimates a prepositional entanglement that is at once the cause of and the release from perplexity. In other words, it’s *within* the difficulty of the text – *through* its knottiness, *in* its refusal of easy answers, *via* its complexity – that we find a measure of difficult art’s salvific significance.

Something of this aesthetic soteriology maps onto the Jesus trilogy, onto the complementarity of its theological and literary criteria of embarrassment. On the one hand, the novels’ biblical and pseudopigraphical parallels between David and Jesus point in the direction of difficult truths, towards guidance in perplexity. On the other hand, the fictions’ disruption of writerly authority, of source texts, of modes of reading all seem a distinctly modernist inheritance. We find this

duality consolidated in one of David's gnomic pronouncements in *The Death of Jesus*: "Have no doubt I will liberate you," said Don Quixote. "But have patience. The time and manner of your liberation is still dark to me" (88). The words, apocryphal to Cervantes, actually modify Christ's in Mark 13:32: 'But concerning that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father'. Biblical scholars cite this passage among instances of the criterion of embarrassment since it casts in open doubt Christ's omniscience.⁷ In the novel, this intertextually imported embarrassment – about the 'specialness' of David/Jesus/Don Quixote, about the salvation they offer – ripples outward towards literature itself. Impeding its own belonging to a network of cultural-ethical value, the work also smooths the way for that belonging. Difficulty sanctions the doubtful article as genuine.

Make it Novilla: Gimmickry and the Trilogy

So, Coetzee makes it difficult, but he also makes it new: recognizable phrases are recast in fresh contexts, uttered by unexpected voices. It's a dislocation that forces us to pay attention to questions of authority and origins. But with this comes a feeling of *déjà lit*. A certain diminution is already heard in 'Novilla' (the setting for *Childhood*): novel but not new, other but not startlingly original. Attending to the word's Spanish meaning ('heifer') gives a further clue to these late works' domestication. If the fictional world presents with some force the estrangement that comes with involuntary relocation, if it worries canon formation, if it portrays a man whose desires are anachronistic and anathema in this *vita nuova*, the oeuvre makes such elements into a recurring motif. *Waiting for the Barbarians*, *The Life & Times of Michael K.*, *Foe*, *Disgrace* – we have been here before. The shock of the new seems absent in this 'making Novilla'.

Suspending for a moment these intimations of misgiving, the trilogy's familiar feel can be placed in relation to the literacies developed to serve modernist studies. In his famous essay on the dangers of teaching modern literature, Lionel Trilling bemoaned the tendency of the academic gaze to turn radical works into 'object[s] of habitual regard' (229). He wanted to resist classroom discussion of Mann, Beckett, Joyce and other modernists for two reasons: it entailed self-exposure, and that exposure necessitated an equable accommodation of the uncanny. By 'socializ[ing] ... the anti-social,' by 'acculturat[ing] ... the anti-cultural,' by 'legitimiz[ing] ... the subversive' (238) – by reading academically – the affective disorientations of these works could be sublimated into institutionally dignified (and therefore commodifiable) modes of interpretation. Coetzee's case doesn't so much represent the apotheosis of this process as its inversion: it's our reading that seems tamed by his writing, not the other way around. His work has often been seen to pre-empt if not to dictate the formal and theoretical terms of its consumption. This authorial prevenience is exacerbated in the Jesus trilogy. We are made to contend with recurring philosophical and stylistic issues – the ethics of hospitality, austere prose, prosaic austerities, etc. – and therefore with a prior body of work that has already reified the 'Coetzeean'. These circular securities explain why Arthur Rose (2017), Hedley Twidle (2012), Yoshiki Tajiri (2017) and Elizabeth Anker (2017) have argued in different ways that our critical investment in Coetzee warrants scrutiny. While a self-referential and theoretically astute creative writing may stimulate and sustain professional forms of attention, it can also induce a certain cleverness-fatigue which leads us to wonder if Coetzee is 'setting us up' (Anker 206)? Keeping Trilling's quandary in mind, we might further ask whether such work doesn't neutralize our capacity for bewilderment or, at the very least, naturalize responses which cast off that bewilderment as ancillary and improper to 'faithful' reading.

Such questions point to a second literary criterion of embarrassment: difficulty creates schisms and exclusions. This much is suggested in the rough divide I drew between the trilogy's reviewers and its academic readers. It's implied, too, in the assumed naïveté by which Dixon mocks imagined doubters from within the fold of the elect. A sharp line separates those who recognize the true worth of the perplexing artwork from those who lack the necessary perspicacity. But the positions are far from stable when difficulty is treated not as an intrinsic property of the literary artefact but as imitable or epiphenomenal, as something that can be reproduced by the artist or externally ascribed by criticism.⁸ In a word, difficulty can be a gimmick.

Indeed, it's the possibility of fraudulence that both Stanley Cavell and, more recently, Sianne Ngai have seen as the centrally animating aspect of modernism's historical divisiveness. Challenging conventional ways of hearing, seeing and reading, the radical work of art solicits suspicion from opponents and trust from adherents. Conservative contingents 'cannot afford to admit the new,' while *avant garde* agitators 'cannot afford *not* to admit the new' (Cavell 206). Cavell also sheds light on what I mean by the 'imitable' and 'epiphenomenal' aspects of difficulty. The fraudulent object, he argues, doesn't imitate specific features of the genuine article (such would rather be the case of Dixon's portmanteaux). Instead, it replicates 'the *effect* of the genuine' (Cavell 190). But what is the effect of difficulty? Can it be measured out in flustered reviews or imperturbable monographs? Such responses are of a piece, I would suggest, when they constitute reactions following the appearance of the artwork. But this causality is troubled in the case of a suspect work. Or, to put it more accurately, a work is rendered susceptible to charges of gimmickry when the causal relation between art and criticism is inverted.

[W]hen criticism is written entirely from the point of view of artists and their technical problems, it does not merely become dully technical; it ceases to be criticism, unable to exert judgment's pressure on art pre-defined by its terms. Art, meanwhile, can no longer be trusted, much less confidently evaluated, since everyone knows that it has been constructed to solve problems preset by the criticism, which is in turn destined to only affirm it The game is rigged – or just ruthlessly circular. (Ngai 93)

This inversion applies to Joyce's *Work in Progress* and Coetzee's Jesus trilogy. In both cases the completed work is preceded by critical engagement. Serendipitous though this parallel chronology might be for the purposes of a provocative introduction, it is far from essential to difficulty's epiphenomenal quality. Had *Our Exagmination or The Ethics of Ideas and Things* appeared after their respective literary targets, they would still have projected onto those targets the aura of a complexity that both warrants and requires expert explication. The brute scholarly structures are enough to caution any outsider: this way difficulty lies.

But as I mentioned, the separation between those 'within' and those 'without' is not fixed. When invoking paradigms of fraudulence, *expert explication* may be substituted for *credulous promotion*, *difficulty* for *trickery*. Ngai (95–96) makes the astute observation that the gimmick, as an aesthetic category, implies the projection of intersubjective communities, even where they don't exist. To claim something as gimmicky, I must also posit someone who has been taken in, someone who has mistaken the fake for the real thing. Or, inverted in line with the readerly factions created by modernist difficulty, it might be said that when identifying a work of art as authentic, the critic simultaneously projects someone who has failed to see its authenticity. The gimmick, after all, is a 'compromised form' bound up with 'ambivalent judgement' (Ngai 1): it pulls us in different directions.

Or at least it *appears* to. What separates the literary gimmick from the plainly commercial contrivance, I want to suggest, is the worth it accrues through intimations of fraudulence. While the latter might enjoy a brief period of overvaluation, it is only a matter of time before its flimsiness surfaces or technological advancement hastens its obsolescence. But this linear decline does not characterize the doubtful literary work. Rather, it is doubt that cathects further investment and valuation (much like the biblical criterion of embarrassment). Take the extended essay question which simply asked a 1981 cohort of Oxford postgraduates: ‘Is *Finnegans Wake* worth the trouble?’⁹ A negative response seems impossible because self-contradictory. To offer it already implies an inordinate amount of ‘trouble’: of acquiring the text, of reading it, of pretending to have contended with a half-century of scholarship. That’s not to mention the trouble (the danger) of submitting a denunciation which, much like this article, must avoid both courting and levelling charges of gullibility or arrogance. In short, any response whatever suggests that *Finnegans Wake* is worth the trouble.

If the Joyce exam topic offers an example of authentication by epiphenomenal doubt, the Jesus trilogy offers imitable examples of the paradox: instances where difficulty comes across as gimmicky, where its effect seems exploited, where it embarrasses our attempts to find guidance in perplexity. To stake the claim directly: I argue that the novel’s central trouble (or its most conspicuous contrivance) pertains to the act of reading itself. Deliberate obstructions run from the forensically minute to the allusively labyrinthine. There are the slipping nominalizations that provoke questions about trilogic continuity: ‘David’ in *Childhood* becomes ‘David’ in *Schooldays* and returns as ‘David’ in *Death*. There is Coetzee’s much-relayed desire for the first book to have been published without the burdensome convention of a cover-page or title (an example of what Ngai sees as a key feature of the gimmick, that it works both too hard and too little).¹⁰ And then there are the intertextual securities, the making Novilla.

I have already alluded to the texts’ engagement with Cervantes. By absorbing an abbreviated and bowdlerized version of a work which is itself extradiegetically abbreviated and bastardized, Coetzee installs metaliterary suspicion by sleight of hand: the fictions announce themselves as simultaneously self-questioning and self-affirming. (Isn’t this both the mark of the good story – the worthwhile artwork which draws us into close reading and self-scrutiny – and the gist of *The Good Story*, where Coetzee concludes that the novel’s primary function is to expose ‘comfortably sustain[ing] ... fictions?’ [191]). A would-be echo of Borges can be taken in the same vein: ‘When you were in love, did you not see the question to which love was the answer ... I ask seriously: What was the question to which Ana Magdalena was in so many cases the answer?’ (*Schooldays* 192). This is a question put to Simón. Coetzee’s question, whether serious or not, seems to be something like this: what is the question to which Borges, modernist maze-creator *par excellence* – is the answer? For are we not meant to hear the famous riddle in the ‘Garden of Forking Paths’ (‘In a riddle whose answer is chess, what is the only prohibited word?’ [Borges 53]) and so see the trilogy itself made up of primrose paths, endlessly refracting?

Simón’s specular recognition of David’s true nature partakes of this endlessness. For a moment, he glimpses something essential yet ineffable in the boy’s eyes. ‘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’ (*Childhood* 186–87). Occurring in a text that is ostensibly in English yet supposedly in Spanish – in a text where German is elsewhere taken without question to *be* English – it is possible that we are supposed to discern the Greek ‘*Icthis*’ (fish), the acrostic used to refer to Christ

in the early days of Christianity.¹¹ If the invisible transliteration of I X Θ T Σ is urged on us, it is done so only briefly. For Simón's ouroboros of similitude marks a gulf between metaphor and simile. Where St. Augustine could sustain the fish/saviour equivalence ('[the earth] feeds upon that fish which was taken out of the deep' [296]), such correspondence is not available to Simón.¹² Instead, he has recourse to a debased variant of what Empson called the 'self-inwoven simile': that device by which the writer 'compares the thing to a vaguer or more abstract notion of itself, or points out that it is its own nature, or that it sustains itself by supporting itself' (190). For something to be 'like a fish' conveys its slipperiness as a concept; but for something to be 'like like a fish' conveys its fictionality. The vehicle of the simile is not an elusive, water-dwelling thing of scales and flesh, but a form of rhetoric caught in the act of being rhetorical.

Perhaps the most compelling example of interpretative embarrassment occurs a few pages earlier in *Childhood*. Squatting in a sandpit, David 'smooths the surface, and with a finger begins to write. [Simón] reads over his shoulder: *O* then *E* then a character he cannot make out then *O* again and then *X* and again *X'* (174). The episode mirrors a moment in the Gospel of John when Christ scribbles something in the sand while the Pharisees bring charges against the woman taken in adultery. In the biblical account, the uncommunicative writing is a prelude to the disruption of the *lex talionis*: as the cryptic signs refuse to enter into an economy of legibility, so the subsequent injunction ('He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her' [John 8:7]) refuses an economy of retribution. But in the novel's iconotropic reworking, in its transposition of the religious onto the secular, the reference is stripped of its concern with mercy and justice. Instead, it foregrounds the trilogy's most persistent theme – the conventionality of reading and writing. 'You can read it because you are the one who wrote it,' says a frustrated Simón. 'But the whole point about messages is that other people need to be able to read them' (175). Unlike Simón, who has been divested of both cultural history and, apparently, short-term memory, the close reader is meant to recognize both the biblical allusion and also how David has turned Simón's own words against him. Shortly before this exchange, Simón tries to explain to David the basics of business: 'if you have X loaves of bread and you give them all away for nothing then you have no loaves left and no money with which to buy new loaves. Because X minus X equals zero. Equals nothing. Equals emptiness. Equals an empty stomach' (173). In the sand-writing scene, then, Simón's placeholders – X, O/O, E/equals – return with a vengeance, unrecognized and unreadable.

If close readers are alive to this irony, reading and recognizing what Simón fails to, their accomplishment still stands exposed to the possibility of misprision or ignorance. The textual remainder – the 'character [Simón] can't make out' – thwarts further explication even as explication is invited. Here, as elsewhere, David's 'divine dyslexia' (to use Jean-Michel Rabaté's apt term [43]) refuses closure. One might regard this as 'communicative ... stinginess,' the thing that marred modernism for Max Eastman (58).¹³ But one might also see in it the genius of a minimalist form that enlists critical completion. Thus Zumhagen-Yekplé praises the 'the novel's extreme phenomenological frugality' for catalyzing 'exegetic abundance' (226). Either side of this line, the Jesus fictions subject readers to potential embarrassment. On the one hand is the total estrangement felt by those intelligent but non-specialist readers who have their usual ways of seeing shown up. On the other hand is the specialist who, armed with theoretical astuteness and a deep familiarity of the Coetzee corpus, commits to a line of interpretation that stands in danger of being undone by the coy self-replications and nearly-theory of the novels themselves. Whether failing to recognize the trilogy's guidance in perplexity or whether taking its

difficulty too seriously, readers seem vulnerable to David's rebuff: 'When you try to understand me it spoils everything' (*Death* 103–4).

Distancing Reading, Critical Embarrassment

This rebuff attends a solemn request: that Simón will record the events of David's life without an irritable reaching after fact and reason. In writing his would-be gospel, he, Simón, 'must promise not to understand' (103) the boy. David's difficulty (the tantrums, the stubbornness) and the difficulty of his exemplary life (the ethical demands) must be set down simply and faithfully. But for a character who has already shown his inclination to subject bewildering experiences to logical ordering and '[g]ood paragraphing' (*Schooldays* 177), the task is likely to prove a challenge. It seems to me, too, among the trilogy's challenges for criticism. By this I don't mean anything as facetious as upending academic style or rewriting the Jesus fictions in the manner of Borges's Pierre Menard. Instead, I am suggesting that there is virtue in attending to the difficulty of difficulty, and so resisting the reflexes that neutralize awkward feelings.

Precedence for such an approach is found in an unlikely source. For all its notoriety as urtext behind literary-scientific neutrality, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' urges attunement to the imbrication of affective and aesthetic judgement. '[W]e might remind ourselves,' writes Eliot, 'that criticism is as inevitable as breathing, and that we should be none the worse for articulating what passes in our minds when we read a book and feel an emotion about it, for criticizing our own minds in their work of criticism' (105). Two things are remarkable here. First, the suggestion that criticism is at once vital and spontaneous (as vital and spontaneous as breathing). Second, that it foregrounds the importance of cultivating a sensitivity towards the affective experience of reading. This does not encourage a kind of 'lived-experience' criticism, nor does it preclude second thoughts or rereadings. Eliot very seldom committed himself to an opinion of a work which he had not subjected to repeated scrutiny. But the process involved a refinement rather than an exorcism of his initial response. Leaving aside his reassessments of Yeats, Milton and Goethe, perhaps one of the most self-contained examples of this refinement occurs in Eliot's introduction to the Harcourt Brace edition of Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood* (1937).¹⁴ Here, he regards his critical contribution as 'trac[ing] the more significant phases of [his] own appreciation of [the novel]' (457). Duly recording what he found engrossing about the book, Eliot also details what he initially thought dubious, superfluous or overwrought. There is an articulation of the emotions he felt on a first reading, followed by a self-reflexive criticism out of which fuller appreciation emerged.

On the whole, this process seems no different from that which underpins the many enriching scholarly responses to the Jesus fictions. If not stated, these responses at least imply some of the puzzlement and confusion registered by the books' reviewers, regardless of that puzzlement's kindling through exhilaration rather than frustration. The divergence from Eliot's approach comes in exactly because of the implicitness, the reticence. In other words, the affective stimulus which attends any critical effort is often buried, defused, or simply ignored as if it constituted something accidental or improper. On rare occasions the impropriety might be declared, as in the case of two readings already mentioned. Simon During's fine essay on Coetzee as academic-novelist concludes with an admission that captures the avowing-disavowing impulse of embarrassment. He owns to a feeling of 'delight' (251–52) on reading a particular passage in *The Childhood of Jesus*. Indeed, the experience was so strong that During 'jumped from [his] chair in excitement'. He affirms it by saying that it is 'not a moment I want to disown,' nor

one that ‘can be undone by ... academic’ reading. But in the same breath we are told that such an experience ‘cannot be owned within intellectual history or ... professional criticism’. As personal joy is smuggled in alongside critical stringency, During seems to be having his cake and eating it too. But the fact that his joy enters the essay as an afterthought reinforces the notion that it must necessarily abide under erasure or, at best, can only be entertained once serious scholarship has had its say. If fiction is not ring-fenced by rules of decorum, criticism is.

A moment in Robert Pippin’s *Metaphysical Exile: On J.M. Coetzee’s Jesus Fictions* supplies a second example. The book’s earlier injunction to read ‘faithfully’ doesn’t quite prepare us for what could fairly be called an eviscerating attack on those reviewers who have expressed doubts about the trilogy. These reviewers have their dismissals quoted back at them, though without attribution. In a scholarly work otherwise meticulously footnoted, the bibliographic omissions might serve to spare the critics’ blushes. But given the concluding swipe, anonymity seems a further twist of the knife: ‘For the most part the criticisms of the novel seem to me simply lazy and, accordingly, superficial, a kind of middle-brow plea for accessibility, all on the assumption that the work of art is there “for us,” that it can make no serious demands on us’ (Pippin 90). Several recognizable attitudes towards difficulty are implied here: that it necessitates recovery of the latent, that it’s unaccommodating of our readerly predispositions, that it marks the worthwhile artwork, that it separates the initiated from the uninitiated. More than that, the vehement, almost personal nature of this barbed passage reveals the perhaps too-intimate relationship between the work of art and the work of criticism, since this defence of Coetzee reads also as a defence of the scholarship that defends. And where scholarship takes the further step of eliding the beautiful and the good, aesthetics and ethics, it’s not unexpected to find an amplified *apologia*.

The question towards which this article has slowly been driving is this: what if the defences came down? What if awkwardness about the apparently sanctioned literary object wasn’t relegated to the province of online opinion pieces but accommodated as part of the critical process. Of course, the question itself isn’t new. It resonates with Eliot’s affective-aesthetic sensitivity, with Eve Sedgwick’s (1997) reparative reading and its afterlife as postcritique, with Ngai’s (2005) ‘ugly feelings’ and with Nick Salvato’s (2016) ‘critical embarrassment’ or ‘cringe criticism’. The last is particularly apt for a discussion that has not only invoked embarrassment as a paradoxical form of enabling obstruction, but which has edged and hedged its way towards something not easily said in polite scholarly company. Hedging a little longer, I will remark that while cringe criticism might appear as a withdrawal from what one considers to be in bad taste (or simply bad) and so remove one to Olympian heights, it can also serve as a form of reading that attaches to ‘an intransigent sense of one’s intractable ... stupidity’ (Salvato 46). In other words, it brings us up against the question: what if my irritation or scepticism or impatience with a particular difficult work is only a mask for a deeper readerly failure? This, after all, is the double-bluff of Dixon’s letter. But whether or not the ugly feelings generated by the difficult work are of a first or second order – whether they are meta-affective responses to a more immediate though less perceptible feeling of intellectual defeat – matters less than the fact of their involvement in our critical reactions. This is to say that that if critical embarrassment is to avoid claiming for itself any sense of superiority it must fuse with critical humility. Thomas Docherty (1031) uses the latter term to describe a necessary ‘passivity’ or ‘passion’ in the critical reader. To my mind, this reinstates critical negative capability and thus the opposite of that restlessness which Empson felt to be the itch of his critical scratching. This passivity means that readers must be ready to open themselves to the singularity of the text, yes. But it also means

that such openness can't occur to the exclusion of passion, where 'passion' implies a degree of suffering that should be registered, explained and turned towards generative discourse instead of being stoically borne or transmuted into critical implacability.

This article opened by juxtaposing reviewers' and scholars' radically different responses to *The Childhood of Jesus*. The aim was not to point to a collective lapse of critical judgement, nor to hold up reviewers' avowed bafflement as a courageous ideal. Rather, it was to consider the gap itself and to provide a partial explanation. But to suggest that the endeavour was impelled by intellectual curiosity would be disingenuous. My attempt to make sense of the disparity of responses between reviewers and critics was born out of sympathy with the former. On a first reading, I was struck by the texts' deceptive simplicity: the sparseness, even straightforwardness, asked to be taken as a sign of profundity. The misgiving deepened on subsequent readings, particularly where I felt intrigued by the textual puzzles themselves or, more accurately, how familiarity with Coetzee's works might enable me to solve them. I was beginning to suspect the novels' motives because, in Cavell's words, I didn't know whether my interest was 'elicited ... by the object or by what can be said about the object' (207). Suspicion about *what* could be said turned into suspicion about *how* it could be said. In part, this explains what might be called the 'distancing close reading' attempted here. And yet, however distant, disavowing or doubting, any engagement with Coetzee nevertheless implies that he is worth the trouble. This is to confirm his own precis that the classic depends on questioning, even 'hostile' (Coetzee 'Classic' 20) acts of criticism. It's also to acknowledge that he invites the trouble, invites our troubling of artistic value.

A last distancing reading may serve to illustrate the point. The phrase '*una tontería*' is apposite to a discussion of embarrassment, difficulty and the doubts raised by the divisive artwork. It first occurs in *The Childhood of Jesus* when Ana, desired by Simón, calls his quest for beauty '*una tontería*' (32). Still getting to grips with Spanish, and also with the apparently passionless society of Novilla, he asks what it means. 'Nonsense. Rubbish' (33), she tells him. When subsequently applying for a 'personal therapist' (euphemism for prostitute), Simón finds himself knotted up about his desires and the ways in which he fails to express them. He writes in his application that he is 'starved of beauty' (139) but reads over his declamations with embarrassment. Adding a tortuously apophatic statement of desire ('Which is not to say that I'm not a man, with a man's needs'), he exclaims: '*Qué tontería!* What a farrago! What a moral confusion!' (139). The phrase recurs a last time in *The Death of Jesus* as part of a ventriloquized attack on the Don Quixote imagined by David: 'Will you acknowledge that it was all *una tontería*, a load of rubbish, the life you led as a knight errant?' (168). From here, we work our way back to other face-value, common sense accusations of worthlessness, of dubious investment. The reader will recall, perhaps even sympathize, with Simón's dismissal of the Academy of Dance's 'philosophy': 'Privately I call it claptrap. Privately I call it a load of mystical rubbish' (*Schooldays* 99). But what to make of David's Museum of the Desultory and Discarded, which Simón rejects in similar terms? "'A load of old rubbish is not a museum. Things need to have some value before they find a place in a museum ... If things have value it means that people in general prize them, agree they are valuable'" (*Childhood* 167). We have, again, the self-immunizing logic of sanctioning doubt: if Don Quixote isn't entirely to be dismissed as '*una tontería*,' then perhaps neither is the rubbish David collects. The novels leave the question unanswered, perhaps offering something like modernism's guidance in perplexity. My own feeling is that it is 'like like' modernist difficulty.

Acknowledgements

My thanks to Arthur Rose, Derek Attridge and Michael Titlestad for comments on draft versions of this article.

Notes

- 1 These are *The Childhood of Jesus* (2013), *The Schooldays of Jesus* (2016), and *The Death of Jesus* (2019).
- 2 See, for instance, Markovits, Tait, and Bellin.
- 3 The editors write (2): ‘At the forefront of literary invention, the novel affirms the enduring capacity of contemporary literature to engage with the most intractable social, political and spiritual problems confronting us at the beginning of the twenty-first century.’
- 4 ‘The criterion of “embarrassment” ... or “contradiction” ... focuses on actions or sayings of Jesus that would have embarrassed or created difficulty for the early Church. The point of the criterion is that the early Church would hardly have gone out of its way to create material that only embarrassed its creator or weakened its position in arguments with opponents’ (Meier 169).
- 5 The latter (‘Making No Compromise with the Public Taste’) served as slogan on the cover page of *The Little Review* from June 1917 onwards.
- 6 I use the book’s subtitle for ease of reference.
- 7 See Meier: ‘Once again, it is highly unlikely that the Church would have taken pains to invent a saying that emphasized the ignorance of its risen Lord, only to turn around and suppress it’ (169).
- 8 As will become clear, I use the term ‘epiphenomenal’ in a distinct way from George Steiner (27–30). In Steiner’s usage, ‘epiphenomenal difficulty’ is synonymous with his preferred term ‘contingent difficulty’, which largely pertains to intertextual or linguistic obscurity.
- 9 The question featured among ten ‘Extended Essay Themes’ for M. Phil. Students in 1981. I am grateful to Andries Wessels for supplying me with a copy.
- 10 The original source seems to be Jason Farrago’s review of *Childhood*.
- 11 For the German/English confusion, see *Childhood* 67; *Death* 12–13.
- 12 E.B. Pusey, Augustine’s translator, provides a useful gloss on the same page: ‘He means Christ; the first letters of whose Names did in Sybiles acrostic verses make up the word $\nu\chi\theta\upsilon\zeta$, a fish. He was also resembled by Jonas drawn out of the fish and deep ... He is fed upon at the Communion’ (in Augustine 296–97).
- 13 I am indebted to Leonard Diepeveen’s *The Difficulties of Modernism* for drawing my attention to this piece.
- 14 Most of these reassessments are contained in Eliot’s *On Poetry and Poets*.

Works Cited

- Anderson, Margaret. *The Little Review* 4(2). New York: Margaret Anderson, 1917.
- Anker, Elizabeth S. ‘Why We Love Coetzee; or, *The Childhood of Jesus* and the Funhouse of Critique’. In *Critique and Postcritique*. Edited by Elizabeth S. Anker and Rita Felski. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2017. 183–210.

- Attridge, Derek. *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*. Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 2004.
- Augustine. *Confessions*. Translated by E.B. Pusey. Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1838.
- Bellin, Roger. 'A Strange Allegory: JM Coetzee's "The Childhood of Jesus"'. *Los Angeles Review of Books*. <https://lareviewofbooks.org>. Accessed on 1 May 2021.
- Borges, Jorge Luis. 'The Garden of Forking Paths'. In *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings*. Edited by Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby. London: Penguin, 2000. 44–54.
- Cavell, Stanley. 'Music Discomposed'. In *Must We Mean What We Say?: A Book of Essays*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976. 180–212.
- Coetzee, J.M. *Elizabeth Costello*. New York: Penguin, 2003.
- Coetzee, J.M. *The Childhood of Jesus*. London: Harvill Secker, 2013.
- Coetzee, J.M. *The Death of Jesus*. London: Harvill Secker, 2019.
- Coetzee, J.M. *The Schooldays of Jesus*. London: Harvill Secker, 2016.
- Coetzee, J.M. 'What is a Classic'. *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa* 5(2), 1993: 7–24.
- Coetzee, J.M. and Arabella Kurtz. *The Good Story: Exchanges on Truth, Fiction and Psychotherapy*. New York: Penguin Books, 2016.
- Diepeveen, Leonard. *The Difficulties of Modernism*. New York: Routledge, 2003.
- Dixon, Vladimir. 'A Litter to Mr. James Joyce'. In Beckett, Samuel, et al. *Our Exagmination Round His Factification for Incamination of Work in Progress*. Norfolk, Connecticut: New Directions, 1972 [1929]. 193–94.
- Docherty, Thomas. 'On Critical Humility'. *Textual Practice* 23(6), 2009: 1029–43.
- During, Simon. 'Coetzee as Academic Novelist'. In *The Intellectual Landscape in the Works of J.M. Coetzee*. Edited by Tim Mehigan and Christian Moser. Rochester (NY): Camden House, 2018. 233–53.
- Eastman, Max. 'The Cult of Unintelligibility'. In *The Literary Mind: Its Place in an Age of Science*. New York: Octagon Books, 1969. 57–78.
- Eliot, T.S. 'Introduction to Nightwood' [1937]. In *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition, Volume 5: Tradition and Orthodoxy, 1934–1939*. Edited by Iman Javadi, Ronald Schuchard and Jayme Stayer. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press; London: Faber and Faber, 2017. 457–62.
- Eliot, T.S. 'The Metaphysical Poets' [1921]. In *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition, Volume 2: The Perfect Critic, 1919–1926*. Edited by Anthony Cuda and Ronald Schuchard. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press; London: Faber and Faber, 2014. 375–85.
- Eliot, T.S. 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' [1919]. In *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition, Volume 2: The Perfect Critic, 1919–1926*. Edited by Anthony Cuda and Ronald Schuchard. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press; London: Faber and Faber, 2014. 105–114.
- Empson, William. *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. London: Penguin, 1995.
- Farrago, Jason. 'J.M. Coetzee's Stunning New Novel Shows What Happens When a Nobel Winner Gets Really Weird'. *The New Republic*. www.newrepublic.com. Accessed on 12 April 2021.
- Graves, Robert and Laura Riding. *A Survey of Modernist Poetry and A Pamphlet Against Anthologies*. Edited by Charles Mundy and Patrick McGuinness. Manchester: Carcanet, 2002.

- James, David. 'Introduction'. In *Modernism and Close Reading*. Edited by David James. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. 1–16.
- Kannemeyer, J.C. *J.M. Coetzee: A Life in Writing*. Translated by Michiel Heyns. Brunswick: Scribe Publications, 2012.
- Markovits, Benjamin. 'The Childhood of Jesus: Review'. *The Guardian*. www.theguardian.com. Accessed on 14 April.
- Meier, John P. *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking The Historical Jesus, vol. 1: The Roots of the Problem and the Person*. New York: Doubleday, 1991.
- Nabokov, Vladimir. *Pale Fire*. Glasgow: Penguin Random House, 2016.
- Ngai, Sianne. *Theory of the Gimmick: Aesthetic Judgment and Capitalist Form*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 2020.
- Ngai, Sianne. *Ugly Feelings*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005.
- Pippin, Robert. *Metaphysical Exile: On J.M. Coetzee's Jesus Fictions*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2021.
- Pound, Ezra. *How to Read*. New York: Haskell House, 1972.
- Rabaté, Jean-Michel. 'Pathos of the Future: Writing and Hospitality in *The Childhood of Jesus*'. In *'The Childhood of Jesus': The Ethics of Ideas and Things*. Edited by Jennifer Rutherford and Anthony Uhlmann. New York: Bloomsbury, 2017. 33–58.
- Rose, Arthur. *Literary Cynics: Borges, Beckett, Coetzee*. London: Bloomsbury, 2017.
- Salvato, Nick. *Obstruction*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading; or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Introduction is About You.' In *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction*. Edited by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1997. 1–37.
- Steiner, George. *On Difficulty and Other Essays*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978.
- Rutherford, Jennifer and Anthony Uhlmann. 'Introduction'. In *'The Childhood of Jesus': The Ethics of Ideas and Things*. Edited by Jennifer Rutherford and Anthony Uhlmann. New York: Bloomsbury, 2017. 1–5.
- Tait, Theo. 'The Childhood of Jesus – Review'. *The Guardian*. www.theguardian.com. Accessed 14 April 2021.
- Tajiri, Yoshiki. 'Beyond the Literary Theme Park: J.M. Coetzee's Late Style in *The Childhood of Jesus*'. In *'The Childhood of Jesus': The Ethics of Ideas and Things*. Edited by Jennifer Rutherford and Anthony Uhlmann. New York: Bloomsbury, 2017. 187–209.
- Trilling, Lionel. 'On the Teaching of Modern Literature'. In *The New York Intellectuals Reader*. Edited by Neil Jumonville. New York: Routledge, 2007. 223–42.
- Twidle, Hedley. 'Getting Past Coetzee'. *Financial Times*. www.ft.com. 2012. Accessed on 13 February 2021.
- Zumhagen-Yekplé, Karen. *A Different Order of Difficulty: Literature after Wittgenstein*. Chicago and London: Chicago UP, 2020.