Encountering, experiencing and performing the other as event in *The Childhood of Jesus* by J. M. Coetzee

Anne-Laure Fortin-Tournès
Université du Maine

The tradition of French philosophy presents the event as an encounter with a form of radical otherness which raises the question of the possibility of naming and formalizing it. Claude Romano, for instance, insists on the idea that the event is epochal (Romano 2012), that it is a suspension, an interruption, and a rupture, but also the origin of unheard-of perspectives, thoughts and modes of becoming which open up onto the possibility of communities or collective forms of subjectivity. In Romano's phenomenology, the event is an unexpected form of otherness that beckons to us and calls upon us to be transformed so as to respond to it. Thus, the event forces us to change, to become other as we reconsider our modes of understanding the world after an event has happened.

Alain Badiou, for his part, insists on the radical unexpectedness of the event. According to him, the event takes place in the void of a situation, from which it differs absolutely, so "other", in its radical alterity, that it "forces" the subject who experiences it, to place a "wager" on its capacity for truth (Badiou 1988 27), a wager that is concomitant, according to Badiou, with naming the event and being faithful to the transformations it produced.

Jacques Derrida's association of the event with the notion of singularity, and in particular with the singularity of the literary work, which is "never closed like a point or a fist" (Derrida 1992 68) but always differential, that is to say bringing about a productive encounter of differences, also foregrounds otherness as central to the mechanisms of the event, a type of otherness that is formalizing, Derrida argues, since it is capable of having an

impact or a force that gives rise to a law or institution when the event is articulated.

The centrality of otherness to the French philosophy of the event is finally exemplified in Gilles Deleuze's identification of the event with the very process of "becoming" at work in meaning as it is actualised. The event for Deleuze coincides with the differentiation that is central to time, it is a continuous process of folding and enfolding of time itself which coincides with the actualisation of virtualities of meaning (Deleuze 1969), with meaning as it necessarily develops in time.

The Childhood of Jesus, J.M. Coetzee's latest novel, tackles the issue of the other in its own specific literary way. It constructs a phenomenology of the event that hinges on the idea that the encounter with newness, singularity and difference constitutes a rupture, something which is thematised in the novel's representation of the migrant as a cultural and social other. However, as I would like to argue, Coetzee's text also reads as a resistant, illegible and irreducible other to the hermeneutic reader who experiences it as an event calling for elucidation but resisting final interpretation. I would like to venture the hypothesis that not only does *The Childhood of Jesus* represent an attempt to thematise the event as the irruption of otherness, in its depiction of the arrival of migrants or refugees in a foreign land, of their perception of that land as alien, and of the perception from the people of that land that the migrants are inassimilable to them, but the text also becomes an event in and of reading as the reader experiences its resistance to interpretation as an encounter with the radical otherness of a meaning that remains elusive. Deceptively posing as an allegory of Jesus' early life, Coetzee's novel actually programs several equally valid allegorical self-interpretations which end up deferring and even defeating the reader's hermeneutic quest. Thus, the novel's peculiar form of unreadability gives the reader first hand experience of the radical otherness, the cessation and the rupture which are the hallmarks of the event as a phenomenon. The absence of allegorical convergence in Coetzee's novel makes the reader experience the meaning of the text as eventmental.

The narrative revolves around a man named Simón, who has taken under his protection a child named David, with whom he

is not related, and whose mother he spends a large section in the novel trying to find, in order for the child to be reunited with her. Simón and David are refugees coming from a camp called Belstar, where they were given Spanish lessons and passbooks, were washed clean of their pasts, and redirected to Novilla, a city where they try to settle down. It is made clear by the narrator that Simón and David arrive in unknown territory and must get used to a different culture, a different language, and different forms of interaction with those around them, which invites the reader to read the two protagonists as figures of the socially and culturally different migrant other. Though the protagonists are assigned a flat and Simón quickly finds a job as a stevedore at the docks, Simon and David keep having trouble fitting into their new world, because they feel it is alien to them, and because they themselves are considered by Novillans as being alien to it. An illustration of this is Simón's difficulty in accepting the passivity and indifference of Novillans and their apparent disregard for sexual and dietary urges, which launches him into a series of rebellious socratic dialogues with the people he encounters. During one of their walks, Simón and David see a woman, Ines, playing tennis in one of the posher parts of the town and Simón, thinking he recognizes David's mother in her, persuades her to adopt the child. The woman proves a toxic mother who spoils David, lets him indulge in fantasies of omnipotent power and leads him to regress to an infantile stage. In spite of this, Simón stands by her when she decides to take David out of school because his boisterous attitude has won him a redirection to a "special institution", and the text ends on the characters setting out on a car journey to escape from Novilla so as to start a new life, a suggestion on which the novel abruptly ends. One of the points of entry into the text is that it raises the issue of the social and political other.

Encountering the social and political other through allegorical readings.

Coetzee's novel seems to be built around allegorical representations of otherness. Its title, to start with, designates it paratextually as a story about the childhood of Jesus of Nazareth

providing fictitious background to the mystery of Christ's existence. The various references to David the child as being "different", even "exceptional", as claiming to be "the truth", and as being forced as a son upon Ines his adoptive mother in a moment that very much resembles the annunciation, seem to validate a biblical decoding of the novel.

Coetzee's representation of Simon and David as two strangers setting foot on foreign land and who are taken aback by the customs of the local people, however, makes the protagonists resemble allegorical personifications of modern migrants in their daily negotiations of the societies and cultures that host them. Alternatively, the novel also reads as a utopian vision of a benevolent communist society where relative happiness is made possible thanks to the supervision of a benign slumbering bureaucracy. When seen through Simon's eyes, however, this vision gives way to a darker allegory of reading, revolving around the dystopian centralized form of the society that is represented in the novel, where individual identity and passion, history and memories have been "washed clean". Interestingly enough, the form in which those various representations of otherness are couched is in itself and paradoxically both hospitable and inamicable to the other. Etymologically, an allegory is indeed a welcoming of the other, from the Greek *allos*: "another", "different". But an allegory is also that which "speaks openly" (from the Greek *Allegorein*) and therefore reduces ambiguities and the number of potential alternatives for meaning (which is what Walter Benjamin debunks as the crystal-clear conception of allegory in his book on *The Origin of German Baroque Drama*). In its capacity to conjure up an alternate, symbolic meaning, the allegory structurally integrates otherness. In the systematicity of its correspondances, however, it is also a negation of other possible forms of meaning. The fact that Coetzee's novel presents us not with one, but with several equally possible allegories complexifies this paradoxical opening out and closing down of the text to otherness to the extent that the use of allegorical saturation prevents the reader from having direct hermeneutic access to the novel and leaves her with the unsolved riddle of its enigmatic significance.

How to reconcile, for example, the paratextual prompt to a biblical interpretation of the novel with the fact that the text openly presents itself as a utopian essay or a political dream on the possibility of a benevolent communist society that is welcoming and hosting enough to the migrant other? In Novilla, regardless of their origins or religions, Simon and David are immediately integrated in the wider communal landscape, their basic needs provided for by social welfare and their more spiritual aspirations presumably satisfied by philosophy night classes. At the outset of the novel, the reader can actually follow the two protagonists as they are assigned basic sleeping and catering facilities at a reception center in Novilla. Simon finds a job easily, and he and the child are offered free bus rides to attend free football games. In a word, they are seen to benefit from the help of a bureaucracy that oversees every form of human interaction. We follow Simon as he marvels at the fact that most Novillans seem satisfied with their lives even though they stay in uniform housing blocks and eat a sparse diet. But the sparse diet is actually where Novillans start appearing as alien to Simon. The ethics of moderation that reigns supreme around him makes him feel increasingly uneasy, as demonstrated on the occasion of a picnic organized by the young woman who welcomes him and David on their arrival, in a passage where Simon expresses his misgivings about the necessity to curb one's desires and hungers:

> The boy nudges him and points to the nearly empty packet of crackers. He spreads paste on a cracker and passes it across.
> 'He has a healthy appetite,' says the girl without opening her eyes.
> 'He is hungry all the time.'
> 'Don't worry, he will adapt. Children adapt quickly.'
> 'Adapt to being hungry? Why should he adapt to being hungry when there is no shortage of food?' (33).

The general ethics of moderation is clearly at odds with Simon's own ethics of passion and desire, and Elena, the woman he befriends and settles down with, makes clear to him that his own ideal of life is alien to the general anti-capitalist way of living in town:

> 'In the old way of thinking, no matter how much you may have, there is always something missing. The name you choose to give this *something-more* that is missing is passion. Yet I am willing to bet that if tomorrow you were offered all the passion you wanted–passion by the bucketful–you would promptly find something new to miss, to lack. This endless dissatisfaction, this yearning for the *something-more* that is missing, is a way of thinking we are well rid of, in my opinion. Nothing is missing. The nothing that you think is missing is an illusion' (75).

The ambient satisfaction and benevolence begin to take their toll on Simon as he becomes increasingly critical of the dominant vision of passionless communal life. As he feels disinclined to believe that Novilla is the best of all possible worlds, the reader starts questioning the validity of her own hermeneutic approach to the text and invalidates the allegory of a utopian communist society as a relevant point of entry into the novel. The systematic erasure of individual identity in Novilla, the generalized lack of critical sense among its inhabitants appear as double-edged and fake to Simon: "What he wants to say, for his part, is that life here is too placid for his taste, too lacking in ups and downs, in drama and tension–is too much, in fact, like the music on the radio." (76) This prompts the reader into applying another interpretive grid to the text, one that makes sense of the numerous intertextual references to dystopian anticipation novels such as Huxley's *Brave New World* or Orwell's *1984*. The following dialogue between Simon and one of the stevedores he works with on the wharf illustrates this point. It showcases the dystopian intertext which Simon's ironic answer to his interlocutor exposes:

> 'If you worked on Seven or Nine you would have an easier time. But you would also not have a full-time job. So, on the whole, you are better off on Two.'
> 'I see. So it is for the best, after all, that I am here, on this wharf, in this port, in this city, in this land. All is for the best in this best of all possible worlds'. (51)

According to Simon, pretending to live in the best of all possible worlds when you have had to renounce your name, when your brain has been washed clean, and when you have been more or less forcefully aligned into fitting with the general landscape, is a price that is too high to pay for a life in which indifference is but another form of death. Simón's difficulties in getting used to the absence of memory, history and passion in Novilla are matched by the impossibility of Novillans themselves to see beyond their own utopian construction of their communal society, so that utopian and dystopian allegories come into conflict and thereby cancel each other out as heuristic hermeneutic keys. As a matter of fact the reduction of the novel to an equally dated pro- or anti-communist pamphlet proves singularly wanting when it comes to describing its fictional power onto its reader. It seems that allegorical surfeit challenges hermeneutic approaches to the text precisely to make the reader experience meaning as resistant, processual and differential rather than fixed and stable.

Experiencing the literary event as a resistance to naming.

Two contradictory but equally possible allegories of reading are woven into Coetzee's novel: on the one hand, the nameless country where the two main protagonists take refuge reads as a benign utopian communal society where everybody's basic needs are provided for. On the other hand, the systematic smoothing out of desires and urges and the erasure of memory and identity in the place where the refugees have landed, carries ominous intertextual overtones redolent of famous dystopian anticipation novels. Characteristically enough for a Coetzee novel, the source of utterance is so volatile and unclear that it becomes impossible for the reader to decide in favour of the utopian or the dystopian allegorical mode of interpreting the text. But the way the allegories cancel each other out invites the reader to reconsider her approach and discard totalizing forms of understanding a text whose powerful impact lies precisely with the paucity of definite answers it gives to the reader's hermeneutic questions. Thus *The Childhood of Jesus* proposes dysfunctional allegories that thwart the reader's hermeneutic approaches to the text.

The textual indecisiveness and opacity resulting from allegorical saturation transforms the reader's experience of the novel into an encounter with an enigmatic and resistant other. Not only does this induce the reader to be further engaged in the reading process, because there is a sense in which this enigma begs to be solved, but it also transforms the reader's experience of the text into an event. Indeed, Coetzee's deceitful manipulation of the reader's expectations in terms of literary mode, form, genre and language makes the reader experience first-hand that meaning is not enclosed and self-contained as it seems to be in an allegory, but meaning is in the making, it is an event that takes place when we read, and when a text resists our usual modes of understanding and interpreting, as it calls for our procedures of comprehension to be transformed, and our definitions of "otherness" to be revised in the same process. As Derek Attridge argues in *The Singularity of Literature*, otherness itself is a construct, it is what "is produced in an active and event-like relation" (29) best exemplified in the relation between a singular text and its reader. This eventlike relation implies response and responsibility of and to the other in the link established between text and reader, which involves a becoming other of the reader herself. It involves the actualisation of meanings and feelings, which the form of the literary work summons us to do. The literary work is an event for both its creator and its reader, and it is the reader – not as free-floating subject but as the nexus of a number of specific histories and contextual formations – who "brings the work into being, differently each time, in a singular performance of [it] not so much as written but as writing" (Attridge Coetzee 9). The reader's act of reading must therefore be buttressed by an ethics of reading, a responsibility which coincides with the reader's own capacity to open up to the event of the other in and of the text:

> What we experience in responding to the artwork is not a generalized obligation but a call coming from the work itself – the work as singular staging of otherness […]. The text that functions powerfully as literature […] uses the materials of the same – the culture which it and the reader inhabit and within which they are constituted, in such a way as to open

> onto that which cannot be accounted for by those materials (though they have in fact made possible its emergence). And the response to such a work – the responsible response, the one that attempts to apprehend the other as other – is a performance of it that, while it inevitably strives to convert the other into the same, strives also to allow the same to be modified by the other (Attridge Singularity 124).

As our contemporary societies' difficulty in opening up to the cultural and social other echoes Coetzee's reader's own sense of alienation at not being able to fully grasp the ultimate signifier in and of the enigmatic novel, the latter turns into "an event of signification" (Attridge, Coetzee 11) which jolts the reader into an awareness of the failure of any ultimate allegories of reading.

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