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The Transcendent Arithmetic of Jesus: An Exercise in Semiotic Reading.[1]

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> "It may be conceded to the mathematicians that four is twice two. But two is not twice one; two is two thousand times one."
>
> (G. K. Chesterton, *The Man Who Was Thursday*, 1908)

1. The assumptions of the interpretation.

How to build a semiotic experiment? Ignorant of laboratories, I have not found better than to observe myself in the reading and in the interpretation of a novel. I did not ask myself the question "how does semiotics read and interpret texts?", but "how do I do it?", what influence decades of semiotic studies have had on my reading but also what influence decades of reading have had on my semiotics? I exclude that, had I not studied and written about semiotics, today I would read and interpret how I do. I claim, however, the personality of my journey, and I peremptorily affirm that the rigid application of a method to interpretation is a kind of violence, as well as a vaguely kitsch act. I am grateful to Greimas, for example, but I would never dissect a text as he did with 'his' Maupassant. That was his style, and it was legitimate. The same cannot be said about his many epigones.

The first secret of interpretation consists in the choice of what is read. For example, I do not think that by interpreting a commercial advertisement one could say something profoundly interesting. At most, one should consider a series of commercials, whose complexity would

[1] A first version of this article was presented during the conference "The empirical research on text", University of Turin, Sala Lauree of the Department of Humanities, 18 October 2013. I thank Aldo Nemesio for propitiating this interesting event. The Italian version was then published in the *E/C*, the journal of the Italian Association for Semiotic Studies.

challenge reading. The corollary of this first assumption is that interpretation needs to meet a certain resistance. Very simple objects, made to be decoded without ambiguity, like most commercials or commercial entertainment products, do not offer any resistance. They let themselves be interpreted without friction. One can try to complicate their nature by deconstructing them, or reconstructing them, and reading in them what no one else does, but this is not interpretation. It is rewriting.

Resistance however does not coincide with complexity. I can meet a resistant object and realize that it inspires me mild, banal readings. The second secret of interpretation is obsession. If an object does not awaken an obsession in me it can be complex at will but it will not challenge me. Instead, I must immediately have the certainty that this object hides an answer to something that haunts me, even something that I try to hide to myself.

There is, however, a third secret, always with regards to the choice of what is to be interpreted. A resistant object may perhaps challenge me but it will not capture my reading unless it involves a seduction. I must fall in love with the shape of an object, with the internal disposition of its elements.

Fourth preliminary secret: a resistant object that haunts and seduces me will not awaken my interpretation if I cannot already see in it the possibility of a gratification, of success. I shall happily interpret only those texts that I can, that I know how to interpret. Entrusting the interpretation of a novel to those who will not know how to recognize its poetics has something grotesque about it, as it is the case with all those methods that aim at teaching how to interpret. Interpretation is neither taught nor learned, like a craft. Rather, it develops as an art, through exposure, imitation, and absorption, but with disappointing results if art is not accompanied by talent. Defining talent is beyond my goals here. Rather, I am interested in the monetary metaphor. There is no interpretation without hoarding. Those who do not read in the hope of finding and setting aside a treasure cannot interpret. Nothing is sadder than those useless exercises, common in the courses of semiotics, in which the student applies a method to a text

by extracting from it a meaning that he or she will forget immediately after the exam. Not to mention the student who asks the teacher what object he or she will have to submit to this mechanic effort. The fifth preliminary secret, therefore, is the following: an object of which one already perceives that it will not leave any trace in one's memory is not worthy of interpretation. The encounter with this resistance, the challenge of obsession and the seduction that ensues, will be tantamount to an artifice, an occasional event.

Sixth secret: one can never interpret by oneself. When Robinson Crusoe meditates on the Bible on his desert island, that is already interpretation, but not when, in the metropolis, an internet user reads a blog that he will not discuss with anyone. Interpretation needs a hermeneutical community because it is like a game that requires the meeting of more intentionalities within a field, a system of limits and rules.

It is important to explain the choice of words in this strange laboratory. When we speak of meaning in the abstract, and semiotics must do so because it aims at studying meaning in all its manifestations, it is impossible not to adopt equally abstract terms, like "object", or "text". The former is methodologically more neutral than the latter, but it doesn't matter. What matters is that, in the passage from the abstract to the empirical, there is something in me that deeply resists the use of jargon. In my experiment I did not read a text, nor even a literary text. I read *a novel*. In fact, to be precise, *I picked up a book* and *read a novel*. And when I go to the cinema I don't watch a 'filmic text', I watch *a movie*. Perhaps we can strive to see a text in a novel even without mentioning it continually, for the sake of a more fraternal dialogue with the readers who preceded us and who will follow us, with those around us.

Last preliminary observation: it is absolutely not true that I have picked up a book, monitoring my moves as an interpreter, for the purposes of the present experiment. On the opposite. I happened to read a novel, and this reading seemed to me the perfect laboratory from which to draw, with an effort of memory rather than attention, some indications on the paths of interpretation. There are complex epistemological questions about the relationship between

observation and monitoring, especially in mental experiments, but I won't deal with them here.

2. The object of interpretation.

The novel whose reading I have decided to recall here is *The Childhood of Jesus*, by the South African (now Australian) writer J.M. Coetzee, first published in English in October 2013.[2] As I have anticipated, it is not a random choice for me, and it could not be one. First of all, I am not just a reader of Coetzee. I am, in a sense, his follower. I read everything he has published, both novels and essays. Why am I a follower of Coetzee? In the first place because, to take up one of the secrets mentioned above, I am enchanted by his way of putting words and sentences together. And I do not speak of metaphorical charm, but of cognitive, physical, almost cerebral charm. Each sentence of Coetzee gives me a sort of sensual pleasure. It is impossible to separate expression and content, but I have the impression that Coetzee's style, the way in which he says what he says, would produce this enchantment in me even if he spoke of absolute trivialities. There is a passage in *The Childhood of Jesus* in which Coetzee speaks of excrements, and describes how the protagonist unclogs an obstructed toilet. Well, this passage is stylistically wonderful. The wonder comes from the intimate certainty that there is no way to put together those words and phrases to say better what they say. I think I have realized, after a long frequentation of Coetzee's novels, why this style awakens in me such a delight, through which linguistic choices. Other writers provoke the same enjoyment in me, yet I cannot consider myself as their follower: the French writer Jean-Philippe Toussaint, for example, or the Spanish Antonio Muñoz Molina, or even more commercial writers, like the American Jonathan Franzen.

I consider myself, instead, a follower of Coetzee for other reasons. First of all, because I

[2] London: Harvill Secker.

am sure that his novels will touch on themes that are essential to me, and that their reading will make them recognizable to me even when, in the hurry of life, I have lost sight of them. Secondly, because Coetzee's books lead me toward the suspicion, at times the conviction, that I could find something intimately precious therein, a sort of an answer. Thirdly, because Coetzee not only seduces me by his style, or his themes, but also by his tone. Sometimes the topics he deals with, like South African society, for instance, do not involve me personally. Yet, I have the distinct feeling that, were this theme to involve me one day, I would like to talk about it in the same way in which Coetzee does. Fourth and last place: I presume to be able to accept the challenge that Coetzee's books offer, to engage in a confrontation with their resistant surface, and to win. In my modest experience as a reader I find these features only in some writers whose work is not an ongoing corpus but an already closed one, such as dead authors Dostoevsky and Camus, and perhaps in no other living writer. That is why I look forward to every new book by Coetzee as a kind of secular revelation.

What happened to me when I picked up this book?

3. The interpretation of the para-text.

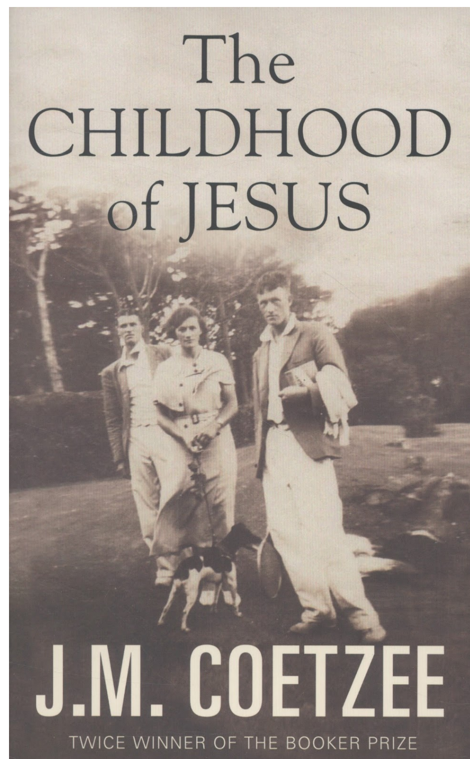

Fig. 1 - Cover of *The Childhood of Jesus* by J.M. Coetzee.

The book's paratext, as Genette would call it, immediately guides my reading. Given my long-term academic interest in religions, the novel's title, *The Childhood of Jesus*, sharpens my curiosity and pushes me to restrict my interpretative approach within a field of moves. In fact, I expect to read a personal story, probably an allegorical one, on the early years of Jesus's life. The title, however, is not isolated in the cover. An image also appears therein, serving as a counterpoint to the title. Three characters are depicted in it, two men and a woman, obliquely arranged on three levels of the photography's perspective, the woman between the two men, all dressed in the Anglo-Saxon sportswear of the 1920s or 1930s: light shoes, comfortable white cotton trousers, loose jackets, open-necked shirts. A tennis racket appears in the hand of the character in the foreground, while the woman keeps a medium-sized dog on a leash. The complexions are fair but very tanned, almost roasted by the sun. The faces, especially the male ones, are bony, leathery, as it was typical in those years. One would say these are faces from Australia, or South Africa, or India, and in any case in a sunny part of the Commonwealth; all

around, a well-kept lawn, surrounded by hedges and tall trees, perhaps jacarandas. Not only what the image represents, but also the technique of representation is at odds with the title: a photo in black and white, conspicuously sepia.

I know, even before I begin to read, that the childhood of Jesus that will be told to me is not a historical but an updated childhood, allegorically transposed to the present time. However, the precise meaning of this image will be revealed to me, at least in part, only later. I am going therefore to read while I am conscious of a tradition, that of the many writers who have told in their own way the life of Jesus, and in particular his childhood. The choice is logical: very few Gospels tell us about this period, while the information we have mostly belongs to apocryphal literature. It is therefore very fertile ground for those who, like Kazantzakis or Saramago, want to create a new imaginary of the early years of Christ as a parable, as a new point of view on Christianity and humanity.

Despite its rigidity, what I have learned about the composition of stories from Greimas' semiotics is essential to me. Not that I begin, as the Franco-Lithuanian semiotician did with Maupassant, to dissect the story so as to eviscerate it of its values, actants, actors, and figures. At first glance I enjoy, first of all, the mental sound of words and sentences, I yield to the childlike lure of narration, and yet a professional deformation, in addition to the set of the experiment, pushes me to a certain alertness. Perhaps interpretation is also that. It is a kind of under-the-skin anxiety, an exercise in paying attention to the signals that are caught in passing while one is immersed in a flow. This attention pushes me to ask myself at what level of abstraction the novel will evoke Jesus's childhood in filigree. It immediately seems clear to me that Coetzee keeps well away from Saramago or Kazantzakis: there the reader would immediately find the subtext of the evangelical or apocryphal tale. Here, instead, I sense that the effort I am asked for is much greater. Coetzee's novel does not tell the life of Jesus, it never mentions him, it does not name any of the characters that compose the scene of the Gospels, and does not even describe the times, spaces, and actions that characterize the biography of

Christ. The novel therefore proposes to me a sort of charade: the title imposes on me that I recognize therein a childhood of Jesus, yet all the clues for this recognition are hidden or rather veiled. I also understand that solving this charade, recognizing the childhood of Jesus in a novel that never talks about him, will give me the key to it. It is by resolving this charade, in fact, that the novel will give me an answer to a question whose fundamental, existential importance for me I am paradoxically still ignorant about.

4. Interpretation of a charade.

As in any charade, however, there are some clues. First there is a child. His name is not Jesus but it is a biblical name, David, referring to a character closely related to the Christian reading of the Old Testament. At the same time we will soon know that this is not his real name. The story is in fact immersed in a kind of sometimes disturbing haze where one is never sure of the space and time in which one finds oneself.

We meet David in the company of Simón, a middle-aged adult who narrates the story and who, as we discover, is the child's godfather. The two arrive tired and hungry in a reception center for migrants in a place called Novilla. We are in fact in an imaginary world in which Spanish has become a lingua franca and the city where most of the story takes place has a toponym that indicates its novelty, Novilla as a *new town*, or as a *nouvelle ville*.

Looking at my moves as an interpreter, I find myself thinking that Coetzee will offer me an allegorical story of the childhood of Jesus as an apologue on immigration. As I continue reading, however, this hypothesis thins out, disintegrates. The novel talks about immigration, but it's not *about immigration*. Or rather, it proposes on immigration a thought that places it in the context of a more general and subtle reflection, free from the banality to which the urgency of current events turns the discourse of media. This first hypothesis breaks down both by virtue

of my prejudices about Coetzee — it is not plausible that such a fine thinker proposes a moralizing story — and by virtue of the continuation of the story itself: slowly I discover that in Novilla they are *all* immigrants. They have all arrived in the new city through a port called Belstar, aboard ships from an unspecified elsewhere. But everyone is encouraged to get rid of the memory of the past life to embrace the new existence that is offered to them by Novilla.

My structural sensitivity suggests to me that the novel runs constantly on two tracks. On the first, sibylline clues continue to nurture the suspicion that I am in fact being told a story of the childhood of Jesus. On the second, signals are given to me to understand in what light the childhood of Jesus is flowing before my eyes.

As for the first track, the genius of Coetzee deconstructs the evangelical narrative into some essential molecules to then re-propose them, rearranged, in the novel. The comparison that best captures this operation is perhaps the one with molecular food, in the style of Ferrant Adriá. I do not recognize the visual aspect of a dish, nor that of its ingredients, yet their decomposition and re-composition not only allows me to recognize the taste of the dish, but also to grasp with unparalleled clarity the contribution of each ingredient to its formation. Joseph's molecules converge and merge together then in Simón: he reiterates on numerous occasions that he is not the biological father of David, but a sort of godfather, or uncle, or guardian, and that he nevertheless considers himself the natural father of the child. Simón finds work in Novilla as a port hauler, a manual work that weakens his body giving it an indefinable age, but nevertheless of a maturity that tends to old age. But Simón inherits from Joseph above all the lucid dismay with respect to what is happening to him: he finds himself the guardian of a child who is not his son, to whom he feels as close as though he were his own, and little by little it is revealed to him that this child is not normal, and that the family situation that is taking shape around him is not normal either.

At one point, David finds his mother, but in a way that again distorts the subtext of the Gospel story. One day, as they wander around the outskirts of Novilla, David and Simón

encounter a sort of luxury reception center called "La Residencia". In the garden we recognize the characters on the book cover, in tennis clothes. An epiphany takes place here: Simón knows that David and his mother were separated on the ship that took them to Novilla. We are told about the father that "it is a complicated affair". David had a letter around his neck that would allow him to be reunited with his parents, but this letter went lost. In the Residencia, Simón sees Inés, the girl in the photo, and has not simply the feeling, but also the utter certainty that she is David's mother. He therefore asks her to take him with her, and Inés accepts, despite the initial contrariety of the brothers.

This recognition, to the reader's eyes, happens in an unexpected and paradoxical way. Simón has been represented, up to this point, as an extremely rational individual. We know, moreover, that David does not remember his mother's face and, last fundamental clue, we are told that Inés is a virgin. Yet Simón has no doubt that Inés is David's mother, and Inés has no doubts about welcoming his son as a natural child.

It is therefore clear that what Coetzee is staging here is *the impossible narrative of the dogma*. It is not possible to tell the birth of Jesus in terms of a narrative rationality, and the astonishment that seizes the reader before this fundamental stage of the story is, therefore, the same that captures the believer before the dogma. Coetzee instills in the reader the bewilderment of dogma.

Finally, even in David we recognize some molecules of Jesus. But it is above all in his case that these elements are blended into a strange, ambiguous result. David has an obsessive relationship with death. There is nothing that dismays him more than any endangerment of life, for example when his friend Alvaro, superintendent of longshoremen, is stabbed by Señor Daga, a gangster of Novilla. And when illness or death occurs around David, he repeats with certainty that he is able to heal, or bring back to life. When Rey, the harbor mule, falls ill and dies, David begs Simón to let him breathe his breath into the animal's nostrils. However, these miracles are promised but never take place, their enunciation is always imputed by adults to the strangeness

of a child with too a fervent imagination.

David is indeed a child full of imagination, and with a very quick intellect. He learns chess with lightning speed, for example. However, it is in this regard that the second of the tracks of the novel manifests itself. When Simón begins to give David the rudiments of education, the child shows strange behaviors. Simón tends to minimize them, but they explode when the child, as required by law, is enrolled in school. After a short time, his putative parents are summoned, because David seems unable to learn, showing a lack of concentration that disturbs the class. The diagnosis is not clear, but dyslexia is explicitly evoked, and the suspicion of autism constantly hovers in the heated conversations between Simón and Inés on the one hand and, on the other hand, the Señor León, the teacher of David. Supported by the opinion of the school psychologist, he claims that David should be sent to a sort of reformatory school for children with special needs, located outside Novilla, where parents can visit him twice a month.

Here a narrative tension arises that will lead Simón, Inés, and David to flee Novilla, to another immigrant city called "Estrellita del Norte".

Here too the reader with some familiarity with the Gospel story will recognize molecules of another escape, that to Egypt; in this case too there is a danger generated by an anti-subject, as Greimas would define it. And yet interpretation does not consist only in grasping this abstract similarity, but also in seizing the particular differences that create a gap with the subtext. Readers must recognize Herod in Señor León, but also ask themselves: what does this Herod of Novilla embody, why does the novel blend the molecules of the Flight to Egypt in this way?

5. Interpretation of the figures.

It is then not around the macro-structures of the story, but around its particular figures that the

interpretation must coagulate. As Louis Marin argued about the column halved in the *Tempest* of Giorgione:[3] this fragment of a column is too strange, in too unusual a position, for not being used as a springboard for interpretation. And this is not because it was placed there, allegorically, by the author's intentionality. Quite the contrary. We can say instead that, in the creation of his painting, Giorgione came across the idea of this half-column as I come upon it in the painting's observation. Giorgione the painter and I the spectator meet just in the impossibility of expressing the meaning of this half column if not with its presence in the middle of the painting.

Adopting a metaphor, one could say that reading the meaning of an object is like passing one's hand on a granite slab, whose smoothness is offered to us by the flow of narration, but whose roughness — the more variable the orography of the slab the more it is beautiful — provides the sense, the direction, as well as the *ductus* of interpretation. With meteorological a metaphor instead of a tactile one, Greimas called the peaks of this micro-orography "isotopy".

So, what is the isotopy of Coetzee's Childhood of Jesus? Certainly not the unstructured reference to the gospel, which rather provides the narrative and mythical support of the story. The isotopy emerges instead from the coalescence of figures craftly disseminated along the story. A fundamental figurative path is outlined in David's relation with numbers. Although the child is endowed with quick intelligence, and grasps the sense of chess in a flash, he shows disturbing difficulties in seizing the arithmetic common sense of numbers. These difficulties then explode in school, and help determine the narrative development mentioned above.

Here is a conversation between David and Simón about the nature of numbers:

David: "I know all the numbers. Do you want to hear them? I know 134 and I know 7 and I know" – he draws a deep breath – "4623551 and I know 888 and I know 92 and I know-

[3] *De la représentation*. Paris: Gallimard – Seuil.

”

Simón: “Stop! That’s not knowing the numbers, David. Knowing the numbers means being able to count. It means knowing the order of the numbers – which numbers come before and which come after. Later on it will also mean being able to add and subtract numbers – getting from one number to another in a single jump, without counting all the steps between. Naming numbers isn’t the same as being clever with numbers. You could stand here and name numbers all day and you wouldn’t come to the end of them, because the numbers have no end. Didn’t you know that? Didn’t Inés tell you?”

David: “It’s not true!”

Simón: “What is not true? That there is no end to the numbers? That no one can name them all?”

David: “I can name them all.”

Simón: “Very well. You say you know 888. What is the next number after 888?”

David: “92.”

Simón: “Wrong. The next number is 889. Which of the two is bigger, 888 or 889?”

David: “888.”

Simón: “Wrong. 889 is bigger because 889 comes after 888.”

David: “How do you know? You have never been there.”

Simón: “What do you mean, been there? Of course I haven’t been to 888. I don’t need to have been there to know 888 is smaller than 889. Why? Because I have learned how numbers are constructed. I have learned the rules of arithmetic. When you go to school you will learn the rules too, and then numbers won’t any longer be such a” – he hunts for the world – “such a complication in your life.”

The boy does not respond, but regards him levelly. Not for a moment does he think his words pass him by. No, they are being absorbed, all of them: absorbed and rejected. Why is it that this child, so clever, so ready to make his way in the world, refuses to understand?

> David: “You have visited all the numbers, you tell me,” he says. “So tell me the last number, the very last number of all. Only don’t say it is Omega. Omega doesn’t count.”
>
> Simón: “What is Omega?”
>
> David: “Never mind. Just don’t say Omega. Tell me the last number, the very last one.”
>
> The boy closes his eyes and draws a deep breath. He frowns with concentration. His lips move, but he utters no word.
>
> A pair of birds settle on the bough above them, murmuring together, ready to roost.
>
> For the first time it occurs to him that this may be not just a clever child – there are many clever children in the world – 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!”
>
> (Coetzee 2013: 149-51)

It is not clear how this surreal dialogue on numbers might intersect the story of a divine childhood, although the reference to Omega, a symbol of both numerical and transcendent limit, encourages one to look for the meeting point of these figurative paths. It is only in the general economy of the novel, however, that the orographic profile of its meaning is clearly outlined, often starting from episodes that seem absolutely unrelated to the one just mentioned. One concerns the sexuality of Simon / Joseph. In search of sexual satisfaction, having no relation with the virgin Inés except that of watching over David’s welfare, Simon goes to a brothel run by the city of Novilla, where he is asked to fill in two forms so that he can be put in contact with the appropriate prostitute. Here is the final phase of the dialogue between the brothel secretary and Simón:

> "You haven't ticked a box," she says. "Length of sessions: 30 minutes, 45 minutes, 60 minutes, 90 minutes. Which length do you prefer?"
>
> Simón: "Let us say the maximum of relief: ninety minutes."
>
> "You may have to wait some time to get a ninety-minute session. For reasons of scheduling. Nonetheless, I'll put you down for a long first session. You can change that later, should you so decide. Thank you, that is all. We will be in touch. We will write, informing you of when the first appointment will be."
>
> (*Ibidem*: 139)

The irony of the episode is obvious. It ironizes on the genre of social relations in Novilla. There is no hatred in the immigrants' city, nor violence, with very few significant exceptions. There is no Herod. Everything bathes in a warm and a bit dull broth of "goodwill", of benevolence. No one remembers their past, everyone is a newcomer, and people help each other not out of love but out of a more bland and widespread feeling, with neither élans nor harshness. The circulation of this aseptic fluid is regulated by an administrative apparatus that takes care of everything, from looking for a job for immigrants to their sexual needs, but without ever taking an interest in them personally.

Therefore, if the baby Jesus of Coetzee paws to affirm his sense of numbers, he does so in order to affirm a principle that is revealed in one of the last episodes of the novel. Simón, recovering from being hit in the port by the arm of a new mechanical crane, has a conversation with Eugenio, the crane operator, who goes to visit him every day because he feels guilty. The two engage in a discussion on David's unique sense of numbers, and for a moment Simón seems to grasp the child's point of view. The discussion focuses on why, for David, two plus two does not make four:

> Eugenio: “But two and two equal four. Unless you give some strange, special meaning to equal. You can count it off for yourself: one two three four. If two and two really equaled three then everything would collapse into chaos. We would be in another universe, with other physical laws. In the existing universe two and two equal four. It is a universal rule, independent of us, not man-made at all. Even if you and I were to cease to be, two and two would go on equaling four.”
>
> Simón: “Yes, but which two and which two make four? Most of the time, Eugenio, I think the child simply doesn’t understand numbers, the way a cat or dog doesn’t understand them. But now and then I have to ask myself: Is there anyone on earth to whom numbers are more real?
>
> “While I was in hospital with nothing else to do, I tried, as a mental exercise, to see the world through David’s eyes. Put an apple before him and what does he see? An apple: not one apple, just an apple. Put two apples before him. What does he see? An apple and an apple: not two apples, not the same apple twice, just an apple and an apple.”
>
> (*Ibidem*: 248-9)

6. Conclusions: the arithmetic of Jesus.

The arithmetic one is not the only figural isotopy that runs across the novel. There is another equally if not more important one, which unfolds around Cervantes’ *Quixote*, a classic that Coetzee both loves and is an expert scholar about. As David insists on not embracing the common sense of arithmetic, so he strives not to give in to the common sense of fiction, to the reasonable separation between what is real and what is fictitious. The two isotopies are intertwined, and together they delineate the profound meaning of this childhood of Jesus. The novel invites us not only to recognize the figures of Christ’s biography, albeit scattered. It also

suggests the teleology of this strange divine incarnation. The evil that the Christ of Coetzee seems to have come to defeat is not that of Herod's violence, the brute prevarication of man over man, the exclusion of the last. The evil of this baby Jesus is more abstract. It could be defined, with a new metaphor, as *a statistical evil*. The evil that is perpetuated in the *oblivion of singularities*. The number, the arithmetical categorization of several elements under the same concept and symbol, embodies this practice, since it is only by repressing the singularities that the world can become a number, a matter for calculation and organization. Coetzee's novel, according to this reading, is therefore a story about immigration, but not in the trivially sociological sense of the term. Instead, it insinuates an atrocious doubt about the human capacity to grasp suffering: when pain is categorized, accounted for, administratively treated, what results is a kind of cold violence, a dehumanization under the sign of logistics.

But *The Childhood of Jesus* is not just a novel about immigration, because it detects an even more general and more pernicious tendency in the collective treatment of this pain. It is the tendency to reduce existence, life, and above all social relations, to numbers, to quantity, to matter for calculation. This reduction to numbers, which feeds the new digital writings in a vicious circle, is certainly functional to life in society. No community could live without numbers. And yet when one begins to count friendships in social networks, or when, in the universities of the whole world, ideas are not exchanged, accepted, or contested, but simply counted, then something in the course of the stars that oversee the human destiny shows a disturbing scenario for the humanist, for the person who wants not to count but to recount.

Thus, in observing myself as I read and interpret this childhood of Jesus, I have found myself thinking of the world where I live and work, and its obsession with numbers and tables, and the tragic destiny of a Christ who, descended again on earth to free us from this evil, is not crucified on a cross but trapped in the cases of a formulary, interned as autistic in a world of accountants.