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### [Review of: R. Pippin (2021) *Metaphysical Exile : On J. M. Coetzee's Jesus Fictions*]

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**DOI**

[10.1353/mfs.2022.0036](https://doi.org/10.1353/mfs.2022.0036)

**Publication date**

2022

**Document Version**

Final published version

**Published in**

Modern Fiction Studies

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[Link to publication](https://doi.org/10.1353/mfs.2022.0036)

**Citation for published version (APA):**

Farrant, M. (2022). [Review of: R. Pippin (2021) *Metaphysical Exile : On J. M. Coetzee's Jesus Fictions*]. *Modern Fiction Studies*, 68(3), 580-583.  
<https://doi.org/10.1353/mfs.2022.0036>

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**Robert Pippin. *Metaphysical Exile: On J. M. Coetzee's Jesus Fictions*.  
Oxford UP, 2021. ix + 137 pp.**

J. M. Coetzee's Jesus trilogy of fictions (a term Coetzee prefers to novels), published between 2013 and 2019, constitute a singular stage in the late career of the Nobel laureate. The trilogy revolves around the young child David (the closest figure we have to the Jesus named in the titles) and his adoptive father, Simón. Like all the other characters, David and Simón arrive in Novilla after having been purged of their former memories (the theme of forgetfulness plays a large role throughout *Metaphysical Exile: On J. M. Coetzee's Jesus Fictions*). They are forced to learn Spanish as their mother tongue and to adapt to a new life in Novilla (a nonplace, a utopia) as refugees. The initial reception of the Jesus fictions, variously described as perplexing or arcane, is a recurring feature of *Metaphysical Exile*, the first work of criticism dedicated to the trilogy. Pippin notes how

the “baffled reviews” (58) of Coetzee’s critics amount to a trenchant “middle-brow plea for accessibility” (90). Key to Pippin’s apologia is the articulation of the philosophical import of the novels’ peculiar setting and narrative structure (which substitutes dramatic action for philosophical dialogue and signifying chains of intertextual allusion). Pippin’s thesis is bold and compelling: he argues that “the trilogy is an allegory of absolute exile” (13), concerned with the as if that structures the relation between the human being and the world in which the human being is destined to live. Is there a purposive fit between us and the world, a connection “between how one feels one should live and what the world, especially the social world makes available to one” (6)? Drawing on the implications of Novalis’s idea that philosophy is really homesickness, Pippin argues that the fictions he examines respond to metaphysical homesickness or absolute exile by depicting an attempt at homecoming, which philosophy itself has never fully attained.

As one of Coetzee’s foremost philosophical commentators, Pippin is well placed to separate the profound from the perplexing, notably by drawing on frameworks and ideas from Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Hegel. However, a key strength of his book is the way it registers the trilogy’s uniquely literary engagement with its ideas. As he writes: “It is . . . not a measure of the philosophical power and value of a piece of fiction that a discursive thesis is forthcoming” (21). Engaging with the concept of allegory, popular in previous Coetzee criticism, notably Derek Attridge’s famous essay “Against Allegory,” Pippin’s task is not to translate the ambiguity of Coetzee’s works into familiar intellectual patterns—an exercise in “analogical geography” (14)—but to register the singular implications that arise from the situations they present; implications that are imaginative rather than merely propositional. This somewhat constrains the standard procedure of philosophical argumentation, but Pippin’s caution is rightly justified by the power of the questions (rather than answers) that he is able to excavate from the trilogy.

This work of excavation is nowhere more evident than in the discussions that trace the intertextuality of the works. The internal organization of Pippin’s project is structured by three “regimes” (25)—those of reason, passion, and nothing, each corresponding respectively to the three novels. The second chapter, on the regime of reason in childhood, explores the many references to the Infancy Gospel of Thomas (explored previously by Jean-Michel Rabaté). The real highlight of this chapter, however, is Pippin’s account of Novilla’s conspicuous resemblance to Plato’s city of pigs in Book 2 of the *Re-*

*public*. Like Novilla, Plato's city is marked by an absence of passion or excess; here desire, yearning, and restlessness have ended: "human beings can approach a state of collective lassitude and indifference and in that paradoxical sense, because they are human, can cease to be human by ceasing to care about what it is to be human" (38). Such a vision is also related to Nietzsche's idea of modern society as a herd society. Against the hegemony of instrumental rationality, Simón rails against the excess of utilitarianism while nonetheless remaining ensnared to reason as the sole mode of justification in the world. In other words, he can see no use for other faculties, namely the imagination.

In *The Schooldays of Jesus*, the second fiction of the trilogy, David offers an alternative to Simón's plodding father figure, an alternative that hinges on the notion of passion. Pippin argues that the trilogy explores the fundamental oppositions of Western philosophy—*physic* and *nomos*, nature and convention, and *eros* and justice—and is marked by an "anti-dualist animus" (125) that is perhaps nowhere more evident than in *Schooldays*. The action of this fiction converges around the murder of Ana Magdalena (David's dance instructor) by Dmitri (the caretaker at a museum). This crime of passion is inexplicable, even to its perpetrator. As such, it mirrors the function of dance in the fiction, which, Pippin argues, transcends the dualistic trappings of Western philosophy and its requirement that everything must be rationally intelligible. Drawing on Marcel Proust's *Swann's Way* (1913) and Heinrich von Kleist's "On the Marionette Theatre" (1810), Pippin relates dance to a mode of aesthetic experience that speaks to the embeddedness of abstraction in the world (a key theme in Coetzee's even more overtly philosophical fiction, *Elizabeth Costello*). Other intertexts that might have been explored include Robert Walser's *Jakob von Gunten* (1909) and Robert Musil's *The Confusions of a Young Törless* (1906). Yet Pippin does an admirable job of relating *Schooldays* to concerns that animated the German Romantic and post-Romantic tradition (self-reflexivity and self-consciousness; abstraction; and irony).

The highlight of the book is the chapter on *The Death of Jesus*. The trilogy's final fiction has received understandably less academic attention, and Pippin's focus on its existential themes of death and nothingness bring to a head the stakes established by the first two fictions. Elaborating on the intertextual references to Friedrich Rückert's poem "In Diesem Wetter, in diesem Braus" (1833–34), Plato's *Phaedrus*, and Goethe's "Erlkönig" (1782), Pippin underscores the strong sense of contingency that the trilogy situates at the core

of existence. The final fiction revolves around the slow demise and eventual death of the messianiclike child, David, who at the start leaves home to join an orphanage. Here, the figure of the orphan joins those of refugee and gypsy, as explored in the first two fictions, to further consolidate the sense of absolute homelessness. This condition is fundamental to Heidegger's account of the meaning of being and the death as the source of our fundamental "'Un-zuhause,' not-being-at-home" (11) in the world.

Although Pippin's focus is thematic rather than formal, by eschewing bold claims for erudite excavations, he manages to avoid the pitfalls of an allegorical or "critical" (1) reading (a term much contested in recent literary studies). Although the reader might be left pondering what the politics or ethics may be of the final and elusive sense of "homecoming" (128), Pippin is an adept (and accessible) surveyor, and there is no doubting the solidity of the foundations he lays out. It will be for other scholars, however, to now attempt to contextualize the trilogy in relation to Coetzee's other works (beyond *Elizabeth Costello*), and to give some further weight to Pippin's claims regarding the existential seriousness of Coetzee's writing (he briefly notes as a background context the Australian migrant crisis, but one wonders how it may be possible to connect the trilogy's philosophical insights into a broader framework for thinking through Coetzee's relation to the Global South). Minor quibbles aside, the book is testament to Pippin not only as a thinker but as a reader of distinguished quality.

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