



The schooldays of Jesus as Christian parable

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Abstract:

The Schooldays of Jesus takes Novilla's lack of passion to its opposite to the town of Estrella where David attends a school of dance and where people are filled with passion which leads at its height to the crime at the center of the novel: Dmitri an unattractive guard kills Ana Magdalena in a crime of passion which is inexplicable apart from the fact that he felt unworthy of her though she was engaged in an affair with him. The fact that this crime of passion is not something he feels repentance for indicates that the opposite of reason, passion and appetite is dangerous territory which leads to sin and unrepentance. Dmitri kills Ana in a violent crime of passion and does not repent over it. So the opposite of Novilla, the boring epitome of Reason, in its brutal turn to instinct and passion has not liberated David and Simon.

Keywords: Passion, Sin, Violence, Instincts, Murder

The repressive aspects of the emphasis on rationality in Coetzee's *The Childhood of Jesus* takes a dark turn in the *Schooldays of Jesus*, where reason takes a backseat to passion and David attends a dance school where he is encouraged to enhance his passions and instincts. However this embrace of passion and desire takes a dark turn when Dmitri, a guard at the museum a floor beneath the dance academy, kills Ana Magdalena, the school ballerina and teacher. Where one had expected the abandonment of reason to lead to liberation for David we find instead the unleashing of lust and violence, madness and criminality. Dmitri kills Ana Magdalena on no grounds apart from the fact that he felt she was too good for him though they were engaged in an affair, in

the heat of passion madness and violence he strangles her to death after raping her and feels no repentance for it as he escapes the salt mines he has been sentenced to. So where reason had proven oppressive and confining for David, in the *Schooldays of Jesus* we see that its opposite, passion without restraint, leads to madness, crime, violence, sin and cruelty. Passion unrestrained becomes madness and leads to selfish crimes without considering the Other.

Down the path of passion, Dmitri descends into madness and murders the woman he loved so much out of no other reason than that he felt unworthy of her and felt his inadequacy so much he had to eliminate the object of his worship. The *Schooldays of Jesus* thus cautions against abandoning reason to embrace Passion unreservedly for it leads to madness, brutal instinct, violence and crime. While the *Childhood of Jesus* had cautioned against the emphasis on reason in education, the *Schooldays of Jesus* cautioned against the overemphasis on passion and mysticism without reason and tells that it leads to madness and crime as well as sin and unrepentance. The solution for Coetzee thus seems to be a balance of reason and passion rather than cold hearted utilitarianism or irrational mysticism which leads to madness, crime, violence and bloodshed without repentance or a sense of a moral order that only reason can bestow.

Coetzee thus does not seem to insist in demonising reason as an evil though this seemed the case in the *Childhood of Jesus*, in the *Schooldays of Jesus* it is shown that passion unrestrained can lead to sin, sensual appetites, violence and inexplicable cruelty that satiates the appetite even for murder when

Dmitri sees he want to rid himself of his love object merely on the grounds that she makes him feel inferior and a lesser being to her because he feels unworthy of her. The Dance academy falls apart on this emphasis on passion which leads to madness violence and crime and we are left at the end of the book with David having to find an alternative to education again having experience two failed models: utilitarian education in Novilla and mystical passionate education at Estrella. It is shown instead that without reason to temper passion, as in the case of Dmitri, this leads to madness, crime and violence as well as unrepentant sin. Passion without reason is thus shown to be as lacking as reason without passion in Novilla.

Background to the Schooldays of Jesus

Reading the *Childhood of Jesus*, one is struck by the uncanny similarities between Simon and David's experience of being brought to a new land washed clean of old ties and memories, and the Christian experience of being born again, washed clean of past sins and ties and living a new life in Christ which is arguably similar to having to learn a new language as Simon and David have to do, which is in their case, Spanish. Along these lines, it is possible to argue that the *Childhood of Jesus* can be read as an allegory for the Christian experience, in which old, familial blood ties matter less than the new spiritual kinships formed in Christ, such as spiritual parenthood, which is arguably the role that Ines and Simon adopt in relation to David. Though they are not David's blood or birth parents, they are his spiritual parents as they feel a spiritual affinity for him and care for his well being enough to want to escape the authorities when they persecute David for being special and want him transferred to a special school.

The kingdom of God

The Christian experience is arguably a separation from worldly ties and connections

and a forging of ties and relations within those in God's kingdom, so it is no wonder that Ines wants David kept all to herself and keeps David from mingling with other children and his old friends such as Fidel. Simon and David's experience of being brought ashore to a new land in which they are washed clean of previous ties is remarkably similar to the experience of being born again as a Christian, in which one seeks new spiritual bonds and family, in this case, when Simon says he wishes to find David's mother and will know who David's mother is when he sees her based on his intuition; this can be read less as a case of insanity on Simon's part as an allegory for the quest for new spiritual kinships after being born again as a Christian, in which one is guided by the Holy Spirit, what Simon refers to as intuition is in fact the transcendental Holy Spirit guiding us to form new spiritual kinships in Christ, which become stronger and more abiding than the blood connections one had previously possessed. Indeed the allegory of being born again as a Christian into a new spiritual family is seen in Simon's encounter with Ana, in which she denies him the sexual relationship with her he seeks.

Transcending the worldly

In the Christian context which entails having to subdue the flesh and carnal relations in exchange for more spiritual relations it is little wonder that Ana does not desire a sexual relation with Simon as these are read to be desires of the old self prior to being born again, in Coetzee's allegory Simon finds the effacement of desire frustrating as he desires the old, carnal relationships and the satiation of desires as well as appetites as he mourns the provision of hearty food such as beef steak with gravy rather than the bread and water they are constantly being fed with. Indeed Simon calls this new state of being bloodless, with everybody being nice and accommodating but with no real desire or passion to them. What Simon fails to see is that this new spiritual rebirth in the land of the

Kingdom of Christ they have been born into entails a surrendering of the self and ego and an effacing of old desires and appetites as one seeks spiritual friendships and kinships in place of the old carnal or gluttonous appetites and desires.

The function of labour

Simon's experience of having to work as a stevedore or labourer transporting sacks of grain to another location is also an allegory for having to labour for Christ and bring the bread of Christ to other people so they can share the joys of living in Christ. Simon wonders why he should labour when it can so easily be achieved by using machines such as a crane which would be far more productive. The reply of the labourers such as Alvaro reveals that it is the joy in labour which would be missing, the camaraderie and companionship and the joys of sharing labour which would not be there if one used machines to transport the grain, and this is very much akin to the joys of sharing Christ and fellowship with fellow Christians, in which as Christians we share the bread of Christ and the joys of labouring for Christ and living in Christ. This is another version of spiritual kinships found in Christianity, in the previous paragraph we had discussed new found spiritual parents, in this paragraph we discuss newfound camaraderie as labourers in Christ in which we seek to sow new seeds for Christ and harvest for Christ in bring Christ to people and people to Christ.

David as a metaphor for Christ

The central subject of the novel alluded to, David, is arguably a metaphor for Christ in his childhood. His repeated challenges to Pharaical common sense, such as why we should use any money to pay for anything, why we should go to school, why we should read in the way other people do, why we should work for money, are similar to Jesus' challenges of the law in his day, such as why he should not heal on the Sabbath, why he should not tolerate merchants in the temple,

and why he should not associate with sinners such as tax collectors and prostitutes. David is nearly expelled from school for his insubordination, much like the way Jesus is persecuted for his insubordination to religious authorities and eventually crucified for challenging religious authority, much like David is arguable sentenced to death by being transferred to a special school by authorities for his insubordination. David also aspires to be a magician, very similar to the way Jesus defied laws of nature in his time by performing miracles and healings. David offers to save the doctor who heals him by asking him to follow him to his new land and new life along with Simon and Ines, much like the way Jesus asks his disciples to leave their old occupation to follow him to a new life in Christ in which one is to become fishers of men rather than their old occupation as fishermen, practical pursuits which are of little consequence to matters of spiritual significance, such as redeeming others from their old ways and leading them to a new life in Christ. The Childhood of Jesus is then Coetzee's retelling of the nativity story in a mode which also fleshes out the implications for spiritual kinship and the kingdom of God as the spiritual kinships that develop between Simon, Ines and David show.

Spiritual kinships

The idea of spiritual kinships is also seen in Simon's growing relationship with Ines. With Elena Simon had shared a carnal relation, as in, an affair which was merely a sexual relation which is why Elena senses that Simon senses something missing from their relationship and is looking for something greater, and this something missing and something greater is found in Simon's relationship with Ines, in which he wants to make her the mother of David, which Elena describes as a peculiar mission and fixation on Ines. Indeed Simon is fixated on Ines with a

mission to make David her son, which is similar to the way God chooses Mary to make her the mother of Jesus though she is a virgin because of her purity and though she has not had sexual relations. Indeed through their growing trials as the spiritual parents of David Simon and Ines are brought closer to each other than the mere sexual relationship Simon had shared with Elena, and it is arguably their common mission and care for David, a metaphor for Jesus, that joins them together in a spiritual affinity which is greater than flesh or sexual ties that Simon had shared with Elena. Elena tells Simon that he seeks a 'something greater' in their relationship which does not exist, but this something missing and something greater turns out to be the transcendental spiritual affinity that Simon shares with Ines as he seeks to make her David's mother and shares a bond with her as the spiritual parent of David. Indeed Ines later sees it as her mission to rescue David from the Spanish authorities of Novilla as they decide to send David to a special school for delinquents and orphans because she knows David is not mentally handicapped and indeed extraordinarily intelligent and spiritually wise as he sees beyond the law, such as the need to use money and to work, and challenges the authority of the law just as Jesus challenges the authority of the lawmakers and Pharisees in his day. This challenge to the law and authority lands David getting persecuted in a manner similar to the way Jesus was persecuted, and it is this condemnation by worldly authorities who have no insight into David's spiritual status as a prophet and visionary in the way Jesus was that Ines wants to save David from as, like Mary who was Jesus' mother, Ines manages to see that David is a special child and spiritually as well as intellectually gifted in a way that makes him too precocious for an ordinary school. It is shown that David has no patience with manmade rules, which in Christ's context is the rule of the law. David rejects his teacher's authority because they are so concerned with science, empiricism, natural laws and

mathematics, which dictate the way the phenomenal functions, but indeed David rejects them because his mind exists beyond the realm of the empirical in the realm of the transcendental, where he sees beyond natural laws of this world to a world of spiritual needs in which people need to be saved from their worldly desires and self-seeking interests by being ushered by him into the kingdom of God where worldly interests are replaced by spiritual interests in which one seeks to follow Christ, serve God and others, love one's neighbour as oneself, and love God and Christ as their new mission as they enter the spiritual, transcendental kingdom of God which transcends or lies beyond the worldly empire of Novilla and the Spanish authorities in Coetzee's context.

The Christian experience is one of repeatedly being born again and starting over and renouncing old flesh ties and sinful desires, so it is little wonder Simon has to renounce his flesh tie to Elena who is described as being jealous of Ines when she fails to comprehend Simon's mission for making Ines David's mother and his fixation on Ines. It turns out to be a relationship which far transcends the carnal relationship she and Simon had shared because Simon and Ines turn out to be David's spiritual parents, who are bonded together by their common mission to protect David, or read allegorically, to protect their bonds in the Holy Spirit and advance the mission of safeguarding Jesus and delivering him from persecution by worldly authorities, which in the case of the book, is the Spanish authorities of Novilla who seek to put David in a special school and rehabilitate him to become more normal or worldly when it is clear David is not one of them in the sense that David, as a metaphor for Christ, is one who is not of the world but one of the kingdom of heaven which he sees as his mission to lead others to and save people on earth from by leading them to a new destiny as his followers and members of his kingdom which will eventually succeed Satan's current reign on

earth. The detachment of worldly ties, the mission to liberate people from worldly ties and entrapments, and the deity of Jesus, or in this case David, all lend support to Coetzee's *Childhood of Jesus* as an allegory for the Christian experience of renouncing old blood ties and the past and being born into a new spiritual family.

Conclusion

Coetzee has thus rewritten the nativity story of Jesus in a highly plausible modern retelling of it that brings out the more metaphorical aspects of it to the foreground. The idea of spiritual kinships in place of flesh ties and the idea of Jesus being a person who was essentially a radical who challenged pharasaical authority and laws of common sense are brought out by Coetzee's retelling of David's story as a child who is ahead and advanced for his time, to the extent that he is misunderstood and persecuted by those around him because his thinking was too radical and advanced for his time.

Indeed, Christianity is described as a religion which exceeds the sensible world of phenomena and a transcendental and otherworldly religion because David defies the world of the sensible and empirical laws, always challenging the authority of material authorities and seeking his authority in a transcendental realm that exceeds the sensible. That David is denounced and exiled to a school for intellectually challenged children reveals that Christianity is a religion that is primarily spiritual and otherworldly rather than rational, David is not bound by the laws of reason because his authority derives from the super sensible of the transcendental rather than the empirical. Indeed Ines recognizes this as did Mary and seeks to protect David because she recognizes that worldly authorities do not recognize his intellect and revolutionary ethics for what it is – a preaching of the kingdom that is to come rather than the empirical world of the here and now.

As Jesus told the authorities before he was crucified, his kingdom is not of this world. Thus persecution by worldly authorities ensues as there has been a division between the city of God and the city of the world since the fall and Satan's reign as the prince of this world. What Coetzee's retelling of the nativity story reveals is that Christianity is ultimately a transcendental, spiritual and otherworldly kingdom that exceeds the world of the sensible and rational.

Works cited:

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