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## **Fiction Beyond Words: Music in J. M. Coetzee’s Jesus Novels**

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### **Abstract**

J. M. Coetzee’s late work exhibits a productive dialogue between fiction and other arts as part of his interest in the possibilities of thinking in mediums other than ordinary language. Focusing particularly on the *Jesus* novels, this article examines the critical role of music and how Coetzee uses musical forms as literary strategies that open up alternative possibilities of communication and thinking. Revisiting the famous “What is a Classic?” essay and the biographical moment that leads Coetzee to the music of J. S. Bach, I look at how Coetzee writes musically by considering questions of content, form, and technique, and then turn to the representation of music in relation to mathematics. I propose that the interest in music in the *Jesus* novels is part of his conscious engagement with ordinary language and his inherent desire to transcend it that characterizes the late work.

**Keywords:** J. M. Coetzee; *Jesus* novels; music; J. S. Bach; mathematics

In general I would say that his work lacks ambition ... Nowhere do you get a feeling of a writer deforming his medium in order to say what has never been said before, which is to me the mark of great writing.

—Coetzee, *Summertime*

There is only the music. Arms extended, eyes closed, he shuffles in a slow circle. Over the horizon the first star begins to rise.

—Coetzee, *The Schooldays of Jesus*

Over the course of five decades, J. M. Coetzee has innovatively explored the possibilities of the novel, taking his writing in new directions with every work he has published. Beginning with *Dusklands* (1974) and *In the Heart of the Country*

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(1977), two fictional works that explore the effects of settler colonialism on the psyche and on human relationships using modernist techniques such as the two-part novella structure and the use of photographic and cinematographic techniques, respectively, Coetzee then turned to the exploration of the consequences of empire on intimacy in *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980).<sup>1</sup> *Life and Times of Michael K* (1983) imagines a near future fraught with civil war while *Foe* (1986) has an eighteenth-century setting and prose style. *Age of Iron* (1990) is written in an epistolary form and deals with the political struggle in apartheid South Africa, and *The Master of Petersburg* (1994) explores fatherhood through the perspective of Fyodor Mikhailovici Dostoevsky. While engaging with and responding to South Africa's postcolonial conditions at the level of themes, motifs, and subject matter, Coetzee also searches for a space within which the conditions governing the writing of fiction and the limits of representation resist being subsumed to the oppressive forces of history and instead contribute to maintaining the authority of fiction.<sup>2</sup>

*Disgrace* (1999) marks a turning point in the life of writing to questions of late style. Though it belongs to the realist tradition, *Disgrace* exhibits an intensification in the representation of the arts, including opera, film, and dance, as aesthetic modes of intelligibility. Subsequent works, including *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), *Slow Man* (2005), and *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007), also reflect on the crucial role of the arts in their own idiosyncratic way. In his fictionalized autobiographies *Boyhood* (1997), *Youth* (2002), and *Summertime* (2009), which experiment with the blurring of the distinction between fiction and autobiography, Coetzee reflects on the influence of literature and other arts in his formation as a writer. What followed was not fiction that anyone could have anticipated, but a series of three novels that proved rather puzzling for readers and critics alike.<sup>3</sup> *The Childhood of Jesus* (2013), *The Schooldays of Jesus* (2016), and *The Death of Jesus* (2019) are set in an unnamed country where its inhabitants (i.e., former immigrants) have forgotten their memories on the sea voyage that brought them there and have sought to integrate into society with the help of their newly acquired mother tongue, Spanish. In the absence of ordinary language, the *Jesus* novels provide a space for creativity, untouched by history and politics (as well as race and ethnicity), within which

<sup>1</sup> For a more comprehensive analysis of cinematic and photographic influence in Coetzee's works, see Iona Gilbert, "Cinematic and Photographic Aesthetics in the Novels of J. M. Coetzee," (PhD diss., University of Western Cape, 2017). In her work, she argues that Coetzee's South African writing is influenced by the film aesthetics of the 1960s European avant-garde.

<sup>2</sup> In "Lie Down in the Karoo: An Antidote to the Anthropocene," in *Public Books* January 6, 2014, <https://www.publicbooks.org/lie-down-in-the-karoo-an-antidote-to-the-anthropocene/>, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, perhaps wishfully, interprets the newly imagined world that *Childhood* harbors through a postcolonial lens as Coetzee's envisioning of precolonial Africa—a place yet untouched by the violence of imperialism. This article moves away from such interpretations that lose touch with the thematic depths and aesthetic artifice of Coetzee's late style.

<sup>3</sup> Whether the *Jesus* novels constitute a trilogy is an idea that Derek Attridge engages with at length in "Reason and Its Others in Coetzee's *Jesus* Novels," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 54.3 (November 1, 2021): 404–24.

the arts, specifically music and dance, take center stage as aesthetic modes of communication.<sup>4</sup>

The aim of this article is to examine the critical role of music in the *Jesus* novels by looking at the ways in which Coetzee appropriates music, notably the music of Johann Sebastian Bach, and musical forms as literary strategies that open up alternative possibilities of communication and productively inform his late style. The chapter's epigraphs establish two reference points for understanding how Coetzee's writing develops from scepticism about the power of fiction to capture the seemingly intangibles of life, as indicated in the first quotation, to a radical willingness to embrace contingency that comes from the power of music, captured in the second quotation. Drawing on the biographical moment that leads Coetzee to the music of Bach, recalled in his famous "What is a Classic?" (2001) essay, the article considers the role and influence of the German composer on the *Jesus* novels, in particular by reflecting on the fictionalization of Bach as a character, and its significance for Coetzee's writing at this stage. The article then turns to a consideration of the ways in which Coetzee writes musically, reflecting on questions of form, content, and technique, and how his representation of music relates to mathematics. I propose that the interest in music in the *Jesus* novels and particularly the music of Bach is part of Coetzee's conscious engagement with ordinary language and the desire to transcend it that characterizes his late style. In the late work, Coetzee searches

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<sup>4</sup> The body of critical work on Coetzee's oeuvre has addressed the subject of music in individual novels. For instance, Hermann Wittenberg, a scholar who has published extensively on intermediality in Coetzee's oeuvre, argues that the three-layered narrative structure of *Diary of a Bad Year* invites a contrapuntal reading technique, originally developed by Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), and typically used in classical music, particularly by Bach. In *J. M. Coetzee and the Power of the Narrative* (Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2010), Gillian Dooley provides a helpful and systematic study of references to music in Coetzee's body of writing. However, the chapter provides less critical depth than her more recent essay "'The Origins of Speech Lie in Song': Music as Language in Coetzee's *Age of Iron*" in *Le Simplegadi*, xviii.2 (2020): 26–34, in which she proposes, presumably following Wittenberg's lead, that the first part of *Age of Iron* replicates the structure of Bach's music, particularly his contrapuntal technique. Derek Attridge also engages with music in Coetzee in *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2004), in which he discusses *Disgrace*'s depiction of music and animals as two strands that rather than being ways out of the political climate of South Africa they produce "an experience, beyond rationality and measured productivity, of their fundamental value" (177). Kathryn Lachman explores the critical role of opera in "Opera and the Limits of Representation in J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*," in *Borrowed Forms: The Music and Ethics of Transnational Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 113–36, arguing for the limits of narrative form emphasized through the representation of music. Among the most recent publications that engage with Coetzee's arts is "Other Arts and Adaptations," in *The Cambridge Companion to J. M. Coetzee* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020):187–205, in which Michelle Kelly links Coetzee's interest in the arts to his scepticism for language and his desire to explore forms of expressivity that exceed the literary. In his excellent study of the *Jesus* novels, *Metaphysical Exile: On J. M. Coetzee's Jesus Fictions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), Robert B. Pippin dedicates a short section to Bach, though focuses more on the importance of dance as a mode of intelligibility. In light of these critical approaches, this paper builds on the work of these scholars while providing a more systematic and methodical reading of the representation of music, with its aesthetic and ethical effects, and linking the trilogy with other parts of the oeuvre.

for new idioms that go beyond the limits of ordinary language specifically and allow imaginative access to planes of reality yet unthought.<sup>5</sup>

The article is premised on the critical concept of late style as defined by Coetzee himself in a letter exchange with Paul Auster on the subject.<sup>6</sup> Schematically, an artist's life can be divided in:

Two or perhaps three stages. In the first you find, or pose for yourself, a great question. In the second you labor away at answering it. And then, if you live long enough, you come to the third stage, when the aforesaid great question begins to bore you, and you need to look elsewhere.<sup>7</sup>

Drawing on David Attwell's consideration of Coetzee's oeuvre in light of these phases—one that never loses sight of the risk of oversimplification intrinsic to schemas—the texts published after *Disgrace* mark the transition to the third stage wherein the concern is for “second order questions” involving craft, medium, language, and representation.<sup>8</sup> Coetzee himself is well-versed in identifying signs of lateness in other artists yet self-conscious about potential signs of lateness in his own writing. For him, late style “starts with an ideal of a simple, subdued, unornamented language and a concentration on questions of real import.”<sup>9</sup> In the *Jesus* novels and in the late work more generally, these questions relate to the productive dialogue between literature and other arts explored using ordinary, everyday, accessible language.<sup>10</sup> As I will show, the *Jesus* novels contain a striving to push at the limits of what can be expressed in language, specifically English, in an attempt to access new dimensions of experience that are residual yet made available through music.

At the age of fifteen, while roaming around in his back garden in Cape Town with nothing to do, Coetzee heard music from the house next door. Later, he would identify it as J. S. Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*. In “What is a Classic?,” he recalls the revelatory moment of encounter with the German composer's music, describing it as “a moment of revelation ... of the greatest significance” in his life “after which everything changed”: “for the first time I was undergoing the

<sup>5</sup> The larger project which this paper is part of is a recently completed PhD thesis at the University of York on late style in Coetzee's *Jesus* novels titled “Fiction Beyond Words: Late Style in J. M. Coetzee's *Jesus* Trilogy.”

<sup>6</sup> In choosing to write about Coetzee's late works, I am aware that the critical concept of “late style” contains the potential danger of reducing the complexity of his writing to a dry list of specific features or of presuming rather wishfully that these texts disclose a set of profound truths that can be interpreted as Coetzee's final statements. Far from understanding late style as a universal aesthetic category, I deploy the term reflexively, analyzing Coetzee's individual and idiosyncratic lateness as it emerges from the works published after *Disgrace*.

<sup>7</sup> J. M. Coetzee and Paul Auster, *Here and Now: Letters 2008–2011* (London: Faber & Faber, 2013): 88.

<sup>8</sup> David Attwell, J. M. Coetzee and the *Life of Writing: Face to Face with Time* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 236.

<sup>9</sup> Coetzee and Auster, *Here and Now*, 97.

<sup>10</sup> I am aware of ordinary language philosophy as a long-standing tradition, represented by leading figures such as J. L. Austin and Stanley Cavell, although my use of the notion of “ordinary language” is as a reference to common sense uses and expressions of language.

impact of *the classic*.”<sup>11</sup> Nearly four decades after the encounter, Coetzee interrogates the experience from a personal and cultural standpoint. He seeks to identify whether Bach's music contains a particular quality that survives through time or whether that moment marked his choosing the European cultural tradition over South African culture, which he suspected was approaching a dead end. In trying to define the classic, the conclusion he arrives at is an aesthetic one: the classic is what is always tested, confronted, renewed; it is the aesthetic that is constantly reproduced through craft. The definition disentangles itself from the Kantian aesthetic tradition in that it resists transcendental explanations, relying instead on empirical, even sociological solutions, in a desire not to isolate himself entirely from materialist forms of thought. Coetzee's answer to the question “What is a Classic?,” which is both artistic and empirical, had undoubtedly been fueled by his latent anxieties about the intellectual climate in South Africa. What animates his insistence on preserving the aesthetic is the belief in its inherent power to change how one perceives the world. The young Coetzee himself perceives this power when, “As long as the music lasted, I was frozen, I dared not breathe. I was being spoken to by the music as music had never spoken to me before.”<sup>12</sup> Hence the necessity to keep the classic alive in order to guarantee the possibility of accessing an alternative order of experience unavailable in ordinary language.

In the *Jesus* novels, music features prominently at the thematic level through the fictionalization of the German Baroque composer in the figure of Sebastián Arroyo, whose Spanish name means “brook” or “stream” in English and “Bach” in German, and clearly gestures to the German musician.<sup>13</sup> Together with his second wife, Ana Magdalena, the name of whom similarly alludes to the historical Bach's second wife, Anna Magdalena, señor Arroyo runs an Academy of Dance and Music (hereafter referred to as the Academy) “devoted to the training of the soul through music and dance ... in the direction of the good.”<sup>14</sup> This is not a regular school but one that promotes alternative, aesthetic education and aims to teach its pupils how to call down the numbers from the sky and embody them in dance while being guided by instrumental music. Both Arroyo and his wife are thus a less than subtle allusion to the Bachs, whose role in the story is crucial in foregrounding music as an alternative epistemology. That the texts draw on the actual composer for inspiration helps anchor them more firmly into the European tradition of music.

The novels construct the fictional Bach as both a highly skilled composer, enveloped in aura of mystery, and as a stereotypical artist, alternating continuously between these interpretations. For instance, to Dmitri, Ana Magdalena's alleged lover and eventual murderer, señor Arroyo is “a great man, a true idealist who lives only for his music ... Unfortunately he does not always have his feet on

<sup>11</sup> J. M. Coetzee, “What Is a Classic?,” in *Stranger Shores: Essays 1986–1999* (London: Vintage Books, 2002), 10; emphasis in original.

<sup>12</sup> Coetzee, “What Is a Classic?,” 9.

<sup>13</sup> That is not to say that the fictional and the historical Bach are identical in the trilogy but that the fictional character bears many resemblances to the real Bach.

<sup>14</sup> J. M. Coetzee, *The Schooldays of Jesus* (London: Vintage Books, 2017), 43–44.

the ground ... Head in the clouds.”<sup>15</sup> Such characterization deliberately serves to counteract larger-than-life interpretations of Arroyo, which the trilogy encourages through the focalization of the story being done by Simón, who regards señor Arroyo as “a true musician” “consigned to the role of schoolteacher” and “little honored” in Estrella.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, Coetzee’s use of comic bathos and irony supports a reading of Arroyo that is more leveled and resists monumentalizing him. The most striking example of this technique is when Coetzee imagines a physical encounter with Bach that preserves the aura of mystery around the musician yet undermines it through the use of irony:

Señor Arroyo, master of music and director of the Academy of Dance: this is not how he expected to meet him, in the nude. A large man, not corpulent, not exactly, but no longer young: his flesh, at throat and breast and belly, has begun to sag. His complexion, the whole complexion of his body, even of his bald skull, is a uniform brick red, as if the sun were his natural element.<sup>17</sup>

The comically represented encounter creates a stark contrast between, as we will see, Arroyo’s virtuosity as a musician, which inspires reverence and awe, and his nudity, which demystifies the reader’s perception of Arroyo and draws attention to his embodiedness, thus humanizing him.<sup>18</sup> The scene reconstructs Coetzee’s own encounter with Bach, which, in the same way that it requires Simón to “collect himself” for a moment, leaves him “frozen” while listening to the German composer’s music.<sup>19</sup> In the story, however, Coetzee imagines an unmediated in-person encounter with the artist himself whose authority is preserved.

Underlying the comical representation of Bach is a more serious engagement with the musician as a virtuoso. As stated previously, the focalization encourages this perspective, elevating señor Arroyo to an almost godlike figure whose omnipresence is captured in Simón’s description of him as “the invisible Arroyo.” The composer proves an elusive, almost spectral figure, whose presence is musical rather than physical. In “Other Arts and Adaptations,” Michelle Kelly identifies a tendency in Coetzee’s writing whereby the representation of visual and performing arts is often done from the perspective of the listener rather than the composer. The Jesus trilogy follows this trend, stressing the importance of the aesthetic and ethical experience of listening to music by highlighting its revelatory qualities.<sup>20</sup> In an exemplary passage at the beginning of *Schooldays*, Simón experiences the effects of señor Arroyo’s music:

<sup>15</sup> Coetzee, *The Schooldays of Jesus*, 54.

<sup>16</sup> Coetzee, *The Schooldays of Jesus*, 71, and J. M. Coetzee, *The Death of Jesus* (Melbourne: The Text Publishing Company, 2019), 29.

<sup>17</sup> Coetzee, *The Schooldays of Jesus*, 94.

<sup>18</sup> His demeanor, with the amused curl of the lip, the rather corpulent body, and the aging appearance, is reminiscent of E. G. Haussmann’s portrait of Johann Sebastian Bach.

<sup>19</sup> Coetzee, *The Schooldays of Jesus*, 95.

<sup>20</sup> In contrast to the *Jesus* novels, *The Pole* (2022) is written from the perspective of a Chopin pianist.

The upper notes of the organ are tinny, the lower notes without resonance. But the music itself takes possession of him. Calm descends; he can feel something within him—his soul?—take up the rhythm of the music and move in time to it. He falls into a mild trance.<sup>21</sup>

The example draws attention to the transformative powers of music, with its ability to trigger in Simón a temporary abandonment of his inherent scepticism and rational way of thinking in favor of perceiving another plane of reality and experiencing a new relationship to himself. (Later he will try to achieve clearer self-understanding by stating that “things change around me but I am unchanging.”)<sup>22</sup> The fact that Simón opens himself up to the music coincides with him being able to identify “a logic that dictates their [dancers] passage, a logic that he cannot quite grasp, though he feels on the edge of doing so.”<sup>23</sup> Music in this scene transcends rational understanding and functions as an aesthetic mode of intelligibility unavailable in language. The example also represents the first instance in a series of attempts, when Coetzee challenges the concept of the classic by testing its soundness, both literarily and metaphorically, when appropriated into the medium of fiction.

In order to begin thinking about how music relates to Coetzee's style, it is important to consider the rhythms of the languages he makes use of in the trilogy. The fact the novels purport to be written originally in Spanish, implying that what we are reading is the English translation, is significant because it indicates Coetzee's search for a more appropriate language to speak about the music of Bach and it proposes Spanish rather than English as able to accommodate music. While Coetzee provides the English translation of words and phrases alongside their Spanish original and in doing so denaturalizing the worldview of English, he occasionally refrains from translating them into English, thus allowing them to intrude upon the reading experience, slowing it down, and consequently determining a linguistically self-conscious experience for the reader. Thinking about this decision in musical terms, Coetzee criss-crosses the “music” of Spanish with that of English. The decision calls into question the value of English and its hegemonic status as the global lingua franca particularly in the context of today's linguistic plurality.

The rhythm of English and Spanish also intersect with those of German, a language that in the novels is mistaken for English. When David offers to sing a song he has learned at the Academy, the words are in German:

Wer reitet so spät durch Dampf und Wind?  
 Er ist der Vater mit seinem Kind;  
 Er halt den Knaben in dem Arm,  
 Er füttert ihn Zucker, er küsst ihm warm.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Coetzee, *The Schooldays of Jesus*, 70.

<sup>22</sup> Coetzee, *The Schooldays of Jesus*, 102.

<sup>23</sup> Coetzee, *The Schooldays of Jesus*, 70.

<sup>24</sup> J. M. Coetzee, *The Childhood of Jesus* (London: Vintage Books, 2014), 80; emphasis in original.



This reference is an imperfect adaptation of Goethe's "Erlkönig," a poem that was later adapted to music by Franz Schubert.<sup>25</sup> The linguistic artifice achieved in this passage through the confounding of these languages contributes to the musical texture of trilogy. The flow, cadence, and rhythm of German further add to those of English and Spanish, thereby influencing their rhythms while maintaining each language's independence and producing a new kind of idiom based on the coexistence of three different languages.

The act of placing one language against another without allowing them to fuse reminds one of Bach's famous counterpoint technique. The term was used by Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) to refer to a critical strategy that focuses on "the dynamic interplay of contradictions."<sup>26</sup> In the *Jesus* novels, Coetzee transposes Bach's counterpoint to challenge the limits of literary form.<sup>27</sup> The event organized by the Academy of Dance in memory of David convincingly illustrates how Coetzee experiments with literary counterpoint. In line with the movements of the dancers on stage, which are meant to bring down the numbers from the sky, señor Arroyo transitions from a "gentle melody" to "the music grow[ing] more complex" while "obeying two different rhythms."<sup>28</sup> That Arroyo uses Bach's famous compositional technique of counterpoint is evident when "above the rhythms of [the dance of numbers] Three and Five there emerges on the organ a rhythm that crosses both."<sup>29</sup> Here, three rhythms complement one another while remaining independent. The music then changes and, in tune with the dance, "begins to simplify too. First the rhythm of Five drops out, then the rhythm of Three. The music grows softer, ceases."<sup>30</sup> The example offers insight into how literary counterpoint works by having a musical sequence appear as a mirror image of the preceding one though at a different tempo from it.<sup>31</sup> The musical structure of señor Arroyo's compositions follows the principles of exposition, complication, and resolution, to which Coetzee regularly returns.

In addition to literary counterpoint, Coetzee uses musical ekphrasis as a crucial formal principle that reinforces the limits of language and its ability to capture musical experience in words, contributing to the trilogy's own musical sensibility. Drawing on Siglind Bruhn's definition of *musical ekphrasis* as the visual or verbal representation of music, there is a particular example in the *Jesus* novels where the novels most strikingly reveal musical ekphrasis. The welcome

<sup>25</sup> Goethe's poem is about a son being pursued by death, the Erlkönig. His father cannot help save him, so the patriarch tries to prolong the moment of death by attempting to convince the boy that he is not dying. Coetzee replicates this situation in the story by having Simón try to convince the child that he will escape the clutches of death.

<sup>26</sup> Kathryn Lachman, *Borrowed Forms: The Music and Ethics of Transnational Fiction* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2014), 62.

<sup>27</sup> Coetzee also makes use of this technique in *Diary of a Bad Year* where, as Hermann Wittenberg points out in "Late Style in *Diary of a Bad Year*," *Scrutiny2: Issues in English Studies in Southern Africa* 15.2 (2010): 40–49, "a form of contrapuntal reading is encouraged."

<sup>28</sup> Coetzee, *The Death of Jesus*, 170.

<sup>29</sup> Coetzee, *The Death of Jesus*, 171.

<sup>30</sup> Coetzee, *The Death of Jesus*, 171.

<sup>31</sup> Siglind Bruhn, Introduction, in *Musical Ekphrasis: Composers Responding to Poetry and Painting* (Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press, 2000), 93.



event of the Academy opens with the introduction of the philosophy behind the Academy offered by Ana Magdalena, followed by the musical interpretation of her words by Sebastián Arroyo. At the Academy, a distinction is made between “the noble numbers” or “numbers in themselves” and “ant numbers” or “simulacra.”<sup>32</sup> The aim is to guide the pupils, through music, to the realm of noble numbers: “As music enters us and moves us in dance, so the numbers cease to be mere ideas, mere phantoms, and become real.”<sup>33</sup> To transpose the idea of noble numbers into music, Arroyo begins with the “muted tones of a pipe organ” followed by “a set of flourishes” and a melody where “the upper notes of the organ are tinny, the lower notes without resonance.”<sup>34</sup> The music “grows more complex, then simple again” before coming to a close.<sup>35</sup> In contradistinction to the tune played to illustrate the noble numbers, the music invoking ant numbers resembles “a march, emphasising its mechanical rhythm” corresponding to the order of an ant colony. The music then “abandons its staccato rhythm and becomes simply one massive, inharmonic chord after another.” Yet order is quickly restored when “the steady rhythm of the march reasserts itself.”<sup>36</sup> What Coetzee describes in this scene bears a striking resemblance to how the creative process works<sup>37</sup>: the moment when creativity asserts itself corresponds to that of the music acquiring a seemingly inharmonic rhythm, breaking free from the laws governing that particular art form. Such experimentation with creative media draws attention to what Jarad Zimble writing about Coetzee's Australian novels (i.e., late works) refers to as “a striving against generic limits,” while also exposing the mutability of forms.<sup>38</sup> Coetzee gestures here to the act of translating between music and language, drawing attention to the on-going dialogue between them.

Coetzee adapts the conventional definition of *ekphrasis* to the terms of the trilogy when he uses literary language to re-create a musical experience, which, in turn, re-creates mathematics. Coetzee's fascination with the architectonic quality of Bach's music comes across clearly in *Diary of a Bad Year* when Señor C remarks that “Characteristically, Bach shows how in almost any musical germ, no matter how simple, there lie possibilities for development.”<sup>39</sup> Bach's ability to create musical pieces is the result of his having absorbed the rules of composition to such a high degree that he was able to manipulate them in order to produce complex musical pieces. Expressing his admiration to Peter Sacks for Bach's methodical approach to music composition, Coetzee describes himself “as the person who sits beside Bach at the keyboard rather than the one who listens to

<sup>32</sup> Coetzee, *The Schooldays of Jesus*, 68–69.

<sup>33</sup> Coetzee, *The Schooldays of Jesus*, 68.

<sup>34</sup> Coetzee, *The Schooldays of Jesus*, 70.

<sup>35</sup> Coetzee, *The Schooldays of Jesus*, 70.

<sup>36</sup> Coetzee, *The Schooldays of Jesus*, 71.

<sup>37</sup> I am grateful to David Attwell for making this connection.

<sup>38</sup> Jarad Zimble, *J. M. Coetzee and the Politics of Style* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 199.

<sup>39</sup> J. M. Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* (London: Vintage Books, 2008), 138.

Beethoven.”<sup>40</sup> It is this formal complexity achieved through rigor and discipline that fascinates Coetzee in Bach and is rendered in the trilogy that preserves the inventiveness and mathematical quality of Bach’s music in the clear transitions between motifs and resolutions, and the appropriation of musical structure into fiction.<sup>41</sup> The narrative distance between author and creation diminishes when Señor C raises the rhetorical question “Why is it to Bach and Bach alone that I have this longing to speak? Why not Schubert? ... Why not Cervantes?”<sup>42</sup> Even though Coetzee has engaged with Cervantes, and with Schubert, most notably in *Summertime*, the *Jesus* novels explore that question in more detail through the fictionalization of Bach and the desire to capture in language the formal perfection of his music.

The contrapuntal technique Coetzee makes use of in the *Jesus* novels is more representative of the mature Bach. In my reading of Bach’s late work, I agree with Erinn Knyt’s argument about Bach’s late style being first and foremost generative rather than merely summative. The trilogy shows how Bach’s music helps to productively inspire Coetzee’s literary creativity.<sup>43</sup> Where Coetzee’s and Bach’s late style intersect is in the shared quality of striving to go beyond their creative medium in order to experience another plane of reality. In the seventeenth century, this striving was directed toward a spiritual, divine realm, and Bach’s devotion to religion is well known together with the fact that his music celebrated the glory of God.<sup>44</sup> The musical piece he composed in the late stage of his career contained a desire to become pure music. In the posthumously published collection that comprises Adorno’s notes and fragments on Beethoven’s relationship to his society, *Beethoven: The Philosophy of Music* (1998), Adorno states that Beethoven’s late style is about pure music, “the bare language of music, purified of all individual expression.”<sup>45</sup> In other words, late style implies that music is stripped of any inflections that would determine its belonging to a particular formal tradition. In the *Jesus* fictions, the striving quality occurs at the level of words on the page that seem to want to take flight, as a way of drawing attention to the plurality of aesthetic “languages” available, including the language of music. One of the ways in which Coetzee’s style reflects this idea

<sup>40</sup> Sacks, interview.

<sup>41</sup> Bach modestly admits the perseverance and hard work that went into music making when he states that “I have had to work hard; anyone who will work equally hard will be able to do as much” (quoted in Albert Schweitzer, *J. S. Bach*, vol. 1, trans. Ernest Newman (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1955), 154.

<sup>42</sup> Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year*, 221.

<sup>43</sup> For a more comprehensive analysis of Bach’s late work, see “Late Style and the Idea of the Summative Work in Bach and Beethoven University of Massachusetts Amherst, 24 April 2021,” *Eighteenth-Century Music* 19.1 (2022): 98–100.

<sup>44</sup> For a historical contextualization of Bach, see Schweitzer, *J. S. Bach*, vol. 1. A suggestive example of the unique quality of Bach’s music is in J. M. Coetzee, *Age of Iron* (London: Penguin Books, 2010), where Mrs Curren imagines heaven “as a hotel lobby with a high ceiling and the Art of Fugue coming softly over the public-address system ... Listening to the heavenly unending music, waiting for nothing, paging idly through the store of memories” (25).

<sup>45</sup> Edward Said, *Late Style: Music and Literature Against the Grain* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017), 154.

more generally is the choice of “a simple, subdued, unornamented language,”<sup>46</sup> that is to say an ordinary, simple (though not simplistic) mode of expression.<sup>47</sup> Rather than using words or phrases that would determine the language's belonging to a particular geographical area, he opts for an international English that easily lends itself to translation into other languages.<sup>48</sup> Coetzee therefore resists the hegemony of English as a global lingua franca and in so doing highlights music as an alternative “language” suitable for expressing subjectivity.<sup>49</sup>

Signs of late style also occur at the level of textual detail, particularly in señor Arroyo's music and its creative trajectory. In the aftermath of the death of Ana Magdalena, he temporarily closes down the Academy. When it reopens, the school is “purely an academy of music. An academy of pure music” where Arroyo teaches music theory and composition.<sup>50</sup> The word play echoes Adorno's definition of Beethoven's late style as music purified of individual expression. Arroyo's new Academy of Music has the aim of purifying the art of composition from traces of subjectivity. Arroyo's own musical piece, which he composes in the aftermath of Ana Magdalena and Dmitri's disappearance, attest to this in that it bears little trace of personal emotion, thus emphasizing music as an autonomous creative medium: Arroyo plays “organ music, a swift bravura passage played over and over again.”<sup>51</sup> Once again, Coetzee adopts the principles of counterpoint when “the quick, brilliant passage he [Simón] had heard is now being woven together with a heavier passage in the bass that seems obscurely related to it.”<sup>52</sup> These “ingenious” compositional artifices in which Arroyo “interweaves motifs” together with “the harmonic surprises, the logic of his resolutions” strengthen the image that the novels construct of Arroyo as “a true musician.”<sup>53</sup> Nevertheless, “there is no sorrow in the music, no pensiveness, nothing to suggest that the musician has been abandoned by his beautiful young wife.”<sup>54</sup> According to Peter M. Walker, “the mature Bach employed fugue in his

<sup>46</sup> Coetzee and Auster, *Here and Now*, 97.

<sup>47</sup> Whether the decision to write in ordinary, everyday language is an allusion to the simplicity of Jesus's language or whether the reductionism relates to the fact that the migrants are forced to speak in beginner Spanish constitutes interesting leads that nevertheless fall beyond the remit of this article.

<sup>48</sup> The linguistic versatility of Coetzee's writing prompts Rebecca Walkowitz to argue in “Introduction: Theory of World Literature Now,” in *Born Translated: The Contemporary Novel in an Age of World Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 1–48, that *The Childhood of Jesus* is “born translated” in the sense that it was conceived and written with the specific purpose of being translated. Although this argument is compelling, it also loses touch with the thematic and formal depths of the novel.

<sup>49</sup> J. M. Coetzee, “Laureate Address,” *John Maxwell Coetzee: Doctor Honoris Causa Universitatis Silesiensis* (Katowice: University of Silesia Press, 2018.): 57–59.

<sup>50</sup> Coetzee, *The Schooldays of Jesus*, 188.

<sup>51</sup> Coetzee, *The Schooldays of Jesus*, 125.

<sup>52</sup> Coetzee, *The Schooldays of Jesus*, 125.

<sup>53</sup> Coetzee, *The Schooldays of Jesus*, 126.

<sup>54</sup> Coetzee, *The Schooldays of Jesus*, 125. In contra distinction with this passage, Señor C in *Diary of a Bad Year* remarks that “music expresses feeling, that is to say, gives shape and habitation to feeling, not in space but in time,” the trilogy challenges that assumption (130).

music for organ,” whose quality was “grander and more expansive.”<sup>55</sup> Coetzee’s ekphrastic writing in this passage captures the *grandeur* and complexity of the music but also music does not contain the traces of subjectivity. What is more, it also tests the quality of the music and the craft that goes into its making, recalling the Classic essay.

Thinking more generally about the *Jesus* novels, these texts adopt the structural elements of a fugue. The term *fugue* comes from the Latin *fuga* “flight,” related to *fugere* “flee”—this is in keeping with the trilogy’s theme of migrancy<sup>56</sup>—has been used since the fourteenth century to “designate a piece of music based on canonic imitation” (i.e., one voice ‘chasing’ another), also referred to as imitative counterpoint. A fugue usually consists of two or more tunes played together, a definition applicable to the three “tunes” each volume plays. In *The Childhood of Jesus*, the music on the radio is not powerful or gripping, it is “even-tempered,” soft, and at most “graceful”;<sup>57</sup> it “lacks weight,” is “*anodina*,” “too placid,” too bland.<sup>58</sup> *The Schooldays of Jesus* evokes a kind of music that contains “flourishes,” is powerful, “complex,” gripping, and even life-changing, thus matching the intensity of events in the story, notably David’s passion for dance and Dmitri’s obsession with Ana Magdalena. Nevertheless, the music preserves its complexity, but, following the *crime passionnel* of Ana Magdalena, it also has a “slow and stately and sad” quality to it; it is “quiet, ruminative” and “not easy to follow.”<sup>59</sup> In *The Death of Jesus*, it maintains a somber timbre though is more abstract, “invok[ing] the higher mathematics and treat[ing] the music made by human hands as at best a faint echo of the music of the spheres.”<sup>60</sup> *Death* thus elevates music as an art form to a state of perfection that goes beyond an ordinary experience of life. In light of these observations, it could be stated that, in the *Jesus* novels, Coetzee writes a kind of musical fiction.

Given the linearity of prose, accommodating the structure of a fugue into the novel form is something that Coetzee ingeniously succeeds in doing. Simón, as the narrator, introduces the “subject” (i.e., the desire to find David’s mother “I need to find David’s mother”<sup>61</sup>), which will find its answer when Inés, David’s future mother, is introduced later in the story. An additional “voice” is that of Bolívar, Inés’s dog, who will accompany the trio from beginning to end. Although Coetzee interweaves the lives of these characters, he also maintains

<sup>55</sup> Paul M. Walker, “Fugue,” *Grove Music Online* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), <https://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/display/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000051678?rsk=U19n6w&result=1>.

<sup>56</sup> The question of migrancy is an issue that falls outside the remit of this article. Rather, the interest here is in music and its ability to help us imagine an alternative order of existence unavailable in ordinary language.

<sup>57</sup> Coetzee, *The Childhood of Jesus*, 76, 77.

<sup>58</sup> Coetzee, *The Childhood of Jesus*, 77, 76. In this respect, it is not unlike the food in Novilla, which lacks the spice of life both literally (“He has yet to find a shop that sells spices”) and metaphorically (moderation in all aspects of life, including diet, feelings, passions, is the norm).

<sup>59</sup> Coetzee, *The Death of Jesus*, 7, 171.

<sup>60</sup> Coetzee, *The Death of Jesus*, 29.

<sup>61</sup> Coetzee, *The Childhood of Jesus*, 22.

their independence and agency over the course of the three texts up until David's death, when Coetzee removes each character in turn—by having Bolívar disappear without a trace after David's death and Inés leave Estrella for Novilla—and the story returns to Simón, left “alone in a strange city, mourning his losses.”<sup>62</sup> Temporally, the novels follow a relatively linear succession of events, from Simón's arrival to the new country, to David's schooldays at the Academy, to the boy's death. Despite the lack of movement between past and present in the trilogy, Coetzee plays with temporality by having the texts remain inconclusive about whether the story universe is an afterlife or a new life.

To return to the question of the formal complexity of music, Coetzee also imagines the witnessing of the act/art of composition.<sup>63</sup> After “The music breaks off, starts again, breaks off again,” with “pauses [that] last too long” and “the music itself [which] seems sometimes to lose its way,” music comes to life:

The music is too variable in its rhythm, too complicated in its logic for a ponderous being like him to follow, but it brings to mind the dance of one of those little birds that hover and dart, their wings beating too fast to see. The question is, where is the soul? When will the soul emerge from its hiding place and open its wings?<sup>64</sup>

The example discloses two forces at work in the music of Arroyo reminiscent of what Coetzee identifies in the music of Bach in the Classic essay. On the one hand, there is a material force that comes from the great craft, which goes into the composition of the musical piece. On the other hand, there is a particular quality in the music that enables the listener to transcend the ordinary experience of listening to music and imagine planes of reality yet unthought of. This description recalls Nadia Boulanger's intuition about Bach articulated in the form of an open question: “Does ... the man Bach have an order of thought which takes you into another sphere of emotional activity, sensual activity, technical activity?”<sup>65</sup> Faced with the formal complexity of the music, self-consciousness is abandoned temporarily.

<sup>62</sup> Coetzee, *The Death of Jesus*, 192–93.

<sup>63</sup> Unlike the *Jesus* novels, J. M. Coetzee, *Disgrace* (London: Vintage Books, 2000) is a different fictional experiment that explores the creative process from the perspective of the artist. For David Lurie, the protagonist, who composes an opera on Lord Byron, “snatches are already imprinted on his mind of the lovers in duet, the vocal lines, soprano and tenor, coiling wordlessly around and past each other like serpents” (121–22). Later in the novel there is a beautiful passage that captures the creative process more fully: “astonishingly, in dribs and drabs, the music comes. Sometimes the contour of a phrase occurs to him before he has a hint of what the words themselves will be; sometimes the words call forth cadence; sometimes the shade of a melody, having hovered for days on the edge of hearing, unfolds and blessedly reveals itself” (183).

<sup>64</sup> Coetzee, *The Schooldays of Jesus*, 194.

<sup>65</sup> Bruno Monsaingeon, *Mademoiselle: Conversations with Nadia Boulanger*, trans. Robyn Marsack, Manchester: Carcanet, 1985):50.

The formal complexity of Arroyo's music bears a striking resemblance to how Coetzee describes Bach's music in an interview with Peter Sacks from 2001.<sup>66</sup> In Bach, Coetzee explains, there is always a "mysterious moment in the improvisation that he produces ... at which he leaves you behind. He leaves your powers to follow him, to imitate him, to do what he is doing, behind."<sup>67</sup> When asked by Sacks if one's state of consciousness can ever pursue that improvisatory moment, Coetzee replied that "Self-consciousness is crippling at that moment. It really is best to cultivate a kind of ignorance or deafness to self-consciousness."<sup>68</sup> Drawing on this observation, señor Arroyo's music elicits a similar reaction in Simón, whose rational faculties stifle before the mathematical perfection of the music while language as a system of reference fails to render the emotional intensity of the experience. The inability to grasp consciously and intellectually the architectonic quality of the music pushes Simón into new ethical and affective territory and leads to what Stephen Benson, writing on the representation of music in literary works, calls an "intimate self-revelation" whereby new interiorities come to the forefront of consciousness and thinking happens in images rather than in language.<sup>69</sup> The *Jesus* novels therefore raise the question of the limits of ordinary language and its ability to render the complexity of music into words.

The sense of mystery Coetzee alludes to in the interview with Sacks is carried over into the trilogy and its number mysticism.<sup>70</sup> As Patricia Álvarez Sánchez notes, Bach himself was a "a follower of numerology" and possibly a believer in "the mystical values of numbers; he, among other Baroque composers, used numbers instead of letters and incorporated them as well to convey hidden messages in his musical works."<sup>71</sup> Although the resemblance between señor Arroyo and the historical Bach is strong, Coetzee substitutes the German composer's faith in God with faith in numbers and music.<sup>72</sup> At the Academy, pupils do not learn "the mindless chant we call *counting*" but move away from an instrumental view of numbers and try to see "through the chant to what lies behind and beyond it, namely the realm of the numbers themselves."<sup>73</sup> As with Bach's

<sup>66</sup> Peter Sacks, "J. M. Coetzee with Peter Sacks," interview by Peter Sacks, *Lannan Podcasts*, November 8, 2001, audio, <https://podcast.lannan.org/2010/06/28/j-m-coetzee-with-peter-sacks-conversation-8-november-2001-video/>.

<sup>67</sup> Sacks, interview.

<sup>68</sup> Sacks, interview.

<sup>69</sup> Dave Benson, *Music: A Mathematical Offering* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 5.

<sup>70</sup> In Baylee Brits, "The Name of the Number: Transfinite Mathematics in *The Childhood of Jesus*," in *J. M. Coetzee's The Childhood of Jesus: The Ethics of Ideas and Things*, eds. Jennifer Rutherford and Anthony Uhlmann (New York: Bloomsbury Books, 2017): 129–146, Brits has remarked that *Childhood* is "the most substantial engagement with numeracy" in Coetzee's oeuvre (131). For a comprehensive analysis of the importance of mathematics in Coetzee's work, see Peter Johnston, "Presences of the Infinite": J. M. Coetzee and Mathematics." (PhD diss., Royal Holloway, University of London, 2013).

<sup>71</sup> Patricia Álvarez Sánchez, "The Limits of Reason in J. M. Coetzee's *The Schooldays of Jesus*," in *Miscelánea: A Journal of English and American Studies* 60 (2019): 115.

<sup>72</sup> The mysticism is discouraged by the narrative perspective offered by Simón, who finds the philosophy "a bit crazy," dismissing it as "mumbo-jumbo about the stars," thus leaving the question of mysticism open to the reader (Coetzee, *The Schooldays of Jesus*, 75, 103).

<sup>73</sup> Coetzee, *The Schooldays of Jesus*, 68.

extraordinary musical creations, the masterpieces señor Arroyo produces go beyond convention and rule in the same way that the Academy's view of mathematics goes beyond calculation and measurement. Coetzee raises the question of measurement in the form of a lecture given by the philosopher Javier Moreno Gutiérrez on *Metros*. The question the trilogy seems to be asking is, What happens when a musical masterpiece, which at the level of craft and intellect stays close to rule and convention, goes beyond measurement and beyond our rational ability to understand? Coetzee therefore opens up a space untouched by mathematical thinking to emphasize that mathematics is an approximation of a perfection that lies beyond ordinary experience.

In developing the number mysticism of the Academy, Coetzee also introduces another "classic," though not of music but of mathematics: Pythagoras.<sup>74</sup> The Greek mathematician believed that "certain rhythms and melodies had a healing effect on the human character and emotions" because they could restore "the soul's strength to its original balance" while "dancing was also used as a therapy."<sup>75</sup> The Academy's philosophy echoes these ideas in its aim to teach pupils to "bring them [the souls] in accordance with the great underlying movement of the universe, or, as we prefer to say, the dance of the universe."<sup>76</sup> Arroyo resembles Pythagoras in that he sees a relationship among music, numbers, and the spheres and considers manmade music to be an imperfect imitation of the music of the universe.<sup>77</sup> Coetzee therefore puts the classics in accord with one another, building on their musical and mathematical thinking while at the same time testing, confronting, and renewing their ideas.

The Academy represents an endeavor to retrieve an alternative epistemology through music. That Coetzee fictionalizes Bach as a character who plays a crucial role in Simón's and David's formation and understanding of the world suggestively points to the importance of his role in the trilogy. The scene that closes *Schooldays*, and from which the second epigraph is taken, is probably the most vivid example of the power of music to help imagine perfection. Initially, Arroyo plays "a simple tune, a child's tune" after which he:

Inverts the tune, varies it, elaborates: while the pulse remains steady, the little aria begins to reveal a new structure, point by point, like a crystal

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<sup>74</sup> In my engagement with Pythagoras henceforth the focus is on those aspects of his philosophy that concern music and mathematics.

<sup>75</sup> Cornelia De Vogel, 164–65, quoted in Sánchez, "The Limits of Reason in J. M. Coetzee's *The Schooldays of Jesus*," 116.

<sup>76</sup> Coetzee, *The Schooldays of Jesus*, 68.

<sup>77</sup> In *Music* Dave Benson sheds light on the figure of Pythagoras, who believed that numbers and mathematics more generally were a guide to the interpretation of the universe, which also included music. Consequently, this influenced the intellectual development of Pythagoreans, Pythagoras's followers, who promoted the idea of education as a quadrivium (four divisions) which included arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music. If mathematical laws explained the laws of nature, then "they expected that the motions of the planets would be governed by the arithmetic of ratios of small integers in a similar way" (138). The phrase "the music of the spheres" encapsulates this belief and refers to the sound made by the rotating motion of the planets.



growing in the air. Bliss washes over him [Simón]; he wishes he could sit down and listen properly.<sup>78</sup>

The description of the music, which echoes Bach's *Goldberg Variations* brings out the architectonic quality of the music, its playful inventiveness, formal perfection, and ability to open new horizons: "There is only the music. Arms extended, eyes closed, he shuffles in a slow circle. Over the horizon the first star begins to rise.<sup>79</sup> Simón's scepticism about the philosophy of the Academy is abandoned in this final paragraph of *Schooldays* in which Arroyo's music transports him to an imagined place inaccessible in ordinary language. In this scene, the feeling of bliss Simón experiences helps to frame the representation of music as an existential solution.

In constructing the Arroyos and their school, Coetzee draws on aspects of the historical Bachs, though in a larger sense than simply biographical. He does not situate them in the history of German music and the Baroque style, despite the German composer's rootedness in the musical tradition of his time. Instead, he introduces the Arroyos in order to begin to grasp, through music, a realm of perfect forms that is not immediately available in ordinary language. The architectonic quality of Bach's music—its mathematical beauty and formal inventiveness—helps Coetzee think about the question of formal perfection as a transformative and ethical principle. The trilogy therefore constructs music as an epistemology in itself that allows the subject to access new forms of knowing and of perception through its power to make the invisible planes of reality become visible.

As I have shown, the texts engage with music on many levels, including thematic, structural, and formal. In particular, Coetzee's play with musical ekphrasis and the counterpoint technique gives the texture of his prose a musical quality as if he were producing music from the pen. The ekphrastic exchange between the mediums of language and music sets the two art forms in tune with each other, opening up a dialogue between them while also showing the underlying representational possibilities of the novel. The contrapuntal technique allows Coetzee to balance language against music without allowing one to take precedence over the other. The result is the coexistence of a plurality of "languages," including the "languages" of music and mathematics, and ordinary language, with their inherent forms of thinking about and ways of expressing the world. In their own way, these languages give the *Jesus* novels an idiosyncratic ring. That Coetzee makes use of the music of Bach, which fills the pages of the three texts, marks a return to an earlier interest but only insofar as Bach helps Coetzee take his fiction into a new creative space. As with señor Arroyo's aim to "try to reveal what has been hidden,"<sup>80</sup> Coetzee's *Jesus* novels and his late fiction more generally allow the musical quality of each word to be heard thus producing a kind of musical fiction that transcends the limits of ordinary language.

<sup>78</sup> Coetzee, *The Schooldays of Jesus*, 259–60.

<sup>79</sup> Coetzee, *The Schooldays of Jesus*, 260.

<sup>80</sup> Coetzee, *The Death of Jesus*, 172.

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