

Études littéraires africaines

Displacement as a Narrative in J.M. Coetzee's Post-Apartheid Novels

Chantal Logan



Number 38, 2014

L'Afrique du Sud et la littérature post-apartheid (1994-2014)
South Africa and Post-Apartheid Literature (1994-2014)

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1028673ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1028673ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Association pour l'Étude des Littératures africaines (APELA)

ISSN

0769-4563 (print)

2270-0374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Logan, C. (2014). Displacement as a Narrative in J.M. Coetzee's Post-Apartheid Novels. *Études littéraires africaines*, (38), 43–53.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1028673ar>

Article abstract

Depuis *Disgrace* (1999) et jusqu'à *The Childhood of Jesus* (2013), J.M. Coetzee présente toute une série de personnages d'origine européenne qui cherchent leur place dans la nouvelle société post-apartheid. Cet article analyse l'expérience du déracinement lié à la perte de pouvoir qu'ils éprouvent. Il étudie trois parcours : celui de David Lurie dans *Disgrace*, celui d'Elizabeth dans *Elizabeth Costello* et celui de Simón dans *The Childhood of Jesus*. La situation de ces personnages est une métaphore du paradoxe vécu par les anciens colons dont l'identité était définie par la distance qu'ils gardaient avec les habitants des terres sur lesquelles ils étaient venus s'établir. L'ère post-apartheid, en les obligeant à partager le même territoire, apparaît comme une remise en cause de leur identité distincte et de l'espace littéraire qu'ils occupaient. L'étude de ces personnages qui s'éloignent de plus en plus de l'espace sud-africain finit par amener la question de savoir si le roman *The Childhood of Jesus* ne serait pas l'expression de l'échec de la communauté lorsqu'elle cherche à trouver sa place hors du pays natal. Une telle interrogation amène à se demander si le déracinement lui-même n'apporterait pas une raison d'être transitoire à un écrivain auto-exilé, en quête d'un nouvel espace littéraire.

DÉCENTREMENT ET DISLOCATION

DISPLACEMENT AS A NARRATIVE IN J.M. COETZEE'S POST-APARTHEID NOVELS

RÉSUMÉ

Depuis Disgrace (1999) et jusqu'à The Childhood of Jesus (2013), J.M. Coetzee présente toute une série de personnages d'origine européenne qui cherchent leur place dans la nouvelle société post-apartheid. Cet article analyse l'expérience du déracinement lié à la perte de pouvoir qu'ils éprouvent. Il étudie trois parcours : celui de David Lurie dans Disgrace, celui d'Elizabeth dans Elizabeth Costello et celui de Simón dans The Childhood of Jesus. La situation de ces personnages est une métaphore du paradoxe vécu par les anciens colons dont l'identité était définie par la distance qu'ils gardaient avec les habitants des terres sur lesquelles ils étaient venus s'établir. L'ère post-apartheid, en les obligeant à partager le même territoire, apparaît comme une remise en cause de leur identité distincte et de l'espace littéraire qu'ils occupaient. L'étude de ces personnages qui s'éloignent de plus en plus de l'espace sud-africain finit par amener la question de savoir si le roman The Childhood of Jesus ne serait pas l'expression de l'échec de la communauté lorsqu'elle cherche à trouver sa place hors du pays natal. Une telle interrogation amène à se demander si le déracinement lui-même n'apporterait pas une raison d'être transitoire à un écrivain auto-exilé, en quête d'un nouvel espace littéraire.

*

In the history of nations, there are dark epochs when the lives of their inhabitants seem to be completely defined by the tragic circumstances which enfold them. Catastrophic events have a way of laying upon the shoulders of the would-be story-teller a burden and a responsibility difficult to assume. What becomes of the literary imagination when survival is at stake and when happenings of apocalyptic dimension shatter the divide between reality and fiction ? And what of the artists whose communities of birth – or even gender for that matter –, locate them squarely in the camp of the villains or of the victims ? Although Apartheid was far from being « a final solution », South African literature for decades was largely defined by the politics of its oppressive regime. Literary critics scrutinized the writer's works to discern how they fared against the political reality of an unjust and violent system. For the readers of the text,

the ethical issues mattered and often overshadowed any others in their interpretation of the literary production.

Yet the end of Apartheid has not seen the issues of ethics disappear from the field of literary criticism especially for authors as internationally acclaimed as J.M. Coetzee. His novel *Disgrace* (1999) was met with great disapproval at home by members of the ANC (African National Congress) when it first was published as the gang rape of the protagonist's daughter by black men « was taken as the revival of the old black peril cliché »¹. Coetzee since then has been at the heart of a controversy, with his allies defending the ethical value of his literary production and his critics pointing to his aloofness or lack of political commitment². He himself had addressed the issues in his well-known essay « The Novel Today » but his definite move to Australia in 2002 added to the controversy at a time when many white South Africans were also leaving the country³. The latest essay « Coetzee in and out of Cape Town » written by South African lecturer Imraan Coovadia re-ignited the debate in South African literary circles⁴ as Coovadia challenged the aggrandizement of Coetzee abroad and his status as an anti-Apartheid hero of sorts⁵. This latest episode illustrates that literary criticism is still very much a minefield in today's South Africa.

The analysis presented here wants to stay as far away as possible from an issue which pertains to biographers to examine. Although the ethical dimension of a literary production is a worthwhile object of study this essay seeks to trace the journey of the protagonists of Coetzee's novel as such. It is the text which is the subject matter and Coetzee, the moral person, the anti-Apartheid white or would-be-

¹ POPESCU (Monica), « The Argument over J.M. Coetzee », September 25, 2013 : <http://africasacountry.com/the-argument-over-j-m-coetzee> ; retrieved March 15, 2014.

² Michael Chapman discusses at length the issue in his paper : « The Case of Coetzee : South African Literary Criticism, 1990 to Today », Plenary Paper, *International Conference on the Humanities in Southern Africa University of Pretoria*, June 22-25, 2008 : http://michaelchapman.co.za/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=65&Itemid=25 ; retrieved 12.2014.

³ The article « White Flight from South Africa », in *The Economist*, gives the approximate number as 800 000 : <http://www.economist.com/node/12295535> ; September 25, 2008, retrieved August 08, 2014.

⁴ COOVADIA (Imraan), « In and out of Cape Town », *Kritika Kultura*, n°18, February 2012, p. 103-113 : <http://kritikakultura.ateneo.net/issue/no-18/special-forum-kritika/coetzee-in-and-out-of-cape-town> ; retrieved February 18, 2014.

⁵ The article « The Case of Coetzee » already quoted gives a complete analysis about this particular controversy.

racist Afrikaner who exists outside the text, is of no interest in this analysis. On the other hand Coetzee, the author, as « the principle that invented the narrator, along with everything else in the narrative » using Chatman's formula ⁶, has his rightful place.

In the same vein, it is important to define how the political reality of Post-Apartheid bears on the analysis of a work of fiction. When Coetzee locates his novels in the geographical space of South Africa, which is the case in *Disgrace*, his characters become inevitably enmeshed into a complex reality of relationships which informs his literary imagination. The author does not start with a South Africa which is a neutral territory but with a map made up of « segregated spaces [which were] designed to foster a separate existence of different officially defined racial and ethnic groups » ⁷. Before the story even begins, each would-be character comes to life already packaged to relate to the different « others » according to pre-defined rules. It follows naturally that the dismantling of Apartheid reassigns them new roles and rewrite their stories. But it is important to clarify that the different « others » in the stories are people whose identity is based on the historical reality of South Africa and differ from the universal category « the Other » in its singular form. The latter has been widely used as a hermeneutic key in the study of Coetzee's novels ⁸, but its use would lead us away from the immediacy of the text in the present analysis.

David Lurie's sexuality as an illusory neutral territory

Disgrace ⁹ does not start as a clearly marked Post-Apartheid narrative : the author locates the story in the territory of the protagonist's sexuality. Before the reader even learns his name, his sexual need is mentioned in the same breath as his age and his marital status. By locating the character in the space of sexual intimacy, the author removes him from the more rugged and dangerous terrain of a changing South Africa. The city of Cape Town and the university where he works find their significance in being only the background scenery where David Lurie, the aging male, had

⁶ CHATMAN (Seymour), *Story and Discourse : narrative structure in fiction and film*. Ithaca (NY) : Cornell University Press, 1980, 277 p. ; p. 148.

⁷ VESTERGAARD (Mads), « Who's Got the Map ? The Negotiation of Afrikaner Identities in Post-Apartheid South Africa », *Daedalus*, vol. 130, n°1 (*Why South Africa Matters*), Winter 2001, p. 19.

⁸ Mike Marais and Derek Attridge, among others, have made of « the Other » and « Otherness » a key to their interpretation of Coetzee's writing.

⁹ COETZEE (J.M.), *Disgrace*. New York : Viking, [First American Edition], 1999, 220 p. [D]

found that « his power fled » (*D*, p. 7) and tries unsuccessfully to get back in the game. The opening scenes are a thorough description of the « oasis » where the protagonist « had solved the problem of sex » (*D*, p. 1), a safe haven he is soon to lose.

In a time when relationships need to be renegotiated, a safe place is a space where the rules of engagement with the « others » are clear. Since the aging professor's partner is a paid sex worker, there are no issues of misunderstandings, emotional entanglement, or long-term commitment. The woman, Soraya, does not have a life of her own ; not even her name is her real name, « that he is sure of » (*D*, p. 3). As a sexual object, her race does not matter and is only indirectly mentioned when he describes the color of her skin : « honey brown body unmarked by the sun » (*D*, p. 1). She does not even merit to be called the « Other » : she is not a « face à face » or « un visage » as Levinas describes the Other in *Totalité et infini*¹⁰ and to meet her does not require to cross any bridges or overstep any boundaries. The apartment where they meet mirrors the neutrality of the terrain : it exists for the sole purpose of their weekly pre-arranged meeting : « A place of assignation, nothing more, functional, clean, well regulated » (*D*, p. 5) ; an unmarked land where there is no trace of colonial conquests, segregated or desegregated spaces, an ephemeral kingdom where he can be lord for a couple of hours.

This safe haven is shattered when David Lurie sees Soraya on the outside « flanked by two children » (*D*, p. 6) he assumes to be hers, and « Soraya's eyes meet his » (*D*, p. 6). Only then, the « face à face » occurs and transforms her into a « someone » with a separate existence and territory. His illusionary kingdom vanishes and he is thrown back into the real world, a world where a sexual object can also be a mother, a disturbing affair, even for a divorced man. The narrative suggests that they are both upset by the irruption of the outside world, but it is Soraya, the mother, who puts an end to their weekly arrangement. Lurie cannot accept his fall from grace and he pursues her with the arrogance of the privileged white male who is not used to be refused. Except that « times have changed » and Soraya chases him forcefully : « you are harassing me in my own house. I demand you will never phone me here again » (*D*, p. 10).

Her refusal is an omen of his loss of power in the new South Africa but he does not heed the warning. In his next amorous adventure, he continues to assert his rights as the privileged male by pur-

¹⁰ LEVINAS (Emmanuel), *Totalité et infini. Essai sur l'extériorité* [1961]. Paris : Le Livre de Poche, coll. Biblio Essais, 1994, 348 p.

suing Melanie Isaacs, one of his students : the difference of age, the university's penalties for sexual harassment and her obvious reluctance and resistance are no deterrent. The narrator lamely remarks after their first meeting « that is where he ought to end it. But he does not » (*D*, p. 18). On the contrary, he forces himself on her and acts as the proprietor of her body, arguing that it is not hers « because a woman's beauty does not belong to her alone [...] she has a duty to share it » (*D*, p. 16).

This time it is not the woman, too young and vulnerable, who puts an end to the relationship but the other « males » with whom he now has to share his hunting grounds. First it is the young boyfriend who challenges him into his own territory – his office at the University – and then the father, more respectful, but still threatening : « you have not heard the last of it » (*D*, p. 38). After being dismissed from the university and a long stay in the country, the professor still tries to reconnect with Melanie but her boyfriend tells him clearly : « stay with your own kind » (*D*, p. 194). The verdict is final, and his displacement permanent.

Yet the character's predicament is presented only as the result of aging and not as any loss of power linked to a new political reality. The distance between the narrator and the character invites the reader to take a skeptical look at the professor's ramblings and mock his old man's desire for sexual intimacy through the voice of the different female characters. But although Cape Town is the setting, the author avoids using any racial categories to identify his characters even if the choice of attire and the names of the characters would be revealing clues for the South African reader. Yet the threat represented by the males from the « other hordes » especially the younger ones, is present in the unfolding of the story : it will come full-blown in the second part of the narrative when David Lurie goes to the country to visit his daughter.

The irruption of violence : unmasking the neutrality of the terrain

There, the pretense of relationships which are not informed by people's ethnicity and the dismantling of Apartheid is abandoned. The narrative takes the reader into the heart of the issues that befell the settlers with the coming of a new era. The professor's daughter, « the new settler », introduces the reader to a land in full mutation where Petrus, the former « hired help » has become her assistant and soon will be a « co-proprietor » (*D*, p. 63). Although the professor at first finds amusing the changing of roles when he accepts to

work under Petrus's orders, « I like the historical piquancy » (*D*, p. 77), his proximity makes him feel uncomfortable : « We live too close to Petrus. It is like sharing a house with strangers [...] sharing smells » (*D*, p. 127). The narrator does not shy away either from identifying the characters by their race or origin in the descriptions : « On their left are African women [...] On their right are an old Afrikaner couple » (*D*, p. 71) ; Ettinger, the closest neighbour, is a German widower whose « children have gone back to Germany » and « is the only one left in Africa » (*D*, p. 100). The lame remark of the professor underlines the issues when he accompanies his daughter to Petrus' party as he remarks that « they are the only whites » (*D*, p. 128) and later when his daughter believes that she is « in their territory » (*D*, p. 158). Contrary to the city of Cape Town which was presented by the professor only as « a city of prodigal beauties » (*D*, p. 12), in the country there is no escape from the reality of the changing face of Post-Apartheid South Africa.

But this impression of a somewhat peaceful and rightful passing of the land is shattered by the episode of the forced entry of three young black males who not only steal the professor's car, but set him on fire, rape his daughter and shoot with glee several of the dogs in his daughter's keep. Everything else for a while takes a backseat to this extremely violent event and changes the tone of the story. The mocking stance of the narrator towards his character disappears during the episode and its aftermath, and the self-centered professor becomes a likeable person, a selfless parent concerned about his daughter, rightfully outraged by the event. In the process, Post-Apartheid South Africa turns into this frightening land where African young men rummage the countryside looking for white women to rape as an act of vengeance : « vengeance is like a fire. The more it devours, the hungrier it gets [...] do you hope you can expiate the crimes of the past by suffering in the present ? » (*D*, p. 112). The only intelligent thing to do, the professor tells his daughter, is to leave, a counsel she refuses to take.

Leaving, on the other hand, is what the professor does by retreating, first in the world of music – writing an opera –, and then into an animal shelter, where he finds solace assisting an English woman, Bev, to perform mercy killings on old and crippled animals that nobody wants. Although he is still on South African soil he is as far away as possible from its center, in a place where he does not have to deal with the desirable colored females of the land and even less with their threatening male counterparts ; even his daughter's rapists seem to have become irrelevant at the end of the narrative

which focuses on the redemption of the defiant professor David Lurie, turned into a humble animal shelter assistant.

What is noteworthy is that *Disgrace* is Coetzee's last story located in Post-Apartheid South Africa, as if, like his character, the author would have thought that there was no safe place for him to stand, even in the world of fiction¹¹. His subsequent narratives center around aging characters, certainly alter egos, with a very thin story line, who, thanks to a variety of literary artifices, deliver long lectures about their hobbyhorses, but have been removed from the dangerous terrain of the new South Africa.

In *Elizabeth Costello* (2003)¹² a famous but aging Australian female writer takes up the challenge of dealing with issues left unsettled in *Disgrace*. In this new narrative, Elizabeth Costello (the main character) is a woman on-the-go who travels around the world to receive awards and deliver lectures about literature but also the fate of animals: the animal shelter, which was a place of redemption for the disgraced professor, develops into intense activism for animal rights. Although the narrator finds his mocking voice to describe all the trappings of literary fame when Elizabeth Costello's son compares her to « an old, tired circus seal » (*EC*, p. 3), irony is replaced by compassion as she offers her passionate plea for animals' rights. Nevertheless, in the middle of the narrative, when all seems to go well for the animal activist, the author deals a fatal blow to her cause, when a Jewish poet objects to her equating « the murdered Jews of Europe to slaughtered cattle ? [...] it insults the memory of the dead » (*EC*, p. 95). At the end of her trip, her personal distress at the fate of slaughtered animals draws a sad portrait of an old, confused and « tearful » woman who needs to be comforted by her son (*EC*, p. 114).

Facing the judges : writing as the ultimate defense

In this story all « the others » seem to have disappeared. The protagonist mingles with her own kind : professors, students on one hand, and family members on the other. The story is located in the familiar terrain of lectures or debates and not of the unpredictability of daily life. The advocacy for animals – the silent victims *par excellence* –, has replaced the ambiguity of speaking for humans who have their own voice and did not summon her to write on their

¹¹ COETZEE (J.M.), *Summertime* (2009) is the only post-apartheid work of fiction which takes place in South Africa but it is set in the seventies.

¹² COETZEE (J.M.), *Elizabeth Costello*. London : Secker and Warburg, 1999, 233 p. [*EC*]

behalf (*EC*, p. 204). It is under the guise of black robed judges that « the others » reappear in the last chapter, but as her equals, a threatening group to whom she has to answer.

The episode sees her « suitcase in hand » at « the gate » (*EC*, p. 193) of an unnamed location where she has to make « a statement of belief » to judges, to pass on the other side. This eerie scene suspended in time between the real and the imaginary, has a taste of the afterlife and the appearance of an « opera bouffon town » (*EC*, p. 198). Yet in spite of all the precautions the author takes to imagine a space, as far away as possible from South Africa, the judges' questions echo the interrogations of other tribunals: the examining board of the university in *Disgrace*, but also, the famed and controversial Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

« What you want from me is not a response but a confession ; well I make no confession » (*D*, p. 51) said the professor in *Disgrace* when asked to write an apology about his affair with Melanie Isaacs. The same words come back under the writer's pen to describe Elizabeth's predicament in her conversation with one of the other « petitioners » (*EC*, p. 211). Although the initial demand is for her to make a statement of belief, she finds it impossible to comply. Her argument is simple : a belief is an « obstacle » (*EC*, p. 200) to being a writer, « a secretary to the invisible », as she calls herself, and therefore she « cannot afford to believe [...] for professional reasons » (*EC*, p. 200). But one of the judges does not let her hide behind her literary alibis : what is her opinion about the extermination of « the old Tasmanians », he asks ? Her answers shows her awareness that his question alludes to the crimes perpetrated by « her ancestors » : « is that what lies behind this hearing ? [...] historical guilt ? » (*EC*, p. 203). The historical guilt of the Afrikaner descendant, the responsibility of the writer in an oppressive regime, the confessions in front of the TRC are all there : the narrative has obliquely re-entered Post-Apartheid South Africa.

What is at stake is a shift of enormous consequences : the former white settler is the one who now has to submit to the verdict of judges. As a privileged coterie, the agnostic Professor and his female Australian counterpart never had to give an account for what they did or did not believe : they were the owners of meaning. As censors and gate keepers of the official languages, especially in their qualities of writers and professors, they exercised through the medium of their linguistic competence a « symbolic power » – to

use Bourdieu's terminology¹³ – which gave them the power to validate or disqualify any philosophical discourse. Now they have lost their place, a development far more disturbing than having to share the land with the Petruses of South Africa. As a response, the professor walks away and even though Elizabeth Costello does not, she hangs around by the gate, advocating to the gatekeeper that her status as a writer should grant her a special dispensation. It is in a much later novel, *The Childhood of Jesus* (2013)¹⁴, that another aging character, male again, does cross over and is waved in by « the man at the gate » (*CJ*, p. 1) : he arrives as a refugee, completely stripped of his identity, having renounced all pretense to be somebody with any special rights or privileges.

Going somewhere else

Simón, a name given to him by the authorities, is with a young boy, « neither my son nor my grandson –, but somebody I am responsible for », he explains to the clerk (*CJ*, p. 1). He is driven by one mission, to find the boy's lost mother or more precisely, it will turn out, the woman he will recognize as « his mother », when he meets her : « And the moment I beheld Inés, I knew it was she » (*CJ*, p. 84). Simón accepts to take on the hard job of a docker, « estibador » (*CJ*, p. 11) in Spanish, and becomes « a beast of burden » (*CJ*, p. 15) to feed the child in his keep. He reads as a chastened David Lurie, completely powerless, who can hardly master Spanish, the language of this new land : gone is the writer or lecturer of previous narratives who could retreat into the world of literature and philosophical discourse to avoid confronting hard truths.

No indications are given of where to find this land on a map, except for the fact that it is by the sea and Spanish is the language. Yet there is an abundance of details to describe the setting and create a feeling of an actual somewhere, not a place suspended in time and space like in *Elizabeth Costello*. The resettlement center seems real enough with its professional personel, but also its administrative trappings : the forms to fill out, the referral to an office which is closed, the assignment to a room whose key cannot be found. Nevertheless as the story develops, the place seems aseptic,

¹³ In *Language and Symbolic Power* (Edited and introduced by John B. Thompson ; translated by Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson. Cambridge (MA) : Harvard University Press, 1991, IX-302 p.), Pierre Bourdieu argues that the discourse of the elite is a form of domination over the common people.

¹⁴ COETZEE (J.M.), *The Childhood of Jesus*. New York : Viking, 2013, 277 p. [*CJ*]

devoid of life : an artificial decor set up for the sake of a tale, which will be dismantled once it has served its purpose.

Most of the characters do not have any consistency or depth. The settlers (although the word is never used) seem lobotomized with no passions and no desires. They are benevolent, full of « goodwill » (*CJ*, p. 55) – the word keeps on coming back – but incapable of humor or irony (*CJ*, p. 123). Even Alvaro, the stivadore, Simón's co-worker, does not have the roughness associated with the trade. The women are a disappointment : the attractive Ana has a nun quality (*CJ*, p. 29) and the mildly attractive (*CJ*, p. 59) Elena lets him have sex with her as an act of goodwill. There is always a brothel, *bordello* (*CJ*, p. 136) in Spanish, but the waiting list is so long and the request forms so complicated to fill out, that Simón never meets any Soraya on Thursday afternoons. Even Inés, the woman that Simon recognized as David's mother, although passionate about her new found role, appears rather primitive, completely obsessed with her child.

« Something is missing » (*CJ*, p. 239), Simón keeps on saying, throughout the story. At first he rebels against the asceticism of a land where desire and passion are shunned, but comes to accept his lot by focusing on the child. But then it is the child David (a diminutive David Lurie ?) who, by refusing to play by the rules, endorses the role of the recalcitrant adult. Bright, imaginative but rebellious, he will not submit to his teacher's authority and runs away from the institution where he is placed. Like in *Disgrace* or *Elizabeth Costello*, he has to face a tribunal which will decide to send him back. Although it is the child and his mother who refuse to comply, Simón is the one who provides the rationale : « there are higher considerations than obeying the law, higher imperatives » (*CJ*, p. 256).

If the denouement of the narrative – leaving to start all over – is the result of David's decision, Simón still holds the key to its meaning. His difficulties to adjust to this new insipid and flat land, « too placid for his taste, too lacking in ups and down, in drama and tension » (*CJ*, p. 64), gives the clues to what is missing : the rich world of memories. By refusing to let the past enter the present, this new world is a sterile land which cannot accommodate the longings of the old nor the imagination of the young. Simón told Elena « we are all supposed to be washed clean by the passage here [...] But the shadows linger nevertheless » (*CJ*, p. 65). And for Simón, the shadows come from a past which talks of the beauty of the exotic Melanie Isaacs, the richness of multilingualism, not just the one official language where « Our very words lack weight, theses Spanish

words that do not come from our heart » (*CJ*, p. 65). A world which refuses change and « the idea of history » (*CJ*, p. 114) leads nowhere. Yet Simón, who hangs on to the past, knows the high price to pay : with history comes the burden of disgrace and the weight of historical guilt ; with change the loss of one's place of privilege from judge to « petitioner » ; but without it, engaging and disturbing stories like *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1981) or *Disgrace* could never have been birthed.

What attracted the readers to Coetzee is not just his *mise à distance* or cynical look at himself, or even his philosophical discourse, but the grounding of his story in the South African soil, a dramatic story which both repelled and fascinated the reader. There is no doubt that Coetzee's literary production has changed after *Disgrace*, as he has retreated into the safe haven of fictions devoid of links with the historical reality of his country. Nevertheless, his characters, pilgrims or gypsies as they call themselves, whether here or there, are still trying to come to terms, in their different settings, with the new South Africa, starting with the vilified professor Lurie and finishing with Simón, the refugee, washed clean from his past. The imagined country in *The Childhood of Jesus* is haunted by a South Africa definitely left behind but whose absence leads the narrative to a dead-end. Yet going back is prohibited : « the harbor master won't let anyone take the boat back to his old life » (*CJ*, p. 261). No matter the nostalgia, the past is not a land where one can return. When he left South Africa, the self-exiled author cut himself from both the actual and imaginary space which had informed his writing. The only thing left is to accept displacement as his Muse, his *raison d'être*, and try again for the sake of the new generation of Davids who say at the gate : « good morning, we are new arrivals, and we are looking for somewhere to stay [...] to start our new life » (*CJ*, p. 277).

■ Chantal LOGAN