



J. M. Coetzee, W. G. Sebald, and Jacques Rancière. An Encounter in Time. (The Jesus Trilogy and *Austerlitz*)

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Abstract. Coetzee's reading of Sebald is significant for his writing of the Jesus trilogy. The very thesis of the trilogy relates to the existence of a world where all references to the past are lost in oblivion, which, according to Coetzee, would have been a possible salvation for Austerlitz, Sebald's protagonist. This paper will analyse to what extent Coetzee's encounter with Sebald determined the conception of time that is found in the three Jesus novels. Furthermore, the two authors share the same preoccupation with the issue of time regarding "the anxiety expressed by Rainer Maria Rilke in his letters about the duty of the artist as bearer of cultural memory" (Coetzee 2008), which I would filter through Jacques Rancière's exploration of time and temporality (*The Politics of Aesthetics*, 2004; *The Edges of Fiction*, 2020; *Modern Times: Temporality in Art and Politics*, 2022). Finally, their conceptions of *Chronos* differ in relation with *Topos*: if Sebald's prose is suffocated with the texture of a collage of historical materials, in Coetzee's prose the materiality is diluted. However, in the two experimental narratives, there are certain institutions that guard over a specific rendering of time which reveals the complexity of the encounter. Moreover, Jacques Rancière is also a reader of Sebald's prose, a fact which motivates the endeavour to explore this threefold relationship.

Keywords: J. M. Coetzee, W. G. Sebald, Jacques Rancière, the Jesus trilogy, *Austerlitz*.

Coetzee, Sebald, and Rancière. An Encounter

Coetzee's interest in Sebald's oeuvre has been constant over the years. It has been materialized in the essay *After Nature* published both in his collection of literary essays (2007) and in the commemoration volume *After Sebald* (2014) or in the

interpretation of the novel *Austerlitz* that he is rendering in the dialogue with Arabella Kurtz (2015) concerning the limits of storytelling.

In addition, Rancière had included an extremely insightful analysis on Sebald's work in his study *The Edges of Fiction* (2020). It should be added that Sebald's presence is not accessory in the economy of the work on account that even the author underlines the "egalitarian principle" of the structure. That is to say, that every chapter in Rancière's book is reflected in the others, and they illuminate each other; no matter how different their nature is, the essays are based on a singular intellectual adventure.

As for the comparative relationship arising between Coetzee and Rancière, this paper argues that their readings of Sebald's work, especially regarding his conception of time, facilitate an increased applicability of Rancière's theories to Coetzee's Jesus novels. Recently, Christina Lupton argued that the two authors share a common interest in the "worker's access to aesthetic experience" (2023) based on their exact contemporaneity. Her comparison of their writing and creativity is a resourceful and successful article as appreciated by David Attwell (2024). For this reason, their common contemporaneity is based on more than a common being in time or on a belonging to the same period of time, but on reading and reflecting upon common authors, yet to be researched.

"Representing the Extreme of Destruction"

Coetzee's reading of Sebald is significant for his writing of the Jesus trilogy. The very thesis of the trilogy relates to the existence of a world where all references to the past are lost in oblivion, which, according to Coetzee, would have been a possible salvation for Austerlitz, Sebald's protagonist. In other words, Austerlitz, whose name is "a near homophone for Auschwitz" (Cook 2014, 98), would not have been eager to dig up his own past and yet to open himself to immense suffering and even disease had he been blessed with the gift of oblivion of his early four years old child memories or had he not been informed that his real name is not Dafydd / David Elias but Jacques Austerlitz. Therefore, David, the child protagonist of the Jesus novels, can be a hypothetical Austerlitz that should not have been distressed by any memories of the past as imagined by Coetzee.

Even though amnesia is a realistic psychological effect in the case of Austerlitz, oblivion of the entire past for a group or a society could be seen in a speculative degree as a utopian/dystopian premise that encapsulates the contemporary polemic regarding the right to represent the extreme of destruction, "whether stories may be made up about it, or even simple pictures of it produced" (Rancière 2020, 110).

Both Sebald and Coetzee refuse to take part in this debate; instead, they look for new ways of writing fiction given the fact that “the work of destruction caused a suffering that exceeds our capacities of representation” (Rancière 2020, 110).

In *Austerlitz*, the reader is coping with the story of a child sent through a *Kindertransport* to London while searching for and composing his real name and identity by deconstructing his own past. He was brought up as Dafydd or David Elias. During the years of boarding school, he discovers that his real name is Jacques Austerlitz, which will lead his interest in history and architecture. Then, the novel ends with him finding out that his real father’s name was Aychenwald as the last piece of the puzzle of his own identity that he has to reconstruct. In a moment of distress, overwhelmed by his findings, he loses his consciousness and enters a state of amnesia.

In the Jesus trilogy, there are institutions and authorities who guard the convention or state of oblivion. To enumerate: Belstar camp, Centro de Reubicación Novilla [Centre of relocation], Recién Llegados [The Newcomers’ bureau], educational institutions. In a word, they are soft actors of censorship who ensure that everyone shares a common parochial worldview. Hence, the fact that David claims that he can remember the old world and the past, the fact that he does not accept his new given name, even though he does not remember the old one, the fact that he even has had a paper with his real mother’s name written on now lost are elements prone to position him in a soft conflict with the new community.

According to Coetzee, the world he is depicting in the Jesus trilogy is a form of afterlife (Marshall 2022). The mythical construction of this world is sustained by the existence of a limbo, the River Lethe from the Greek mythology or the great ocean that David and Simón are passing. However, the story of the boy is rather tragic, and even the society does not seem to enjoy much of the state of oblivion. Difficult to resume, David, after being adopted by Simón, and then by Inés, unsuccessfully tries to integrate in the state education system, until he finally finds his place in a vocational dance school. After the murder of his teacher, Ana Magdalena, he tries to integrate among the orphanage children of Estrella in spite of his parents’ concerns. Finally, an incurable disease leads to his death.

Excluding Time from Fiction

Regardless of the fact that the amnesia is applied to a single person or a group, the difficulty of representing time can be identified. The two authors share the same preoccupation with the issue of time regarding “the anxiety expressed by Rainer Maria Rilke in his letters about the duty of the artist as bearer of cultural memory” (Coetzee 2008, 149). Cultural memory can be extended for

both authors from their individual experiences (Nazism and Communism for Sebald; apartheid, Australian colonization, and contemporary border policies for Coetzee) to broader understandings and interpretations of universal history and philosophy of history, and a form of cultural psychoanalysis. To clarify, if for Sebald individual characters are “labouring under the burden of Europe’s recent history” (Coetzee 2008, 146), for Coetzee, in the Jesus trilogy, the society as a whole is labouring under the burden of a painful past, unknown for the reader, forgotten by its members. In either case, Coetzee identifies a common internal conflict for individuals and society, both of them are manifesting “a self-protective urge to block off a painful past and a blind groping for something, they know not what, that has been lost” (2008, 146).

When reading *Austerlitz*, Coetzee illustrates the fact that “[t]ime has no real existence” (2008, 148), so “one consequence of the denial of time is that past is reduced to a set of interlocking memories in the minds of the living” (2008, 149). The very fact that time is evacuated from the story is specific for the Jesus trilogy too. There is no need for temporality or progression of moments in time because in the world depicted by Coetzee nothing really happens. For instance, Simón, one of the protagonists, “remembers asking Álvaro once why there was never any news on the radio. ‘News of what?’ inquired Álvaro. ‘News of what is going on in the world,’ he replied. ‘Oh,’ said Álvaro, ‘is something going on?’ As before, he was ready to suspect irony. But no, there was none” (Coetzee 2013, ch. 8).

In this paper, I analyse to what extent Coetzee’s encounter with Sebald determined the problematic of time that is found in the three Jesus novels, which I would filter through Jacques Rancière’s exploration of time and temporality (2004; 2020; 2022). To begin with, Sebald points out his perspective upon time using his protagonist’s confession: “Instead of the continuous medium of time, says Austerlitz, there exist interconnected pockets of space-time whose topology we may never understand, but between which the so-called living and the so-called dead can travel and thus meet one another” (Coetzee 2008, 148–149).

J. M. Coetzee is fascinated with the replacement of “the continuous medium of time,” which he will abolish too in his Jesus novels. Moreover, he empathizes with Austerlitz in the state of being overwhelmed by the new realities and by the multitude of spaces together with their stories in an excess of detail.

This particular characteristic of Sebald’s prose is interpreted by Jacques Rancière as a replacement of the conception of time as a progression of construction and destruction, a chain of cause and effect towards a final end with the invention of “another image of time: a time of coexistence, equality and the inter-expressiveness of moments” (2020, 120).

Astrological Structures and Constellations

As an illustration, the classical conception of time could be perceived as a hierarchical structure of cause and effects, while the modern conception of time would be perceived as an astrological structure that brings moments and places in simultaneity and correspondence. By the same token, Tess Jarray painted an extraordinary constellation during her endeavour of illustrating Sebald's work (Fig. 1). By the same token, during the *Encounters Conference*, the image I brought to sustain the conception of time as an astrological structure (Fig. 2) seemed to be a perfect match with Judit Pieldner's map of locations in Sebald's novel *The Rings of Saturn* used in her presentation *Spectral Encounters of Intermediality in Grant Gee's Patience (After Sebald)* (2024). Uncanny as it may seem, this coincidence of representation and understanding time and space is justified by the way we perceive time by measuring the distance from a point to another, so the multiplicity of places that a man came to encounter, especially from the twentieth century onwards, became a multiplicity of times which easily leads to their contemporaneity, a phenomenon that Sebald was so sensible to observe and depict in his novels. In Rancière's terms, this phenomenon uncovers "a time of coexistence, overcome by the liberalness of space" (2020, 115), available through the technological advancements of faster and faster means of transportation.

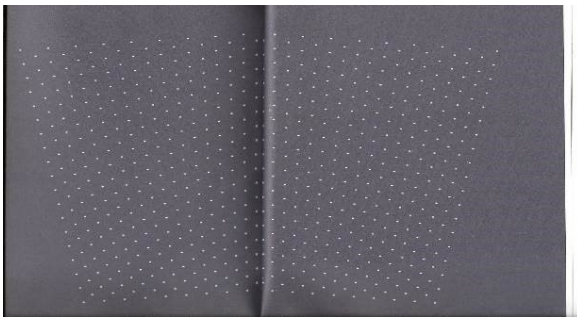


Figure 1. *Requiem Blue* by Tess Jarray (*Cook ed.* 2014, 150–151)

Coetzee's meditation on Sebald's astrological structure is embodied in the philosophy of the star numbers that David, the protagonist, develops and encounters in Estrella, at the Arroyo Academy. To clarify, Ana Magdalena's philosophy claims that dance is the only way of bringing the primary numbers back, whose names are the only remnants of the old world. Thus, the space of the dancing becomes an inter-world between which remnants of the past are co-existing with elements of the present like in a resurrection (Coetzee 2016, ch. 7) or commemoration. The Platonistic structure of this philosophy identifies dance

as a material replacement for the act of contemplation, which was supposed to lead man from an object to its concept.

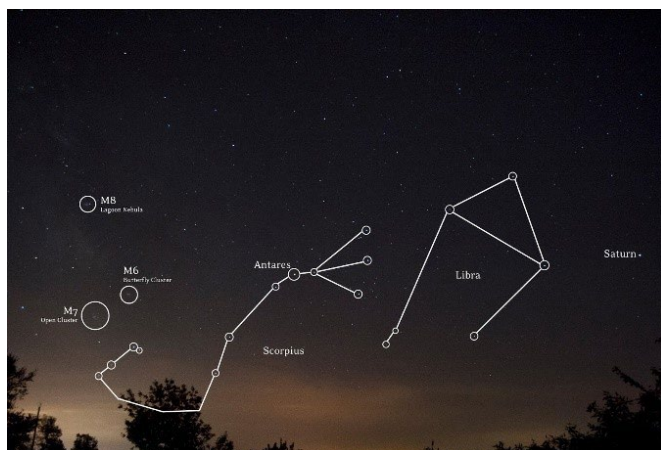


Figure 2. *The modern conception of time as an astrological structure*
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The academy “is dedicated to guiding the souls of our students toward that realm, to bringing them in accord with the great underlying movement of the universe, or, as we prefer to say, the dance of the universe” (Coetzee 2016, ch. 7). Furthermore, the Arroyo philosophy asserts that there are two kinds of numbers:

The numbers you have in mind, the numbers we use when we buy and sell, are not true numbers but simulacra. They are what I call ant numbers. Ants, as we know, have no memory. [...] Tonight, in the second part of the show, you will see our younger students playing the parts of ants, performing the ant operations that we call the lower arithmetic, the arithmetic we use in household accounts and so forth. [...]

The laws they (*ants*) obey are the laws of addition and subtraction. That is all they do, day in and day out, during every waking hour: carry out their mechanical, twofold law.

In our Academy we do not teach the law of the ant. [...] We do not want to turn your children into ants. (Coetzee 2016, ch. 7)

As can be seen, the academy as a topos is secluded from the rest of the community, it is a space that is tolerated on account of the fact that its mysticism is unharmed, while the separation of the children that are slightly different secures the rest of the community.

Similarly, Rancière hypothesizes around Sebald's conception of time reaching the same condition of routine specific to Coetzee's world. This world is characterized by the fact that nothing really happens. The action of the novel evolves in the reader's mind by composing and deconstructing the cognoscible elements of a world of objects and humans that refer to something other than themselves.

But precisely the right thread is to be found in another cartography of time, not one of a cause-and-effect governed chain of succession. Now, calendar time provides the simplest image. For this time is not the pure succession of things that occur idiotically, one after the other. Each date of a calendar is separated from the order of succession and refers to something else other than itself: to events arising at diverse places on a same day of the year, in a more or less distant past; to the history of a patron saint or a mythological divinity; to tasks or moods of the season; to diverse pieces of information or stories specially composed at the end to instruct, entertain or delight all those who otherwise endure the routine wherein each day is like every other. (Rancière 2020, 121)

However, Coetzee's characters do not enjoy the privilege of a cartography of time with days enriched with the meaning of something other than their plain routine and fixed forms of spending leisure time. For instance, in a philosophy class for adults, the only subject of discussion is the nature of a chair.

Tracing the Links between the Stars

Under those circumstances, the new image of time, that of an astrological rationality, which can be found in Sebald's prose and Coetzee's trilogy, is not fully explained by Rancière in terms of what replaces the cause-and-effect rationality. Furthermore, he outlines the fact that the links between the pockets of time-spaces are not fully arbitrary, while the elements are not entirely equivalent. In like manner, not all new orders are good. Intriguingly, he does not develop the criteria by which the pockets of time-spaces are linked as in a constellation more than the principle by which the calendar organizes time for what he calls routine people. I would venture to discuss how Sebald and Coetzee develop criteria for tracing such links.

In the case of *Austerlitz*, the protagonist struggles to face "the torrent of memory (memory in the widest sense, including the historical memory of Europe)" (Coetzee and Kurtz 2015, 189), by constructing personal and identitarian narratives and by taming the wildness of time as a burden of the unknown and

tracing a “topography of memory” (Pieldner 2013). In other words, he links recognizable chronology or set of chronologies: “the narrative of his life; the narrative of his historical researches; the narrative of his mother’s life, insofar as that is recoverable” (Coetzee and Kurtz 2015, 189) and, finally, the promised narrative of searching who his father was, Maximilian Auchenbach. This is a story that the reader would never discover and hardly can he/she imagine that even Austerlitz would recover something of it.

In the case of the Jesus trilogy, the micro-philosophic dialogues are not linked by a grand narrative with a search for anything; actually the reader is confronted with the answer received by David, the protagonist, that he must accept that the world is what it is, that this is how things work, without attributing any final cause to anything, even though there are plenty of references to grand narratives, symbols, and philosophies of European culture such as Don Quixote, Dostoyevsky’s works, Plato’s sky of ideas, the cave myth, the figure of Christ. Time sequels do not have even the accumulation of spaces used by Sebald; they are linked by their very nature, a catalogue of symbolic elements devoid of their own meanings similar to a constellation of pockets of grand narratives devoid of time and space retaining only a meaning that, as allegorical as it may seem, is not supposed to expose more than the structure of such a complexity.

Hence, Coetzee’s and Sebald’s conceptions of *Chronos* differ in relation with *Topos*. If Sebald’s prose is suffocated with the texture of a collage of historical materials creating what Rancière calls “paper landscapes,” in Coetzee’s prose the materiality is diluted revealing the imponderability of space and time. Moreover, Sebald himself appreciated Tess Jarray’s art as “oblique” and “weightless” (Cook, ed. 2014, 144–145). This specific rendering of time unfolds the complexity of the encounter. With Jacques Rancière and J. M. Coetzee as readers of Sebald’s prose, the threefold relation builds experiences of time, that although different find enough similarities that have their grounds in the act of interpreting W. G. Sebald’s work.

Another key point is that of Robert Pippin, who states that in the Jesus trilogy “[f]orgetfulness might be a figure for an unbridgeable gap in time, for the irrelevance of remembering a now distant past” (2021, 16). By the same token, Ali Smith questions the “translation as a liminal state which admits the never-definitive, which moves between the original and the new, in the continuing refinement of language as communal act, typical of the shared project that all writing is” (Cook, ed. 2014, 82) in the case of Sebald’s works, by interpreting his texts as aspiring to exist “in the vital state between words and their possible meanings, between languages and all possible languages” (Cook, ed. 2014, 82). Thus, a specific kind of intermedial space is identified in the two fictions.

Furthermore, two types of anxiety can be identified by the way both authors construct new ways of representing time. For David, there is the anxiety that he

could fall between the spaces from one step to another, from one star to another, from one time to another. For Austerlitz, there is the anxiety of being overwhelmed with the multiplicity of details, places and times that should compensate for the fact that he finds out several times new histories and names about himself. Hence, the *horror vacui* and *horror abundationes* seem to be two faces of the same coin. Similarly, the two types of anxiety illustrate different modes of tracing the links between the stars while asserting that everything is about the act of tracing.

Obsessed with Time. Fed up with Time. The Co-existence or Disappearance of Time? Conclusions

On the one hand, Jacques Rancière uses his interpretation of Sebald's work to support the development of his well-known theories from *The Politics of Aesthetics* (2004) in *The Edges of Fiction* (2020). The quoted analysis has a particular role in the argumentation of his inquiry "into the revolution by which those who are nothing become everything" (2020, 12) as a rationality paradigm. He illustrates by treating Sebald as a symptom for the use of temporal frame to build new ways to "identify events and actors and other ways of linking them to construct shared worlds and shared hi/stories" (2020, 8) and to announce the analysis of the structure of "random occurrence" (2020, 128), not to say that he recently came to dedicate a whole treaty on the use of time in modern fiction: *Modern Times: Temporality in Art and Politics* (2022). Despite the ideological framework to which Rancière subscribes his interpretation, the structures he identifies in Sebald's work are perfectly available for Coetzee's trilogy.

On the other hand, Coetzee creatively develops Sebald's endeavour of using a different time framework. Namely, he constructs a mode of representation that gets rid not only of the time paradigm but also of the space paradigm. If Sebald felt the need to compensate his dilution of time causality, rationality by building heavy agglomerations of spaces, Coetzee continues this endeavour by cutting the rope to earth and materiality, and traces an imponderable prose devoid of Chronotopes. He builds a symbolic universality that, surprisingly, is not lacking the sense of life or of reality but rather encapsulates life in the scriptural reasoning specific to the Christ narratives in the *Bible*. His prose does not create shared experiences; his characters are all alone in the new world. If they do not have a past, no matter how painful, to link them, all that actually links them is the routine of everyday life with no further significance other than pointing the typologies that are naturally sacrificed in such an environment not without marking traces behind.

Given these points, the importance of the problematic of time in contemporaneity is of full importance, as Jacques Rancière emphasizes. Furthermore, the relationship between Sebald and Coetzee as novelists and Rancière as a critic and philosopher illustrates the consequences of changing the cause-and-effect time framework as a symptom of a “self-protective urge to block off a painful past” (2008, 146) manifested not only on a personal level in Sebald’s work but also on a societal level as in Coetzee’s. “The repressed always returns,” as Coetzee anticipated (Coetzee and Kurtz 2015, 191). There is no possible narrative without this unwritten law, which he identifies as a need of the faith that there is justice in the universe. Nevertheless, the broadening of modes of representing time is a necessity for the creation of new ways of dealing with the painful truth of the past that hangs on the shoulders of humanity. The novelists describe the human condition as the condition of the Atlas, but instead of a heavy sky, there is a heavy past.

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