Chapter 10
Coetzee and Wittgenstein on Play the Law

Gaetano Albergo
Independent scholar
gaetanoalbergo@yahoo.it.
ORCID: 0009-0007-6555-6148

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Abstract

It is only because literature is probably the most appropriate means to express, without falsifying them, the indeterminacy and the complexity of moral life that it can teach us something essential in this domain. To take up Wittgenstein's phrase, it can help us to watch and to see many more things than what ordinary life would allow us to watch and to see. Coetzee's three 'Jesus' fictions are not realist novels, although he has not made up a new world. Here, his true South, with complex histories of colonization, is difficult to identify. Historical contingencies do not frame his ethical enquiries. At the core we find self-reflexive linguistic questions. Here I follow Pippin (2021) and Mulhall (2022) in investigating the trilogy's philosophical commitment, with particular attention to the way Coetzee manages to make literature a device for the human search for meaning and understanding, starting from the particular jurisdiction that it realizes in the very act of serving language.

Keywords

philosophy and literature; unknowingness; rule-following; Wittgenstein; ethics of ideas.

Literature and Moral Philosophy

Recently, John Maxwell Coetzee has shown an increasing disenchantment with the global hegemony of American and British culture, and has developed the desire to engage with what might be called "Literatures of the South". The project should be conceived in terms other than the usual parameters adopted by the cultural gatekeepers of the metropolitan outpost of the North. A really interesting case concerns the final volume of the 'Jesus' trilogy. It was first published in Spanish translation, as *La Muerte de Jesús,* six months before the English original first appeared in Australia. According to Stephen Mulhall, Coetzee went to create the impression amongst those in the Anglo-American cultural world that the English edition was somehow a belated translation of the Spanish one, and in this way he would have placed the fundamental theme of being transported, or translated, at the center, as a typically philosophical and existential problem. Recently, Derek Attridge has asked «are the "Jesus" novels peculiarly Southern?» (Attridge 2019).

It seems that matters of great pertinence to the colonial history do not feature importantly, and the South has no particular claim on the issues thrown up by the narrative and dialogues of the Jesus' novels. However, Coetzee has accustomed us to review our most faithful beliefs. So, the world in which the trilogy is set is a place where passion is lacking, sex has little value, taste is never an expression of subjectivity. In this way, our common understanding of the South turns out to be merely stereotypical, and the 'regime of reason' also turns out not to be definable or attributable in a culturally relevant way[1]. The protagonist, the rational Simon, expresses an erotic urge, but it makes reflective sense to himself as an attraction to the beautiful, and passions should prompt a form of reflection. As a result, an erotic dimension is attached to reason. Following the works of Robert Pippin (2021) and Stephen Mulhall (2022) I think the 'Jesus' trilogy maintains Coetzee's long-established interest in philosophy, and this interest finds expression in a double direction: the question of the relation between ideas and reality in philosophy and literature, and the way in which philosophy's drive to apprehend the reality beneath or beyond appearances finds its literary counterpart (but not its competitor).

The Swedish Academy decided to bestow the Nobel Prize to a «scrupulous doubter, ruthless in his criticism of the cruel rationalism and cosmetic morality of western civilization» (Nobel prize 2003). We could ask if Coetzee's critique of reason is subordinated to a moral concern. We could follow Martha

1 There seem to be some similarities to the way Milan Kundera, in his *Les testaments trahis*, attributes new impulses in the art of the novel to the novels from the South: its unbridled imagination, capable of breaking all the rules of verisimilitude. However, Kundera is more precise in agreeing with Fuentes on a more exuberant, more foolish baroque, as a characteristic of the novel below the thirty-fifth parallel.

Nussbaum when she says that the most difficult question is the Aristotelian one: How should one live? If we followed the traditional distinction introduced by Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen we should distinguish between philosophy in literature and philosophy through literature. The former case is substantial, because it stresses the importance of literature and it is relative to the way in which an imaginative world artistically constructed contains philosophical insights. We have two domains, and they are not commensurable, because the literary working-out of the theme is different from the philosophical one. This way, philosophy is subordinated to the purpose of fiction, and the philosophical features become an integral part of the aesthetic value of the work, partially constitutive of it.

Let us give a look at the second hypothesis. In this case, philosophy through literature: the philosophical conception needs imaginative literary forms as devices of exposition in order to gain a more effective communication. The accent is now not on the features that make this work unique, as a fundamentally different literary version of a philosophical topic, but on the philosophical purpose and its value. The aesthetic value is only contingent. According to Lamarque and Olsen this is the way Martha Nussbaum and Hilary Putnam consider those works of literature able to contribute to moral philosophy.

We meet a first problem. How can philosophy enter into the reader's appreciation of literature? We can formulate the problem in these terms: is it correct to say, as Lamarque and Olsen do, that Nussbaum and Putnam avoid the question whether the moral value of a novel is (in part) *constitutive* of its aesthetic value? I think the two questions are very similar, but not the same. We have a weak perspective, and a strong one. They say that some works are integral to moral philosophy, but Nussbaum and Putnam do not consider the opposite question, that is if the moral philosophy inside the work is constitutive of its aesthetic value. Lamarque and Olsen have a negative answer because according to them every reading has a perspective or purpose, so if it is philosophical it cannot be literary.

Another question: it seems we have a problem with the concept of 'truth'. If a work has a philosophical value, we are compromised with an evaluative view, and philosophical truth is not a standard for literary appreciation, even with literature labeled as 'realistic'. The reader could be involved in the application of general rules or facing a complex situation by discriminating between conflicting moral claims and balancing them against each other. He would always be concerned with 'getting it right'. However, we can appreciate a literary work without judging the truth of its content.

Coetzee's novels show how the problem of truth is offstage or suspended.

The thesis of the independence of literature is logically compatible with the moral value of literature. Coetzee's intention in the trilogy is to affirm a dimension for literature where there is no subordination, or, following Martin

Woessner we could say that what Coetzee's novels do not do is tell us how to live. But we should recognize that Coetzee's work proposes an embrace of a pre-reflective empathy that stands in opposition to Nussbaum's stripped-down Aristotelianism.

In order to be clear we can try to enumerate some positions in the field:

– Martha Nussbaum. She supports a larger perspective, not reducible to a Kantian one; she says:

> we are made aware that if the events in which we, as readers, participate had been described to us by a Kantian character, they would not have had the literary form they now do, and would not have constituted a novel at all. (Nussbaum 1990: 26)

So, we need to follow an Aristotelian strategy, based on the imaginative description of the facts inside a situation given by a work of art.

– Cora Diamond. She supports Nussbaum pointing to the role of imagination and improvisation to elicit the possibilities implicit in a situation. Literature is important for moral philosophy because it goes beyond the categories of 'action and choice' so as to address an individual 'texture of being'.
– Martin Woessner. He refuses Nussbaum's Aristotelian stance because we should separate philosophy from literature.
– Alice Crary. She wants a larger perspective on rationality, not a restrictive one based on argument and preserving the truth.

It may still be argued that a literary work is dependent on a moral argument because what is represented is 'exemplary', it gives us 'a pattern of real life', etc. But, as Lamarque and Olsen recognize, when a situation is represented in a literary work something new is created, with the use of rhetorical and stylistic means typical of that artistic genre. Thus, they claim:

> The situation presented by a literary work is *unrepeatable* […] and this is not merely a contingent fact. A literary work is always a representation where the mode and means of presentation constitute the nature of the situation represented. (Lamarque and Olson 1994: 395)

So, if a real situation were presented identically to one the reader might find in a book then it would invite a literary response. This seems strange if we think of how the representation of a dialogue of Plato, for example the *Symposium*, could not elicit a response only in literary terms. From their point of view our appreciation of the representation should be only on the aesthetic value, as if the specific thematic content were something else.

Lamarque and Olsen defend the uniqueness of literature. Therefore, if we translate this feature in terms of exemplarity, we define the situation as

repeatable. But then it is in need of an interpretation. If we define a situation as 'paradigmatic', that means we have found in it an exemplar value. Can we speak, in this case, of an extended text, that is, literary work plus an ethical interpretation? This involves other related problems. If we elicit the ethical meaning of a novel, is our appreciation driven just by a philosophical interest? If so, it means that we have not discharged the 'getting it right' that Lamarque and Olsen wanted to abandon. This problem is not of secondary importance. Do we have incompatible standards of appreciation? Obviously, this is based on their idea that we have just one point of view when we read a novel, or…or, a sort of cognitive limitation similar to what happens in front of an ambiguous figure.

It seems we need a way to dispense with such rigid classifications. Lamarque and Olsen claim that both in the case of the philosophy in literature and of philosophy through literature the features that contribute to its moral appreciation are partly identical to its features as a work of art. Moreover, they claim that an imaginative working-out of a philosophical theme is incommensurable with philosophical deliberation, there is not transfer of insight. But, is this the case with Coetzee's trilogy? This question can only be addressed appropriately if we now move on to demonstrate that we cannot find dead ideas in these works.

Speaking of the first two novels of the trilogy, James Ley affirms:

> More than any of his previous works, they have a contingent feel, as if the author is embellishing the sparse details of his fictional setting in an *ad hoc* manner. The conflicted and compromised author-figures that have been a feature of his novels are conspicuously absent. Neither the bureaucracy in *The Childhood of Jesus* nor the court in *The Schooldays of Jesus* have the kind of oppressive authority that Coetzee has so often and so effectively identified and dissected, in large part because they are placed [in] such an obviously arbitrary fable-like context replete with celestial imagery that, unlike the nowhere-in-particular setting of his early masterpiece *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), entertains the impossible escape fantasy of being 'washed clean' of the past. Rich and intriguing though these novels are, the potency of their philosophical arguments is, I think, somewhat diminished as a consequence. (Ley 2016)

The problem of ideas has been addressed by Coetzee in *Elizabeth Costello*:

> [R]ealism has never been comfortable with ideas. It could not be otherwise: realism is premised on the idea that ideas have no autonomous existence, can exist only in things […] ideas do not and indeed cannot float free: they are tied to the speakers by whom they are enounced, and generated from the matrix of individual interests out of which their speakers act in the world. (2003: 9)

With this in mind, we can try to answer by examining an important contribution coming from the American philosopher Robert Pippin. In his monograph dedicated to the trilogy, entitled *Metaphysical Exile*, he claims that «the three

Jesus volumes are filled with philosophy» (Pippin 2021: 6). He describes the setting of the trilogy as a world in which everyone is in exile, without memory of their homeland. The protagonist and focalizer, Simon, feels that there might be some appearance/reality distinction, that the experience of estrangement and homesickness might be mitigated or lessened by some experience, perhaps an aesthetic one. Pippin quotes Novalis: «Philosophy is really homesickness, an urge [Trieb] to be at home everywhere» (2021: 6). It is not a demand for explanation, it is rather a sort of experience. It is a search for a reconciliation with the world, an ideal fit that makes one feel the "meaning of Being", by feeling how one should live and what the world, especially the social world, makes available to one. Homesickness is balanced in Simon by a sense of beauty, but, anyway, that would happen if something would be shown, not by something being demonstrated.

Such a theme resonates with other Coetzee's novels. Even if the author is not able to give an answer to the question: 'how one ought to live', he tries to say what has gone wrong. There is a difference between an epistemological state, that we find in the skepticism of René Descartes or David Hume, and a state of being based on a sense of 'unknowingness'. It could be manifested as a sense of not knowing what we need to know to live well, and a novel can show what it would be to fail to live well.

According to Pippin, there is a sort of existential irony if you feel at loss about issues of meaning, without knowing exactly what would be to know them. But this is not the case of the inhabitants of Novilla, because only Simon seems to have a *sense* of these desiderata. Pippin thinks that the strangeness of the historical situation we live in and the lack of consensus on many issues are what is evoked in the novel, and that is the natural condition of philosophy, always animated by wonder. Pippin proposes an allegorical setting: a premise the implications of which do not simply follow, that are not directly implied by such a premise. These implications are continually novel and unexpected in ways that demand philosophical reflection, not just a location in what is presumed to be the 'real' analogue of a philosophical idea. But how can we avoid Attridge's worries about allegorical readings of Coetzee? The trilogy is an allegory in this sense, as an exploration of experiences. It is a version of our personal setting, but that does not resolve anything. There is no message, so there is no allegory. We should also avoid treating the setting as a 'thought experiment' in philosophy, an artificially constructed situation meant to highlight some universal principle behind one or another possible decision, and then to test our intuitions about how the case should be decided. The primary issues are meaning, mattering, significance, and achieving some clarity about these will not be a matter of discovering some universal discursive thesis that can be applied in all cases. That would be useless, as moral idealism is (it would be a lie, as Robert Musil calls moral idealism). A setting allows us to understand the

major questions that arise in the novels. The first question Simon must face is "How ought one live?". Thus, Coetzee fits perfectly into the current intellectual ethical debate on cognitive virtues. Forgetfulness might just figure a lack of concern for either who we are, or who we have become. As Pippin claims «It is a figure for thoughtlessness, intellectual lassitude, an *unwillingness* "to remember"» (2021: 16).

These examples support a sort of independence of literature from philosophy. Coetzee made the point in 1988 in *The Novel Today*, saying that the fact that literature can have a bearing on issues also of importance to philosophy, especially questions of morality and politics, does not at all mean that it is a mere supplement to philosophy. It can have such a bearing even if it is in many respects a rival to philosophy. We can formulate this in terms of a special status of a literary work, its proper 'misunderstanding'. This clearly emerges if we consider the thesis of moral knowledge of literature. We can find some limits for a full understanding of a moral problem. According to Alice Crary, a skeptical about the wider conception of rationality could allow that a reading of a work of literature may invite us sound moral thought through an emotional engagement, but he/she might not concede that actually it is inviting such thoughts, because it is not warranted and we may not be justified in representing it in this way. A variant of it is offered by Lamarque and Olsen. A supporter of a moral reading of literature, they say, may fail to make a distinction between recognizing a conception of a situation and adopting that conception. A literary work realizes a conception of reality based on a subjective experience, but a reader is not constrained to adopt it. We could run to enrichment of our concepts but this doesn't mean we necessarily adopt that view. Reading does not require the reader to intend the work as requiring to modify his concepts. There is no demand to adopt the authorial perspective. In the case of Coetzee, he does not tell us how to live. The way of living is the way of love. Coetzee tries to transcend the ethical limitations of philosophy. As Derek Attridge says, Coetzee's works demonstrate that

> the impulses and acts that shape our lives as ethical beings – impulses and acts of respect, of love, of trust, of generosity – cannot be adequately represented in the discourses of philosophy, politics, or theology, but are in their natural element in literature. (Attridge 2004: xi)

Unfortunately, misunderstanding is always around the corner. It comes down that Crary is concerned just with a defense of a meliorative reading of the intentions behind Coetzee's novels, losing the opportunity to see the accusatory intent of Coetzee versus the failure of western rationality. For example, looking for a wide rationality in the novel *Disgrace,* Crary claims that the novel invites us to engage with the protagonist, so it intends to produce insights in us. We can

so better understand what is lost on David, even if at the end of the novel he starts to discern something. Crary is here affirming her idea that the novel must make us understand the right route, what is the best according to the author. But I think this is a perfect way to misunderstand him. The same with the other examples that follow in her analysis. About the animals she says that we are encouraged to sympathize with the feeling of vulnerability that led David to identify with animals and at the same time to acknowledge these identifications as just and appropriate. We can concede that the novel makes us reach a better grasp than the protagonist, David, of situations and natural and political forces beyond his control, so we are equipped with an image clearer than David's. Crary quotes the passage in *Disgrace* where David and Lucy cannot talk rationally «because of who you are and who I am» (Coetzee 1999: 155), as Lucy says. Does this mean that David should abandon the rational side? Rationality and truth are cognate concepts, but in different places Coetzee seems to associate truth and coercion. Crary adds that «the novel as a whole positions us to recognise Lucy as in the right in this instance» (Crary 2010: 264). This is untenable, otherwise we should support the idea, as Crary does, that Lucy's decision to remain there and give birth to the fruit of a brutal rape is reasonable and justifiable. It emerges an obvious and strong ameliorative perspective. I believe moralism as idealism finds strong opponents both in Musil and in Coetzee.

Literature as Subversive Juridicity

In *The Childhood of Jesus* the child David has a problem with rules. A good reader could think this is a typical feature of great literature. Think, for instance, of the way Jacques Derrida considers Franz Kafka's *The Trial*. Like the man from the country, literature stands before the law. It attempts to access it through a door that is wholly unique, ever hoping for a glimpse of its splendor. Literature always does something other to the law. Patrick Hayes says literature has the potential to make otherness felt by interrupting the law in the act of serving it — by saying 'not yet' to its decision upon the truth of the matter. Derrida uses the words *joue la loi*. With this we mean both 'playing at being the law' and 'deceiving the law'. He explains how literature brings about a state of subversive juridicity:

> Under certain linguistic conditions, literature can exercise the legislative power of linguistic performativity to sidestep existing laws […]. This is owing to the referential equivocation of certain linguistic structures. Under these conditions literature can *play the law*, repeating it while diverting or circumventing it. (Derrida 1992: 216)

I think literature adopts more than simple referential equivocation in order to play the rule[2]. Literature is a normative concept, as Pascal Engel recognizes, but we need a sort of imaginative understanding in order to consider a number of beliefs, many of these may be true, with cognitive value. This work of linguistic juridicity, with the help of the work of imagination, can enhance our cognitive powers. This subject has been central in Kendal Walton's book, *Mimesis as Make-Believe*. In his words:

> Imagining from the inside will be central. Such self-imaginings are crucial component of our imaginative experiences […] It's when I imagine *myself* in another's shoes that my imagination helps me to understand *him*. Such imaginative understanding may be what has been called *Verstehen*. And when I imagine this I also learn about myself. (Walton 1990: 34)

And:

> Promoting understanding is arguably the primary objective of many paradigmatic works of fiction, including ones in which no unusual efforts are made to get the particulars right. *Great* fiction may go for *Verstehen*, lesser though still paradigmatically fictional works may settle for imparting information. (94)

We can take an example. Theodor Fontane's *Effi Briest*, as Nussbaum acknowledges in her *Upheavals of Thought*, is an example of a fatal mistake because it represents, as Nussbaum says, «what is wrong with bringing people up to live by rules alone rather than by a combination of rules with love and imagination» (Nussbaum 2001: 390). The young Effi is given in marriage to an older man, who is unable to conceive marriage in a different way from that of codes of conduct of the society in which they live. After she betrays him, without that excess of aspirations which characterize Emma Bovary, the husband will make amends with a duel. This is followed by the death of his opponent and the estrangement of his wife. In all this the author does not ask the readers to sympathize with the young woman and to perceive the limits of unconditional adherence to codes of honor and duty. As Jean-Baptiste Mathieu suggests (2007: 101), if the husband had accepted the perspective that the reader develops on Effi, sympathizing with her, thus avoiding making accidental adultery a fatal episode, then their love would take a more meaningful natural course.

Thus, emotion, imagination, and change of judgment are part of a perspective that naturally calls into question the concept of rule. With this we come inside the perspective developed by Coetzee in the trilogy. Here I follow the way Stephen Mulhall develops the concept of rule in Coetzee's works. In his book on the trilogy, *In Other Words*, Mulhall describes what is perhaps the most widely noted sequence in *The Childhood of Jesus,* where the young protagonist David

2 See Carola Barbero (2023).

shows himself to be a literary embodiment of Ludwig Wittgenstein's deviant pupil. Probably Coetzee is following this argument very closely.

David refuses Simon's idea of an endless sequence of rightly related numbers.

> David: I know all the numbers. Do you want to hear them? I know 134 and I know 7 and I know…
>
> Simon: Stop! That's not knowing the numbers, David. Knowing the numbers means being able to count. It means knowing the order of the numbers – which numbers come before and which come after […] which of the two is bigger, 888 or 889?
>
> David: 888.
>
> Simon: Wrong. 889 is bigger because 889 comes after 888.
>
> David: How do you know? You have never been there.
>
> (Coetzee 2013: 145)

Wittgenstein's solution is that what makes a given step the right one to take is conformity to the way a community is inclined to go on. There is no standard of correctness external to our form of life, so we have just the way a community draws it, and this means that teaching is a matter of bringing the child into conformity with that communal practice. This is the argument against a private language. We know Wittgenstein refers to the concept of form of life:

> How I am to follow a rule? If this is not a question about causes, then it's about the justification for my acting in this way in complying with the rule. Once I have exhausted the justification, I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: This is simply what I do. (1953: 217)

We might find it strange that in *The Blue and Brown Books* Wittgenstein says: «If a child does not respond to the suggestive gesture [to the teacher's indications of how to go on], it is separated from the others and treated as a lunatic» (1958: 93). However, this might simply mean that if the child does not understand, we should enforce conformity. Maybe telling him 'you simply must do exactly what I am inclined to do'? This reading takes Wittgenstein's passage literally, failing to hear its Swiftian tones, its irony. There is not an order but something like 'this is what I do, this is the way I and my fellow grown-ups do things, will you take me as an example you are willing to follow?' But the teacher actually is limiting himself to show rather than tell, because his actions are embodiment of certain possibilities adopted by the community. Such a non-coercive pedagogy is an exemplification that explanation and justification may run out, and in these cases

teacher and pupils share a repertoire of natural reactions, the kind that makes our interaction possible. Put otherwise, the normative is embedded in, and so dependent on, the natural, human nature; so what we call 'deviance' is a manifestation of differences, something natural. This could reshape our authority as adults who care about bringing the youths into their form of life.

In *The Childhood of Jesus* these two models are embodied respectively by the schoolteacher, Señor Leon, who reacts sending the young David to exile to the remedial school. By contrast, Simon slowly has a sort of redemption, which involves a willingness to acknowledge the possibility that David's perspective embodies an alternative way of making sense of things. David feels an exceptional sensitivity to the sheer individuality of every particular thing he encounters. This is the reason why he refuses to consider singular numbers inside an indefinite sequence. Simon reveals the real question when speaking about numbers and cracks and David's fear to fall, and keeping falling forever, he says 'if getting from one to two is so hard, I asked myself, how shall I ever get from zero to one? From nowhere to somewhere?' The step does not require a miracle each time, but represents the step into the conceptual system of numbers, and a step into orientation by any conceptual system of thought.

This drives us to the private language argument. David is complaining about having to speak Spanish all the time, and declares that he wants to speak his own language, starting enunciating nonsense syllables. Then something interesting happens. Simon looks into the boy's eyes:

> He sees something there. He has no name for it. *It is like* – that is what occurs to him in the moment. Like a fish that wriggles loose as you try to grasp it. But not like a fish – no, like *like a fish*. Or like *like like a fish*. On and on. (Coetzee 2013: 186)

The emphasis is not on the fish, the recursivity returns the emphasis to the idea of likeness as such rather than to any particular likeness. This suggests that meaning in general is a matter of relations of likeness, that word meaning is constructed from the perception of similarity rather than identity. Simon's image of the fish invites us to consider alternatives to the concept of grasping experience conceptually. However, prior is the idea of likeness that invites us to consider a non-grasping interpretation of experience, in this way we could save David's desire for individuality without having to sacrifice the idea of mutual intelligibility, in a sort of compromise à la Nietzsche. Their personal experience of moving close to the other's position makes us understand how deep and significant is the reframing of what mutual intelligibility really is like. Understanding another's words can be elusive but not ungraspable, it can be regarded as a kind of Keatsian negative capability: as a 'willingness to dwell in uncertainties', mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact and reason. So, we can recognize with Mulhall that Coetzee and Wittgenstein agree:

we should be careful about the real characteristics of human communication, but also about the ways in which fantasies of privacy and publicity shadow those characteristics. These fantasies sometimes allow us to outwit our individual responsibilities, by putting our unknownness to others and our knowness by them beyond our control.

Mulhall's interpretation of Wittgenstein is mediated by Stanley Cavell's critique of Malcolm's one. Cavell refused to read Wittgenstein's thesis against a private language as a substantial perspective a priori avoiding any deviation from the rule. This led Cavell to suggest that our relations to 'other minds' are better understood not in terms of knowledge but of acknowledgement. To withhold the concept of acknowledgement is just to withhold the concept of interpersonal relationship, and hence to withhold the concept of a person, also as experiencing subject. Malcolm is refuting to imaginatively inhabit the skeptical interlocutor's perspective. He is lacking a willingness to see how his interlocutor might get himself into the grip of a conviction that there is an intelligible possibility here, when ultimately there is no such a thing. I think that Cavell is right in saying that we feel a sort of metaphysical finitude (very close to 'exile' in Pippin's words), a separateness. A philosopher should give expressions to such feelings. You can dismiss others because they refuse to give up giving sense to a shared world in a proper linguistic way. This is the way Cavell reads Malcolm's interpretation of the private language argument. Otherwise you can try to bestow on others a kind of unknowingness, and at the same time let your own one to have voice. Unknowledgment is the key term. It gives form to the demand of openness that needs to be addressed when doing philosophy. Coetzee uses literature as an alternative, to take care of openness, as a condition to let otherness be a natural component of human life. Cavell highlights this aspect when he says that we recognize to poets the capacity to give sensible aspects to feelings and remote aspects of experience:

> A natural fact underlying the philosophical problem of privacy is that the individual will take *certain* among his experiences to represent his *own* mind — certain particular sins or shames or surprises of joy — and then take his mind (his self) to be unknown so far as *those* experiences are unknown. There is a natural problem of *making* such experiences known, not merely because behaviour as a whole may seem irrelevant (or too dumb, or gross) at such times, but because one hasn't forms of words at one's command to release those feelings, and hasn't anyone else whose interest in helping to find the words one trusts (someone would have to *have* those feelings to know what I feel). Here is a source of our gratitude to poetry. (Cavell 1976: 253)

Can we address these regions of the mind's life using ordinary language and philosophical arguments? Is it possible to refer directly to the other's unknowingness in virtue of our experience? Here I think the image of Keats

is appropriate. Philosophy gives voice to uncertainty and keeps exploring the extension of intellectual lack. In order to put new dimensions of human mind under scrutiny, philosophy needs the imaginative explorations from literature. Before starting its conceptual work it needs to meet reality as it is experienced and shared by humans. The problem is not to look for a piece of evidence able to disconfirm a conceptual claim. That could be a hopeless enterprise (maybe for the same reason according to which the sceptic says that evidence is and is not support for a claim of knowledge). The worry is about which kind of ground, if any, can supply a sufficient solidity and reliability, in order to start up a conceptual work. When dealing with such topics as privacy, communality, other minds, etc., it could be reasonable to recur to a wide, but sufficiently determinate, concept of nature.

We started this section with a plea for a sort of empathetic imagination when reading literature. What we seek is not just information but meaning. Obviously, as Iris Murdoch teaches, simply gaining conceptual clarity is not enough. Above we saw that meaning is not a matter of identity and rule-following, but of likeness, similarity. There is a cognitivist tradition that downsizes the role of grammatical rules as a tool to respond to the request for meanings. According to Colin McGinn there is not creativity in a linguistic competence if:

> One is thinking of linguistic understanding as some kind of syntactic symbol-crunching, a mere following of rules of grammatical construction […]. So understanding is memory plus imagination — memory of what words conventionally mean, and imagination of what possibility the sentence represents. This second component will be constant across languages. We all have to perform the act of imagining the possibility that snow is black in understanding a sentence that means that snow is black, despite the variations in the way this is conventionally expressed. (McGinn 2004: 150)

When talking of *Verstehen* we should think about content, about meaning. Coetzee has accustomed us to a literature that requires reflection and a continuous work of the sympathetic imagination. Philosophy has often constructed representations of reality according to the order of reason or with the mediation of a possible natural mental equipment. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, to name only the most well-known, did not believe that reality could understand itself. Coetzee's literature continues, on a modal because imaginative level, this effort to construct human models of reality starting from human concerns and interests. As Pippin says:

> It's a common non sequitur to think that because the world is intelligible only as imagined or represented that the world, the one we must content ourselves with, consists in imaginings and representings. Rather, it is the conception of a so-called reality from which these meaning-making efforts have been 'subtracted'

> that is fictional, even delusional. It is also much more artificial and constructed a conception of the real, and not at all 'genuine'. (Pippin 2021: 61-62)

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