RESTORING MADNESS TO HISTORY IN J.M. COETZEE’S IN THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

WILLIAM COLLINS

“The indifference of South African historiography to the question of madness […] should arouse nothing but mistrust, and make us redouble rather than abate our efforts to call up and interrogate the demons of the past.”

—J.M. Coetzee (Giving Offense 164)

In spite of Magda’s repeated descriptions of herself as “mad” (8; 10; 79; 123; 124; 125), “melancholy” (3; 7), “crazed” and “crazy” (50; 6; 138), the question of madness receives less than satisfactory attention in the critical landscape surrounding J.M. Coetzee’s In the Heart of the Country. One might first attribute such lack of attention to the relatively obscure place Heart occupies in Coetzee’s oeuvre. It is only his second novel, appearing just before the international readership garnered by Waiting for the Barbarians, and even amongst the likes of The Life & Times of Michael K with its inscrutable title character and Diary of a Bad Year with its multigeneric and multivocal textual apparatus, Heart presents to its readers unparalleled hermeneutic difficulties, several of which I outline below. Perhaps more tellingly, and more germanely to the interests of this essay, Heart’s relationship with its cultural moment remains difficult to formulate. Because literary production and reception under apartheid in South Africa were overdetermined by—from one part of the political spectrum—rigorous censorship legislation, and—from another—an expectation that literature should respond transparently to its cultural moment, much Coetzee criticism seeks to gauge how and how adequately his novels constitute a response to the exigencies of his historical milieu. Variously articulating the pertinence of Coetzee’s novels to their cultural moment as “situational metafiction” (Attwell 3), “middle-voice writing” (Macaskill 466), and “stag[ings] of otherness” (Attridge xii), critics effectively demonstrate that,
despite his self-consciously oblique and erudite narrative praxis, Coetzee’s work does manifest a thoroughgoing critique of not only South African apartheid, but also of the larger genus of political hegemony to which apartheid belongs.

Although I find occasion to quibble with him later in this essay, I wholeheartedly share Derek Attridge’s faith in the vast reinterpretive potential of Coetzee’s work, and likewise endorse “an engagement with the text that recognizes, and capitalizes on, its potential for reinterpretation, for grafting into new contexts, for fission and fusion” (10). In pursuit of this potential for reinterpretation, I read Coetzee’s Heart through the as yet neglected lens of madness. Because of the novel’s singular interpretive challenges, and because of its affinities with the novels of Samuel Beckett, I turn to Coetzee’s scholarship on Beckett for two conceptual tools with which to engage the text: Heidegger’s concept of Geworfenheit, and the Beckettian self-negating fiction of net zero. Using these tools, I observe that Magda negotiates the unclear rules of her existence by inhabiting and casting aside, in the style of a hermit crab, various literary tropes. Having thus provided some strategies for apprehending the text, I work toward outlining the semantic and rhetorical range of madness in Coetzee’s lexicon via an intertextual examination of his fiction and scholarship. What emerges from this reading is a vision of madness with distinct yet mutually implicated poles: on the one hand, madness as a contagious force moving throughout a social body and, on the other hand, madness as the experience of the labour of writing, especially that writing conducted under the threat of illegibility, a threat conditioned at least in part by the madness of the social body. Further, madness occupies a curious position with regard to history, figuring prominently in it while also evading or distorting it, a curiosity perhaps implicated in, caused by, or otherwise symptomatic of the resistance of madness to definition.

I

Following and at times parodying the South African plaasroman, Heart depicts a pastoral drama staged between Magda, a lonely “spinster with a locked diary” (3), her unnamed father and master of the farm (from whose mouth “echoes and echoes his eternal NO” [16]), and several servants (early in the novel, Jakob and Ou-Anna, but later and more principally, Hendrik and Klein-Anna). The central events of the novel—insofar as some agreement can be reached concerning what here constitutes an event—are the father’s marriage (quickly annulled, so to speak), Hendrik’s marriage, the father’s affair with Hendrik’s young bride, the impossibly multiple deaths of the father, Hendrik’s rape or numerous repeated violations of Magda, the servants’ departure from the
farm, flying machines possibly visiting the veld over which they perhaps voice cryptic aphorisms from the Western philosophical tradition, and Magda’s eventual isolation. More or less written or at least ostensibly verbalized by Magda, the text presents itself in 266 numbered sections, some as short as a sentence, others a few pages long, but most the length of a substantial paragraph. The numerical mediation of the text functions, according to Coetzee, “as a way of pointing to what is not there between” the sections: “the kind of scene-setting and connective tissue that the traditional novel used to find necessary—particularly the South African novel of rural life that In the Heart of the Country takes off from” (Doubling 59–60). Amongst that which is “not there” in the gaps between narrative sections, and so amongst that now missing material which “the traditional novel used to find necessary,” is coherence in its most mundane sense: while Magda’s self-effacing tone and philosophical rigor remain constant, the narrative at times jumps without transition from event to event, and at other times backtracks and retells events from a different and even conflicting perspective. At the end of Heart, readers may have powerfully real impressions of certain events having transpired, yet no reading of the novel can determine which events are or were “real” without giving priority to one of two or more conflicting episodes.

Perhaps more saturated with doubt than any of Coetzee’s other narrators, Magda and her “stony monologue” (12) evoke the work of Samuel Beckett, and in particular those aspects of Beckett’s writing illuminated by Coetzee’s own scholarly reflections on Beckett’s work. Himself following after Roland Barthes on this point, Coetzee in Doubling the Point somewhat ironically asserts that “The art of Samuel Beckett has become an art of zero, as we all know. We also know that an art of zero is impossible”; yet Beckett achieves “a fiction of net zero” by dramatizing “an incapacity to affirm and an inability to be silent” (43–44). In The Unnamable, this fiction of net zero takes the form of “phrase-by-phrase self-creation and self-negation” where each positive statement receives, if not full negation, then at least some annulling, minimizing, questioning, or qualifying statement (44). For example, the following passage—which auto-characterizes itself as a “bad example”—effaces itself thoroughly and more clearly than some of the other passages in which patterns of assertion and annulment span pages:

For example, to begin with, his breathing. There he is now with breath in his nostrils, it only remains for him to suffocate. The thorax rises and falls, the wear and tear are in full spring, the rot spreads downwards, soon he’ll have legs, the possibility of crawling. More lies, he doesn’t breathe yet, he’ll never breathe. Then what is this faint noise, as of air
stealthily stirred, recalling the breath of life, to those whom it corrodes? It’s a bad example. (Beckett 355)

The voice’s example asserts the breathing of an unnamed individual, denounces that assertion as “More lies,” and then decries itself as a “bad example.” One pattern of affirmation and negation enfolds another. The voice carries out this practice ad nauseum because it knows, as much as its unstable epistemology allows it to know anything, that it must never lapse into silence; it “must go on […] must say words, as long as there are any” (414). The art of “net zero” might not be the impossible art of pure zero, but its enactment nonetheless provides ample ground for the kind of philosophically inflected despair and delight so characteristic of Beckett’s work.

One such aspect of Beckett’s fiction Coetzee identifies and Magda embodies is “well described by Heidegger’s term Geworfenheit: being thrown without explanation into an existence governed by obscure rules” (Inner Workings 171). Magda “live[s] neither alone nor in society” (Heart 7), and feels herself to be “on the road from no A to no B in the world” (19). She cannot grope her way through dialogue like that which flows between Hendrik and her father, “so unruffled, so serene, so full of common purpose,” so unlike her own “torment of And next? And next?” (21). “[A] hole crying to be whole” (41), she “want[s] [her] story to have a beginning, a middle, and an end” (42), but perhaps because “Lyric is [her] medium, not chronicle” (71), she fears that “there is no past or future, that the medium [she] live[s] in is an eternal present” (116). Her words “come from nowhere and go nowhere, they have no past or future, they whistle across flats in a desolate eternal present, feeding no one” (115). David Attwell astutely describes her as the earliest example of a recurring character type in Coetzee’s oeuvre he calls the “displaced subject,” who “is not one of the primary agents of colonization but who lives in the conditions created by such agents, and who endures the subjectivity this position entails” (56). One by one, the conditions structuring Magda’s life come undone until, at the end of the novel, she is alone in the shell of the farm, no closer to answering the questions consuming her consciousness than when her father in the beginning pages first came clip-clopping across the flats.

Although Coetzee affords Magda a more fully realized environment and narrative than Beckett does for most of his narrating and writerly protagonists, she, or at least her discourse, also follows Beckettian self-annulling patterns: from the level of syntax and even etymology to the level of narrative episodes at large. Speculating, for instance, on her own origins, she claims to “extract a faint grey image” of her mother from “one of the farthest oubliettes of memory,” yet oubliette—a place where something is thrown (geworfen) in
order to be forgotten—clearly derives from the French *oublier*, “to forget,” and so preemptively invalidates this already tenuous “memory” (2). Surely enough, she concedes in the next clause that her image of a mother is precisely “one such as any girl in [her] position would be likely to make up for herself” (2).

The opening lines of the novel showcase a larger episodic instance of self-negation especially disorienting for first-time readers. “Today my father brought home his new bride,” claims Magda: “They came clip-clop across the flats in a dog-cart drawn by a horse with an ostrich-plume waving on its forehead, dusty after the long haul” (1). Yet Magda immediately—in the very next sentence—casts doubt upon the second of these sentences: “Or perhaps they were drawn by two plumed donkeys, that is also possible […] I was not watching” (1). Her further negation or revision of the first sentence reportage of what *she was not watching* comes many pages later, after a possibly imagined parricide, when it turns out that her father “does not die so easily after all” (16), and also that it was not or might not have been her father, but Hendrik, a servant, who “Six months ago […] brought home his new bride” (17). As a strategy for apprehending conflicting narrative sequences in *Heart*, Derek Attridge observes a “corrective rhythm” in Magda’s incompatible accounts, where she relates “first a fantasized version that comes to an abrupt halt, then a more grounded one that carries the narrative on to the next stage” without quite constituting a solution sufficient “to restore our faith in the realism of the narrative” (28). One might extend Attridge’s observation by making clear that, while the narrative action appears to follow from the second of two alternatives, the first is negated only in action but not in psyche; that is, for Magda’s consciousness, the second narrative is not corrective but palimpsestic.

In an effort to find her bearings in this antipastoral world governed by obscure rules, Magda inhabits literary tropes, follows alongside them for a time, then either casts them aside or is cast aside by them, not unlike “the hermit crab” she puts forward as an image of herself, “migrat[ing] from one empty shell to another” (43). In this way the Beckettian pattern of affirmation and negation extends itself to narrative structure and identity. In an early and rather self-contained example, constituting the whole of section thirteen, Magda imagines an iconic caretaker: “The Angel, that is how she is sometimes known, The Angel in Black who comes to save the children of the brown folk from their croups and fevers” (5). This caretaker “sits up with whimpering children

---

1 As a clear example, after Magda kills her father the first time, but he reappears riding “in out of the sunset” (16), her “heart leaps at this second chance, but [she] move[s] demurely, she bow[s] [her] head” (17). Although neither her father nor anyone else has any recollection of her first patricide, she behaves as if still chastened by it, or chastened simply, and as usual, by her father’s authority.
or women in labour” and “lighten[s] the last hours of the wounded” (5). This vignette is immediately preceded, at the end of section twelve, by aphorisms on identity: “I am I. Character is destiny. History is God” (5). Readers may want to interpret the Angel as Magda’s fantastical image of herself, yet “what is not there between” sections twelve and thirteen suspends the interpretation invited by their juxtaposition, and section fourteen carries on from section twelve as if section thirteen were not there. A reading and an identity are presented, but the mode of their presentation renders them void.

Having sloughed off the carapace of seemingly beneficent Angel, Magda—now an angel of death—kills her father (for the first time), along with his new bride who perhaps later turns out to have been imagined, and decides to commit suicide, opining that “Of all adventures suicide is the most literary, more so even than murder” (13). No sooner does she “dive for the abyss” than “the elegiac trance passes and all the rest is cold, wet and farcical” (13). Mediated in markedly literary terms, this episode showcases quite clearly the process visible also elsewhere in the narrative by means of which Magda seizes upon a narrative formula, here the romantic suicide, and thereafter rejects it or is rejected by it. Such episodes highlight Magda’s inability to fit certain narrative identities, a constant which is of a piece with her inability to fit into the pastoral social structure generally, contributing to what Coetzee might call her sense of Geworfenheit.

Magda goes on to inhabit several other tropes, like those of Cinderella (132) and Narcissus (134), but proceeds to cast these and other literary associations aside, as before. Madness, itself a trope with a rich and varied literary history, Magda consistently evokes—as in the above-cited descriptions of herself—even as she neither affirms nor denies madness as the state of her being. In her bedroom she is “the mad hag” she is “destined to be” (8), “crazed with loneliness” (50), and she has a “mind mad enough for parricide and pseudo-matricide” (10); yet much of her discourse reads so much like a masterful exercise of reason. Her mind works “clearly […] like the mind of a machine” (15), she has “meditations that would do credit to a thinker” (41), and she wonders: “How can I be deluded when I think so clearly?” (126). Committing herself neither to nor against it, Magda at least has a relationship with madness; it animates her discourse, it accounts for the instability of the narrative, and—in its historio-political aspect—it describes the cruelties of the radically asymmetrical power relations of a more or less colonial South Africa. But before determining more clearly Magda’s relationship with madness, and before making further suggestions about the relative dearth of trenchant criticism regarding Magda and (her?) madness, a working definition of madness
will be necessary, best gleaned, I believe, by attending to citations of its lexical variants from Coetzee’s fiction and scholarship.

2

The epigraph for this essay comes from “Apartheid Thinking,” Coetzee’s reading of apartheid architect Geoffrey Cronjé’s writings on race relations in South Africa, racial purity amongst the Afrikanervolk, and social policy for eventuating state segregation of racial groups. Excerpted in epigraph above, the full paragraph runs:

The notion I will explore here is that the men who invented and installed apartheid—or at least some of the men, some of the time—were possessed by demons. Pinning the blame for apartheid on demons is, I realize, pinning it nowhere at all. Nevertheless, if madness has a place in life, it has a place in history too. The indifference of South African historiography to the question of madness, and the tacit consensus in the social sciences that while madness—like what used to be called the “illegal Bantu”—may be conceded to have a place in society, this is ontologically a place apart, a nonplace that does not entitle madness to a part in history, should arouse nothing but mistrust, and make us redouble rather than abate our efforts to call up and interrogate the demons of the past. (164)

Coetzee hereafter specifies that his concern lies “less with Geoffrey Cronjé himself” than “with [Cronjé’s] madness, and with the question of how madness spreads itself or is made to spread through a social body,” and “More generally […] with the reinsertion of madness into history” (165). Coetzee poses his analysis against accounts of apartheid that deem it “a by no means irrational response to social developments which threatened the expectations of Afrikaners and the privilege of white South Africans in general” (163). According to such a view, apartheid was rational because it perpetuated extant segregationist practices and it served white material interests. Coetzee madly responds by following (in and by way of a reading) apartheid’s “heart-speech of autobiography and confession” (164): Coetzee follows, in and by reading, Cronjé’s obsession with the threat of mixture and his difficulty in accounting for desire across racial boundaries, and thus he—Coetzee—arrives eventually at the disconcerting conclusion that the aversion toward black bodies at the heart of the thought underpinning apartheid legislation spreads contagiously and indefinitely via metaphor and metonymy, and that, while we can read racism, “we are in no position to eradicate it, not only because it has no root (no ‘ultimate’ root), but because a reading position is not a position at all: it is what
I can only call a following” (184). For Coetzee, madness here denotes a potent social force capable of effecting historical change, one which any history of apartheid should take into account.

Coetzee does not consider himself exempt from the contaminating force of madness: not the racist variety of madness inflicting “the electorate that bought the package offered by Cronjé and his friends” (183), but the contagion of madness engendered nonetheless by the workings of apartheid. Elucidating another aspect of apartheid’s madness, this time in “Emerging from Censorship” (also collected in Giving Offense), Coetzee describes how the paranoia that motivates state censorship practices can “spread from above to infect the whole of the populace” (34), including “writers themselves under censorship” who “Time and again record the feeling of being touched and contaminated by the sickness of the state” (35). “The paranoia is there, on the inside, in their language,” writes Coetzee (36). In a characteristically confessional move of autobiographical “heart-speech,” he admits: “In the excessive immediacy of its phrasing, its vehemence, its demand for sensitivity to minutiae of style, its overreading and overwriting, I detect in my own language the very pathology I discuss” (37). Writing during the heyday of apartheid, in “the repressive political climate of the post-Soweto period” when the narrow-minded, bureaucratic Judge Lammie Snyman chaired the Publications Control Board, Coetzee arguably never had the figure of the censor more in mind than when he was preparing Heart, as Hermann Wittenberg demonstrates in his reading of Coetzee’s correspondence from this period (134–136). The pathology Coetzee associates with state censorship thus contributes a particularly biting, personal layer to the already multivalent madness of and in the heart of the country, in and of In the Heart of the Country.

Despite the centrality of madness to Coetzee’s thought on apartheid and its censorship practices, and despite his own above-cited celebration of the reinterpreative potential of Coetzee’s work, Derek Attridge makes an overly facile (Foucault might call it Cartesian) dismissal of madness as it animates Heart. “Fantasy or mental disorder on Magda’s part seems out of the question now,” he writes, “as there is no suggestion that she could have read Hegel, Blake, Pascal, Spinoza, and Rousseau” (25). Attridge makes his assessment in the context of deciding if the flying machines Magda sees near the end of the novel, which speak “a Spanish of pure meanings such as might be dreamed of by the philosophers” (Heart 126), actually visit the veld, or if they are mere

---

2 Macaskill and Colleran follow at some length Coetzee’s troping of reading and racism in “Interfering with ‘The Mind of Apartheid.’”
illusions or fantasies she conjures up. Firstly, not having read Blake does not stop Magda from quoting and alluding to him—long before the arrival of the flying machines—when she claims that she “struggle[s] with the proverbs of hell” (126). The proverbs of hell, out of which emerges Magda’s claim—verbatim albeit uncited—that “Energy is eternal delight” (101), come from Blake’s *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, as do other tropes from the novel, such as Magda’s preoccupation with “contraries.” Secondly, even if the echoes of the other Western thinkers unavailable to Magda could serve as a useful heuristic for establishing the exteriority of those flying machines to her imagination, their existence would not preclude her madness or at least her relationship with madness. If readers take too seriously the issue of madness, Attridge believes “the novel loses any grip on the real, and thus much of its narrative drive and engagement with the very real issues of family, gender, racial, and master-servant relations” (24). In other words, Attridge chooses to stabilize the narrative by controlling for madness in order to ease his approach to other thematic concerns. Readers should “assume, as [they] normally do in reading fiction,” Attridge claims, “that the words are to be taken as referring to real events unless there is good reason […] to take them as the outcome of fantasy or psychological derangement” (24); yet Coetzee himself writes to Clive Levinson, who wanted to adapt the novel for film, that “in fact it turns out at the end that nothing, or very little,” in the novel, “has been trustworthy” (qtd. in Kannemeyer 314). In an otherwise formidable reading, Attridge’s dismissal of madness constitutes the blindness that allows for his insights.

The impulse behind Attridge’s dismissal of madness provides a first clue toward explaining the absence of madness from criticism of *Heart*, and perhaps begins to explain also the “nonplace” to which madness, according to Coetzee, is relegated in South African historiography. Bracketing madness and its destabilizing effects on exegesis allows for more immediate engagement with those more transparently political, cultural, and historical concerns—those ‘very real issues’—which Coetzee’s earliest critics took him to task for not approaching more directly. Those earliest criticisms are by now well documented. David Attwell recalls the consensus in the mid-1980s amongst the South African Left that “Coetzee was a philosophical idealist whose fiction graphically portrayed the breakup of the dominating, rationalist subject of colonialism but who offered […] neither an analysis of the play of historical forces nor a moral anchor in the search for a humane response to colonialism and apartheid” (1). Similarly, Brian Macaskill pits Coetzee’s argument for the novel as “rival” rather than “supplement” to history against those who “find the ‘agency’ or ‘instrumentality’ of Coetzee’s writing inadequate to the demands of South Africa’s sociohistorical structure and associate this inadequacy with the
self-consciously postmodern literary structure of his narratives” (444). Although Attridge can be counted in the front rank of critics who attend to the “challenge” in Coetzee’s fiction “that goes to the heart of the ethical and political” (12), the cost of such approaches has been, for Heart and for other entries in Coetzee’s oeuvre, the denial, dismissal, or minimization of madness and of other issues whose political engagement is not immediately apparent.

Alternatively, some of the resistance to defining the role of madness in Heart may be implicated in the word’s resistance to definition in general. The lemmata for mad, its adjectival form, summon in the Oxford English Dictionary nine definitions, each with several sub-definitions, dozens of phrases and hyphenated usages, and citations reaching back through Chaucer and beyond to the eighth century Corpus Gloss (mād and gemād). One may be mad about, after, for, of, on, over, upon, and with something; or be as mad as Ajax, as a brush, as a goose, as a hatter, as a meat axe, as a wet hen; one may be mad-blooded, -humoured, -mooded, or -pated. Yet despite its vast semantic range, madness in Coetzee’s fiction and scholarship consistently and meaningfully denotes, on the one hand, a contagious force moving throughout a social body, and on the other, the labour of writing, particularly under the threat of illegibility. These discernibly separate poles of meaning are also implicated in one another, complicit with one another; the madness of writing under the threat of illegibility appears precisely under and as a result of the wider, contagious madness of the active social body: that is, a madness which all too often constitutes history and distorts or interferes with the historical record. A survey of Coetzee’s fiction turns up the strikingly specific recurrence of a writing subject who, embattled from without by personal circumstance and by madness in its historical scope, struggles to translate faithfully such madness into writing, who labours as the conduit of madness, infected by that which he or she seeks to express. Though Coetzee’s oeuvre provides numerous examples of such figures, I limit my focus to two exemplary novels below. The first, Age of Iron, persistently foregrounds the issue of madness, and ties it clearly to writing and to the turbulence of history. Madness figures less predominantly, or at least less often as a signifier, in the second novel I examine, Waiting for the Barbarians, but when it does appear, it demonstrates how the tension between madness and writing extends itself to a tension between madness and the writing of the historical record. Strangely, madness thus inhibits or distorts its own record in history, auto-negating itself in a fashion not unlike Magda’s Beckettian discourse.

Age of Iron, Coetzee’s second novel directly treating apartheid, presents itself as an epistle from retired classics professor, Mrs. Curren, to her estranged daughter in America. The novel opens as Mrs. Curren, arriving home after
having been diagnosed with cancer, comes upon “a house of carton boxes and plastic sheeting” in which she finds a dog and a homeless drunkard who gives his name as Vercueil (3). Unable and ultimately unwilling to evict Vercueil and the dog from her property, dodgy and irascible though the former is, Mrs. Curren comes to depend upon Vercueil’s “hovering if undependable solicitude” (196), entrusting him to post her letter to her daughter after her death. That readers may never know for certain, because of the limitations of the narrative frame, whether the letter ever reaches its addressee constitutes a painful, persistent subtext throughout the novel.

Less trusting of Vercueil is Mrs. Curren’s housekeeper, Florence, whose teenaged son Bheki forces Mrs. Curren’s brief immersion—despite her age and condition—in the fully real madness of South African apartheid. Bheki, once “an open-faced little boy” (36), is now amongst what Mrs. Curren calls “Children of iron” (50), children who burn down schools even though her generation would think it “madness to burn a school down” (39). Accompanied by a truculent young youth who gives his name as John, Bheki participates in the armed resistance against apartheid police forces. During a lengthy episode in some ways reminiscent of epic descents into the underworld, Mrs. Curren accompanies Florence and her friend or cousin, Mr. Thabane, into a destitute township where fighting has broken out. Working her way through “the looming world of rage and violence” (96), she arrives at a school where, amongst other bodies, she finds “that of Florence’s Bheki” (102). Returning afterward to her car, she finds herself under the gaze of Afrikaner policemen. “A mad old do-gooder caught in the rain,” she imagines them thinking: “Am I mad? Yes, I am mad. But they are mad too. All of us running mad, possessed by devils. When madness climbs the throne, who in the land escapes contagion?” (105). Afterward, submerged in a melancholy imposed by her sickness and the sickness of her country, she contemplates suicide and tries to explain to Vercueil “the craziness that has got into [her]” given that “There is madness in the air here,” here in their country (117). Madness in this instance describes a turbulent force moving through a social body yet also surfacing in individuals, visible as the un- and dis-ease of entire communities rent by social policies cooked up by the likes of Cronjé.

Coupled with the pain of her cancer, the madness of her historical milieu—contagious as it is—inficts her writing. Entailed upon the madness of her writing is not only the madness of her historical situation, but also the madness of translating such a situation into writing. Not long after arriving home after receiving her diagnosis and after finding Vercueil next to her garage, she has an outburst at her cats, in which she detects in her voice “a new,
Madness here is immediately juxtaposed with the possibility of illegibility, the meaningless scribbles constituting a failure of writing. Later yet, in her closing passages, Mrs. Curren refers to her letter as “this confession, this madness” (194), and, a little later still, she chides her daughter for speculatively affording her grandchildren an ostensibly serene upbringing in the United States. These children—her daughter’s children—photographically captured wearing their orange lifejackets in a canoe on a lake “tamed,” a lake “renamed” and now called a “recreation area,” are, she thinks, wearing their “bright orange wings” so that should they end up in the water they will be safe “till a motor-boat comes to pick them up”; these children—her grandchildren—will “bob safely in the water,” and die “at seventy-five or eighty-five as stupid as when they were born.” “Let me say,” she adds, “in all tentativeness, that perhaps it dispirits me that your children will never drown.” Mrs. Curren imagines her daughter’s inflamed response to this unwelcome section of her letter: “Are you, at this very instant, flinging the page away from you in disgust? Mad old woman! are you crying out?” (195). Mrs. Curren’s “rope of words” (197) toward its end thus threatens to become a mad provocation, the final desperation of a writer working under constraints to press her situation into writing, unsure how her writing will reach its reader, and unsure how its reader will respond to her writing.3

3 A strikingly similar and similarly mad figure, Coetzee’s Dostoevsky in The Master of Petersburg—biographically inaccurate because autobiographically infected by Coetzee’s incorporation into the life of Dostoevsky the death of his own son Nicholas—succumbs to a madness that drives him, through writing, to betray his son and to pervert Matryona, the daughter of his son’s former landlady. Just as Mrs. Curren finds herself out of place in “The age of iron. After which comes the age of bronze” (Age 50), Coetzee’s Dostoevsky finds himself out of place in “An age of acting […] an age of disguise” (Master 195). Visiting St. Petersburg in hopes of reclaiming his son’s effects and perhaps of discovering the details of his death, Dostoevsky ends up embroiled in an affair with the landlady, all the while experiencing pangs of longing for her daughter Matryona, and consorting with Nechaev, a young revolutionary—not wholly unlike Bheki—who, claiming that Dostoevsky’s son Pavel was killed by the police, may have himself killed Pavel. Furthermore, Nechaev—pimpled “enfant terrible of anarchism”
The difficulty of translating madness into writing in *Waiting for the Barbarians* raises the question of what happens when the writing in question could potentially constitute historical record, or, more concisely, what happens when madness impedes its own placement in history. The Magistrate of one of the distant outposts of an Empire irrecoverably loses his idyllic way of life when Colonel Joll of the Third Bureau pays a visit to conduct investigations regarding a possible—and possibly invented—uprising by the barbarians, upon whose land the Empire erected itself. Joll captures several barbarians, tortures them until they admit to plotting against Empire, and—having obtained or produced the information he needs in order to initiate armed action against them—plans further incursions. The Magistrate, his prudence at times lapsing, falls afoul of Empire when he returns a barbarian woman—partially blinded and hobbled, bodily inscriptions bearing the signature of Empire—to her people, an act which the Empire perhaps intentionally misinterprets as consorting with the enemy. Upon his return, he is imprisoned, deprived of food and contact, and tortured until, with a change of seasons and of fortune, winter arrives and Empire’s conquests begin to flounder.

The Magistrate concerns himself in large part with history and the recording of history. One of his hobbies is to excavate the ruins found buried in dunes outside the town walls, “waiting for spirits from the byways of history to speak to him” (16). Such endeavours colour his vision of his place in relation to the Empire, and of the Empire’s relation to history. At times he believes “It would be best if this obscure chapter in the history of the world were terminated at once” (24). “Empire has created the time of history,” he claims, Empire has located its existence not in the smooth recurrent spinning time of the cycle of the seasons but in the jagged time of rise and fall, of beginning and end, of catastrophe. Empire dooms itself to live in history

(101), “extremist of the senses” (114), and “pope of ideas, dull ideas” (196)—represents a part of the madness of nineteenth-century Russia, but only a part. When Dostoevsky calls Nechaev mad, Nechaev warns him: “I am of Russia: when you say I am mad, you say Russia is mad” (202). Dostoevsky in turn replies: “You are only part of Russia, part of Russia’s madness […] I am the one who carries the madness” (202). The same madness that prevents Coetzee’s Dostoevsky from writing at the beginning of the novel spurs his writing on at its end. In an attempt to follow his habit of writing in the mornings, he sits at a writing desk, but “does not write a word,” because “the writing, he fears would be that of a madman—vileness, obscenity, page after page of it, untameable” (18). Yet in the end he surrenders to the madness and the vileness and obscenity it entails: “The madness is in him and he is in the madness; they think each other; what they call each other, whether madness or epilepsy or vengeance or the spirit of the age, is of no consequence” (235). Under the influence of this madness, he writes out, in Pavel’s old notebooks, where he knows Matryona will find and read them, two narrative sketches effectively perverting her image of Pavel, and he thereby betrays both children.
and plot against history. [...] A mad vision yet a virulent one: I, wading in the ooze, am no less infected with it than the faithful Colonel Joll. (133)

The Magistrate does not except himself, but rather sees himself as “the lie that Empire tells itself when times are easy” (135). Madness, as in Age of Iron and in apartheid generally, denotes again a social force concerned with dividing people, and again the force is a contagion, infecting even those Attwell calls “displaced subjects,” who do not instantiate such divisions yet who nonetheless endure the conditions created by division.

Although infected, the Magistrate is not willingly complicit, and it is he who acts as a conduit in the difficult relation between madness, writing, and history. After returning the barbarian girl but before being imprisoned, he begins work on a document, though he does not know, at first, of what type: “A testament? A memoir? A confession? A history of thirty years on the frontier?” (57–58). When, after imprisonment and public humiliation, he is brought to face Colonel Joll, the Magistrate fervidly believes: “If I were to confront these men now, in public, in a fair trial, I would find the words to shame them” (113). Joll detects his unyielding sense of conviction and mocks him for it: “You seem to want to make a name for yourself as the One Just Man”; but, “to the people in this town you are not the One Just Man, you are simply a clown, a madman” (114; emphasis added). “History will bear me out!” cries the Magistrate, surely as have others, if not verbatim. “Nonsense,” says Colonel Joll. “There will be no history, the affair is too trivial” (114). At this point in the narrative, optimistic readers might expect the Magistrate eventually to clarify history vis-à-vis Empire, yet when he returns to his document at the end of the novel, he records “not the annals of an imperial outpost,” but instead its pastoral seductions as “paradise on earth” (154). The evils of maintaining colonial conquest and the earnest voice of the man who might denounce them remain unwritten and unheard, displaced because of the difficulty of putting madness into writing. Drawing upon Friedrich Hegel, Michael Valdez Moses also ties inscription in Waiting for the Barbarians to the possibility of history: “Those who do the writing make history; or what amounts to the same thing, those who make history are the only ones in a position to write it” (120). With Empire in retreat, the Magistrate would seem to have regained a position from which to write and to make history, yet his infection with the mad vision of Empire deters him from so doing. At the time when he means to undertake a meaningful record of Empire and its madness, he instead—in a cluster of paragraphs beginning “I think” instead of, say, “I write”—succumbs to doubt. He gives up his archaeological hobby, gives up also his attempt to write history,
and gives madness the opportunity to reduce to “net zero” its own place in the historical record.

3

Given the tension between madness, writing, the writing subject, and the writing of history in Coetzee—given Coetzee’s own infection under censorship by a contagious pathology or paranoia akin to madness—and further given the early charges of political quietism against Coetzee, one might ask: why, in writing Heart, does Coetzee allow madness to figure so prominently? What does the novel stand to lose or gain by eschewing realist or even transparently allegorical representations of historical circumstances in favour of a shifting, unstable, oblique narrative structure? To begin to answer these questions before returning again to Magda and her relationship with madness, I propose an examination of a few more citations of madness in Coetzee’s oeuvre, these ones less directly concerned with madness in apartheid, and more concerned with the rhetorical potential and limitations of madness in general.

To begin with, the tension between madness and the writing of history in Waiting for the Barbarians might remind readers that during the particularly oppressive period of apartheid, in the 1970s, when censorship laws were most aggressively enforced and when Coetzee published Heart, another properly historical movement, revolutionary in scope—the anti-psychiatry movement—was underway, and that its intellectual arm was inaugurated by a work itself animated by the tension between madness and history: Michel Foucault’s History of Madness. For Foucault, madness constitutes the undifferentiated din against which history is written: “The necessity of madness throughout the history of the West is linked to that decisive action that extracts a significant language from the background noise and its continuous monotony, a language which is transmitted and culminates in time; it is, in short, linked to the possibility of history” (xxxii). Just as Empire defines itself in part by its rejection of the barbarians, so too does history, kin of Reason, require madness as its Other.

Jacques Derrida’s well-known criticisms of Foucault’s project sparked one of the sharpest philosophical conflicts of the twentieth century, the Foucault-Derrida debate, which in turn propagated considerable and

4 Derrida executes his critique of History of Madness, “Cogito and the History of Madness,” in two major movements, the first addressing the feasibility of the project and the second challenging Foucault’s reading of Descartes’s Meditations, taken as a philosophical correlative of the social exclusion of madness. Derrida avers that Foucault’s desire to write an archaeology of silence from the perspective of madness is “with all seriousness, the maddest aspect of his
illuminating commentary. Among those texts inspired by the Foucault-Derrida debate, Coetzee shows some interest in Shoshana Felman’s *Writing and Madness*, which provides particular insight into the way in which literature mediates madness and history (see Coetzee’s “Madness and Rivalry” in *Giving Offense*). Felman finds that both Foucault and Derrida agree on fiction as a buffer zone between madness and philosophy, but they articulate differently the mode of this mediation, and in this way the question of madness becomes a question of position. Because madness is “pathos, not logos; literature, and not philosophy,” writes Felman,

> The tragic structure of history proceeds from the obliteration of tragedy from history. The pathetic resonance of madness proceeds from history’s obliteration of the pathetic resonance of madness. Madness as pathos is, in other words, the metaphor of the erasing of a metaphor; the history of madness is the story of the metaphor of history’s forgetting of a metaphor. (52)

Felman aligns literature with madness and opposes the pair to philosophy and history. Although he does not in “Madness and Rivalry” refer explicitly to rhetoric (as Felman does), Coetzee is drawn—in both Foucault and, antedating Foucault, in Erasmus—to the curious rhetorical potential of a position that, surrendering its claim to self-knowledge in the interest of placing itself outside the discourse defining the terms of a rivalry, carves out for itself “a position for the critic of the scene of political rivalry, a position not simply impartial between the rivals but also, by self-definition, off the stage of rivalry altogether, a *non*position” (84). Further, madness as “nonposition” evades the possibility of rivalry by refusing the status of model which, in Coetzee’s reading of René Girard from this same essay, inspires the desires that lead to the mimetic violence of rivalry. Refusing the status of model also makes willfully emulating the Erasmian nonposition of madness difficult, especially if one wants to appropriate irreproachable madness for political ends: there is “an extraordinary project” (34), and that, to the extent the project puts reason on trial for its crimes against madness, “such a trial may be impossible for by the very fact of their articulation the proceedings and the verdict unceasingly reiterate the crime” (35). As for the reading of Descartes, who Foucault claims simply banishes “madness in the name of the man who doubts” (Foucault 46), thereby disqualifying and excluding it in advance, Derrida counters that, far from simply excluding madness, Descartes fully subjects the Cogito to madness and other forms of error via hyperbole: “Whether I am mad or not, *Cogito, sum*. Madness is therefore, in every sense of the word, only one case of thought (within thought)” (Derrida 56). Thus, according to Derrida, Foucault misreads Descartes and, instead of putting reason to task from without, only repeats the Cartesian gesture of exercising radical doubt upon the tradition of what Derrida calls the *logos*, of which the Cogito is just one moment (55).
resistance in the Erasmian text to being read into and made part of another discourse” (103). Resisting political co-optation, madness once again—in its Erasmian strain—though implicated in and born of the workings of history, somehow also holds history at a distance.

This distance is not, however, infinite or unbridgeable. Even if one could recreate a self-effacing, mad consciousness, and set it up as the dominant voice of a novel, according to Coetzee the position of this consciousness would not remain forever outside the reaches of history in the way Erasmus’s madness would remain irreproachably outside of the scene of political rivalry. Coetzee’s early, trenchant essay, “Nabokov’s Pale Fire and the Primacy of Art”—in a chain of numbered paragraphs like those which constitute Heart—quickly traces out the artistic pretensions that animate Pale Fire:

Romantic art appropriated the myth that the madman is the greatest truth-teller, and assimilated to the madman the ironist. To call “the madman is the greatest truth-teller” a Romantic myth is an act of post-Romantic exegesis. To call “the madman is the greatest truth-teller” an act of post-Romantic exegesis is itself an act which will be open to the endless exegesis of the meta-myth we call history. By incorporating the exegesis into the fiction we do not escape history, we merely pre-empt its first stage. The double irony of Pale Fire does no more than pre-empt two stages [...] The ideal of Pale Fire is a Symbolist ideal: [...] having incorporated into itself all possible interpretations of itself, the work of art has, like a closed system of mirrors, shut itself off forever from interpretation and become a monument of unageing intellect. (6)

This cutting conclusion more or less directly reaffirms what has been at stake all along: that Coetzee would not imagine a work of art immured against the exegesis of history, not even with an ironic madwoman as its great truth-teller. An author might outfit a novel with effete ironic devices to pre-empt its en- and un-folding by history, but even such devices will turn out to belong to an identifiable time and place, and to serve or be made to serve certain interests.

Yet readers of his widely cited “The Novel Today” would also never expect Coetzee to compose a novel merely answerable to the kind of historical exegesis Pale Fire seems to seek to resist. According to Coetzee, the novel written not to complement history but instead to rival it would “work itself out outside the terms of class conflict, race conflict, gender conflict or any of the other oppositions out of which history and the historical disciplines erect themselves,” amongst which are such dyads as “propertied/propertyless,
colonizer/colonized, masculine/feminine” (“Novel” 3). Such dyads recall the “contraries” Magda wishes to “reconcile” (*Heart* 133): hole/whole (41), alone/in society (7), parent/child (133), master/slave (133). Following Coetzee’s foray into speculative linguistics in “A Note on Writing,” Brian Macaskill finds Magda’s resistance to binary identities and *Heart’s* resistance to both reductively historicist and theoretical interpretive schemes to be an indicator that Coetzee’s writing “resonates with properties of the linguistic middle voice,” in which writing or “doing-writing” “takes place between the strictures of self and other, language and history, intransitive and transitive utterance, practice and theory” (466). Coetzee’s best readers take steps neither to isolate him from nor to reduce him to history. His texts may participate in history, but some residue or remainder, constitutive of the singularity of any literary text, will at once resist immediate, local exegesis and enable engagement with unanticipated contexts, historical or otherwise.

My aim here is not to recast Coetzee as a Foucauldian or as some kind of anti-Nabokov, but rather to suggest that aside from apartheid, critics of historicist inclination could read *Heart* into and against the background of the anti-psychiatry movement. The near-paradox of such an act of reading is that while the anti-psychiatry movement was a properly historical phenomenon, it served as the foundation for an intense theoretical exchange, the likes of which were not far removed from the continental theoretical trends considered anathema, by some, to the historical exigencies to which literature under apartheid was answerable. Apartheid and anti-psychiatry, with their shared territory of madness, are for Coetzee mutually illuminating contexts. Historicizing literature contemporaneous with the period of high theory may thus mean reading theory as history.

I return now to Magda, about whom “so much […] is only theory” (*Heart* 43), and who in spite of fighting “against becoming one of the forgotten ones of history” (3), concedes at the end of the novel to having become one of “the

---

5 These very terms, which Coetzee wishes to see the novel work itself out outside of, uncannily recall the terms earlier cited by Attridge, inside of which he wants to read *Heart*. Again, “history and the historical disciplines” are opposed to the workings of madness.

6 Coetzee in turn follows Roland Barthes who in turn follows Emile Benveniste. In “A Note on Writing,” Coetzee briefly considers the implications of writing in the linguistic middle voice; that is, writing not as a subject independent of object and verb, writing neither completely actively nor passively, but doing writing “with reference to the self” (*Doubling* 94), such that, as Barthes claims, the writer remains “inside the writing, not as a psychological subject […] but as the agent of the action” (qtd. in *Doubling* 94).
castaways of history” (135). The ambivalence of the final passage, section 266, is troubling. On the one hand, the disequilibrium introduced into the colonial power structure by Magda’s father’s having trespassed the master/slave boundary as well as the racial barrier—common as such trespasses have historically been in southernmost Africa since the arrival of the first Europeans in the seventeenth century—has finally played itself out to the point of exhaustion. The violence has ended at last. On the other hand, she is alone, or as good as alone, having for company what seems to be the corpse of her father or, as in Coetzee’s screenplay version of the novel, a father who “trembles with Parkinson’s disease” and “gives no sign of recognizing her” (Screenplays 92–93). Her earlier postulate that “It is not speech that makes man man but the speech of others” knells bitterly throughout the closing monody (Heart 126).

While she has throughout the narrative established her distance from the disjunctive poles of binary identities and from the hermit crab shells of literary tropes, Magda has deferred, up to this moment, defining her relationship with madness, itself a literary trope. Tempted at last “to tie up the loose ends,” she asks herself, among other questions, whether she will “die a crazy old queen in the middle of nowhere, unexplained by and inexplicable to the archaeologists,” or whether she will “yield to the spectre of reason and explain [her]self to [her]self.” Because “these are not idle questions,” she has “no doubt” that “somewhere there is a whole literature waiting to answer them for [her]” (138). Madness, reason, and Magda, “LA MEDIA ENTRE,” between them (133): just as she seems about to pose an answer to the question, to position herself regarding madness, she defers yet again. “Unfortunately I am not acquainted with that literature,” she claims, “and besides, I have always felt easier spinning my answers out of my own bowels” (138). Unlike other tropes and identities in the novel, Magda neither consents to nor denies madness, but breaks off or is broken off from her narrative at the moment she poses the question to herself. Even Coetzee, when asked in an interview about Magda and madness, concedes that Magda “may be mad,” but in the following paragraph, he goes on to say that he “see[s] no further point in calling her mad” (Doubling 61).

To ascribe madness to Magda as a physician or a psychiatrist might do to a patient would be naïve. While madness constitutes a substantial presence in Heart as it did in the “heart-speech” of Geoffrey Cronjé, madness is also a question Magda leaves unanswered; but silence—and particularly the silence to which history relegates madness—is not the mode of her non-answer. Geworfen into an antipastoral decaying colonial structure, she writes herself into and is written out of various literary tropes, deferring beyond her “closing plangencies” the moment when she accepts or rejects madness. Heart thus does not place madness into history but rather stages the decisive moment of its
emplacement, suspending it in profile, traced out without leaving a trace, net zero but not pure zero. Characterized—according to Coetzee, Felman and Foucault—by its “nonplace” or “nonposition” outside history, that is, by its nonplacement, the resistance of madness to history may imply its resistance—manifested through proliferation—to definition. When definition fails, one turns—as Coetzee does in “Apartheid Thinking”—to metaphor, following and tracking a meaning back through the terms it has, like a hermit crab, inhabited and left behind; yet even metaphor, itself replacement, is another act of placement, another act resisted by madness. The best metaphor for madness may thus turn out to be its regression beyond every metaphor.
Works Cited


