Kriz, Ellen. "An Unrecorded Grammar: Speaking Embodiment in J.M.Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country*."

Transnational Literature, vol. 12, November 2020

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33008/TNL.2020.04>

URL: <https://transnationalliterature.org/>

An Unrecorded Grammar: Speaking Embodiment in J. M. Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country*
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Abstract

This essay seeks to understand how J. M. Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country* elaborates a response to the suffering body through linguistic indeterminacy, including its formal and structural presentation of numbered and often contradictory passages and through the liminality of the narrator Magda's consciousness. Grounding the paper on the possibility that *In the Heart of the Country* functions through its lacunae, I argue that Magda rewrites the oppressive language she has inherited by pointing to realities words cannot grasp, including the irreducible witness of the body in pain. The body stands as an incontrovertible presence just outside the reach of language, where, in its refusal to be codified, it catalyses new, transgressive attempts at speaking. Such attempts function as a body-speech that could transform the speaking-about of Magda's monologue into the speaking-to of reciprocity. It is a language that Magda, however, ultimately fails to articulate. She remains suspended in potentiality, reading the signals "in conformations of face and hands" that communicate, incompletely, the mysteries of another's being. But perhaps the act of speaking to another must always remain poised on the brink of failure: response to the unknown of another's being requires an unrecorded grammar. Thus, in the lacunae of his unfixed text, Coetzee offers a linguistic event as response to actual suffering.¹

Keywords: embodiment, reciprocity, linguistic event

I live neither alone nor in society but as it were among children. I am spoken to not in words, which come to me quaint and veiled, but in signs, in conformations of face and hands, in postures of shoulders and feet, in nuances of tune and tone, in gaps and absences whose grammar has never been recorded. (Coetzee 1977, 7)

Organised by way of 266 numbered sections, J. M. Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country* (1977, hereafter *Heart*)² immediately challenges the conventions of the novel. The narrator Magda's relation to the telling of the novel's "events" is profoundly unstable from the outset. In the first scene, Magda describes watching her father drive a horse-drawn cart bearing his new bride toward their home. Then she immediately retracts that description and adds, "Or perhaps they were drawn by two plumed donkeys, that is also possible" (*Heart* 1). Not all of the scenes that follow are so benign. Violence and bodily suffering – from rape to parricide – are conveyed with similar indeterminacy.

Heart was first published in South Africa in 1978 while the nation was in the throes of the suffering of apartheid. Coetzee's early fiction was initially criticised for reducing the material reality of suffering to a matter of linguistic reflexivity.³ More recently, critical reception of his early work has shifted towards examining the ways in which Coetzee's experimental linguistic techniques respond to the political and ethical dilemmas of South African history. In his historiographic reading, David Attwell (1993) traces how Coetzee's self-conscious fiction engages many voices and discourses of colonialism and apartheid in order to critique dominant narratives, while Brian Macaskill (1994) foregrounds the way Coetzee's preoccupation with linguistics provides a unique site and medium for social and historical engagement in "Charting J. M. Coetzee's Middle Voice."

The groundbreaking research of Derek Attridge (2004), however, spearheaded a significant turn in the critical reception of Coetzee's work towards ethics. Attridge argues that:

Coetzee's handling of formal properties is bound up with the capacity of his work to engage with—to stage, confront, apprehend, explore—otherness, and in this engagement it broaches the most fundamental and widely significant issues involved in any consideration of ethics and politics (6–7).

Building upon Attridge's ethical analysis by combining it with Macaskill's socially aware linguistic approach, Carrol Clarkson (2009) broaches the ethics of literary address in Coetzee's oeuvre—"the positions of the speaking or writing self in relation to those whom one addresses, or in relation to those on whose behalf one speaks" (1)—including the limits language places on what can be said.

Heart's unusual sequences—which Coetzee explains are "numbered as a way of pointing to what is not there between them"—become more comprehensible in light of the engagement with otherness explored by Attridge and Clarkson (*Doubling* 59). Following in their footsteps, this essay seeks to understand, more particularly, the ways in which the novel's linguistic indeterminacy works out an ethical response to the suffering body.

Heart functions through the "gaps and absences" of language, apparent in the blank

spaces between numbered sections of the text and semantically in the contradictory language of Magda's consciousness (*Heart* 7). Magda's existence in the isolation of the Karoo is constrained by a vaguely colonial system of relations encoded in the language of her father, a language that fails to recognise its limitations. Oppressed by the dualistic hierarchies of her inherited language, Magda rewrites its rules by continually pointing to realities it cannot grasp, especially the "loves of the body" (8). The body, I argue, stands as an incontrovertible presence just outside the reach of Magda's language, a presence which, in its refusal to be codified, catalyses new, transgressive ways of speaking.

Yet, the epistemological gap between body and language that grants such linguistic freedom also defines the ethical limits of that freedom. Coetzee insists that the body's vulnerability to pain and certain death endows it with a powerful claim to the privacy and safety of its interiority. Faced with the inevitability of her desire to embrace and to be embraced, Magda tests the limits of communing with another, who must, by the nature of embodiment, always remain an Other.

Throughout the novel, Magda begins to realise that the unlimited imaginative power that attends the gap between language and the world can create the potential for reciprocity. The challenge for Magda is to transform that potential into reciprocal action—a speech-act, a body-speech, if you will, that could transform the speaking-about of Magda's "stony monologue" into the speaking-to of reciprocity (*Heart* 12).

THEORISING BODY-SPEECH: FIGURATION AND THE SUFFERING BODY

Attwell posits a "curious tension" between Coetzee's "respect for the linguistic-structural conditions of fiction, and the existential-historical dramas being played out within them" (*Doubling* 59). Without denying that the linguistic maze of *Heart* disrupts an existential reality in which Magda could achieve being or selfhood, Attwell nonetheless finds it difficult to believe that Magda is simply a product of language with no agency or capacity to act in the world. He maintains that even though the "existential dimension (*Being and Nothingness* seems to figure prominently in Magda) is clearly ruled by the linguistic, the former is still there as a ghostly field of possibility" (59).

In his reply to Attwell's reading, Coetzee expresses "hope" that the work does not "dissolve 'problems of selfhood and relationship,' conceived in their fullest historical dimension, into postmodernist game-playing" (60). Or, as Coetzee puts it elsewhere in this text: "writing-about-writing hasn't much to offer" (204). The reflexivity of Magda's language and the indeterminacy of the events in the novel—the multiple deaths of Magda's father, for instance—seem to point to the kind of "writing-about-writing" that Coetzee denies. Yet, if we believe Coetzee's statement of intentions, Magda's fluid, albeit often contradictory, language must offer something more.

Attwell identifies one of Coetzee's chief preoccupations as a linguist and essayist: the relationship between language and the world it supposedly represents and/or constitutes. In "Isaac Newton and the Ideal of a Transparent Scientific Language," Coetzee tests the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which claims that language fundamentally circumscribes one's knowledge of the world. For Whorf, even Newtonian physics exemplifies "how one can unconsciously project the

structure of one's language out on to the stars and then believe that the resulting map is a true picture of the universe, rather than a picture determined by one's own particular linguistic perspective" (*Doubling* 184). Rather than finding Newton's thought fits neatly into language as Whorf suggests, Coetzee makes the case that Newton struggled to translate his theory of gravitational force from mathematical terms to Latin and English. When Newton disseminated his work in the first edition of the *Principia* in 1686, he faced dogged resistance from fellow scientists who objected to the idea that massive objects could attract each other across distances. For scientists serious about developing a "truly material science with a truly empirical methodology," the metaphor of attraction seemed to attribute agency dangerously to inanimate objects (185). But, as Coetzee argues, avoiding metaphor proves more difficult than it seems because the very syntactical structures of Latin, English, and perhaps all languages, are inherently metaphorical: even when Newton removed the metaphors of attraction and repulsion from his language, the subject position in Latin and English as well as the subject-verb-(object) structure of the active voice inherently attributed animistic agency to the force of gravity. Newton evaded this problem in subsequent disseminations by using the passive voice in Latin, which conveniently glosses over the distinction between agent and instrument.⁴

While Whorf postulates that Newton's language constitutes his thought, Coetzee comes to a slightly different conclusion: that Newton's writing demonstrates "a dense complicity between thought and language" (*Doubling* 191). Coetzee admits that language encodes set pathways of thought and so can, at times, limit thought. However, as Newton's struggle shows, the existing structures of language do not necessarily circumscribe thought and even point to "an incapacity of language to express certain thoughts" (184). Furthermore, Newton's writing suggests this gap between language and the world is obviated by metaphor, which Coetzee describes as "always ambiguous" (193). To the extent, then, that language is inherently figurative even in its syntactical structures, Coetzee might say that all language bears within it the measure of its own limitations. He juxtaposes this "mediatory role of language between reality and mind" with the materialist worldview of Newton's detractors and scientists today who seek a "'real' language—language with 'real' powers of reference to the universe" (183, 188). Coetzee questions the possibility of achieving such transparency between word and world when he asks "whether a metaphor-free language in which anything significant or new can be said is attainable" (193). He suspects, in other words, that recognising what language cannot grasp can catalyse linguistic innovation. As such, assumptions of linguistic transparency can be understood as misguided attempts to stabilise what is ontologically ambiguous, and productively so.

In "Apartheid Thinking", Coetzee extends this critique to measure the substantial political and ethical costs of assuming linguistic transparency. Coetzee's method in this essay, which he describes as reading the "text of apartheid", traces how certain tropes in the writing of nationalist Geoffrey Cronjé (1907–1992) have propagated racist ideologies in South Africa ("Apartheid Thinking" 178). Coetzee thereby shifts focus away from materialist analyses that explain apartheid as a function of economic self-interest, and aims to restore what has been censored from this "text": namely, the irrationality, the madness, and, ultimately, the inexplicability of apartheid's partial location in the "lair of the heart" (164). While Coetzee recognises that the typical explanations of greed and self-interest undoubtedly contributed to the terrors of apartheid, he

also detects in Cronjé's racist ideology "the enigma of desire" for racial mixing—sexually, socially, and otherwise—and the repression of that desire (173). The creative power of figurative language deriving from its always ambiguous grope toward the inexplicable appears again in Coetzee's thinking as he follows tropes that ramify from Cronjé's inability to understand his own desire. Coetzee unpacks the trope of "contagion", which was used to justify racial segregation in South Africa. Officials with racist agendas targeted black slums as sources of disease, but before long it was not just unsanitary conditions but the black slum-dwellers themselves who were blamed for the spread of disease (180). While this may not seem like a surprising jump in racist logic, Coetzee detects in it the subtlety of the metonymic displacement that eventuates, with "blackness itself" becoming "the infection, therefore subject to public health measures like isolation/segregation" (181).

This example illustrates the devastating political consequences of accepting one of many possible linguistic interpretations about a material phenomenon—in this case, the spread of disease—as a "serious account of reality" ("Apartheid Thinking" 179). And yet, careful not to divorce language from reality, Coetzee reminds us that "it is philosophically naive to believe that metaphors stand for things that are more real than the metaphors themselves" (183). In one sense, then, revealing the operation of narrative in history and dispelling notions of linguistic transparency, as Coetzee does in "Apartheid Thinking", opens up the possibility that such narratives can be reimagined to serve political and ethical reciprocity rather than oppression. And for those who might lay the "charge that [Coetzee's] work endorses a linguistic idealism, that it upholds the view that reality and history are purely constructs of language," Coetzee would likely respond that language is fundamentally embroiled in the world; language's mechanisms and the ideas that they carry engender real and sometimes quite harmful effects in society and in individual lives (*Doubling* 145).

Coetzee's analyses of Newton's and Cronjé's writings bear on my interpretation of Magda's use of language in several ways. For one, Magda's creative figuration constantly reveals its own contingency, and in so doing, undermines the dangerous assumptions of transparency embedded in her father's language. However, it is insufficient to reduce Magda's resistance to a matter of "mere" language, to a false solution divorced from the material realities of suffering. As Coetzee shows in "Apartheid Thinking", language has brought about painful events when it presumes to directly reflect reality. The question Coetzee leaves unanswered at the end of "Apartheid Thinking" but engages with in *Heart* is what can or should be done about suffering once we establish a productive gap between word and world. His answer—if it can be called that, for it is hardly definitive—must be understood within the context of his thinking on the body and on what language can and cannot do to alleviate the body's suffering.

In another interview with Attwell, Coetzee confirms the body and the experiential reality it can be said to navigate consistently appear in his work by way of an uneasy juxtaposition with self-referential language. "If I look back over my own fiction," Coetzee remarks, "I see a simple (simple minded?) standard erected. That standard is the body. Whatever else, the body is not 'that which is not'" (*Doubling* 248). If the body is not "that which is not," would a fair paraphrase be that the body is not absent? If so, can we therefore say that the body is present? The latter paraphrase (the body is present) loses the texture of Coetzee's original construction and suggests instead

that the body or the material can be understood at face value, that it can be labelled, fully integrated into supposedly transparent systems of knowledge. Rather, in avoiding the direct affirmation of the body's existence, Coetzee implies that materiality is that which exists beyond language. To put it differently, the double negation of Coetzee's construction suggests that the body as it appears in his fiction is not so much an ontological problem as an epistemological one; the body does exist—the body is not absent—but we cannot fully articulate what exactly the body is—cannot positively assert its presence. The body, in short, defies linguistic explanation.⁵

For all the body's mysteries, however, we do know undeniably that the body feels pain, or so Coetzee claims. When Coetzee remarks that "the body is not 'that which is not,'" he continues the thought as follows:

the proof that [the body] is is the pain it feels. The body with its pain becomes a counter to the endless trials of doubt. [...] Let me put it baldly: in South Africa it is not possible to deny the authority of suffering and therefore of the body. It is not possible, not for logical reasons, not for ethical reasons (I would not assert the ethical superiority of pain over pleasure), but for political reasons, for reasons of power. And let me again be unambiguous: it is not that one *grants* the authority of the suffering body: the suffering body *takes* this authority: that is its power. To use other words: its power is undeniable. (248)⁶

The body in all its vulnerability to pain must not be violated, not because an individual or society sanctions that right—and can, by that logic, revoke it—but because the very condition of embodiment demands it.

The distinction Coetzee draws between granting and taking authority is central to the political and ethical force of his fiction writing. Clarkson elaborates Coetzee's use of "countervoices"—"raised by the creation of fictional characters in relation to each other, in relation to the voice of the narrator, and ultimately, in relation to the implied author they affirm" (77)—to interrogate the assumed authority of the authorial "I", and in so doing, constitute an ethical voice, an *ethos*. The ethical quality of this voice—this "I-as-responding" (104)—arises from its proximity to and distance from other voices.

This voice—constituted by "endless trials of doubt"—faces its most challenging "counter" in the intractable ontological conditions of embodiment, especially the realities of suffering and death, suggests Coetzee. From its counter-position outside socio-linguistic structures, the suffering body instantiates the proximities and distances constitutive of reciprocal feeling or action.⁷

Magda's vexed authorial voice probes the limits of these proximities and distances and, in so doing, prompts the reader of *Heart* to experience "in a manner at once pleasurable and disturbing" the "inescapable demands" of "a complex and freighted responsibility to and for the other, a responsibility denied for so long in South Africa's history" (Attridge 31).

A LANGUAGE OF TRANSGRESSION: SPEAKING THE BODY AS LIBERATION

Magda admits she was "born into a language of hierarchy, of distance and perspective"; she calls

this language her “father-tongue,” and her relationship with it is complex (*Heart* 97). As a subordinate daughter, Magda feels profoundly alienated by the worldview of her father: she despairingly observes, “To my father I have been an absence all my life. Therefore instead of being the womanly warmth at the heart of this house I have been a zero, null, a vacuum” (2). As a woman who fails to conform to the feminine roles sanctioned by her father’s worldview, Magda feels so excluded in her being that she effectively imagines herself as a non-being. Yet, the same language that refuses her also grants her, at least in theory, a measure of authority over the servants with whom she and her father live. Magda occupies a position that blurs the boundary of master and servant, affording her a unique perspective on the seemingly unbridgeable divide the language of mastery erects between self and other.

The linguistic mechanisms of Magda’s resistance to inherited structures of power—and the body’s influence on those mechanisms—are perhaps more obvious in the South African edition of the novel. In this edition, dialogue is rendered in Afrikaans, a language shared among Magda, her father, and the servants as a first language. In one sequence, the servant Hendrik asks Magda to find work in the house for his new bride, Anna. The sparse dialogue between Magda and her servants is carried out in language that encodes a hierarchical dynamic. Magda patronises Anna in the typical tones of the master: “Look at me, Anna, don’t be shy,” commands Magda. “Would you like to come and work in the house?” she continues, even though Hendrik has already made it clear that is why they have come (*Heart* 29). The force of the language of mastery is so strong that when Magda asks Anna, “Do you know who I am?” Anna can only respond, “Miss is the miss” (30). Anna cannot express a response in terms outside of Magda’s racially determined social status. This stilted dialogue stages the difficulty of cultivating reciprocity within a language of mastery.

As the moment unfolds on the page, however, this hierarchical language proves more unstable than it appears. The very failure of reciprocity and the incomprehensibility of Anna’s interiority undermines the power of a language so closely tied to gradations of rank and privilege. Magda’s authoritative queries and commands and Anna’s submissive responses register as an overtone in the cadence of the exchange. That overtone begins to fissure as Magda’s inward thoughts and her apprehension of the servants’ body language emerge just underneath what is actually spoken. Anna’s moments of linguistic silence—marked, nevertheless, by body-speech like a suspicious flick of the eye—are more pregnant in this dialogue than the words either woman speaks. In a telling moment, Magda informs Anna that she (Magda) will refer to Anna as “Klein-Anna” to distinguish her from an older servant also named Anna. A nickname can convey warmth in an intimate relationship, and Magda seems to intend such a gesture when she explains to the older Anna she would now be referred to as “Ou-Anna” because she is “so nice and big” (*Heart* 30). But the potential for intimacy fails when Klein-Anna does not respond to her new name. In the context of Klein-Anna’s silence, the naming reads like another power move on Magda’s part, one that widens the gulf between them.

By pointing to that which the language of mastery cannot grasp—from Hendrik and Klein-Anna’s gestures to Magda’s interior pain—this sequence unravels the authority of Magda’s father-tongue. Her performance of mastery barely disguises her real desire to cultivate intimacy with Hendrik and Klein-Anna. Even though Magda fails to establish a viable linguistic alternative

to communicate with the servants in this moment, the texture of the passage grapples toward the rhythms and tones of a new language. Once the language of mastery is stripped of its meaning, the unique syntactical and phonological characteristics of Afrikaans locutions lurking behind their English counterparts come to the fore. The “nuances”, the “supple word-order and delicate particles” of Afrikaans engender “moments of solidarity” and “moments of distance” between Magda, Klein-Anna and Hendrik (*Heart* 30). Magda’s emphasis on the physicality of the language they all share evokes the nascent grammar of a child’s babble,⁸ rendering the hierarchical code of the exchange superficial. While Magda and the servants remain tenuously bound by antiquated hierarchical codes, the shared corporeal experience of Afrikaans rolling off the tongue grasps toward the possibility of a more reciprocal language.

Breaking down language into its sensory constituents is not the only way Magda turns to the directness of the body as a potential point of connection to others on the farm. Magda frequently uses figurative language to imagine herself in the bodies of others. Sometimes, these moments of imagined embodiment signal Magda’s longing to escape the prison of her own consciousness, as the following example—in which she avoids confronting her father about his illicit sexual advances on Klein-Anna—demonstrates: “I am going to [...] explore the pleasures of drowning, the feel of my body sliding out of me and another body sliding in, limbs inside my limbs, mouth inside my mouth. I welcome death as a version of life in which I will not be myself. There is a fallacy here which I ought to see but will not” (*Heart* 53–54). Such moments also illustrate her desire to connect deeply with another. When Magda’s father is on the verge of dying from the gunshot wound she inflicted, she addresses him directly: “Oh father, father, if I could only learn your secrets, creep through the honeycomb of your bones, listen to the turmoil of your marrow, the singing of your nerves, float on the tide of your blood, and come at last to the quiet sea where my countless brothers and sisters swim” (71).

These examples demonstrate a radical reconceptualisation of dualistic distinctions such as self/other or body/mind that Magda has inherited from her father. In the first instance, Magda resists the logic of identifying a “fallacy” in her thinking and embraces the paradoxical possibility of being and not-being simultaneously. The second example anthropomorphises the alien yet intimate world of the inner body to collapse the hierarchical relationship between the father and his daughter. Magda transforms herself into just another particle floating through her father’s veins, but by assuming her consciousness as a particle that moves through his body, she ascribes agency and purpose to an otherwise unconscious ebb and flow. Barring the possibility of ever experiencing another’s being unmediated, Magda’s ambiguous metaphorical language imaginatively reaches out across the distances power creates.

Sheila Roberts would disagree, however, that these examples effectively set Magda’s language apart from her father’s. Instead, Roberts sees Magda unintentionally reinforcing power dynamics even as she tries to escape the feeling of isolation these unequal relationships produce. After Magda describes, or imagines, being raped by Hendrik, she wishes to “be” Klein-Anna, possibly to recast the act of violence as an act of marital intimacy:

I would like to climb into Klein-Anna’s body, I would like to climb down her throat while she sleeps and spread myself gently inside her, my hands in her hands, my feet in her feet, my

skull in the benign quiet of her skull where images of soap and flour and milk revolve, the holes of my body sliding into place over the holes of hers, there to wait mindlessly for whatever enters them [...] the parts of a man, not angry now but gentle. (*Heart* 108-109)

Even as Magda attempts to soothe the anguish of her own violation, Roberts notes that Magda is still “locked into the discourse of the Master, has no means of discovering the quality and complexity of Klein-Anna’s thoughts” (28). According to Roberts, Magda objectifies Klein-Anna by simplifying a complex mind into the “mindless” reflections of a servant woman who waits passively for her husband.

Magda does characterise her tendency to imagine herself into the bodies and beings of others as an act of domination. In a moment of despair, Magda asks herself, “Is it any wonder that nothing is safe from me, that the lowliest veld-flower is likely to find itself raped in its being or that I should dream with yearning of a bush that resists my metaphysical conquest?” (*Heart* 74). Magda locates the danger of this “metaphysical conquest” in the very language that frees her. Reflecting upon her and Hendrik’s failure to cultivate intimacy, she discerns she has “the words but not the means” to establish reciprocity, “for there is nowhere, I fear, where my words will not reach” (117). Magda’s use of the conjunction “for” as a causal link is crucially ambiguous. She notes the vast reach of her linguistic freedom, which can penetrate any barrier, but she “fears” the apparently unlimited possibilities this freedom affords. She does not have the “means” or the ability to build reciprocity precisely because her language, for all its expansiveness, does not have to account for the needs of others. Magda admits she weaves a “monologue of the self,” which she describes as “a maze of words out of which I shall not find a way until someone else gives me a lead” (16). The problem for Magda, it seems, lies in whether she can find a way to extend her hand.⁹

A LANGUAGE OF RECIPROCITY: GUARDING THE BODY FROM THE “FRENZY OF DESIRE”

Magda’s desire, her need to embrace and to be embraced by another human being, motivates her linguistic revolt against her father, and it ultimately forces her to recognise that her linguistic freedom must have limits. Desire itself is something of an “enigma”, to recall Coetzee’s choice of words in “Apartheid Thinking,” and perhaps it is mysterious insofar as it arises, at least in part, from the body. Magda often describes desire as sexual impulse. She feels it, for instance, when she erotically imagines “soft flesh brushing soft flesh under the stiff calico of [Klein-Anna’s] skirt” (*Heart* 26). But that does not exhaust its potential meanings. In a futile attempt to speak to Klein-Anna, Magda says, more abstractly, that “it is the first condition of life forever to desire, otherwise life would cease. It is a principle of life forever to be unfilled. Fulfilment does not fulfil. Only stones desire nothing” (114). Magda asks herself “faintly, dubiously, querulously,” whether it is possible to attend to desire without “striving to possess the desired in a project which must be in vain, since its end can only be the annihilation of the desired” (114).

Magda finds words cannot help in her tenuous quest for recognition sans possession. Speaking in a way that reveals the troubling power dynamics inherent in desire is itself a testament to failed desire. Klein-Anna only offers “limp hands” in response, and Magda’s words “come from nowhere and go nowhere [...] feeding no one” (*Heart* 115). Just after she imagines

Klein-Anna's flesh brushing underneath her skirt, Magda observes that "words again begin to falter," and yet Magda cannot help bursting into linguistic reverie:

Words are coin. Words alienate. Language is no medium for desire. Desire is rapture, not exchange. It is only by alienating the desired that language masters it. Hendrik's bride, her sly doe-eyes, her narrow hips, are beyond the grope of words until desire consents to mutate into the curiosity of the watcher. The frenzy of desire in the medium of words yields the mania of the catalogue. I struggle with the proverbs of hell. (26)

While Magda seems to celebrate the "rapture" of desire and lament the distances words create, this passage hints at the potential dangers of unchecked desire. As she yields to the medium she distrusts, she inadvertently catalogues and thereby objectifies Klein-Anna's body. At the same time, her frenzied words paradoxically point toward the possibility that a meaningful connection does, perhaps, require some level of "coin" or "exchange"—that words may yet have a place in establishing reciprocity. What might have happened if Magda succeeded in shifting her speaking-about to a speaking-to, if Klein-Anna had the words and the will to respond in kind, if Magda's words had somewhere to go?

The novel stages the troubling consequences of wasted words and the incessant need to fulfil desire. The moments of greatest violation—moments in which Magda or others inflict suffering upon the vulnerable body of another—are also warped quests for recognition. I return to the scene in which Magda addresses her father after she fatally shoots him (perhaps). Magda fires blindly into her father's bedroom because she is angry that he is sleeping with Klein-Anna. The bullet strikes him in the gut, and his subsequent death is torturously slow and painful. Magda reveals that, if nothing else, it is her profound sense of loneliness that drove her to the act, if it can so be construed. The gunshot is not a request but a demand for response. When Magda realises that "he will never get well" (70), and thus will never respond to her, she spirals into one of her most intense moments of linguistic creativity, which climaxes as follows:

Speak to me! Do I have to call on you in words of blood to make you speak? [...] Must I carve out my beseechings with a knife on your flesh? Do you think you can die before you have said Yes to me? Do you think I cannot breathe the breath of your lungs for you or pump your heart in my fist? [...] You and I will live together in this room till I have my way, till the crack of doom, till the stars fall out of the sky. *I am I!* I can wait! (71-72)

Magda's logic is twisted, of course. She can only threaten him with more pain—inscribing her pleadings in his flesh, artificially pumping his heart, coercing recognition from his lips. Magda's imagined "words of blood" stage the power of the suffering body to undermine acts of violation. Violence is presented as an ironically impotent response to the yearnings of desire because the impenetrability of another's pain excludes the perpetrator.

To the extent this passage is a verbal attempt to ascribe significance to the violence—Magda's words reach the register of apocalyptic high-drama—words also fail to confront the reality of the suffering body. Magda's forceful declaration "I can wait!" concludes one

numbered sequence and is followed abruptly with the stark, single-sentence paragraph, "There is no change in his condition" (*Heart* 72). Her father's body and its march toward death do not wait for Magda's lengthy display of linguistic prowess.

Moments of such violence have led some critics to conclude that Magda's monologue is simply an exercise in failed reciprocity. Attwell maintains this "sense of failure" pervades the closing pages of the book (67). Magda laments, on the last page, the loss she suffers when "the ghostly brown figures of the last people [she] knew crept away from [her] in the night" (*Heart* 139). Coetzee also comments in an interview from 1978 that Jacobus Coetzee (from *Dusklands*) and Magda "lack the stature to transform [the] 'It' into a 'You,' to, so to speak, create a society in which reciprocity exists; and therefore condemn themselves to desperate gestures towards establishing intimacy" ("Speaking" 23). We have seen already that despite the transgressive power of Magda's language, her words tend to objectify others as long as they remain imprisoned in her consciousness. Coetzee's use of pronouns here evokes Magda's tautological and thus meaningless self-affirmation "*I am I!*" in response to her father's pain (*Heart* 72). Coetzee prompts us to ask what Magda might have done differently to achieve reciprocity: how she might have spoken to transform the "It" to "You".¹⁰

Magda's transgressive language fails to achieve reciprocity because it does not *do* anything. In the despair of her loneliness, Magda tests violent action but discovers it deepens her isolation: as the sufferer withdraws into the interiority of his pain, the perpetrator realises that in violating the body, she has closed it off from her reach.

But by staging this failure, the novel points us back to what language *can* do to achieve reciprocity. In the epigraph, Magda senses how she might transform her interior monologue into outward expression. As Magda "grope[s]" toward understanding the "brown folk" with whom she lives, she conceives the possibility of suspending speech in favour of listening, of watching, of waiting for signals that are beyond words—"in conformations of face and hands, in postures of shoulders and feet, in nuances of tune and tone" (*Heart* 7). Attuned to the body-speech of the servants, Magda positions herself to speak in a way that responds sincerely to the mysterious being of the other, rather than relying on the old codes of her father. It is a language Magda ultimately fails to speak to her father or the servants. Instead, she remains suspended in potentiality, reading the signals that communicate, always incompletely, the embodied mysteries of another's being.

But perhaps the act of speaking to another must always remain poised on the brink of failure—a genuine response to the unknown of another's being, that is, requires a language that remains unfixed. In this way, the numbered sections of Magda's text might properly be understood as moments of presence, the contradictions of which enact a real challenge to discourses that assume unambiguous truth-value. The paradoxical quality of Magda's transgressive language invites us to temporarily abandon our typical linguistic resources and become, in some sense, "children" learning language anew, coming to grips with a grammar that must remain unrecorded (*Heart* 7).

Notes

- ¹ I thank Brian Macaskill for his expert guidance, and for reading and commenting on multiple drafts of this essay.
- ² The full text of *In the Heart of the Country* was first published in Great Britain under this title and in the United States under an alternate title in its first edition. A year later, it was published in South Africa with some important variations. The South African version, for example, renders all dialogue in Afrikaans, whereas dialogue appears in English in the American version. Throughout this essay, I cite the reprinted American version, which appeared as *In the Heart of the Country*.
- ³ Macaskill, pp.443–444, provides an account of these criticisms by Nadine Gordimer in “The Idea of Gardening” (1984), Abdul R. JanMohamed in “The Economy of Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in Colonialist Literature” (1985), Peter Knox-Shaw in “Dusklands: A Metaphysics of Violence” (1982), Paul Rich in “Tradition and Revolt in South African Fiction: The Novels of André Brink, Nadine Gordimer and J. M. Coetzee” (1982), and Michael Vaughan in “Literature and Politics: Currents in South African Writing in the Seventies” (1982).
- ⁴ See also Macaskill, pp. 453–454.
- ⁵ Another sense in which Coetzee’s expression “the body is not ‘that which is not’” may operate is that it expands embodiment beyond human experience to all forms of being. Magda calls herself “a poetess of interiority, an explorer of the inwardness of stones, the emotions of ants, the consciousness of the thinking parts of the brain” (*Heart* 35). The continuities here expressed among human bodies, animal bodies, and inanimate matter are beyond the scope of this paper.
- ⁶ My use of the term “ethics” differs from Coetzee’s definition of the ethical in this instance. Here, ethics seems to denote moral code (e.g., Christianity’s prescriptions elevate pain as moral good.) My definition of the ethical cannot be separated from what Coetzee here calls “political.” When I refer to the ethical, I am concerned with the power dynamics between self and other.
- ⁷ Clarkson examines how an authorial voice might respond ethically to “voiceless” animal beings—whose status outside socio-linguistic structures normalises their extermination but whose shared experience of bodily suffering challenges that norm (see chapter 4, “Voiceless”, pp. 106–132). She also addresses how the inability of Coetzee’s characters to articulate the experience of torture nevertheless reaches across that communicative distance affectively: “What remains in a reading of the artwork, even if the words do not strictly follow a reasoned narrative or philosophical argument, is the recognition on the part of the reader of the poet’s human attempt to voice an appeal against the unspeakable” (188).
- ⁸ I am not denigrating the language by calling it “a child’s babble” nor denigrating those who speak it but celebrating its youthful potential in this moment of exchange.
- ⁹ Magda’s insight mirrors Coetzee’s conclusion about his textual method in “Apartheid Thinking”: he writes that his conclusions may put us in a “better position to read racism, but 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). There is a difference, in other words, between being aware of the conditions that engender suffering and translating that awareness into action.
- ¹⁰ See also Clarkson, pp. 55–56. She addresses not only the narrative theme on which Coetzee elaborates but also the significance of “an ‘I-you’ relation instantiated by the material existence of the novel itself [...] the novel as address between the writer and reader” (55).

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