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Attuning philosophy and literary criticism: a response to 'In the Heart of the Country'

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Philosophy and Literary Criticism: Responding to *In the Heart of the Country*

Abstract

This chapter argues that some literary texts call for the attunement of philosophy and literary criticism. De Gaynesford begins by explaining what attunement is: a mutually shaping activity in which we really do philosophy in doing literary criticism. This implies differences between philosophy and literary criticism that run at least as deep as the usual disciplinary and classificatory boundaries. But it is also consistent with an essential feature of attunement: that it be a single, unified activity. The chapter then gives various reasons for thinking that Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country* (1977) calls for attunement. The question of what a responsible reading procedure for this novel should be, given that it may simply be read as fantasy, is one specific feature of the novel which encourages and even requires that we adopt an approach that makes philosophy and literary criticism a single, unified activity. Two further features which call for an attuned approach concern two basic themes of the novel: the silencing of the narrator and her claims to being regarded as a person of integrity. In pursuing these themes, de Gaynesford moves from reflecting on attunement to practising it, in two separate studies. In the first, he deploys a combination of philosophy and literary criticism to analyse the metaphor that the narrator uses for herself: that of the spinning spider. It is mainly in the guise of ethics that philosophy enters here. Longstanding philosophical arguments connect integrity with such qualities as being united in agency, or true to one's self, or remaining free from taint. Yet the figure of the narrator shares none of these features. Like a Beckett character, she is highly unstable and suspicious of any attempt to define her identity. As de Gaynesford argues, though, reading the text with a literary critical attention to the felt quality of her textual performance – as opposed to merely a philosophical 'example' – places pressure on these definitions of integrity. While the narrator may have little stability as a character, she does not emerge as mad or incoherent, but instead as passionate and determined. Coetzee's text therefore qualifies John McDowell's argument in *Mind and World* that we would be merely 'spinning frictionlessly in the void' without rational relations to the world. The narrator's form of 'spinning', in which she, spider-like, spins ideas and stories about herself, complicates our conception of what is required for integrity. In de Gaynesford's second study, he deploys a combination of philosophy and literary criticism to analyse the narrator's use of brackets, the form of punctuation in which she seems most at home. The areas of philosophy called on here are philosophy of language (understanding what brackets are, what functions they perform), philosophy of action (understanding what kinds of action brackets can perform),

metaphysics (understanding the ways that Coetzee reconfigures the plight of the peculiarly Cartesian rationalist) and epistemology (what we might know, or fail to know, in making judgements about the world from a sideways-on perspective). In the final section, de Gaynesford shows how attunement can offer what Martha Nussbaum has called on philosophically-minded critics to provide, and raises a number of further questions that send us between the practice of attunement and reflection on that practice.

I Attunement

Some literary texts call for the attunement of philosophy and literary criticism. I have argued for this elsewhere in relation to poetry.[1] But it is true also of some prose fiction, and here I argue for it in relation to J. M. Coetzee's *In The Heart Of The Country* (*Heart* henceforth[2]). I shall first sketch out what I mean by attunement, offer various reasons why I think *Heart* calls for it, and then pursue some of these reasons to see how attunement might work out in detail.

By attunement, I mean a mutually shaping approach in which we really do philosophy in doing literary criticism. By 'doing philosophy', I mean analyzing material in genuinely philosophical ways, with the prospect of changing the way we think about things in general. By 'doing literary criticism', I mean adopting a genuinely critical approach, with the prospect of changing the way we respond to literary works. And I mean 'mutually shaping' in a strong sense: attunement is a single, unified activity.

If this makes it seem that the normal disciplinary and classificatory boundaries between philosophy and literary criticism reflect deeper differences between them, then that is accurate enough. Very often, and not simply in seminar rooms, we are struck by three things: the different kinds of question that philosophy and literary criticism tend to ask, the different objects on which they tend to focus their attention, and the different modes of attentiveness they tend to focus on those objects. For example, a paradigmatic philosophical question in this area is 'What is literature?', one that literary critics are content to say is not a literary question.[3] Given such a question, the

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[1] See 'The Seriousness of Poetry', *Essays in Criticism*, 59, 2009, 1-21; 'Speech acts, responsibility and commitment in poetry' in Peter Robinson (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary British and Irish Poetry* (Oxford: OUP, 2013) pp. 617-37; *The Rift in the Lute: Attuning Poetry and Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

[2] References throughout are to the reprinted, currently available edition (London: Vintage, 2004).

[3] Derek Attridge 'Introduction: Derrida and the questioning of literature' *Acts of Literature* ed. Derek Attridge (London: Routledge, 1992) pp. 1-29; p. 1. Some philosophers would also deny that it is simply a philosophical question; see

focus tends to be on the essence of literature, and the mode of attentiveness frames itself around the need to identify a few very general differences between what does and what does not count as such. Paradigmatic literary critical questions, on the other hand, are those that enable us to get to grips with the literary content of particular works. Given such questions, the focus tends to be on collecting and then relating very many specific features of that work to each other, and the mode of attentiveness frames itself around the need to persuade us of the existence and relevance of those features to some reading or set of possible readings. These divergences go some way to explaining why it is that philosophy often changes the way we think about things in general but rarely affects the way we respond to particular literary works, and why it is that the reverse is true of literary criticism.

If there are such differences between philosophy and literary criticism, it may seem problematic that attunement presents itself as a single, unified activity. But attunement is like walking in this respect, also a single unified activity. Someone able to walk would normally be able to move each of their two legs independently of each other, but they would have to unify these movements to engage in what would count, at least standardly, as walking. In the same way, someone able to attune philosophy and literary criticism would normally be able to appreciate literature and do philosophy independently of each other, but they would have to unify these activities to engage in what would count as attunement. Appreciating literature and doing philosophy contribute equally to this one exercise. The contribution is mutually shaping, with one constantly affecting and responding to the position and force of the other. So attunement contrasts with approaches which take a pre-existing philosophical outlook and impose it on literature, or which take a pre-existing critical outlook and impose it on philosophy.[4] Attunement is to these affairs what walking is to hopping.

In attunement, philosophy takes literary criticism as an opportunity to exercise itself, and vice versa. How? As a starting point, and only that, it is clear enough that appreciating literature as such has intimately to do with what language is, what it does and what it is for, just as philosophy as such has intimately to do with these same questions. On the one hand, these questions invoke a good deal of philosophy. On the other hand, abstract ingenuity and formal resourcefulness alone are rarely enough to answer

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Derrida 'Is there a philosophical language?' in *Points…Interviews 1974-1994* ed. Elizabeth Weber (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995) pp. 216-27; p. 217. I agree, for reasons that are our business here: it is a question that calls for the attunement of literary criticism and philosophy.

[4] Toril Moi is rightly concerned about the first model, which is common in attempts to bring philosophy and literature together; 'The adventure of reading: Literature and Philosophy, Cavell and Beauvoir' (2011, 125-40).

them. Sensibility and receptivity to the varied uses of language are also called for, capacities that are sustained and developed by appreciating literature. Building on this commonality, it is possible to find mutually enhancing ways of appreciating literature and doing philosophy, rather than simply using one to illustrate or ornament the other.

This is a brief, stratospheric and necessarily inadequate way to make these points, lacking nuance and carefulness. Greater subtlety and precision should come as we proceed, and in the only way possible: by practising attunement in relation to specific literary works.

II Attunement and *In The Heart Of The Country*

It may be possible to practise attunement on any literary work. But of some we may say that they *call* for attunement—that their content is such as to encourage, perhaps even to require, that we engage in this single, unified activity. *Heart* belongs to this category for reasons we shall now examine.

One of the most compelling has been raised and acutely shaped by Derek Attridge. If he is right, 'there is nothing in the entire narrative from start to finish that, in the final analysis, could escape the possibility of being read as fantasy'.[5] So, he asks, what would a 'responsible reading procedure' for such a fiction be? Just to see this problem for what it is, let alone to go about answering it, one has to cross backwards and forwards between collecting many specific details of the narrative and assessing their significance for our reading procedure, asking what a 'responsible' procedure would be, sharpening the answer for this particular occasion so that it is capable of taking account of these specific details that we have begun to appreciate, and then using that procedure to adjust what we look out for, recognizing new details as significant, relating them in new ways, then sharpening the procedure again to take account of what we have now learned, and then using it to identify and assemble new details, and so on, back and forth between philosophy and literary criticism. This is the attuning of poetry and philosophy, a process that is at once systematic and cumulative. And Coetzee's novel calls for it, if Attridge is right about what *Heart* has it in mind to ask.

Another reason for acknowledging that *Heart* calls for attunement is that one of its major themes does so. When the novel was first published in its English version[6]—by Martin Secker and Warburg Limited in 1977—the dust-jacket set the scene:

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[5] *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading* (London: The University of Chicago Press, 2004) p. 28.

[6] 'English version prepared by the author' (London: Martin Secker and Warburg Ltd, 1977) Copyright page. In the South African version (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1977), the dialogue was in Afrikaans. On the

> Stifling in the torpor of colonial South Africa, trapped with his serfs in a web of reciprocal oppression, a lonely sheepfarmer makes a bid for private salvation in the arms of a black concubine, child-bride of his foreman.

This weird sensationalism—it belongs to a Wilbur Smith novel—is chiefly notable for its fantastically skewed perspective: there is no mention of the narrator[7], not even a space left for her, though she is the central character in what is narrated, the figure whose development is the subject-matter of the novel, the only one whose thoughts and responses are considered along with her actions.[8] And yet there is also something appropriate about this silencing of the narrator.[9] For this is the nub at which the novel worries away: partly the way in which a speaker may be silenced, robbed of voice, left speechless, and partly the way in which that same speaker may nevertheless silence others or control the silence, deciding when (and when not) to be silent.[10] As Coetzee comments, '[the narrator] is an anomalous figure: her passion doesn't belong in the genre in which she finds herself'.[11] Just to see the problems that the novel thus sets for itself, and for us, is to cross backwards and forwards

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'disturbing' effects of this 'switching of languages'—for a South African reader—see Derek Attridge *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading* (London: The University of Chicago Press, 2004) pp. 22-3

[7] Preferable to the more rarified 'speaker' since she has, so essentially, a story to tell.

[8] For the blurb in the South African version, Coetzee advised that Ravan Press use a review from the *Irish Times*, one that does focus on the narrator and her 'delusions' (see Peter D. McDonald *The Literature Police: Apartheid Censorship and its Cultural Consequences* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009 p. 311). Coetzee himself was responsible for the Secker and Warburg blurb it seems (conversation with Peter McDonald).

[9] The sense of 'silencing' in play here wavers, just as 'mute' does, between a dampening of sound (e.g. a trumpet-mute) and a cutting out of sound (e.g. a 'mute button'). And it is worth asking why we are comfortable with a word that could mean either, when—so we might assume—it is so very important to know *which* is meant. Is it, perhaps, that it is convenient to avoid having to say which?

[10] *Heart* 7-8, 28-9, 39. Coetzee's discussions of censorship are relevant here (*Giving Offense: Essays on Censorship* Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1996), particularly his carefully attuned response to Catherine MacKinnon's claims that the pervasiveness of pornography has worked not only to subordinate but to silence women ('The harms of pornography' in *Giving Offense* pp. 61-82).

[11] Interview with David Attwell *Doubling The Point* ed. David Attwell (London: Harvard University Press, 1992) p. 62.

between collecting specific details about the complexities of silencing and assessing their significance for the economies of self-fashioning and self-destruction, between noticing just and unjust actions and asking what conceptions of justice enable us to arrive at these judgements, developing our answers so that we are capable of recognizing more and better evidence for these judgements, of proceeding from clearer and sharper conceptions, and so on, back and forth.

Heart's dealings with integrity—its nature and complexity, what it requires and how it is sustained, what weakens it and what destroys it—are another reason for thinking that the novel encourages and requires us to form a single, unified activity out of philosophy and literary criticism. On the one hand, the narrator is presented as a person of integrity. Indeed, this is one of the most striking features of *Heart*. It can best be appreciated in conjunction with the silencing theme. The narrator counters her silencing with attempts to silence others and to control her own silence, where this qualified exercise of a qualified control is an aspect of her integrity. On the other hand, it is difficult to see exactly how this can be the case. On the usual conceptions, the narrator is anything but a person of integrity. She does not seem at all a unified, integrated person. She is not a person who has a true self to be true to. She is not an uncorrupted person, innocent, free from taint. This problem is related to another: how is the integrity of the narrator made manifest? For the manic monologue-form of *Heart* seems anything but promising as the expression of a person of integrity. It often seems closer to Yeats' description of *Ulysses*: 'neither what the eye sees nor the ear hears, but what the rambling mind imagines from moment to moment.'[12]To recognise these problems is to cross between noticing specific details of the narrative and assessing their significance in the light of various conceptions of integrity, sharpening the answers so that they can make sense of these details, sharpening our sense of the integrity that is in play here.

So this is another reason why *Heart* calls for attunement. To pursue the integrity theme in a literary critical way, getting to grips with the literary content of the novel, is to be constantly attentive to questions of philosophical significance, where pursuing these questions sends us back into a more acute search of the literary material.

III The Spinning of the Spider

Heart calls for attunement. We know something about what this means and why it holds. But we have yet to appreciate what attunement might look like in practice, what shape an inquiry might take if it formed a single, unified activity out of philosophy and literary criticism. That is our task in this section

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[12] Quoted in *James Joyce* Richard Ellmann revised edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982) pp. 530-1.

and the one following, where we shall pursue some of the themes we have touched on.

Start with a detail. The narrator likens herself to a spider—'a black widow spider'[13] and develops the metaphor in one particular direction: 'I have always felt easier spinning my answers out of my own bowels'.[14] This is partly a pun no doubt, converting anger at representations of her state ('Do I feel rich outrage at my spinster fate?') into something more positive, the spinster ('When I was a little girl (weave! weave!) in a frilled bonnet I would sit all day in the dust').[15] And it reflects the resolve of the narrator ('Prolong yourself, prolong yourself, that is the whisper I hear in my inmost.').[16] The spider may also be prompted by Francis Bacon's well-known characterisation: 'rationalists, like spiders, spin threads out of themselves', by contrast with empiricists who, 'like the ants, merely collect and use'.[17]

'Those are the antagonists'[18]: this is how the narrator introduces herself, her father and his new wife, as if there were no protagonist. And in some ways there is not. Not in the sense in which, say, Descartes' *Meditations* lacks a protagonist (that the particularities of the 'I' are gradually stripped away, so that it becomes a voice without much individuality, making it possible for any reader to slip into the role). This narrator is always to the fore, with all that makes her individual. Rather, it is that the story leaves no room for a protagonist. She is so overwhelmingly self-critical—and the story is so much that of her self-criticism—that she can only figure in the role of antagonist, at once the opposing and opposed force. In and around her, the protagonist role is silenced.

Though the narrator is to the fore with all the particularities that Descartes strips away, she negotiates a context that is in many ways like that of Descartes' meditator, distrustful of others and of her environment, thrown back on her own resources, particularly her rich inner mental life.[19]

The complexity here is figured in various ways, but the main point can be simply illustrated. The central character is known to us throughout as 'I' and is named for us only towards the end—as 'Miss Magda'[20]—by another character and in such a way that we may even doubt whether this really is her name. Without a certain name, she recedes somewhat, but into a silence that

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[13] *Heart* p. 43; also pp. 64, 75.
[14] *Heart* p. 150.
[15] *Heart* pp. 5, 6.
[16] *Heart* p. 6.
[17] Bacon, *Novum Organum*, tr. P. Urbach and J. Gibson (Chicago: Open Court, 1994) Book 1, aphorism 95, paragraph 64.
[18] *Heart* p. 1.
[19] *Heart* pp. 4, 59, 137-8, 150.
[20] *Heart* p. 111.

she may herself have chosen, and one that is in part protective—since being named gives one salience, but also grants others power over one.

This complexity may direct us to the usual philosophical questions: is knowledge possible under such constraints, and if so how? Because the narrator has some special faculties, perhaps? But what is of equally deep significance to our understanding of the novel is the way the narrator herself conceives of this complexity, grapples with the epistemic condition in which she recedes into a partly protective silence, by presenting herself under the metaphor of the spinning spider, at the centre of a world of her own making, steadfast, resolute, intense, single-minded, passionately devoted to her task:

> There is no doubt about it, what keeps me going … is my determination, my iron determination, my iron intractable risible determination.[21]

Steadfastness, resolution, passionate intensity: according to many philosophers—John Rawls, Alasdair Macintyre, Michael Slote, Lynne McFall—to have such characteristics is to be a person of integrity.[22] That the narrator is such a person is something that comes across strongly to the reader, despite her acknowledged weaknesses of character and rationality. (Many of these are exaggerated or playful, e.g. 'How can I be deluded when I think so clearly?')[23] And our appreciation of this coheres with Coetzee's own: in resisting the temptation to interpret the narrator as mad, what he insists on is precisely her 'passion' and 'intensity' and 'all-embracingness', calling it a 'species of love'.[24]

Some think of integrity in other ways: as essentially a matter of being united in agency[25], or of being true to one's ('true') self[26], or of remaining free

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[21] *Heart* p. 19.

[22] John Rawls *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972). Alasdair Macintyre *After Virtue* (London: Duckworth, 1985). Michael Slote *Morals from Motives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). Lynne McFall 'Integrity', *Ethics*, 98, 1987, pp. 5-20.

[23] *Heart* p. 137. Note how her confessions of ignorance about philosophy (p. 19) are offset later by her ability not only to quote but to confront passages—of Novalis (p. 138), Nietzsche (p. 139), Hegel (p. 141), Weil (p. 141), Rousseau (p. 146), Pascal (p. 146). Some passages, for example pp. 38-9, show a knowledge of Wittgenstein.

[24] Interview (with Derek Attwell) *Doubling The Point* p. 61. Coetzee moves swiftly in a short conversation from '[she] may be mad (if that is indeed your verdict), but I, behind her, am merely passionate' to '(I see no further point in calling her mad)'.

[25] For example, Christine Korsgaard (*Self-Constitution*, OUP, 2009); John Cottingham 'The Ethics of Self-Concern', *Ethics*, 1991, pp. 798-817; Gabrielle Taylor 'Integrity', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary

from taint.[27] The narrator is not in a position to satisfy these requirements, and this tells us a good deal about her. Too damaged to count as united in agency, she is not integrated, intact or whole. Too sceptical of herself and others, she is scornful of the aim to be true to oneself, to be identified with one's actions, motivations, projects. Too conscious of her own complicity in injustice, she does not mischaracterise herself as pure, innocent, decent.

Indeed, the narrator is particularly sensitive to perceived taint ('wherein does my own corruption lie?'; 'I am corrupted to the bone with the beauty of this forsaken world'[28]) and her monologue is replete with various ways of talking about it—ways of talking of other human beings as 'low-grade people, degenerate types, *Untermenschen*, the unfit, slave races'; 'phrases involving blood (*blood-consciousness, pure blood, tainted blood*, etc.)'; 'certain terms from the fringes of the science of heredity (*taint, flaw, degeneration*)' which Coetzee notes elsewhere have been 'put a stop to' by the Nuremberg trials and what they revealed.[29]

These contrasts also tell us a good deal about the kind of integrity that the narrator *does* manifest. We might regard it as a virtue of hers that she possesses integrity *in spite of* the fact that she does not satisfy these other requirements. But we may also think that it is precisely *because* she does not satisfy them—because she acknowledges her fragmentary nature, her lack of a self to be true to, her complicity in injustice—that she manifests integrity, or at least the particular kind of integrity she does manifest.

Much of the narrative is constructed in such a way as to replicate the narrator's conception of herself as a spinning spider, working away and producing material out of itself. This is the basic form: an idea or image will occur fleetingly in one section, a side-thought only, and will then become the

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volume, 55, 1981; Valerie Tiberius *The Reflective Life: Living wisely within our limits* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

[26] For example, Bernard Williams ' 'Persons, Character and morality' in his *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981) pp. 1-19; Harry Frankfurt 'Identification and wholeheartedness' in his *The Importance of what we Care About* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988) pp. 159-76.

[27] For example, Sissela Bok *Lying* (Hassocks, Sussex: Harvester Press, 1978).

[28] Heart pp. 64-5; p. 151

[29] *White Writing* (London: Yale University Press, 1988) Ch 6 p. 136. There need be no conflict here though the narrator does speak of a 'Führer' (*Heart* p. 11). Internal evidence e.g. the fact that she is unsure whether there were bicycles when she was young (*Heart* p. 2), makes it plausible that the events described take place prior to the Nuremberg trials. Trying to work out when and where the events of *Heart* take place caused the South African censors considerable trouble; see Peter McDonald *The Literature Police: Apartheid Censorship and its Cultural Consequences* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) p. 313.

principle thread of the next section, in which a developed form of that idea or image will occur fleetingly, and then become the principle thread of the next, and so on. This is an appropriately internal reason (or justification) for the prose style in *Heart*, which is far distant from the 'uniformly plain, flat, unadorned prose, in which nothing so luxurious as a metaphor emerges, or a striking employment of syntax, or a word of more than a few syllables' which Joyce Carol Oates finds in Coetzee's *The Childhood of Jesus*.[30]

This 'spinning' form is established early and becomes increasingly complex. As illustration, consider the early sequence §§3-6. In §3, the narrator 'extracts' a 'faint grey image' which she immediately works up into something more material, from a grey *image* to an image *of* something grey, her 'faint grey frail gentle loving mother'.

She extracts the image 'from one of the furthest oubliettes of memory' where this word for a secret dungeon whose access is limited to a trapdoor in the ceiling may recall John Locke's famous description of the mind as a 'dark room', 'a closet wholly shut from light, with only some little openings left, to let in external visible resemblances, or ideas of things without'.[31] The use of 'oubliette' to suggest such a room may betray a taste in the narrator for sensationalist Romantic literature; Walter Scott adopted the word into English, in *Ivanhoe* in 1819.[32]

The image remains fleeting and diaphanous here, but it becomes the central theme and subject of the succeeding section (§4) as the 'frail gentle loving woman', the mother whose dying is poignantly described there. In §4, the fleeting sense of her compassion is introduced, which will become the central theme in §6, the 'womanly warmth' against which the narrator contrasts herself as 'a zero, null, a vacuum'—where it is possible to see this nullity also as an inheritance from her mother, reading the threefold description of herself as 'a zero, null, a vacuum' (in §6) beside the threefold description of her moribund mother as 'patient, bloodless, apologetic' (in §4). And from here—§6— the original image is spun further, again using the original 'grey': what was in §3 a 'faint grey image' and then a 'faint, grey, frail gentle loving mother' becomes in §6 a description of herself as 'a turbulence, muffled, grey, like a chill draft eddying through the corridors, neglected, vengeful'. Spinning makes this transition possible, a self-reflection that moves from disembodied image through to full embodied human presence and back again to something disembodied.[33]

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[30] *New York Times Review*, 2014.

[31] *An Essay concerning Human Understanding* Book II, Ch 11 § 17.

[32] Entry under 'oubliette' in *Oxford English Dictionary*.

[33] This theme of 'embodied' and 'disembodied' prose is evidently of considerable significance to Coetzee; he uses it to distinguish between those works of Beckett which 'matter' to him. Interview with David Attwell

The practice develops many complexities in the course of the monologue. For example, the 'impulse… telling me to hide in a corner like a black widow spider' in §85 prompts the theme for the next section 'But the truth is that I have worn black widow-weeds longer than I can remember' and then doubles back to re-invoke the insect in §86: 'for all I know I was a baby in a black diaper waving my rickety little legs'.

The narrator is conscious of her spinning practice and increasingly reflective about it; it makes her impressively self-reliant but it has its limitations which embarrass her: 'That is what she gets from me, colonial philosophy, words with no history behind them, homespun, when she wants stories'.[34] So there is an odd combination of resignation and pridefulness about her concluding comment: 'I have always felt easier spinning my answers out of my own bowels'.[35]

The spinning form stands in clear relation to the use of numbered sections (§§1-266) which play so large a role in determining the appearance and form of *Heart*. Coetzee reflected later that his decision to use such sections was influenced by his interest in 'film and / or photography', and particularly 'how rapidly narration could be carried out' in film. This interest led him to 'a heavy concentration' on 'cutting, montage' in *Heart*, whose sequences are numbered precisely to assist this 'feature of technique: they act 'as a way of pointing to what is not there between them'.[36] The numbering certainly intensifies the effects of spinning in *Heart*. By creating semi-discrete sections with gaps in between, ideas can be spun very rapidly. A faint image or idea can be introduced in the sidelines of one and then appear fully embodied and dominant in the next, where the reader can be relied on to fill in the transition, just as a film-watcher manages cuts.

John McDowell's phrase 'spinning frictionlessly in a void'[37] seems apt for this. In part, this is because it is precisely in a *void* that the narrator's spinning takes place. As she herself recognizes (or at least as she presents herself; the distinction is necessary because of games played with the reliability of the narration), she is forced to live off her own resources, being cut off from the rest of the world geographically (she lives in an isolated house in a desert region[38]) and socially (she and her soon-to-be-dead father

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Doubling The Point ed. David Attwell (London: Harvard University Press, 1992) p. 23.

[34] *Heart* p. 125.

[35] *Heart* p. 150.

[36] *Doubling the Point* pp. 59, 142-3.

[37] *Mind and World* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1996) p. 11.

[38] Coetzee comments ruefully: it is a landscape 'I know… all too well'. Interview with David Attwell *Doubling The Point* ed. David Attwell (London: Harvard University Press, 1992) p. 142.

are exceptions, isolated members of a master class) and emotionally (her mother is dead; her brutal father has chosen a young wife inimical to his daughter).

In part, McDowell's phrase is apt because it is precisely in a *frictionless* way that the narrator's spinning takes place. As she recognizes (or at least as she presents herself), she is in a hopelessly compromised, subordinate position, quite powerless to constrain what happens. Her labours, and indeed her presence, have little effect on the way things are. Conversely—though this is not so constantly part of her self-presentation—the world seems incapable of constraining her. In particular, the way things are seems to exert little or no influence on the material she spins out. The words we read seem detached, self-generating, self-sustaining. So it seems curiously beside the point to ask whether or not the narrator gives an accurate depiction of what happens, whether her words truly 'match' reality. We have the sense that the material would have been spun out this way regardless.

McDowell coined the phrase for another purpose: we would be 'spinning frictionlessly in the void' if our experience failed to provide us with rational relations to the world. The metaphor McDowell puts in play is not that of an individual working away and producing material from out of itself, but of a rotating object, revolving on itself—a perfectly smooth sphere perhaps. 'Spinning frictionlessly' in this sense would be a poor or even hopeless position for the rational subject to be in, epistemically speaking. To be able to think knowledgeably, our thoughts must 'have a grip' on the world, must 'gain purchase' there. To count as such, the knowing rational subject must have their experience *constrained* by the way the world is.

When these two senses of 'spinning frictionlessly in a void' rub up against each other, there is some friction: it becomes a pertinent question to ask just how the narrator's spinning is even possible. She seems to be capable of acting in a knowing and rational manner. Either this is only ever mere appearance, or empiricism is wrong: there need be no rational constraint by the world if a subject is to act in a knowing and rational manner. Spinning (spider-spinning) is possible whilst spinning (sphere-spinning) frictionlessly in a void. The first option is unappealing: we may think the narrator mad, or touched by madness, but to suppose her incapable of *ever* acting in a knowing and rational manner is inconsistent with the text and would drain it of interest. To adopt the second option and thus challenge McDowell's modest form of empiricism is to ask 'how *does* the narrator spin whilst spinning?'

This inquiry into the spider and its spinning is in its opening stages. But we have done enough to answer the question set. For we have seen how the theme encourages and requires us to form a single, unified activity out of philosophy and literary criticism. The combination has revealed a variety of means through which the narrator's integrity is achieved, and centrally by an instrument that develops the figure of the narrator. She meets the temptation

to spin frictionlessly in a void, an object revolving on itself without any 'grip' on the world, with attempts to re-conceive herself as a spinning spider, working away and producing material out of itself. And this integration of her self-conception as a spin-ster with her control over language, over her use of the monologue-form, opens up an alternative conception of integrity, based around being constant and resolute, which seems to be possible for a person without the usual markers of integrity—being unified, being authentic, being uncorrupted. In short, we have moved from talking about attunement to practising it.

IV Brackets and what they Dis-enclose

The attunement that *Heart* calls for can be practised in many ways. We have just used it to work on a metaphor, that of the spinning spider. We shall now use it to work on an element of punctuation.

Start again with a detail. The narrator describes herself as living 'inside a skin inside a house'.[39] Matching this, she seems most at home in brackets. It is in what she places there that we seem to get closest to her thoughts, her voice, her tone. Consider the close of the novel:

> I have never felt myself to be another man's creature (here they come, how sweet the closing plangencies), I have uttered my life in my own voice throughout (what a consolation that is), I have chosen at every moment my own destiny, which is to die here in the petrified garden, behind locked gates, near my father's bones, in a space echoing with hymns I could have written but did not because (I thought) it was too easy.[40]

The narrator uses the brackets to comment ironically on common forms ('the closing plangencies') which press almost inescapably on her own 'voice', even while she claims this voice as her own, so that we wonder how much of a 'consolation' this ownership really is. The brackets also serve as a correlative to the 'locked gates' and the echoing space they enclose, a resonance which in the final occurrence—'(I thought)'—returns the voice to the rationalist theme, turning the essential feature of the Cartesian meditator ('I think') into the past tense, making what is indubitable (if I am doubting, I cannot doubt I am thinking, because to doubt is to think) into what is thoroughly dubitable (how

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[39] *Heart* p. 10. This notion of an embedding which is also an embodying resonates with other aspects of Coetzee's work; for a discussion of both relations in the context of Elizabeth Costello's reflections on the monologue by Red Peter in Kafka's 'Report to an Academy', see Stephen Mulhall *The Wounded Animal: J. M. Coetzee and the Difficulty of Reality in Literature and Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009) pp. 162-72 (embeddedness), pp. 172-83 (embodiedness).

[40] *Heart* p. 151.

can I be certain that once *I thought*? The fact that I am doubting now, in the present, is no guarantee of what happened in the past).

One use the narrator has for her brackets is to reflect, and reflect on, various aspects of her silencing. There are, for example, her own attempts to be silent:

> I close the door, sit down…This is the irreducible, this is my room (I settle deep in my chair)…[41]

where the brackets help figure seclusion of self prior to intense thought (like Descartes setting out on his *Meditations*, or the eponymous hero strapped into his chair at the start of Beckett's *Murphy*.)

There are the narrator's attempts to silence others:

> (I have said nothing of the girl's nakedness. Why?)[42]

where this is made complex by what the brackets contain, a saying of what is not being said.

There is the narrator's being silenced:

> Having failed to make my shouts heard (but am I sure they did not hear me? Perhaps they heard me but found me uninteresting, or perhaps it is not their wont to acknowledge communications), I turned to writing.[43]

where this being silenced is as much a matter of others not listening, not being unreceptive.

There is the segregating of the narrator's narrative, played out in part in that concluding passage with its ironic detachment:

> I have never felt myself to be another man's creature (here they come, how sweet the closing plangencies), I have uttered my life in my own voice throughout (what a consolation that is)[44]

where the brackets sustain the sense that her narration is wholly removed, of a different order, much as in Shakespeare's Sonnet 49:

> Against that time (if ever that time come)
> When I shall see thee frown on my defects[45]

where the bracketing in the first line underlines the sense of what is there enclosed: that unlike the events which we might expect to be described in poem, this is one whose time may not come, and hence we are to regard it as appropriately segregated, its existence as belonging to another order.

Heart complicates the way brackets segregate, for example to double what is described

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[41] *Heart* p. 52.
[42] *Heart* p. 68.
[43] *Heart* p. 144.
[44] *Heart* p. 151.
[45] *The Oxford Shakespeare: Complete Sonnets and Poems* ed. Colin Burrow (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) p. 479.

> It is at times like these that I notice (what a helpful device a mirror is for bringing things into the open, if one can call it a device, so devoid of mechanism) how thickly the hair grows between my eyes[46]

There is a Beckett-like comedy to this: the reflective passage set in the midst of the everyday. And the brackets seem to work like the mirror they speak of, a helpful device which brings into the open what the surrounding sentence would cover over.

Brackets also reflect and offer their own commentary on the central themes of the novel. There is, for example, the general spinning economy

> When I was a little girl (weave! weave!) in a frilled bonnet…[47]

and resoluteness, the particular form the narrator's integrity takes

> (Yet what is it in me that shrinks from the light?... Prolong yourself, prolong yourself, that is the whisper I hear in my inmost.)[48]

and the narrator's attempts to recede, to draw back, and to draw away

> (and what do I, poor provincial blackstocking, know about philosophy, as the lamp gutters and the clock strikes ten?). [49]

From these examples, we can see how the narrator employs brackets not only to register and face up to the way she is silenced, but to exert an equal and opposite set of forces, to push back, setting up her own sphere in which she can exercise silence herself, both in silencing others and in choosing to silence herself. She uses brackets to counter being placed out-of-play by her father and step-mother and servants (as well as by various geographical, social and economic features of her situation), enabling herself to remain alongside them. Again, she uses brackets to counter being viewed by others in an excluding way, enabling herself to view the whole situation which contains others from within that whole situation, as one amongst its various occupants of it. And this exercise of her capacity to think and act in an including way, by means of her uses of brackets, is also an aspect of her integrity. This use enables her to meet being segregated with attempts to find value in being unique, in being regarded as unique. It enables her to meet being contained by other people and by various features of her situation with attempts to re-conceive containment—as inclusion rather than restraint.

These uses of brackets call for philosophical reflection. By creating an inside, brackets raise the question of an outside. They form their own commentary. Nesting one text with another enables one voice to be nested in another. They are, if Coleridge is right, 'the drama of reason'; 'no work of impassioned and eloquent reasoning ever did or could subsist without

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[46] *Heart* p. 23.
[47] *Heart* p. 6.
[48] *Heart* p. 6.
[49] *Heart* p. 19.

them'.[50] In its use of brackets, *Heart* complicates Dr Johnson's dictum about parentheses—that in them, a sentence is 'so included in another sentence, as that it may be taken out without injuring the sense of that which encloses it'. The basic idea retains a strong hold on theorists of punctuation. Strong contrary evidence in usage has not got rid of the idea but seems only to have modified it. Eric Partridge is representative: 'The essence of all parentheses is that … they explain or modify, but they do not determine the sense'.[51] The idea is retained in the philosophy of linguistics with the notions of 'bracket absorption' and 'bracket erasure'.[52] If the narrator's brackets enclose her deepest self, its reflections, then Johnson's dictum is a very effective means of silencing her. But equally it may be that she uses the dictum for her own purposes: brackets enable her to say things, to 'get away' with doing so.

Brackets have particular relations to silence and silencing, as we have seen. Christopher Ricks develops the thought in insisting that brackets speak to the eye rather than the ear, that their use draws attention to silence as something beyond what is voiceable.[53] But Ricks is somewhat evasive here because he does seem to admit that *something* about brackets is voiced:

> [brackets] belong with those signs of punctuation which the voice cannot *sufficiently* utter…the voice is not able to make *adequately* clear (adequate in both delicacy and clarity) whether the parenthesis is bracketed off, comma'd off, or dashed off.[54]

The point here is a good one: that the voice has no clear means of indicating that it is *brackets*, rather than some other parenthetical device (like dashes, commas), that are being used. Ricks agrees that punctuation which is markedly durational can be uttered. But he denies that brackets are essentially a mark of duration. They indicate a relationship that may or may not have a durational dimension. This is why he says 'they speak to the eye and not to the ear'.[55] Still, Ricks seems to me too absolute in all this. When he says 'they speak to the eye and not to the ear', what he might have said (and done the careful distinguishing work then necessary) is that they *may* speak to the ear, but in a way that differs in various respects (and here they are…) from their speaking to the eye.

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[50] Letter to Thomas Poole, 28th Jan 1810.

[51] *You Have a Point There* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1953) p. 63.

[52] See Geoffrey Nunberg *The Linguistics of Punctuation* (Stanford: CSLI, 1990) pp. 57-64.

[53] *The Force of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984) pp. 294-5.

[54] *The Force of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984) pp. 294; 295. My emphases.

[55] Not marking what is logically comic about this speaking to an eye. How could the eye be expected to hear? Is this not another form of silencing—like putting one's blind eye to the telescope?

Heart offers opportunities to pursue this more discriminating approach, once we attune our literary and philosophical attention. In her use of brackets, for example, the narrator sometimes takes on a sideways-on perspective to the world, seeming to regard herself as circumscribed within a boundary with the world outside, but nevertheless capable of making judgements about that world. This is a metaphor that John McDowell adopts to portray a common philosophical conception of the way mind and world relate.[56] Sometimes, however, the narrator uses brackets to take up the perspective that McDowell contrasts with this sideways-on perspective. Like her, he is particularly interested in the case where one works at making someone else 'intelligible'.[57] We can find others initially 'opaque'[58], but nevertheless retain the sense that the world this other person is engaging with is a shared world, so that we come to a standpoint from which we can join that other person in directing a shared attention at the world.[59] And this also is figured in the narrator's use of brackets. On occasion, they do not operate as a figure of the boundary one might have to break through, but as an opportunity for conscious self-reflection on the fact that one's world is a shared world. For example,

> A woman with red blood in her veins (what colour is mine? A watery pink? An inky violet?) would have pushed a hatchet into his hands and bundled him into the house to search for vengeance.[60]

Here, whilst calming the violence of the image, the brackets also serve to set the narrator's sense of herself within an overall context that includes her sense of others. Brackets are a means of uniting these impressions.

This inquiry into brackets and what they dis-enclose is still in its early stages. But we have done enough to see what an inquiry would look like if it formed a single, unified activity out of philosophy and literary criticism. And we have begin to appreciate the breadth of the philosophy that an attuned reading of *Heart* calls upon. Not just ethics and moral psychology, which the focus on silencing and integrity makes central, but also philosophy of language (understanding what brackets are, what functions they perform), philosophy of action (understanding what effects brackets can achieve and how, what kinds of action they can perform), metaphysics (understanding the ways that Coetzee reconfigures the plight of the peculiarly Cartesian rationalist) and epistemology (what we might know, or fail to know, in making judgements about the world from a sideways-on perspective).

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[56] *Mind and World* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1996) p. 34.
[57] *Mind and World* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1996) p. 35
[58] *Mind and World* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1996) p. 34
[59] *Mind and World* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1996) pp. 35-6.
[60] *Heart* p. 68.

V Further Reflections

We have now seen two examples of what attunement looks like in practice. The experience raises further questions that send us from practice back to reflection. Where does attunement end? Is there some priority between literary criticism and philosophy, some privilege that one has over the other in terms of approach or point of entry? Is this unified activity a mixture of philosophy and literary criticism or a compound of them? Does philosophy or literary criticism change its character within the activity that is attunement? Are there particular kinds of literary work that call for attunement—do they form a recognizable type, and if so, in virtue of what? Or are all literary works such that they call for attunement, and if so, what is it about all such works that makes this the case? These are deep questions that raise complex issues and each deserves a chapter of its own. I cannot deal with them here, but they are worth raising now so as to offer possible routes beyond this chapter.

What I can offer by way of conclusion is a kind of checklist, following a recommendation by Martha Nussbaum. She laid down various requirements for any philosophical study of Shakespeare if it is to 'make any contribution worth caring about'.[61] If we generalise these requirements, with one amendment, we arrive at a basic conception of what it is that attunement sets out to achieve. And my claim is that we have been meeting these requirements in our approach to Coetzee's *Heart*.

The first requirement is that an inquiry must really *do* philosophy, 'wondering and pondering in a genuinely philosophical way'. This is something we have made a start at with the discussion of silencing and integrity, of what brackets are and what they do, of the metaphysics and epistemology associated with the figure of the narrator. Second, an inquiry must really *do* literary criticism, 'changing the way we see the work'. Again, this is something we have made a start at, noticing the dramatic salience of the pinning metaphor and of brackets in *Heart*, thus developing and changing the way we see the novel, both in particular places and as a whole, reconfiguring the elements, sharpening attentiveness, unlocking principles of composition, doing literary criticism in doing philosophy. Third, an inquiry must explain why philosophers *need* literary texts, what they supply that straightforward philosophical prose does not, why 'the philosopher must care'. Our reflections on *Heart* go some way towards meeting this requirement. In thinking about what is at issue in silencing and being silenced, in comparing and contrasting different conceptions of integrity, in appreciating the effects that brackets achieve, there is much that a literary text can convey which ordinary philosophical prose finds difficult or impossible—a sufficiently rich sense of what is *at stake* for the narrator in her silenced and silencing position, in the complexities of her exercise of integrity, in her

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[61] 'Stages of Thought' *The New Republic*, May, 2008.

reasons for retreating into the use of brackets. But a full study would also show other uses: that there is a real prospect of improving our philosophy of language analysis of brackets, for example, if we use literary works like *Heart* to appreciate what they are *for*, what *uses* they have.

That exhausts Nussbaum's requirements, but we ought to add a fourth. An inquiry must explain why texts like *Heart* or authors like Coetzee *need* philosophers, what philosophy supplies that straightforward literary criticism does not, why we must care about philosophy. Again, our reflections on *Heart* only go some way towards meeting this requirement, but it is already evident what a full study might show: that there is a real prospect of improving our understanding of the novel if we use philosophy to appreciate the ethical and metaphysical and epistemological questions it raises. Sometimes philosophy will give us reason to revise a critic's view of the novel—its dealings with philosophy are not restricted to a kind of intellectual flummery in the quotations that occur towards the end, as is often assumed, but inform the metaphors and uses of punctuation which the narrator adopts, thus helping to create the conditions in which she is able to perceive herself and her situation. Sometimes philosophy enables us to offer a reasoned explanation for the impression that a critic was only able to register and record—it is often said that the novel constructs a narrator possessing a multi-layered self, but philosophy helps demonstrate how and why this is so. These are isolated cases, dependent on the context provided by one or two features of the novel alone—its use of the spinning metaphor, of brackets. A philosophically-informed full study could revise our view of the novel as a whole and give reasoned explanations for what we perceive.

For example—and this is just one option, though an important one—philosophy can recognise the ways in which *Heart* acts as a reflective study of uses of language, singularly and uniquely equipped to provide its suitably directed appreciators with philosophical insights into those uses. The opportunity to appreciate philosophical distinctions and discriminations in the novel can improve our ability to discriminate features of philosophical significance. And this opportunity to grapple anew with philosophy in turn heightens our capacity to appreciate what is rich and subtle in the novel, which returns us more richly provided to pursue philosophy, from where we can go back more generously supplied to appreciate the novel, and so on, back and forth. This vigorous spiralling—circling, but with progress—is what I mean by attuning literary criticism and philosophy.