

“Lyric is my medium, not chronicle”: Temporality and Narrative in J.M. Coetzee’s *In the Heart of the Country*

Barbara Janari

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6930-5492>

University of South Africa

janarbc@unisa.ac.za

Abstract

In J.M. Coetzee’s *In the Heart of the Country*, Magda’s contention that “[l]yric is my medium, not chronicle” reflects a recurring theme in the novel—the mutability of time. Magda’s time-orientation in the novel is unconventional: She makes a sharp distinction between the chronological time of her father (which travels along “arrow-straight paths”) and her own, “mythical” time. Her narrative does not follow a linear track—forward movement is instead often disrupted by “speculative” histories, digressions, repetition, and reversals. I would like to propose in this article that Magda’s resistance to the discourses of patriarchy and colonialism is framed primarily through her temporal reconstructions, and that her lyrical mode of narration reconceives temporality in both the novel’s narrative organisation and its thematic concerns.

Keywords: J.M. Coetzee; *In the Heart of the Country*; time; temporality; lyrical fiction; montage; reflexive referencing; speculative histories

UNISA 

Journal of Literary Studies

Volume 41 | 2025 | #19138 | 16 pages



<https://doi.org/10.25159/1753-5387/19138>

ISSN 1753-5387 (Online)

© The Author(s) 2025



Published by the Literature Association of South Africa and Unisa Press. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>)

Reflecting on what it was about Ezra Pound's Cantos that gripped him, J.M. Coetzee commented that it was "[s]omething to do with the way in which time slowed and stopped as one sense-datum after another was impeccably and unforgettably registered" (1993, 6). Coetzee's comment offers an insight into his view of the relationship between time and narrative, and reflects a concern that is especially notable in his earlier novels. In his discussion of Coetzee's connection to Franz Kafka, David Attwell suggests that "[a]ll Coetzee's novels share to some extent Kafka's concern with the relation between narrative and the experience of time" (1993, 102).

In Coetzee's novel *In the Heart of the Country*, the relationship between narrative and time is a central one. Set on an isolated farm in the Karoo, the novel is narrated by Magda, a spinster who lives on the farm with her father and the servants. Magda refers to the farm as "an island out of space, out of time" (1977, 123), emphasising both the farm's isolation and its disconnection from the usual passage of time. Magda's reflections on time foreground the novel's thematic concern with temporality, a concern that intersects with ongoing scholarly debates about gendered temporality in postcolonial contexts (Jessica Murray 2021, personal communication). When she contemplates all that has happened to her, towards the end of the novel, she reflects:

Perhaps I am wrong to picture time as a river flowing from infinite to infinite bearing me like a cork or a twig; or perhaps, having flowed above ground for a while, time flowed underground for a while, and then re-emerged, for reasons forever closed to me, and now flows again in the light. (123)

Magda's meditations at first reflect the conventional conception of time moving forward as a river, carrying us, and everything else, inexorably along with it. But she then adds a twist to this scenario: perhaps time's forward movement is disrupted, departing from its usual flow, before continuing on its way. In the next passage, Magda wonders if time even exists, commenting, "Or perhaps there is no time" (123). Magda's comments underscore the fluidity of temporal movement in the novel. Like Gabriel Garcia Marquez's novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the arrow of time, which moves inexorably forward from an immutable past, is displaced by a kind of time that is both unstable and mutable. As the narrator comments, it can falter and break:

... and then they understood that José Arcadio Buendía was not as crazy as the family said, but that he was the only one who had enough lucidity to sense the truth of the fact that time also stumbled and had accidents and could therefore splinter and leave an eternalized fragment in a room. (1979, 355)

Like José Arcadio Buendía, Magda's temporal disjunctions do not reflect madness—as Coetzee commented in an interview with David Attwell, "I see no further point in calling her mad" (Coetzee 1992, 61). He argues, instead, that "Magda is passionate ... and her passion is ... the love for South Africa," especially, "the country and its people" (61). I would argue that Magda's fractured temporality reflects her attempts to disrupt and fragment the colonial, patriarchal discourse of the farm on which she lives. Her

linguistic disruptions of sequence, and her “speculative histories,” present alternative, sometimes conflicting, versions of both the past and the future. In Magda’s narrative, temporal boundaries are frequently blurred, so that the past, present, and future intermingle in a way that emphasises the intersections in the novel between patriarchy and colonialism.

Magda’s contention that “[l]yric is my medium, not chronicle” suggests both her privileging of language and imagery over plot, as well as her resistance to a conventional, chronological narrative (1977, 71). Dominic Head, in fact, argues that Magda’s claim can be extended to Coetzee’s writing more generally, that, “in a complex sense, lyric rather than chronicle is his medium” (2009, 45). Head’s comment reflects the ways in which Coetzee’s fiction frequently eschews conventional plotting and favours an approach that challenges traditional storytelling narratives. Lyric’s approach to temporality differs from that of narrative in its expression of subjective experience, which often does not follow a linear progression of events. As Jesse Matz points out, even though events happen in linear time, we do not necessarily experience them that way, because intervening memories can take us “back into the past even as we proceed into the future” (quoted in Richardson 2006, 406). Susan Friedman and Suzanne Bennet both highlight the links between lyric and temporality. Friedman comments that, unlike lyric, “[n]arrative is understood to be a mode that foregrounds *sequence* of events” (1989, 164; italics in original). Bennet expands on this, arguing that, in lyrical fiction, “[r]ather than moving forward in time, the story turns within, goes backward, and views the present in relationship to the past” (1981, 38). With its focus on introspection and her internal state of mind, Magda’s lyric rescripts the discourse of patriarchal, colonial culture, subverting the dominant narrative and social order.

In *In the Heart of the Country*, the structure of numbered passages (1–266) sets an expectation of linear chronological progression, but this expectation is frequently frustrated—instead, the narrative moves both backwards and forwards in time, and in some cases skips time completely. At one point, Magda comments that “[a] day must have intervened here. Where there is a blank there must have been a day during which my father sickened irrecoverably” (Coetzee 1977, 79). On another occasion she comments: “All at once it is morning. It seems to lie in my power to skip over whole days or nights as if they did not happen” (93). In Magda’s narrative, forward movement is instead often disrupted by digressions, reversals, and repetition—as Wittenberg observes, “There are gaps, overlaps and repetitions which complicate a simple narrative progression” (2014, 18). Iona Gilburt also notes the gaps in the novel, arguing that, in Magda’s narrative, they are then highlighted in the spaces between each passage, and that these “visual gaps” in Magda’s narrative are “of particular import in staging a formal resistance to patriarchal modes of representation” (2017, 32). In frustration at her fragmented life, Magda comments that she wants her story to have “a beginning, a middle, and an end” (42); instead, her story more closely resembles the one in the quote by the filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard that films should have a “beginning, a middle and an end, but not necessarily in that order” (quoted in Parkinson 2015).

The novel's temporal location is both imprecise and elusive; Head points out that the types of transport used—horse, bicycle, and train—suggest the late nineteenth or early twentieth century, but that the aeroplanes at the end of the book suggest the later twentieth century (2009, 44). The uncertainty in the novel's temporal realm can be linked to a feature of what Ursula Heise refers to as the transformation in postmodernist texts away from high-modernist narrative techniques: the creation of a sense of time that is discontinuous and fragmented “into multiple temporal itineraries” (1997, 5). In Magda's narrative, temporal sequence is frequently abandoned in favour of a narrative that presents a “network” of times. This mode of narration is foregrounded in the novel's montage structure, in which events, rather than proceeding chronologically, are juxtaposed. Coetzee himself commented on the concentration of cutting, or montage, as a technical feature of the novel (1992, 142–143). This narrative technique is a feature of Coetzee's earlier works, and is reflected in both *In the Heart of the Country* and his first novel, *Dusklands*. The montage technique undermines the dominant historical discourse, eschewing a singular, absolute truth. In both novels there are multiple versions of the same event, echoing the kind of temporality seen in Jorge Louis Borges's short story “The Garden of Forking Paths.” In the story a character observes that:

In all fictional works, each time a man is confronted with several alternatives, he chooses one and eliminates the others; in the fiction of Ts'ui Pên, he chooses—simultaneously—all of them. *He creates*, in this way, diverse futures, diverse times which themselves also proliferate and fork. [...] In contrast to Newton and Schopenhauer, your ancestor did not believe in a uniform, absolute time. He believed in an infinite series of times, in a growing, dizzying net of divergent, convergent and parallel times. (1941, 7; italics in original)

Like Ts'ui Pên, Jacobus, the narrator of the second novella in *Dusklands*, “The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee,” creates “diverse futures, diverse times.” He narrates various scenarios of the same event, each presented as “forking paths.” When describing a meeting, he presents a number of different scenarios in which the meeting could proceed, commenting that he “[t]ranquilly ... traced in [his] heart the forking paths of the endless inner adventure” (Coetzee 1974, 70). Each “adventure” follows a particular trajectory and ending to the colonial quest. Temporality for Jacobus is experienced as a simultaneity of different possible events, similar to what J. Hillis Miller describes in his analysis of time in William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*. Miller argues that for Faulkner, time “exists not as a continuity between future, present and past, but as a simultaneity, an all-at-once viewed from multiple perspectives” (2003, 96). As Ursula Heise explains, such “novels thereby project into the narrative present and past an experience of time that is normally only available for the future: time dividing and subdividing, bifurcating and branching off continuously into multiple possibilities and alternatives” (1997, 55).

Magda's narrative similarly includes multiple temporal shifts in which time is split and branches off into multiple “realities.” Beginning in the novel's opening passage, her repetition of the word “perhaps” suggests numerous alternative pasts (and an indeterminate present—a reality that is open-ended and ambiguous). A few examples

demonstrate this. When Magda describes the day her father brought home his new bride, events are narrated that suggest multiple paths in time: They arrived “in a dog-cart drawn by a horse,” but they were also “perhaps” drawn by “two plumed donkeys” (Coetzee 1977, 1). When she contemplates committing suicide by drowning herself in the dam, she presents a number of alternative ways in which the drowning takes place: “Perhaps I strike out once or twice with wooden arms. Perhaps I sink a second time ... Perhaps I come to the surface again ... Perhaps I beat the water now in one spot only” (6). These alternative narratives reflect a key structuring element of the novel’s subversion of chronological sequence in its use of reflexive reference, which occurs when a text is composed of “numerous references and cross references that relate to each other independently of the time sequence of the narrative” (Frank 1963, 16). Joseph Frank suggests that the reader must connect these references and view them as a whole before a meaningful pattern can be established. As an example, he cites James Joyce’s *Ulysses* as a novel in which reflexive referencing is significant, arguing that Joyce “present[s] the elements of his novel ... in fragments” (18). The reader was expected to reconstruct the novel from these fragments, scattered throughout the book and sometimes separated by hundreds of pages, leading Frank to conclude that “Joyce cannot be read—he can only be reread” (19). Stephen Kern argues in a similar vein, suggesting that Joyce wanted his readers to go back to the book many times, “continually building up the network of cross-references scattered throughout until Dublin came to life” (2003, 77). In *In the Heart of the Country*, references and cross-references, which have to be connected to each other, are also independent of the time sequence of the narrative. Reflexive referencing operates in the novel specifically through repetition of action and replication of syntactical sequence, in which phrases and sentences are repeated in passages that are separated by numerous pages and events.

A number of the passages in *In the Heart of the Country* display repetition and syntactical replications that are virtually identical. Passages 1, 27, and 38 recount signal events in the novel: Magda’s father and their servant, Hendrik, bringing home their new wives. Passages 1 and 27 describe the same event (Magda’s father bringing home his new wife), using an almost exact syntactical sequence. In passage 38 Hendrik, their servant, brings home his new wife. These two events in the novel are linked by syntactical replication. In passage 27, Magda, contemplating her refusal to engage with her father’s new wife, changes the statement in passage 1 to a question: “Why, since the moment she came clip-clop across the flats in the dog-cart drawn by a horse with ostrich plumes in its harness, dusty after the long haul, in her wide-brimmed hat, have I refused speech with her?” (Coetzee 1977, 12). The repetition links the opening of the novel to later events, emphasising the significance of Magda’s father’s marriage. In passage 38, there is again syntactical replication in the description of Hendrik bringing home his new wife, with the repetition slightly altered: the “dog-cart” in the description of her father bringing home his new bride changes to a “donkey-cart”; in passage 1 it is her father’s bride who wears “a wide-brimmed sunhat,” while in passage 38 Hendrik is described as wearing “an old wide-brimmed felt hat.” These changes undermine the realist tradition by foregrounding the contrived nature of realist discourses, in which

details, such as those described above, are seemingly interchangeable. Later, in passage 49, there is again repetition of part of this phrase, where Magda recalls Hendrik's arrival from Armoede, referring to the donkeys as being "weary after the long haul" (Coetzee 1977, 25).

The repetition of the two events—Magda's father bringing home a new wife, and Hendrik bringing home a new wife—emphasises the intersection between patriarchy and colonialism, core preoccupations in the novel. There is further repetition in Magda's description of the new bride, which hinges on the repetition, with slight changes, of aspects of her physical appearance. In passage 20, Magda describes her as having "full dark lips" and later, "full ironical lips," a phrase which she repeats further on in the same passage. The description of the new wife focuses on aspects of her physical appearance that are markedly different to Magda's, emphasising her (Magda's) fear of the new wife displacing her. The repetition undercuts the temporal sequence of the two events and instead juxtaposes them, forcing the reader to find the connections between them in order to apprehend their meaning.

The most significant repetition in the novel, however, is Magda's act of patricide. She describes the same act—killing her father—on two occasions in the novel: the first time when he brings home a new wife, the second time linked to Hendrik bringing home a new wife (because he has seduced Hendrik's wife). The effect of the repetition of Magda's patricide is to undermine historical time. Elizabeth Ermath attributes this type of temporal disjunction to a feature of postmodern fictions which disrupt the homogeneity of time; neutral time and space are dissolved, and with them "the bracketing of empiricist and historical thinking as just one more construction" (1992, 66). Magda's narrative emphasises the novel's postmodernist scepticism towards historical discourse—as Ermath argues, "Gone are the linear coordinates that make possible the description of a stable objective world; pattern is always emerging and dissolving without certain foundation or even intelligible residue" (54).

The repetition of Magda's patricide and her father and Hendrik bringing home new wives links these events, emphasising their interconnectedness. Both occasions of Magda's patricide involve lengthy descriptions, filled with detail, of how she killed her father and disposed of his body. In the first description, in passage 26, she narrates killing her father with a hatchet—"The axe sweeps up over my shoulder" (Coetzee 1977, 11). At this point, however, the forward movement of time is disrupted—Magda digresses to comment on her action, noting that she is not alone in having committed such an act, that many other kinds of people have done the same thing before her: "wives, sons, lovers, heirs, rivals" (11). Magda's commentary on her actions echoes Eugene Dawn's in Coetzee's *Dusklands*. Derek Attridge argues that Dawn's first-person present-tense narrative "has become an impossibility, telling as it does of events that could not by any stretch of the imagination coincide with the recording of them" (2005, 15). In both novels the discordance between the first-person, present-tense narrative and the events narrated suggests a temporal disjunction between the events and the narrative

that purports to record them. Magda goes on to narrate how fortunate it is that, at such a dramatic moment, not very much is required of her other than presence of mind, because “the larger action flows of itself” (Coetzee 1977, 11). After having struck her father, she recalls how his wife “wriggles her nightdress decently over her hips” before she kills her as well—delivering “much the better chop”—by hitting her on the crown of her head with the axe (11). At this point, Magda again digresses to comment sardonically, in parenthesis, on her action: “Who would have thought I had such strokes in me?” (11).

After drawing a sheet over the bodies of her father and his wife, Magda continues beating their bodies. Passage 26 ends with Magda killing both her father and his new wife and contemplating the story she will have to invent to explain their absence. The next four passages (27 to 30) make prominent use of anaphora, emphasising Magda’s lyrical mode of narration. Each one begins with: “I ask myself ...” in which Magda digresses from the murders to contemplate alternative histories. In passage 27 she speculates about a relationship between her and her father’s new wife that would counter the conventional jealousy between the daughter and stepmother that is an extension of patriarchal discourse, and that imagines cooperation and partnership rather than competition. In this scenario, she and her father’s new wife might have become friends, engaging in shared activities: she would “cut[...] out patterns with her,” or they would “stroll[...] through the orchard hand in hand, giggling” (12). She even contemplates the friendship deepening into intimacy, wondering whether they might not have “lain in each other’s arms all afternoon, whispering, two girls together” (12). In the next passage, Magda ruminates on her life on the farm and the alienated conditions it engenders, making normal relations with others virtually impossible, so that “the merest pedlar or visiting third cousin would find himself poisoned at his meat or hatcheted in bed” (12). Using anaphora again, she then describes a speculative suicide, in which she imagines various scenarios: “perhaps I strike out once or twice with wooden arms. Perhaps I sink a second time ... Perhaps I come to the surface again ... Perhaps I beat the water now in one spot only” (13). Even here her musings are lyrical—her skirt “billows and floats around [her] waist like a black flower” (13), and in the next passage, she asks: “why these glorious sunsets ... if nature does not speak to us with tongues of fire?” (14).

After a lengthy interval, the forward movement of narrative time is again dramatically disrupted by the repetition of Magda’s killing of her father, but this time when he is with Hendrik’s wife, Klein-Anna. Magda’s father’s seduction of Klein-Anna is a cataclysmic event in the novel, rupturing the master-servant relations upon which their life on the farm is founded and sustained. Magda alludes to the catastrophic nature of her father’s actions when she notes that “[t]here are few enough words true, rock-hard enough to build a life on, and these he is destroying” (35). This time her father’s murder is stretched out—in passage 118 she shoots him with a shotgun while he is in his bedroom with Klein-Anna, but her shots only wound him. After an interval of several passages, in which Magda leaves the farm and embarks on a journey that mixes memories,

reflections, and speculations about the future, the account of her father's murder recommences in passage 123. Coetzee discusses this strategy of stretching time in his essay "Four Notes on Rugby," observing that, if we want to understand what makes the game so appealing to those who watch it, the most significant consideration is that of time (1992, 123). He argues that "[t]he game promises to give meaning to a stretch of time," adding in parenthesis that in this respect "it is like narrative" (123). Coetzee likens the experience of watching a game to "a low-level experience of transcendence" in which "the spectator's time-sense is stretched and the second hand slows" (123). A similar strategy is at play in the novel. In addition, Magda's reflections encompass both the present and the anticipated future—she anticipates her journey on the road, imagining the people she will meet, "the innkeepers and postillions and highwaymen," but again adds a twist to the temporal dimension, noting that she will only meet these people "if that is the century I am in" (63). She thinks of "the adventures, the rapes and robberies" she might experience, although also speculating that there is an alternative future, one in which "the road is forever as it is now, dark, winding, stony," a road that "goes nowhere day after day, week after week, season after season" (63). Magda's conflicting futures—some filled with drama and action, others placid and uneventful—reflect her fluid, shifting sense of identity. As she notes later in the passage, "I ... hover ever between the exertions of drama and the languors of meditation" (63). After her "adventure" on the road, Magda resumes her narrative in passage 123, which finds her back in the house tending to her wounded father.

Further repetition in the novel underscores the narrative's "network" of times in which the same incident unfolds in different ways. In passages 67, 68, and 69, Magda presents alternative versions of how her father attempted various strategies to initiate a sexual relationship with Hendrik's new wife, Klein-Anna. In passage 67, he visits Klein-Anna one afternoon while Hendrik is out working and offers her a brown paper packet of various types of candy. But passage 68 begins with an alternative version in which her father comes upon Klein-Anna while she is making her way homeward one afternoon, again presenting her with a brown paper packet of candies. In the next passage, instead of the packet of candy, he gives her a silver coin. The three passages are linked by syntactical repetition of specific aspects of the seduction, focusing on the interaction between Magda's father and Klein-Anna. In passage 67: "He speaks to her. She is bashful. She hides her face. He tries to soothe her. Perhaps he even smiles ..." (33). In passage 68, the syntax changes slightly and there is additional detail that is absent from passage 67 but which reappears in passage 69. The basic repetition, however, remains: "bending over the horse's neck, he speaks to her. She is bashful and hides her face. He tries to soothe her, even smiling at her" (33). In passage 69: "He bends over the horse's neck, talking to the girl, trying to soothe her. She hides her face" (33). In the same way that her father has fractured the pattern of their lives on the farm, Magda's narrative ruptures the forward movement of narrative time, signalling the novel's core themes of fragmentation and dislocation engendered by their colonial situation.

Magda's peculiar time orientation also undermines realist discourse, underpinned by conventional plot, in which the sequence of events is highly structured. Friedman argues that there is a gendered dimension to the relationship between narrative and authority, embodied in the "tyranny of plot," which Virginia Woolf attacks in her essay "Modern Fiction" (1989, 162–163). According to Robert Caserio, "Woolf's attack on the tyranny of plot is a rebellion against the authority of narrative to 'father' a meaning," and that "[o]verthrowing the tyranny of plot is ... tantamount to overthrowing the power of the father" (quoted in Friedman 1989, 163). In its winding, meandering narrative, Magda's lyric subverts the realist, chronological time of her father. Coetzee has commented that the novel's numbers (1–266) are there "as a way of pointing to what is not there between them: the kind of scene-setting and connective tissue that the traditional novel used to find necessary" (1997, 59). He suggests, in other words, the novel's resistance to the tradition of realist fiction. Coetzee alluded to the connection between historical time and the discourse of realism in a 1987 talk, entitled "The Novel Today," in which he commented on the relation between novels and their historical context (1987, 2). His argument hinges on a distinction between two types of novel: those that supplement history, and those that rival history. The novel that rivals history

[o]perate[s] in terms of its own procedures and issues in its own conclusions, [and is] not one that operates in terms of the procedures of history and eventuates in conclusions that are checkable by history [...] In particular I mean a novel that evolves its own paradigms and myths, in the process ... perhaps going so far as to show up the mythic status of history. (3)

Coetzee's comments suggest that novels that supplement history are closely aligned to the discourse of realism (those novels with "conclusions that are checkable by history"), while those that rival history have the potential to subvert history. In its "speculative histories," *In the Heart of the Country* epitomises the type of novel that rivals history. The significance of Magda's "speculative" histories is tied to the conception of history as "the most powerful construct of realistic conventions as we have known them since about 1400" (Ermarth 1992, 13). Ermarth argues that the way in which postmodernist texts most radically transformed the historical construction of temporality that underpins the humanist tradition is through its undermining of realist traditions (ix).

Magda's resistance to her father's historical, chronological time is a thread that runs throughout the novel and is reflected primarily in her construction of alternative, "speculative" histories, in which there is "a vision of a second existence passionate enough to carry me from the mundane of being into the doubleness of signification" (1977, 4). It is this "second existence" that opens an alternative vision of the farm on which she lives. Early in the novel Magda wonders "whether a speculative history is possible ... all sucked out of my thumb" (19). Much of what happens in the text is a result of Magda narrating precisely such histories—weaving stories about the farm on which she lives, from its colonial past to her relationship with her father and stepmother and the servants who work there.

In opposition to the historical, chronological time of her father, Magda's interior world is governed by its own time, and is frequently privileged over the exterior, visible world of chronological time.

Magda makes a sharp distinction between chronological time and her own, "mythical," time. Time on the farm on which she and her father live is "the time of the wide world, neither a jot nor a tittle more or less," but there is another kind of time, which she calls "the blind subjective time of the heart" which she has to "beat down" (3). In this "mythical" time she experienced a childhood that was characterised by a sense of connectedness and kinship. It was a time when she shared her life with those of the servants' children, where she "spoke like one of them" and "played their stick and stone games" and roamed the veld with them and sat listening to the stories of their grandfather, stories of living in harmony with the world (6). On the farm where she lives with her father, her references to herself are often highly disparaging—she refers to herself as a "miserable black virgin" and her story as "a dull black blind stupid miserable story, ignorant of its meaning" (5). These descriptions, however, are markedly changed when she describes the "mythical" time she experienced—she enjoyed tending to the servants' children and the women when they were in labour, and when they called her "[a]n angel from heaven!" it made "her heart sing" (5). Linked to these positive experiences is her recollection that "[a]t the feet of an old man I have drunk in a myth of a past when beast and man and master lived a common life as innocent as the stars in the sky, and I am far from laughing" (6–7). David Attwell alludes to Magda's alternative histories when he suggests that "[t]he drama of this novel lies in Magda's attempts to find and speak a life for herself ... in which usual forms of exchange or relationship ... seem either unauthentic or unavailable" (1993, 58). It is through her alternative histories that Magda rebels against her father's corrosive forms of exchange.

Magda's "speculative" histories are a central feature of the novel's narrative. In one of them, she speculates that "perhaps if I spend a day in the loft emptying old trunks I will find evidence of a credible past" (1977, 38). After the sardonic reference to a "credible past," the entire passage is then taken up with a narrative about her imagined past. She observes that, among other items, she could perhaps find photographs, which she identifies as being "daguerrotypes perhaps," and then weaves a tale about them that includes a history of a conventional nuclear family: a mother and father, a baby, and a brother "who must have died in one of the great epidemics, the influenza epidemic or the smallpox epidemic" (38). Despite the speculative nature of her narrative, it mimics the realist tradition in its detailed descriptions—her brother, for example, wears a suit "trimmed with lace," and her mother must have died "giving birth to a third child" (38). But she acknowledges that the history she has recorded is speculative because her narrative hinges on her temporal location, on whether "there were photographs in those days" (38).

Photographs are key to the novel's form in its depiction of temporality. The influence of film and photography on the novel's structure emphasises its unconventional time-

orientation. In an interview with Attwell, Coetzee commented that the fundamental influence behind the novel is film and/or photography (Coetzee 1992, 59). In commenting on the kind of film whose style most influenced *In the Heart of the Country*, Coetzee cites two films. The first is a short French science fiction film from 1962 by Chris Marker called *La Jetée*. The film is unusual in that it uses almost entirely still photographs. The second film is called *The Passenger*; this film uses a combination of live action, still photographs, and voice-over narration (Balfour 2006). What impressed Coetzee the most about films like these was what could be achieved through stills with voice-over narration: “a remarkable intensity of vision (because the eye *searches* the still image in a way it cannot search the moving image) together with great economy of narration” (Coetzee 1992, 60; italics in original). While the films influenced his writing of *In the Heart of the Country*, Coetzee insisted that it “is not a novel on the model of a screenplay” (59). What he has done in the novel, instead, is to approximate in narrative form the effect of still images—as Wittenberg observes, “Coetzee was interested in the disjunctive effects that could be achieved by presenting a succession of still images that were not necessarily connected to each other sequentially or by way of content” (2014, 17). The novel’s numbered passages can be likened to the still images of a photograph, with the passages forming a collection of images, or a montage. The numbered passages make each passage open to the kind of *searching* and intensity of vision that Coetzee refers to in his explanation of why a still image is so much more compelling than a moving one. The novel’s narrative method, then, allows Coetzee to approximate in prose what the two films achieve using still images and a combination of still and moving sequences.

Coetzee’s comments about the influence of film and photography are extended by his reference to Ezra Pound’s concept of an image, which he (Pound) defined as “that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time” (quoted in Frank 1963, 9). Coetzee notes that the image is a singularly striking and vital one: He argues that Pound can teach—more than any other poet he knows—the process of slow reading essential for the mind to be prepared for the image (1993, 6). Iona Gilbert notes the significance of photographs in Coetzee’s work by referring to his novel *The Schooldays of Jesus*, in which Dmitri “turns himself in for the murder of Ana Magdalena after being confronted by her image in a newspaper article” (2017, 14). As Gilbert notes, in the novel it is “the photograph whose eyes, as he put it, pierced him to the soul” (Coetzee 2016, 129) that causes him to confess. Gilbert goes on to argue that, in Coetzee’s novels, photographs are perceived as “narrative objects” (2017, 17). She refers to a review of the novel by Peter Temple, who emphasises the relationship between images and Coetzee’s writing style:

The product is lucid, compelling, intensely graphic prose. His images linger, his scenes have a frozen, cinematic quality. He has the ability to halt his story, as it were, in mid-frame, to zoom the narrative in from a great height to capture and hold the single moment. (quoted in Gilbert 2017, 13)

In poetry, Coetzee argues, the slowing-down that prepares the mind for the image is easily achieved by metrical technique, but prose also has resources that enable it to achieve a similar effect. These include “all the resources of syntax to mime logic and to mime the movements of the mind in general, to indicate relations between elements, logical and rhetorical, in all their complexity” (1993, 6). In *In the Heart of the Country*, as discussed above, Coetzee relies on the resources of syntax to disrupt temporal sequence and slow down the narrative through a recurring pattern of repetition, and by undermining the realist tradition. Magda’s narrative defies chronological time and the logic of cause and effect. In its contradictory elements, her narrative, moreover, undermines the realist tradition in numerous ways. For example, the first time she kills her father, she describes him as lying “face down,” but a few lines later she notes that “[m]y father lies on his back” (Coetzee 1977, 11). Magda’s claims about the farm and its history are also marked by uncertainty. When she contemplates the farm’s history, she imagines how possession of the land came about, starting with the erection of fences, but notes “I speculate of course” (18) and “one does not know” (19). Hendrik’s arrival at the farm is likewise open to speculation; when she offers an explanation, she also notes “I am guessing” (19). This uncertainty is reinforced when she tries to recall what her father said to Hendrik when he arrived at the farm. Her observation that “I cannot know whether Hendrik heard what I heard besides, what I perhaps did not hear that day but hear now in my inner ear,” also underscores the inherent tendency to create fictions to facilitate storytelling (20).

The description of her father’s arrival with his new wife is also inconsistent and unreliable, filled with the kind of detail that is meant to evoke the realist tradition—they arrive in a dog-cart drawn by a horse; there is an ostrich plume on the horse’s forehead, and her father and his new bride are dusty after the long journey. The description, however, is immediately undermined by Magda’s admission that she cannot, in fact, be sure of any of the details because she did not witness their arrival; hence, she notes, it is equally possible that their dog-cart had been drawn by two donkeys rather than a horse. Her first narration of patricide is also unreliable. When she kills her father and his new wife, Magda is alarmed that the servants will find out about the murders before she has had time to dispose of their bodies, and she imagines Klein-Anna at the door of the room, asking her to leave. She notes that she can hear Klein-Anna leave, can hear the back door close behind her and the sound of her feet on the gravel as she walks away, but then she notes how implausible it would be for her to be able to hear this: “I hear the back door close behind her, then, though she ought to be out of earshot, the trot of her feet on the gravel” (14).

The novel has numerous such instances of narration that are clearly unreliable. In the third and fourth passages, the veracity of Magda’s description of her mother is undermined by her meta-commentary on it—according to her, it is “one such as any girl in my position would be likely to make up for herself” (1977, 2). Scepticism about her description is reinforced by the repetition of the words she uses to describe her mother—gentle and loving—suggesting that she is merely reproducing platitudes usually

associated with motherhood. In the fourth passage she narrates her mother's struggle to give birth to her and the subsequent calling for the doctor: A messenger uses a bicycle to get to the doctor, and the doctor arrives in a donkey-cart. In the next passage, however, in parenthesis, Magda questions why the messenger did not rather come on horse-back, and wonders whether there were in fact bicycles in those days (echoing her earlier comment about the photographs she finds, in which she wonders whether there were in fact photographs in those days), incidents that suggest the novel's temporal disjunction. In passage 15, when she offers a description of herself, it is one filled with adjectives—she wore a “frilled sunbonnet”; she played with beetles, “the grey ones and the brown ones and the big black ones” and anteaters “who made those elegant little conical sandtraps,” and the scorpion she encounters is a “pale dazed flaccid baby scorpion” (6). The highly descriptive detail again mimics realist discourse, but the descriptions are undermined by her satirical aside—in parenthesis she notes “weave, weave!” Interspersed with the descriptions is her comment “so the story goes,” suggestive of fabrication and evoking scepticism about her account.

Magda's yearning for reciprocity with others is a thread that runs throughout the novel, and accounts to a great extent for her alternative histories. The form of the novel is echoed in the distance between her and her father, and between her and the servants on the farm. Her disconnectedness from the servants is emphasised by her observation that “we might as well be on separate planets, we on ours, they on theirs” (Coetzee 1977, 28). There is a parallel between the discontinuity of Magda's narrative and her sense of her lack of community with her world. The rupture between the farmer's daughter and the servants is immense. Much as she would like to bridge this chasm, Magda finds that she is not able to—the highly stratified social relations engendered by colonialism and apartheid are insurmountable using ordinary language; she is “not spoken to in words ... but in signs ... whose grammar has never been recorded” (7). Emphasising the chasm between them, she observes that, “Across valleys of space and time we strain ourselves to catch the pale smoke of each other's signals” (8). Magda's recollection of the “mythic” time of the past, in which there was no such rupture between her and the servants, is one of the ways in which she counters the fractures between them. So intense is her desire to bridge the chasm between her and the servants that she would like to “climb into Klein-Anna's body ... 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” (109). Sheila Roberts's critique 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” (1992, 28) aptly reflects Magda's inability to escape the master-servant discourse in her reference to Klein-Anna's domestic concerns. It also, however, demonstrates Magda's longing for communion with Klein-Anna in the absence of a shared language, and underscores Ellen Kriz's argument that Magda realises that “the unlimited imaginative power that attends the gap between language and the world can create the potential for reciprocity” (2020, 3).

Magda's narrative suggests another way in which temporality can oppose linear movement. She wonders whether she, "the true deepdown I beyond words," has not simply participated in the drama of her life "by simply being present at a moment in time, a point in space, at which a block of violence, followed by a block of scrubbing, for the sake of the servants, rattled past on their way from nowhere to nowhere" (Coetzee 1977, 16). Coetzee seems to be suggesting here a view of time in which it does not flow, but one in which all moments coexist. J. Hillis Miller's analysis of Faulkner's conception of temporality in *As I Lay Dying* is pertinent to Coetzee's in this text. Miller argues that Faulkner's mode of narration suggests that human temporality "consists of blocks of language that register what is 'out there' from different temporal and spatial points" (2003, 93). He suggests that "the events of the story ... seem to hover somewhere in perpetual simultaneity, going on being repeated over and over, waiting to be partially recited in one or another of the blocks of narrative" (93). Magda's narration suggests a similar temporal movement. Her ruminations imply that her history can be viewed as events playing themselves out according to some predetermined pattern that repeats itself endlessly, reinforcing her notion of cyclical time. Life on the farm proceeds according to a pattern, so that even Hendrik's grave "is marked out for him in the graveyard" (1977, 24). When Magda contemplates her father's life, she notes that time is made up of rituals: "Who would think that out of rituals like these he could string together day after day, week after week, month after month, and, it would seem, year after year?" (31), something that he seemingly does not grasp. For her father, time is conventional and sequential—when she is restricted to her room with a migraine attack, she compares her life to that of her father's after he has begun an affair with Klein-Anna, in terms of the different kinds of time they seem to occupy, saying "I lie here involved in cycles of time, outside the true time of the world, while my father and Hendrik's wife travel their arrow-straight paths" (36). In her essay "Women's Time," Julia Kristeva argues that "female subjectivity would seem to provide a specific measure that essentially retains *repetition* and *eternity* from multiple modalities of time known through the history of civilizations" (1981, 16; italics in original). This kind of time involves "cycles, gestation, the eternal recurrence of a biological rhythm which conforms to that of nature" (16). In opposition to this is a conception of time "as project, teleology, linear and prospective unfolding ... in other words, the time of history" (17). Magda associates her father's time with the time of history; it is this that allows him to seduce their servant's wife with impunity. It is ironic that his time is also the "true time of the world," associating conventional time with the history of colonisation and patriarchy, one that is contested by her cyclical time. As Magda notes, "One day, some as yet unborn scholar will recognize in the clock the machine that has tamed the wilds" (3).

At the end of the novel, Magda contemplates the more conventional history she could have created for herself—"hymns I could have written but did not because (I thought) it was too easy" (139). She chooses, instead, a narrative that, rather than supplementing history, rivals it, in the processing creating "its own paradigms and myths" (Coetzee 1988, 2). In doing so, she creates a time of wholeness and fraternity, as opposed to her

father's time (the same time of Empire in Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*—a time that is warped and unnatural, and which locates its existence “not in the smooth recurrent spinning time of the cycle of the seasons but in the jagged time of rise and fall, of beginning and end, of catastrophe” [1980, 133]). Magda's narrative demonstrates the consequences of such a time, one in which relations with others are wholly ruptured. Her “mythical” time and alternative, “speculative histories,” by contrast, create a time of connectedness and belonging. It is by imagining different histories and rewriting the farm's colonial history in favour of one that imagines reciprocity and connectedness that she is able to subvert her father's patriarchal, colonial discourse.

References

- Attwell, David. 1993. *J.M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing*. Berkeley: University of California Press. <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520912519>.
- Attridge, Derek. 2005. *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event*. Scottsville: University of Kwazulu-Natal Press.
- Balfour, David. 2006. “Andrzej Munk's *The Passenger*.” *Vertigo* 3 (2). https://www.closeupfilmcentre.com/vertigo_magazine/volume-3-issue-2-summer-2006/andrzej-munk-s-the-passenger/.
- Bennett, Suzanne. 1981. “Lyric Fiction: The ‘Semi-Transparent’ Narrative Mode.” *Literature in Performance* 1 (2): 36–44. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10462938109365832>.
- Borges, Jorge Louis. 1941. “The Garden of Forking Paths.” Accessed March 12, 2020. <http://shiraz.fars.pnu.ac.ir/portal/file/?970437/The-Garden-of-Forkling-Paths-Original.pdf>.
- Coetzee, J. M. 1974. *Dusklands*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press.
- Coetzee, J. M. 1977. *In the Heart of the Country*. London: Secker and Warburg.
- Coetzee, J. M. 1980. *Waiting for the Barbarians*. London: Secker and Warburg.
- Coetzee, J. M. 1987. “The Novel Today.” Talk Given at the *Weekly Mail* Book Week, Cape Town.
- Coetzee, J. M. 1992. *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Coetzee, J. M. 1993. “Homage.” *The Threepenny Review*, no. 53: 5–7.
- Coetzee, J. M. 2016. *The Schooldays of Jesus*. London: Harvill Secker.
- Ermath, Elizabeth. 1992. *Sequel to History: Postmodernism and the Crisis of Representational Time*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780691219608>.

- Frank, Joseph. 1963. *The Widening Gyre: Crisis and Mastery in Modern Literature*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Friedman, S.S. 1989. "Lyric Subversion of Narrative in Women's Writing: Virginia Woolf and the Tyranny of Plot." In *Reading Narrative: Form, Ethics, Ideology*, edited by J. Phelan, 162–185. Columbus: Ohio State University Press.
- Gilburt, Iona. 2017. "Cinematic and Photographic Aesthetics in the Novels of J.M. Coetzee." PhD diss., University of the Western Cape.
<https://uwcscholar.uwc.ac.za:8443/server/api/core/bitstreams/f35f74ad-a663-4433-b39b-15eb19c66738/content>.
- Head, Dominic. 2009. *The Cambridge Introduction to J.M. Coetzee*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511816901>.
- Heise, Ursula. 1997. *Chronoschisms: Time, Narrative and Postmodernism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kern, Stephen. 1983. *The Culture of Time and Space: 1880–1918*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson.
- Kristeva, Julia. 1981. "Women's Time." Translated by Alice Jardine and Harry Blake. *Signs* 7 (1): 13–35. <https://doi.org/10.1086/493855>.
- Kriz, Ellen. 2020. "An Unrecorded Grammar: Speaking Embodiment in J.M. Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country*." *Transnational Literature* 12: 1–13.
<https://doi.org/10.33008/TNL.2020.04>.
- Miller, J. Hillis. 2003. "Time in Literature." *Daedalus* 132 (2): 86–97.
- Parkinson, D. 2015. "Where to Begin with Jean-Luc Godard—The Early Stuff." British Film Institute, December 3. Accessed July 7, 2025. <https://www.bfi.org.uk/features/where-begin-jean-luc-godard-early-stuff#:~:text=It%20may%20seem%20invidious%20to,successive%20picture%20if%20they%20are>.
- Richardson, Brian. 2006. "Making Time: Narrative Temporality in Twentieth-Century Literature and Theory." *Literature Compass* 3 (3): 603–612.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-4113.2006.00321.x>.
- Roberts, Sheila. 1992. "Cinderella's Mothers: J. M. Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country*." *English in Africa* 19 (1): 21–33. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40238685>.
- Wittenberg, Hermann. 2014. "Godard in the Karoo: J.M. Coetzee's Screenplay Adaptation of *In the Heart of the Country*." *English in Africa* 41 (2): 13–33.
<https://doi.org/10.4314/eia.v41i2.1>.