Melancholy and the magpie: Coetzee’s Amoro-Dolorous Duo

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Abstract
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(André Brink 2007 176)

Many years ago as a young intern in St Ann psychiatric hospital I saw a patient who had descended into a profound melancholy. He was a caricature of depression, like an image of melancholia from Esquirol’s atlas (1838); his face was turned away and his body, refusing to inhabit its frame, was held in place only by the chair. He said nothing for many weeks, and then one day he responded to a question with a slurry of words: ‘Why struggle when one is already defeated? Why speak when one can say nothing of all this?’ In these words, weighted with futility, the melancholic experience is distilled. Melancholy shuts the mouth: when it descends even breath finds it difficult to clamber from a body willing itself into the grave. It is the gap on the page marking the time when words have failed, ‘when there is nothing to say of all this’.

Yet, if melancholy paralyses speech it also, paradoxically, galvanises it. As Burton writes in *The Anatomy of Melancholy*: ‘I write of melancholy, by being busy to avoid melancholy’ (20). Burton’s anatomy translates melancholic paralysis into a language that is florid, angry, energetic, ludicrous and brilliant:

I was not a little offended with this malady, shall I say my mistress Melancholy, my Egeria, or my *malus genius* (evil genius)? and for that cause, as he that is stung with a scorpion, I would expel clavum clavo (a nail with a nail), comfort one sorrow with another, idleness with idleness, *ut ex vipera theriacum* (as an antidote out of a serpent’s venom), make an antidote out of that which was the prime cause of my disease. (21)

This capacity of melancholy to manifest in antithetical forms means that melancholy can never be read simply as the sign of itself. Historically, it manifests within a dialectic of twinned opposites: paralysis and mania; excess and order; marginality and chauvinism; verbal collapse and logorrhoea; retreatism and utopia. From the Greeks to the Romantics, melancholia is both an illness of lethargy and paralysis, and the forge of creative energy and brilliance. For Burton in the seventeenth century, melancholy’s inhibition of action, introspection, and social withdrawal, is at the same time the springboard for his Utopia. As the
German sociologist, Wolf Lepenies points out, Saturn is both ‘Lord of Utopia and the sign of melancholy’ (Lepenies 11). In Freud’s re-conceptualisation of melancholia in the twentieth century the unconscious cause of melancholia is the antithesis of its visible manifestation. Melancholic despair for a lost love-object camouflages the ambivalent hatred the ego bears towards an incorporated other (Freud 247–68). In all these divergent understandings of the term, and across its long history, melancholia is never simply reducible to its representative content, either physically or textually. If one hears only melancholia’s base note — its gloom, fear and despair — then one misses the way melancholia plays parallel notes as if playing two instruments at once. Just as a songbird can use both the left and right sides of the syrinx to produce a two-voiced song (Kaplan 86), melancholy produces two seemingly independent and contrary songs that issue from the same source.

In his most recent novel, *Diary of a Bad Year*, J.M Coetzee attempts to bring this melancholic dialectic into view by its visible enactment in a novel that opens like a songbird singing a two-voiced song. From the first page of *Diary of a Bad Year*, the narrator’s voice is split into two: the disembodied and disaffected voice of an essayist, and the voice of a diarist, embodied, affective, and riven with desires and despair. These two voices sound at the same time, in a text that one can read vertically or horizontally, but however one proceeds the reader must reconjugate a parsed form.

Above the bar that divides the page, Juan is an essayist whom the reader encounters only as the didactic voice of critique. Short of neither breath nor words, his essays target every contradiction, moral failing, imbecility, illegality and perfidy of the Western world. In the first set of essays the reader is introduced to the melancholic state of modern political culture articulated as a set of paradoxes. We are born into a state, the essayist argues, created to protect us from the violence of others, but we have no right to decline this protection because if we do, we are outlaws reduced to the status of animals. The state protects its citizens through subjection, and democracy guarantees the freedom of choice by repressing the possibility of not choosing its choices — hence democracy is totalitarian. There are essays on democracy; bureaucracy; power; nationalism; globalisation; the war on terror; terrorism; the destruction of the university; the decline of honour; the policing of desire; the failure of Art to influence politics (People in power ‘could not care less what ballet audiences think of them’ [33]); the abjection of the Australian government in its service to the coalition of the willing; governmental contempt for the rule of law; the likelihood that humans will lose the battle against viruses; Australian detention centres; the apology as Act; the decline of sincerity; the myopia of rationality; the blind-spot in the theory of evolution; and the oxymoron of a humane slaughterhouse.

While some critics have been careful not to conflate the opinions of the essayist with the novelist, many critics have read the essays on face-value, as
if they are a direct expression of the political and philosophical meditations of J.M. Coetzee. For some critics there is no distinction between the writer and the character. Richard Eder, for example, writes: ‘His views are undoubtedly the author’s, reflecting fierce ideals estranged from a contemporary relativism’ (1). Some critics have debated the content of the essays, as if an effective response to the novel requires an intellectual engagement with the essayist’s ‘strong opinions’. Peter Brooks, for example, criticises the essayist’s ‘bitter condemnation’ of contemporary literature departments as if the literary character and the author are synonymous (B5). Others have seen the essays as a source of insight into the intimate experience of the novelist in his post-apartheid life in Australia. As one critic writes, they create a ‘compelling even loveable portrait of a chilly and curmudgeonly ageing writer’ (Massud 3).

James Wood warns against such simple equations of author and character, pointing out sharply that the essayist’s opinions ‘have a slightly overinhabited quality, as if too many other people had been squatting in their public rooms’ (142). Indeed, it’s the very familiarity of the ideas contained in these essays and the ease with which the arguments are identified and assimilated that should alert the reader to the performance and repetition of a semantic field rather than a direct engagement with the supple, sinuous and enigmatic thought of J.M. Coetzee. As Wood writes; ‘a passage “On Terrorism”, sounds like a bull with a bullhorn, and is very different in tone from the more feline Coetzee, who would surely rather have his claws pulled than commit to print the phrase “It’s deja vu all over again”’ (143).

The essayist is a literary character whose most pronounced characteristic is his split subjectivity. Far from representing another subject — the author — he represents a particular kind of disembodied, critical, rational and philosophical thought. Robert Spencer recognises this in an article, ‘J.M. Coetzee and Colonial Violence’, in which he reads the novel as predominantly concerned with Coetzee’s long standing themes of guilt and ethical responsibility. Citing D.G Myer’s study of holocaust victims — ‘Confronted with the accusation of another’s suffering, the “I” is put in question’ (175) — he argues that *Diary of a Bad Year* induces this experience in the reader through the essayist coming to realise that his cantankerous and pedantic opinions lead only to despair and solitude. For Spencer, the ‘I’ put in question is the authoritative ‘I’ of the essayist faced with his own failure to translate opinion into concrete ethical acts (175). In Spencer’s reading, the novel continues Coetzee’s longstanding preoccupation with relations between domination, dehumanisation and moral and ethical responsibility. I would suggest however, that in this novel Coetzee refocuses his attention from the failures of community, which may be conceptualised following Sam Durrant, as Coetzee’s ‘dogged insistence on the time of mourning’ (445), to a focus on melancholy as the pathology not simply of modernity but of the form of its thought. In *Diary of a Bad Year* the ‘I’ that is put in the question is the ‘I’ of critique, of liberal
rational thought, and most pointedly of moral humanism. To suggest this, is not to imply a diminishment of the ethical imperatives sustained throughout Coetzee’s oeuvre, but rather to attempt to follow the ethical challenge of this particular novel generated in the melancholic doldrums of Howard Australia; a political context very different from apartheid South Africa.

The essays, or rather their content, are not the critical matter of the text. To focus on the essays’ content alone is to miss both the form of the novel — its split voice — and its tone. Derek Attridge has written eloquently on the relationship between Coetzee’s formal singularity and the ethico-political significance of his oeuvre, arguing that Coetzee’s formal innovations are irreducible to both utilitarian intentions and post-modernist play. Formal innovation in Coetzee’s writing, he suggests, involves innovations in meaning and it is at this level that Coetzee makes his strongest ethical demand on the reader (11). Perhaps then, it is worth pondering the relationship between the split form of the novel, its affective tonality, and its innovation in meaning qua ethics.

Coetzee has often given fictional form to the view that reason is, as Elizabeth Costello argues, ‘Only “the being of one tendency in human thought”’ (McInturff 5). To see the action of the novel, as Woods suggests, as occurring primarily at the top of the page and in the essay’s elaboration of ideas (145), is to miss those other tendencies and affects that resound below and across the bar. In Diary of a Bad Year, the essays can be read as a metonym both of the disembodiment of their author, and of rational thought itself.

Throughout the novel, melancholy awareness resounds — of the immateriality of reason in an epoch where intellectual thought is without social force. Behind the essayist’s volley of critique one can detect an echo of Burton castigating the world for its idleness, sloth and corruption — but there is a significant difference. In Burton’s Anatomy, melancholic disgust at the world transforms into the poetic inspiration that leads him to invent a self enclosed work; a Utopia:

It were to be wished we had some such visitor … he should be as strong as ten thousand men … he might … alter affections, cure all manner of diseases … end all our idle controversies, cut off our tumultuous desires, inordinate lusts, root out atheism, impiety, heresy, schism and superstition, which now so crucify the world, catechise gross ignorance … I will yet, to satisfy and please myself, make a Utopia of mine own, a New Atlantis, a poetical commonwealth of mine own, in which I will freely domineer, build cities, make laws, statutes, as I list myself. (96–97)

The distinctive form of melancholia for intellectuals at the turn of the twenty-first century however, lies in the inability to transform melancholic disgust into utopian fantasy. The blind alley of Utopia cannot be taken — even in fantasy — in a century that has witnessed Utopia’s disgrace. Coetzee’s anatomist has no recourse to fantasies of social engineering of any political form. Unable to take recourse in Utopia, his essays return again and again to the question of how can honour be reclaimed given that agency itself has been annihilated. His is a melancholy that redoubles on itself without exit, disgust further inflamed by impotence.
The essayist could be characterised as an everyman of the post-Enlightenment tradition, enraged by his impotence in a world that refuses to mirror his reason. Identifying every contradictory logic at large in the world, he berates and castigates the world — as if the world could be perfected with the word — while at the same time analysing and elaborating the impossibility of the word to act in the world. In a world of dismantled universities, disempowered intellectuals, dishonest governments, and a rapacious capitalism, the essayist is conscious of his powerlessness and predicates his analysis on this powerlessness but continues, nevertheless, to speak relentlessly in the voice of reason.

If melancholy is conceived as residing not in its representative content but in its tonality, in its flattening of affect (Kristeva 43), then in these essays it is in the stripped down voice of reason — a voice that registers no body, affect, or symbolic play — that carries the melancholic lode. While the essays are elegant in their logic, and have the unclouded perspicacity associated with melancholy since Aristotle; and while they identify the metaphoric spark of poetry as operating like terrorism, outside the law, — cunning, ungrounded and more mobile than the state — they are completely without symbolic play. To read them, is to encounter not only the Western malaise, but the malaise of the Western intellectual who has nothing left but his reason. With neither agency nor poetry, his is a flattened and disembodied language in which reason holds the world to account for its failure to be reasonable. But who is listening? And who, for that matter, is speaking?

A crumpled old fellow, the reader discovers, when reading below the bar that divides the page. If the bar registers as an echo of Saussure’s algorithm that divided language into signifier and signified, then the text is structured around a joke; for the referent for the essayist’s endless chain of signifiers is not the corrupt and dishonoured world of men, but the melancholy of an old man’s thwarted desire. Below the bar Juan’s diary begins with desire — an old man’s impossible desire for a woman with a perfect ‘derriere’.

My first glimpse of her was in the laundry room. It was mid-morning on a quiet spring day and I was sitting, watching the washing go around, when this quite startling young woman walked in. Startling because the last thing I was expecting was such an apparition; also because the tomato-red shift she wore was so startling in its brevity. (3)

He attempts to engage the young woman in ‘pleasantries’, but sitting crumpled in the corner he could be mistaken for a tramp, and it is only neighbourliness and its code of courtesy that holds her to his banter. He knows that she knows that between them there is not simply gallantry but something more personal, ‘something to do with age and regret and the tears of things’ (7), and it is not his desire that she wants to avoid, but his melancholy, his old man’s impossible regret for everything lost to him as he edges closer and closer to death. This regretful old man is the essayist and the essays are his ‘opportunity to take magical revenge on the world for declining to conform to [his] fantasies’ (22). They form part of a collection entitled ‘Strong Opinions’, in which six eminent writers pronounce their opinion on what is wrong with the world.
Here we are, six éminences grises who have clawed our way up to the highest peak, and now that we have reached the summit what do we find? We find that we are too old and too infirm to enjoy the proper fruits of our triumph. Is this all? we say to ourselves, surveying the world of delights we cannot have. Was it worth all that sweat? (22)

Through the device of the split page, Coetzee re-institutes melancholy as the counterpoint of rational discourse. Above the bar the essayist lays bare the world in its irrationality and immorality, a world in which the subject is stranded without moral compass, in which good camouflages evil, and in which nature inevitably dwarfs the rational intentions of men, just as men destroy nature. This is a voice and vision of deep — albeit unconscious — melancholy — a voice individuated and isolated by modernity, writing out of melancholy, but unable even to voice its own loneliness, fear, and loss of being. Above the bar reasoned critique, below the bar the detritus of the aging body, and the ‘tears of things’. Above the bar, a voice interrogating the failure of the world to uphold law and honour; below the bar, an old man sharpening his cunning to lay siege to the girl.

If melancholy is the defining mood of modernity (Fergusen), then Coetzee is giving it back its body, the thinker’s head returned into the hands that have cupped the melancholic’s brow since antiquity. In this sense, Diary of a Bad Year is asking the reader to ponder the being of the Western intellectual, to refocus attention from cause to condition. If modernity’s bird’s-eye view of the world — a view uncluttered by religious consolation, unsupported by mechanical solidarity, and unregulated by tradition and taboo — delivers the modern thinker into a melancholic condition that cannot even recognise itself, might there be another way to be an intelligent subject in the modern world? Might there be another way of embodying reason and thereby melancholy differently? For if ‘the tears of things’ are excluded from the essayist’s rational/moral discourse, so too is his aggression. In splitting the page, Coetzee focuses attention on the way moral and political discourse proceeds as if it issues from a subject uncompromised by animal spirits.

Enter Anya, the girl from the Laundromat whose bottom wiggles before the old man’s besotted eye:

I turn my back and off I go with a waggle of the bum, his eyes avid upon me. I picked it up from the ducks, I think: a shake of the tail so quick it is almost a shiver. Quick-Quack. Why should we be too high and mighty to learn from the ducks? (27–28)

Cajoled by Juan to become his typist, the page splits once more and Anya’s voice enters the text warbling and chirruping in duet with the melancholic’s two-voiced song.

When I am not carrying laundry baskets I am his segretaria, part-time. Also, now and again, his house help. At first I was just supposed to be his segretaria, his secret aria, his scary fairy, in fact not even that, just his typist, his tipitista, his clackadackia. He dictates great thoughts into his machine, then hands over the tapes to me, plus a sheaf of papers in his half-blind scrawl, with the difficult words written out in careful block letters. I take away the tapes and listen to them on my earphones and solemnly type them out. Fix them
up here and there where I can, where they lack a certain something, a certain oomph, though he is supposed to be the big writer and I just the little Filipina. (25–26)

If the essayist views the world from a disembodied bird’s-eye vantage point, Anya views him with the sharp-eyed focus of a bird scrutinising its patch. Her eye goes straight to the worm: ‘Cockroach heaven. No wonder his teeth are so bad. Crunch-crunch. scribble-scribble talk talk. Down with the Liberals. What Hobbes said. What Machiavelli said. Ho Hum’ (40).

She is every writer’s nightmare. He says ‘papists and Popery’, she types ‘papers and papery’. He says the ‘Urals’, she types ‘the urinal’. She can neither type nor spell, is as narcissistic as a spoilt child, and her typist’s credentials derive from her past employment in a cattery. Debased by the times, epitomising the world he rails against — a world of pragmatism, consumerism, amorality and narcissism — she is the detritus of a romantic heroine in late modernity. She spends her life shopping, augmenting her boyfriend’s status by augmenting his commodity — her body. Yet she waggles her bottom and the writer is transfixed. If his strong opinions performed the symbolic demand that the world acts ethically, under the bar this demand is haunted by the melancholic object; the man himself who hunts the woman as object. She is not Anya but ‘derrière’. There is a sorry truth on view here: a melancholic truth Burton recognised when he wrote, ‘Men will cease to be fools only when they cease to be men. So long as they wag their beards they will play the knaves and fools’ (97), and the girl waggles her bottom, and the old man wags his beard, while the essays continue above the line pontificating about the knavery and foolishness at large in the world.

It is out of this encounter in all its foolishness, that Coetzee gestures towards a way forward for his melancholic intellectual. Unlike the essayist who disdains and distances himself from an imperfect world, Juan’s desire holds him to the imperfect Anya, and subjects him to her gaze and the intolerable truth that she finds his prating as tedious as he finds her prattle. It is only through the encounter with her and her insistent preference for his embodied being in lieu of symbolic representation that he is slowly returned to the tears of things and hence, to himself:

Write about cricket, I suggest. Write your memoirs. Anything but politics. The kind of writing you do doesn’t work with politics. Politics is about shouting other people down and getting your own way, not about logic. Write about the world around you. Write about the birds. There are always mobs of magpies strutting around the park as if they own it, he could write about them. Shoo, you monsters! I say, but of course they pay no heed. No brow, the skull running straight into the beak, no space for a brain. (31)

Just as the essayist is doubled by his body, Juan is doubled by Anya — the Western intellectual tradition and its nemesis, mass culture. Coetzee holds them in dialogue; the old man desperate to be desired by the young woman, the young woman in need of something the old man has that she does not know she lacks. While Burton fantasised Utopia as the antidote to his melancholy Coetzee
limits himself to the diminished fantasy of a *volte-face*. What might the modern melancholic intellectual learn, the novel ponders, if the writer spoke with an ear to his audience? Could Juan learn something from the bird-woman? What does she know that he does not know and what might they learn from each other if he learnt to sing and she learnt to talk? For, while Anya has no language, in the sense that she is outside the discourse of Western knowledge, she has what he lacks: song — the intuitive embodied song of the birds. While she has no knowledge as such, she knows what his knowledge forecloses: that humans are territorial and that territories of the self will not be dissolved by discourse. It is this mutual need born out of the destitution of their respective positions that enables the essayist to recognise the empty cadences of his own prating. At the critical turning point in the novel, Juan recognises sorrow as the foundation of his thought:

Perhaps what I feel descending on me when I am confronted with images, recorded with zoom lenses from far away, of men in orange suits, shackled and hooded, shuffling about like zombies behind the barbed wire of Guantanamo Bay, is not really the dishonour, the disgrace of being alive in these times, but something else, something punier and more manageable, some overload or underload of amines in the cortex that could loosely be entitled depression or even more loosely gloom and could be dispelled in a manner of minutes by the right cocktail of chemicals X, Y and Z. (111–12)

This is a revelatory moment which fuses the split voices of the text, and after which the essayist/diarist begins anew, writing a second sequence of essays — his ‘soft opinions’ — which gather up the body of the man, his desires, dreams, imperfections and vulnerabilities. This new voice is not the voice of a man who has turned his back on the Western intellectual tradition, nor is it the voice of a man who has been cured of his melancholy, but his voice is now weighted with his embodied being.

While not paralysed by melancholy, his voice carries the trace of its affect. His point of view is no longer held aloft from self and other, but views the world from an embodied circumference. A brief essay, ‘On Ageing’, reads:

My hip gave such pain today that I could not walk and could barely sit. Inexorably, day by day the physical mechanism deteriorates. As for the mental apparatus, I am continually on the qui vive for broken cogs, blown fuses, hoping against hope that it will outlast its corporeal host. All old folk become Cartesians. (147)

But if Juan has managed to inhabit his melancholy and so find a dwelling place for being within the body of the word, Anya returns his melancholic vision of the world to him, as it were, from the real. For lurking behind Anya is *Homo-Economicus*, her boy-friend Alan, the territorial and predatory investment consultant who confirms the melancholic’s vision of the lawless immorality of the modern world.

Alan is a boundary rider, policing his territorial rights over Anya. With his magpie-brain tuned to territorial incursion he recognises Juan instantly as a threat. Using Anya’s typing files he penetrates Juan’s computer gaining knowledge of
the financial details of the old man’s millions. He plans to steal Juan’s money but Anya will not have any part of it. When it comes to the crunch, she recognises territorial acquisition as law-bound, and Alan, whose anomic territorialism knows no law, ends up losing her. She has been changed by her encounter with Juan and while his two voices have fused on the page, her voice now splits into a two-voiced song. As she makes preparations for Juan’s death, Anya — the feminine anagram of Juan — has a new bottom line.

A number of critics have commented on the musical structure of the novel. Jeff Simons suggests that the novel can be read contrapuntally as you might listen to one of Bach’s Brandenburg Concertos. Neel Mukherjee argues that Coetzee’s use of counterpoint translates the capacity of the ear in music to hear two things simultaneously — to the practice of fiction. Yet no critic, to my knowledge, has connected the musical structure of the novel — its simultaneous sounding of three voices — with its exploration firstly of melancholy as the counterpoint of enlightenment reason and secondly, with the magpie.

*Diary of a Bad Year* is not, as one critic suggests, ‘a dazzling celebration of what binds us’ (Craven, 20), nor is it a new kind of writing from the ‘Aussie Coetzee’ who has imbibed the playfulness of ‘other great literary eccentrics from Down Under’ (Upchurch online). It is a deep meditation on how critical and cultural thought can embody its melancholy in an age when intellectual thought is disenfranchised, and where the moral projects of intellectuals have driven vast numbers of people into oppression. Coetzee moved from South Africa to Australia at a time when indigenous Australians were once again being driven off History’s page, and when the Australian intelligentsia were being pacified and silenced. These were bad years when the low-browed magpie appeared victorious, and yet, it is to the magpie that Coetzee turns to chart a trajectory through the ethical impasses facing the contemporary artists and intellectuals of Australia and the world. The magpie — an iconic Australian bird of domination and territoriality — flits through these pages as a meta-trope of the novel’s musical form, its themes, and its forward flight. If this, the most recent of Coetzee’s ‘Australian’ novels, expresses his new locale, it is less in its explicit Australian content (the essayist’s debate with the Howard government) than in this meditation on the magpie as a trope for the writer’s search for a voice.

Magpies are boundary riders defending territories of the self with a punitive will that John Howard might have approved of. Pecking and slashing at asylum seekers in the 2005 election Howard could have been a Magpie Chief, mimicking the war cries of his Magpie Madam, Pauline Hanson. Her boundary song: ‘if I can invite whom I want into my home then I should have the right to have a say in who comes into my country’ (Hanson). His war cry: ‘We will decide who comes into this country and the circumstances in which they come’ (Howard).

Magpies have survived colonisation remarkably well. As fringe-dwellers and ground-foragers they have profited from its clearings and have been largely
invulnerable to its predators. Even dogs are chary of them given the way a flock will remember and relentlessly punish any act of predation. Territorial and hierarchical, they lend themselves all too readily to anthropomorphic interpretation. In the early days of colonisation the dominant magpie became a central and parodic motif of incarceration. Dressed in the piebald suits known as ‘Magpie suits’, convicts parodied the magpies’ fearless visibility in a humiliating costume that ensured their visibility in the bush. For colonial writer Marcus Clarke, the magpies’ frenzied song was a melancholy synonym for a colony unable to speak itself into existence. Clarke conceived of the Australian landscape as a melancholic maniac, in turn sullen, withdrawn, grotesque, and hysterical — scribbling dementedly like a creative genius at the height of a hypomania (Rutherford). He could not find in it a home for the writer, and the magpie’s song redoubled this homelessness, parodying the thwarted voices of his fellow ‘poets of desolation’: ‘That bird,’ he wrote, ‘is typical of everything Australian. There is something in him but it can’t get out’ (Phillips 24).

But as the ornithologist Gisela Kaplan’s extraordinary study of magpies suggests, magpies are irreducible to their deployment as synonyms for territorial aggression. In fact, territorial acquisition is beyond most magpies and they could as readily serve as synonyms for diaspora and homelessness, as territoriality. Many magpies never acquire territory, they are migratory birds, travelling from one feeding ground to the next, never able to secure ground or settle. Some are marginal: like stateless refugees they exist with neither territory nor flock but stand ‘facing trees for hours, beaks often pointing at the bark or touching the tree and adopting crouching postures without feeding or drinking’ (Kaplan 34). If they turn and face the feeding grounds of established magpies they are subjected to brutal pecking until they return to their subservient posture. Birds who do manage to establish territories, gain dominance in their flock, and breed, live highly stressful lives fighting off territorial encroachments and policing every incursion into their space.

Yet, for all their territorial aggression, magpies are birds of high etiquette and eloquence, their musicality provides the means for negotiating territory without war. Kaplan documents how magpies sing their territories, boundary riding through song. In disputes over territory, flocks stand parallel to a territorial border and contest propriety through the eloquence of their carolling. Every object in a magpie’s territory is sung and the male magpie only swoops at the unsung trespasser who fails to heed their eloquent warning (120). Judith Wright recognised this duality in the magpie’s behaviour when she contrasted the magpie’s clashing beak and greedy eyes with the grace and joy of their song: ‘Their greed is brief; their joy is long./ For each is born with such a throat/ as thanks his God with every note’ (Wright 340).

It is this split nature of the magpie that Coetzee draws on to provide a meta-trope for Diary of a Bad Year. When Juan follows Anya’s advice and writes about
the magpies that inhabit the park opposite, he sees in them a sign of his own masculinity, fighting to defend a territory:

the magpie in chief (that is how I think of him), the oldest — at least the stateliest and most battered looking. He, (that is how I think of him, male to the core) walks in slow circles around me where I sit. He is not inspecting me. He is not curious about me. He is warning me, warning me off. He is also looking for my vulnerable point, in case he needs to attack, in case it comes down to that…. (163)

Juan sees Alan in the magpie, a boundary rider looking for a weak spot in a potential adversary, but Anya recognises the magpie as the old man’s bedfellow. Melancholy and the magpie, a two-voiced song which the old man is finally learning to sing:

If I had cared to listen to him on a warm spring night, I am sure I would have heard him crooning his love song up the lift shaft. Him and the magpie. Mr Melancholy and Mr Magpie, the amoro-dolorous duo. (176)

In ‘Writers on the Wing’, Lucile Desblache suggests that magpies in *Diary of a Bad Year* figure as creatures of enclosure and entrapment, mirroring the controlled spaces of human inhabitation. Coetzee’s birds, she writes ‘do not sing, they are dark and constrained’, and when the magpie does sing his song it is a war cry (Desblache 178–91). Desblache focuses on the negative meaning of the magpie which, she rightly argues, hovers over the novel, but the magpie in this novel is also both a master and symbol of counterpoint. The novel ends as the old man defends his territory, as magpies do, carolling out a war cry. Simultaneously, he elects Bach as his father, and sings a song of praise for the rhetoricity of Dostoevsky, of whom he writes:

far more powerful than the substance of his argument, which is not strong, are the accents of anguish, the personal anguish of a soul unable to bear the horrors of this world. It is the voice of Ivan, as realised by Dostoevsky, not his reasoning that sweeps me along. (176)

This is not a novel that attempts to resolve or cure melancholy, nor to deny the veracity of the modern melancholic’s vision, but rather to deliver melancholy back into the word — to recollect it as a mode of expression and to regather sorrow in the body of the voice. It is a work about the voice, about the way the voice can either elide its melancholic trace, and so lead us by reason into a paralysis, or can sing its song. If there is a movement in the novel it is a movement forward into death. Its question: how can one embody death and sing its song from within the territories of the self? How might the word change, how might thought change if one moves from the bird’s-eye view of the melancholic critic of modernity back into a body weighted with its stupidities, aggressions and imperfections. Another way of posing this question is to ask how might thought change if the fools recognised their knaves within? If melancholy met its magpie?
WORKS CITED


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