

Review

IN THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

by J.M. Coetzee (Secker and Warburg R8,50. Ravan Press R4,50)

Reviewed by Tony Morphet

It cost a good deal in confusion, discomfort and pain to read John Coetzee's new novel *In the Heart of the Country*. I would guess that many people will find those demands too high but I certainly didn't.

Coetzee's subject is consciousness itself and the limits he chooses for this novel are imposed by his central character – the spinster daughter of a Karoo farmer living on an isolated sheep farm with four Coloured labourers. The parallels with Olive Schreiner are too close not to be deliberate.

The whole novel, written in 266 numbered sections, takes place within Magda's mind. If we expect a logical narrative which follows the dimensions of familiar space-time reality then we are disappointed with the result. It may be that all the "events" described are only in the woman's imagination – that the murders, seduction and rape do not actually "happen" at all. The question really has no meaning. It is what happens in Magda's mind that is all-important

Yet accepting that, and admiring Coetzee's skill in following the deep logic of his character's consciousness, one has to ask what he is actually doing. Joyce, Faulkner and Pynchon the formative influences in this style of writing were after all in pursuit of more than merely the structure, content and rhythms of particular minds. They had their larger themes. Their characters have their representative status even though it may appear and operate in ways quite different from the familiar patterning of the realist novel. Does Coetzee have his own larger theme? He does – but how clearly he understands and controls it I am not so sure. The Olive Schreiner parallel (or contradiction) is instructive here. He, like every other novelist in South Africa, is handling the national theme. Magda's consciousness gives him an oblique and penetrating perspective on the dimensions and fate of the master, locked in struggle with the landscape and

people of Africa. In her role as "poetess of interiority" Magda goes far beyond Schreiner's characters in registering and responding to the drama of the struggle.

Magda is a victim of the world. Rejected, denied and betrayed by her father, abandoned in death by her mother, her dark imaginings are her chief resource in a barren world. She is no passive sufferer. Murderous revenge is a central experience of power for her. But beneath her violence and beneath even her strongly creative awareness of things is a longing for affirmation through people – her father, Klein-Anna the servant-mistress or Hendrik the Coloured foreman. The pain of the novel lies in the terrible distortions and ultimate extinction which this most human of needs suffers.

My doubts about Coetzee's control over his theme derive from a sense of uncertainty which came to me through the surprising regularity of the tonal range of his sentences. The prose is startling in its precision, solidity and power. It handles abstract concepts and specific objects with the same facility and definitive energy. And yet I feel it doesn't have the capacity that one finds in the masters of the genre to register the layers and relativities of the consciousness. One cannot be sure of where the depths and the surfaces of Magda's mind are, nor of how they relate to each other. From this I think that the theme itself suffers some confusion. But in what other writing can one discover such a power of penetration – such a capacity to create the shape and feel of things – such a sense of the inward workings of emotion and thought and above all such an experience of entering the deep dark recesses of hidden states of mind, especially when the mind is our own inheritance.

Coetzee's contribution to South African literature has really only begun but already it is clear that he compels us to revalue all our previous literature. That in itself is a measure of his achievement and his value.□