The Absence of Narcissus: Anti-psychiatry, Madness and Narcissism in Vladimir
Nabokov's Pale Fire and J. M. Coetzee's In the Heart of the Country

A thesis presented to
the faculty of
the College of Arts and Sciences of Ohio University

In partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Master of Arts

William J. Collins
May 2014
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This thesis titled "The Absence of Narcissus: Anti-psychiatry, Madness and Narcissism in Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* and J. M. Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country*"

by

WILLIAM J. COLLINS

has been approved for

the department of English

and the College of Arts and Sciences by

Marilyn J. Atlas

Associate Professor of English

Robert Frank

Dean, College of Arts and Sciences
ABSTRACT

COLLINS, WILLIAM J., M.A., May 2014, English

The Absence of Narcissus: Anti-psychiatry, Madness and Narcissism in Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* and J. M. Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country*

Director of Thesis: Marilyn J. Atlas

The principal aim of this thesis is to reconstruct part of the literary experience of mental illness during the Western anti-psychiatry movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Using Michel Foucault's *History of Madness* as a representative text of the anti-psychiatry movement, and borrowing some of his insights for methodological inspiration, this project seeks cultural traces where mental illness has not yet, in Western perception, severed its ties with moral condemnation. One such intersection of mental illness and guilt can be found in the term *narcissist*, which is equally capable, as a signifier, of designating a moral fault or an instance of pathology, or of conflating the two, or even of describing, with tones of condemnation, the outward symptoms of a less visible trauma.

The literary case studies for this study are, from the beginning of the anti-psychiatry movement, Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* (1962), and from its end, J. M. Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country* (1977). As exemplars of metafiction, both novels constitute what some critics call "narcissistic narrative," and thus they enact, formally and rhetorically, the seemingly excessive self-concern that characterizes their respective narrators, Dr. Kinbote and Magda. Together both novels deconstruct the concept of *narcissism* by contrasting the narcissist with Narcissus, thus destabilizing the foundation of the term's
authority, and by complicating (in Nabokov) or suspending (in Coetzee) readers' moral assessments of the superficially narcissistic narrators.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I owe thanks to Dr. Marilyn Atlas for agreeing to oversee this project, for reading several versions of it over the past year, and for providing thorough and timely feedback for every draft. Next, I owe thanks to Dr. Thomas Dancer for agreeing to participate in this project so soon after he joined the faculty of Ohio University, and to Dr. Amrit Singh—whose guidance I wish I had sought sooner—for acting as a reader at very short notice. Contributions from all three professors appear in this final version.

On a more personal level, I owe hearty and heartfelt thanks to Chrissie Caral, Victoria Dickman-Burnett, Calan Henderson, and McCray Powell for their unwavering personal support. I wish I could say the most challenging parts of the past few years were academic, but they were not, and without those steady supports, I am not confident I could have continued through the degree program.

I thank my parents for sending me to university in the first place, and for not steering me away from pursuing literature. I hope, two degrees later, that my course of study is beginning to seem like a good decision. It will make sense eventually.

This list of acknowledgments cannot be considered complete without some recognition of Giggles, my Thesis-Cat, who will, with a lot of care and a little luck, live on for many more years—long enough, I hope, to become my Dissertation-Cat.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>Error! Bookmark not defined.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1: Anti-psychiatry and Michel Foucault's <em>History of Madness</em></td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2: &quot;New Kind of Insanity&quot;: Ovid's Narcissus, Freud's Narcissist Narrative</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3: &quot;No Real Doubles&quot;: False Reflections in Vladimir Nabokov's <em>Pale Fire</em></td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4: &quot;Without Courting the Fate of Narcissus&quot;: Madness as Trope in J. M. Coetzee's <em>In the Heart of the Country</em></td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works Cited</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

The principal aim of this thesis is to reconstruct part of the literary experience of mental illness during the Western anti-psychiatry movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Using Michel Foucault's *History of Madness* as a representative text of the anti-psychiatry movement, and borrowing some of his insights for methodological inspiration, this project seeks cultural traces where mental illness has not yet, in Western perception, severed its ties with moral condemnation. One such intersection of mental illness and guilt can be found in the term *narcissist*, which is equally capable, as a signifier, of designating a moral fault or an instance of pathology, or of conflating the two, or even of describing, with tones of condemnation, the outward symptoms of a less visible trauma.

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I structure this inquiry as three reflections upon reflection itself, carried out over the course of four chapters. The first such reflection, carried out in Chapter One, provides an overview of the Western anti-psychiatry movement and of Michel Foucault's *History
of Madness. I provide a brief history of the various criticisms faced by psychiatry since its inception, and then explain how the liberalism and counterculture forces of the 1960s and 1970s provided a suitable environment for anti-psychiatry to become a visible cultural phenomenon. Shifting attention to the academic component of the movement, I provide a list of inaugural texts, and then focus upon Michel Foucault's *History of Madness* as both a representative text and a methodological guide. Because Foucault's project has attracted several trenchant criticisms, I discuss briefly the most widely known of those criticisms—that of Foucault's former pupil, Jacques Derrida—and then recuperate two of the animating insights behind the text: firstly, that the textual traces of each successive cultural moment reveal different experiences of madness, which together do not necessarily coalesce into a history of progress; and secondly, that madness has never sloughed off the patina of moral contamination that, according to Foucault, has inhered in its perception since at least the Classical Age. In this way, this study reflexively reapplies some of Foucault's questions to the very cultural moment in which his text participates.

The second act of reflection entails an examination, in Chapter Two, of Ovid's *Narcissus*, Freud's narcissist, and metafiction as narcissistic narrative. Because I contend that Freud's narcissist has effaced many readers' understandings of Narcissus, I revisit Ovid's "Narcissus and Echo" in order to highlight some of the myth's themes besides self-love, such as division, recognition, self-destruction, desire, and frustration. Doing so provides a foundation for my readings of *Pale Fire* and *In the Heart of the Country* in later chapters. After rereading Ovid's myth, I summarize Freud's understanding of the
narcissist, and then show how Michael Warner and Julia Kristeva have also drawn attention to the distance between Narcissus and the narcissist. Lastly, I share Grant Stirling's faith that metafiction, which Linda Hutcheon calls "narcissistic narrative," may employ its discursive self-reflectiveness as a locus of cultural contestation, in this instance, to undertake a deconstruction of narcissism as one trace of the tie between madness and guilt.

The third act of reflection consists of my readings of *Pale Fire* and *In the Heart of the Country* in Chapter Three and Chapter Four, in both of which madness, morality, Narcissus, and narcissism all overlap through narcissistic narrative. In one of his most critically acclaimed and widely read novels, *Pale Fire*, Nabokov creates a parody of scholarly literary analysis in which the narrator, Dr. Kinbote, strives to use "Pale Fire," unfinished poem of his late friend John Shade, as a receptive mirror-text with which to recreate his own identity by manipulating his false reflection. Unlike Narcissus who fails to recognize his reflection where it does exist, Kinbote falsely recognizes his reflection where it does not exist. Additionally, Kinbote recognizes Narcissus in another character, Gordon Krummholz, thereby transgressing the mythical axiom that Narcissus cannot recognize himself. Lastly, alongside Kinbote's putative narcissism, Nabokov plants multiple clues that together suggest he suffers from severe social exclusion, and that his superficial narcissism may be the symptom of a descent into madness ending, as the novel suggests and as Nabokov affirmed in an interview, in suicide.

Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country* receives relatively scant critical attention compared to both *Pale Fire* and to Coetzee's own later, more impactful works, and the
attention it does receive tends to downplay or rule out the question of madness in spite of
textual evidence and comments from Coetzee himself. The narrator, Magda, repeatedly
describes herself with the term mad and its synonyms, and she shares some
characteristics with both Narcissus and the narcissist. Because she has some intuition,
though never full knowledge, of her status as a literary character, Magda endeavors to
achieve agency by alternately inhabiting and rejecting different literary tropes. Toward
the end of the novel she identifies Narcissus as one particular trope she must reject, and
Coetzee complicates readers' assessments of her as a narcissist because her obsessive
self-reflection arises not from moral fault, but partly from her status as the earliest
example, in Coetzee's oeuvre, of what David Attwell calls a "displaced subjectivity": "a
narrator who is not one of the primary agents of colonization but who lives in the
conditions created by such agents, and who endures the subjectivity this position entails"
(Attwell 56), and partly from the abuses she suffers from her father and one of her
father's servants, Hendrik.

In spite of their discursive self-concern, both Pale Fire and In the Heart of the
Country, as well as their respective narrators, together help to deconstruct the concept of
narcissism and to sever its ties with moral guilt. Admittedly, considering the innumerable
intersections of mental illness and guilt, the deconstruction of one term is a modest
endeavor. The secondary accomplishment of this study—the discovery of a kind of
paradox—may be more illuminating since it bears witness to the exterior, transitive
benefits of exorbitant interiority and self-concern. Through a curious alignment of
dissident politics, intellectual fashion, and literary vogue, two acts of novelistic self-
reflection reflect a larger cultural moment in which psychiatry is impelled to reflect upon itself.
CHAPTER ONE: ANTI-PSYCHIATRY AND MICHEL FOUCAULT’S HISTORY OF MADNESS

Since its inception in the eighteenth century, psychiatry has attracted various criticisms from diverse groups. According to Norman Dain, the church and the judicial system were among psychiatry's first critics because psychiatry usurped upon their ideological domains by recasting instances of moral and behavioral deviance into clinical phenomena involving potentially blameless subjects. The soteriological worldview of the church depends upon the assumption of a fully responsible subject "struggling between God and Satan and answerable for the outcome" (Dain 4). If, according to the church's beliefs, "through the mind one reads the soul" (4), then certain difficult questions arise regarding salvation and the condition of the self. Is mental illness a flaw in the relationship between a troubled mind and an innocent, imprisoned soul, or is the mental illness the most immediate symptom of a wicked soul? Like the church, the law of the state assumes a free, rational subject and, as Dain points out, although one now typically conceives of the psychiatrist as one of the innumerable agents enforcing normative society, "the early asylum superintendents were challenging the prevailing system of social control by advocating ... treatment rather than punishment or death for certain offenders" (5). In this way, the determinist arguments of psychiatry challenged the foundations upon which both the church and the courts constructed subjects answerable to a law, be it divine or secular.

The criticisms that would eventuate in the anti-psychiatry movement did not, however, come from the church or the law, but were fomented—at least in part—from
within. Both psychoanalysis and developmental experimentation left psychiatry vulnerable to criticism. While the prestige of psychoanalysis would seem to strengthen psychiatric practice, it had the effect of undermining other treatments, as well as the field generally: "... if talk alone was applicable even to so-called psychotics, upon what logic could psychiatry claim to be a medical specialty?" (Dain 7). At the same time psychoanalysis was in vogue—toward the end of the first half of the twentieth century—some practitioners also forced upon patients the violent "methods of insulin coma, psychosurgery, electric shock treatment, and tranquilizing drugs" (Itten and Roberts 782). Psychiatry suffered doubly on account of such invasive measures. On the one hand, the failures of such treatments gave psychiatry a savage face, recalling the recent medical experimentation of the Holocaust. On the other hand, as Dain demonstrates, successful invasive procedures were credited "not to psychiatry but to medical science generally" (7). Between the controversial treatments and the undermining of its value as a practice, psychiatry had a troubled reputation, yet in the first half of the twentieth century, no organizing force was in position to mount a large-scale movement against it.

Both historians and critics of the anti-psychiatry movement point to the growth of liberalism and countercultural forces of 1960s and 1970s as the fodder necessary to form anti-psychiatry into a politically visible movement. Suspicions that all institutions might be oppressive forces serving the economic, social, and political preferences of a narrow elite were "part of a worldwide liberation movement of subject peoples, a movement that went beyond traditional political and economic struggles to almost every aspect of life and society" (Dain 8). Because mental illness was and still is so imperfectly understood,
neither the cause nor the corporeal locus of mental illness was clear: Is subject A mad, or are her behaviors entirely attributable to the stresses of being an impoverished African American woman in a racist, misogynist, capitalistic and class-structured society? Is subject B mad, or might homosexuality be an instance of variance and not of pathology? Such questions bring to light how easily some thinkers, as shall be seen, might read the history of some psychiatric practices—especially confinement—as a history of purposeful, targeted oppression, since the stressors of minority status may provoke the same symptoms as mental illness, and since confinement serves as a superficially legitimate means of imprisonment. Berlim, Fleck, and Shorter, in their derisive and sometimes even ad hominem overview of anti-psychiatry, likewise credit its mobilization and legacy to "[t]he Zeitgeist of the 1960s and 1970s, epitomized by the rebellion against the 'system'" (66). The resistance to psychiatry—potentially like certain aspects of psychiatry itself—was in many ways political.

The main thinkers of the anti-psychiatry movement, at least as an academic phenomenon, were united more by their target than by any shared vision. Two of the major figures, R. D. Laing and Thomas Szasz, were highly critical of each other. In Theodor Itten and Ron Roberts's illuminating analysis of their conflict, they demonstrate how Laing's criticism of psychiatry was "elaborated within a Marxist framework," while Szasz denigratingly describes Laing and other anti-psychiatrists as "communist, anticapitalist, collectivist . . . anti-American, left-liberal statist, and socialist" (787). In fact, as Itten and Roberts point out, neither Laing nor Szasz "had any allegiance to the term [anti-psychiatry]—a phrase that was coined by Laing's former colleague David
Cooper” (781 emphasis in original). In spite of these thinkers' indifference or hostility toward their label, it seems to have endured, all the while conferring to disparate thinkers a veneer of unanimity.

Even if anti-psychiatry was heterogeneous, it was also widespread and simultaneous enough to constitute a formidable political force. A flurry of texts inaugurated the movement: Thomas Szasz's *The Myth of Mental Illness* (1960), R. D. Laing's *The Divided Self* (1960), Michel Foucault's *Folie et déraison* (1961), and the works of David Cooper, who, as stated above, coined the term in 1967. These thinkers represent the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and South Africa, but there were also important works from Silvano Arieti and Franco Basaglia in Italy, and in the 1970s Walter Reich documented and exposed abuses of psychiatric power by the Soviet Union. In lieu of a united, purposive coalition of thinkers targeting psychiatry, what transpired was a coincidence of intellectual fashion and liberal culture resulting in something that, retrospectively and superficially, might seem like a concerted upheaval.

Of those works that inaugurated the anti-psychiatry movement, Foucault's ambitious *Folie et déraison*, translated in full into English for the first time in 2007 as *History of Madness*, arguably remains the most in vogue among literary scholars, critical theorists and philosophers. Inspired by the genealogical work of Friedrich Nietzsche, the emergent structuralist thought in the French intellectual scene, his background in phenomenology, and his own experience as a psychiatric patient, Foucault sought to write a history of madness not from the perspective of positivist psychiatry, which would seek to write a history of progress oriented around a gradual discovery of the truth of mental
illness, but rather from the discrete experiences of successive cultures responding to
madness as a phenomenon caught up in political, economic, social, and religious
exigencies. Foucault directs his study not by "the comfort of terminable truths," but rather
by "the caesura that establishes the distance between reason and non-reason" (Foucault
xxvii-xxviii). To that end, he examines legal documents, letters, diaries, and
philosophical documents spanning from the outbreak of leprosy in the Middle Ages to the
birth of the modern asylum in the nineteenth century, all in hopes of reproducing the
different—though not, according to him, progressive—experiences of madness through
European history.

From Foucault's project I make two major borrowings. The first of these is the
principle animating question behind his inquiry: "To write the history of madness will
therefore mean making a structural study of the historical ensemble—notions,
institutions, judicial and police measures, scientific concepts—which hold captive a
madness whose wild state can never be reconstituted" (Foucault xxxiii). In short,
Foucault asks: how can various documents reconstruct a certain culture's experience of
madness? While Foucault boldly takes on the problematic of a given culture's entire
experience of madness, my focus is admittedly narrower: what do select Western novels
from the era of the anti-psychiatry movement reveal about that culture's experience of
madness? For this reason, this study makes recourse mostly to literary texts and criticism.

The second major borrowing I make is Foucault's repeated contention that
through its cohabitation with the figures of unreason in forced confinement, mental
illness became enmeshed in a network of moral judgments from which it has yet to
extricate itself. He first elaborates this phenomenon toward the beginning of his
description of "the correctional world":

For a period of nearly 150 years, the venereal were to be penned in side by side
with the insane in a single enclosure, and the result was a certain stigma which for
the modern consciousness was the sign of an obscure kinship . . . This kinship
between the pains of madness and the punishment of debauchery was not some
archaic trace in the European consciousness, but came into being on the threshold
of modern times, as it was the seventeenth century that was almost entirely
responsible for discovering it . . . Madness found itself side by side with sin, and it
is perhaps from there that stems the immemorial linking of unreason and guilt that
the alienated today still feel to be their fate, and which doctors discover as a truth
of nature. (86)

Far from losing this moral dimension through progress, therapeutic psychology built its
foundation upon the phenomena of guilt, sin, and personal responsibility. "A purely
psychological medicine was only made possible," writes Foucault, "when madness was
alienated into guilt" (326). Even the putative liberation of the mad by the founders of the
modern asylum was, according to Foucault, made possible only after mental illness
"[took] on the moral form that was so instantly recognizable to Pinel and Tuke" (444).
Foucault leaves readers to doubt whether modern psychology and psychiatry will ever be
able to dispense with the forces of morality that empowered them in the first place.

Such a viewpoint is, according to others, tenable only if one believes Foucault
succeeded in his aim to erect his project outside of the historically determined legacy of
reason and the Cogito, because otherwise, his project could simply restructure reason from within. One of those others, Foucault's former pupil Jacques Derrida, suggests that, strictly speaking, Foucault's project fails in this regard, and is only—to borrow a phrase Derrida employs elsewhere—"party to and part of" the same tradition of reason he seems to condemn ("Law of Genre" 72). Derrida executes his critique of *History of Madness, "Cogito and the History of Madness,"* in two major movements, the first addressing the feasibility of the project and the second challenging Foucault's reading of Descartes's *Meditations*, taken as a philosophical correlative of social exclusion. Derrida avers that Foucault's desire to write an archeology of silence from the perspective of madness is "... with all seriousness, the *maddest* aspect of his project" ("Cogito" 34), and that, to the extent the project puts reason on trial for its crimes against madness, "such a trial may be impossible for by the very fact of their articulation the proceedings and the verdict unceasingly reiterate the crime" (35). As for the reading of Descartes, who Foucault claims simply banishes "madness in the name of the man who doubts," thereby disqualifying and excluding it in advance (Foucault 46), Derrida counters that, far from simply excluding madness, Descartes fully subjects the Cogito to madness and other forms of error via hyperbole: "Whether I am mad or not, *Cogito, sum*. Madness is therefore, in every sense of the word, only one *case* of thought (*within* thought)" ("Cogito" 56). Thus, according to Derrida, Foucault misreads Descartes and, instead of putting reason to task from without, only repeats the Cartesian gesture of exercising radical doubt upon the tradition of what Derrida calls the *logos*, of which the Cogito is just one moment (55).
Foucault's project never entirely recovered from Derrida's criticisms. Though he responded with an acerbic counter-reading of Descartes and a denouncement of deconstruction in general, and though Jean Khalfa believes "... that on the textual analysis of Descartes Foucault has no difficult countering Derrida's argument" (Khalfa xxiii), Derrida's attack on Foucault's methodology remains trenchant. As Slavoj Žižek puts it much more recently (2007), "he [Foucault] ultimately falls prey to the trap of historicism which cannot account for its own position of enunciation" (Žižek). Further, Žižek reminds readers that two of Foucault's later works, History of Sexuality and Discipline and Punish, dispense with absolute exteriority (in the sense that madness would be absolutely exterior to madness), and suggests instead that "madness is also generated by the very discourse that excludes, objectivizes and studies it—there is no 'pure' madness outside it" (Žižek). To write the history of madness from the perspective of madness is therefore either to relegate oneself to silence or to cross over to the side of reason.

In spite of these considerable criticisms, one can still recuperate the animating questions behind History of Madness, as well as Foucault's thorough elucidation of madness's relationship with immoral unreason. Even in his critique, Derrida does not question Foucault's thesis on mental illness's situation with morality: "It is only one step from here [making madness a willful error] to making madness a sin, a step that was soon after cheerfully taken, as Foucault convincingly demonstrates" ("Cogito" 52). Moreover, one can approach literature with Foucault's questions in mind: What does a certain novel
reveal about how a culture experiences madness? How does that novel repeat, revise, or
call into question the moral condemnation of mental illness?

The following chapters take up these questions in order to approximate the
experience of mental illness during the anti-psychiatry movement. Extant traces of the
intersections between mental illness and moral condemnation are innumerable: grotesque
or fetishized depictions of madness in films (Psycho; Girl, Interrupted), a recent interest
in cracking down on the mentally ill in the interests of preserving second amendment
rights, and perhaps most insidiously, individual signifiers. A recent media controversy
involving Ann Coulter demonstrates how easily the terms used to describe mental
illnesses double without modification as insults. After President Barack Obama's third
debate with Mitt Romney, Coulter tweeted: "I highly approve of Romney's decision to be
kind and gentle to the retard" ("I highly. . ."). In response to the backlash, she issued a
defense instead of an apology. Appearing on Piers Morgan, she argues, "Moron, idiot,
cretonne, cretin, imbecile: these were—exactly like retard—once technical terms to
describe people with mental disabilities. Changing the word doesn't change the
condition" (Coulter). Although here, strictly speaking, she describes mental disabilities
and not mental illnesses, both appear under the heading of "Disorders" in the DSM.
Coulter demonstrates, wittingly or unwittingly, the double life of terms used to describe
people with non-normative mental characteristics and capabilities. In each case, a
pathological term doubles as some kind of opprobrium for its target. The present study
shall, in the chapters that follow, pursue the overlap and conflation between mental
illnesses and guilt as they appear—though under some concealment—at the level of the
The signifier in question is *narcissist*, not only because it serves as both an insult and a pathological description of an illness or symptom, but also because, as shall be demonstrated below, the narcissist has such a rich and persistent literary history, appearing again and again alongside images of madness. Perhaps more interestingly, because the anti-psychiatry movement overlaps quite neatly with a surge in postmodern metafictional literary praxis, the excessive self-reflection of narcissism finds formal expression in the discursive self-awareness of so-called "narcissistic narrative." In spite of the moral baggage and notions of self-centered impotence such a description might connote, this narcissistic narrative provides fertile ground for cultural critique, including the deconstruction of its own descriptor.
CHAPTER TWO: "NEW KIND OF INSANITY": OVID’S NARCISSUS, FREUD’S
NARCISSIST AND NARCISSISTIC NARRATIVE

The tie between madness and the themes one associates with Narcissus or the
narcissist long predates the formal development of narcissism as a mental illness. In fact,
I take my title from Ovid's description of Narcissus's condition as a "new kind of
insanity" ("genus novitasque furoris") (Ovid 3.350). Although Foucault nowhere mentions
Narcissus or narcissism by name in History of Madness, he does highlight madness's ties
with both water and attachment to the self—hallmarks of both Narcissus and the
narcissist. Discussing stultifera navis, the oneiric ship of fools that served as the Middle
Age's precursor to forced internment of the Classical Age, Foucault remarks: "... the link
between water and madness is deeply rooted in the dream of the Western man" (Foucault
11). Later on in the same chapter, he claims, "an attachment to oneself is the first sign of
madness... In this imaginary adhesion to the self, madness is born like a mirage. From
now on, the symbol of madness was to be a mirror, which reflected nothing real, but
secretly showed the presumptuous dreams of all who gazed into it to contemplate
themselves" (23). The link between madness and an attachment to the self not only
presages the development of narcissism as a mental illness, but it also injects
responsibility into the fact of madness: the subject is mad as a result, a punishment, or a
symptom of his excessive self-concern.

Foucault aside, one can find repeated evocations of Narcissus and the narcissist
alongside figures of madness in Western novels. Oscar Wilde's Dorian Gray sustains his
youthfulness by redirecting the decay of his soul onto Basil's portrait of him, his analogue
to Narcissus's watery reflection, and like Narcissus who at the height of his madness claims he wants to leave his body, so too does Dorian "[want] to escape from himself" after his unfading beauty spoils his soul and leads him into madness (Wilde 193). At the scene of his death, the narrator opines: "The world would simply say that he was mad . . . For it was an unjust mirror, this mirror of his soul that he was looking at" (228). William Faulkner's Quentin Compson, though far less vain than Gray, still—like Narcissus—suffers sexual frustration-cum-mental illness, which leads to his suicide at a river where, again combining water and reflection, light plays "upon tideflats like pieces of broken mirror" (Faulkner 170). At the end of the novel, as at the end of Ovid's myth, readers find "a single narcissus" (318). Lastly, who but Narcissus does Toni Morrison evoke when her Pecola Breedlove, after suffering racially motivated exclusion, not to mention rape and pregnancy, will do nothing but "stare in that mirror," madly believing she has blue eyes at last? (Morrison 194). These examples, spanning nearly a century, from Wilde (1890) to Morrison (1970), suggest a strong kinship between madness and, if not Narcissus, then at least the themes of his narrative.

*Pale Fire* and *In the Heart of the Country* are thus not original in evoking Narcissus and narcissistic character types in their description of mental illness. Such associations are older than narcissism as a pathological term. What distinguishes these novels from other works is their use of metafiction, through which issues of self-consciousness, self-centeredness, and reflection take on meaning at the levels of form, genre, and rhetoric. Before reading Nabokov and Coetzee in depth for their representations of Narcissus and narcissists, however, an exploration of narcissism will
be necessary as used in colloquial speech, inherited from Freud, and in turn granted authority from a myth it no longer necessarily reflects. Aside from self-love, Ovid's myth also focused upon division, recognition, sexual frustration and self-destruction. Freud focused only upon the self-love aspect of the myth, resulting in a divergence between Narcissus and the narcissist, which other critics have observed.

To read "Narcissus and Echo" primarily as a story about reflections and self-love is to commit an exegetical version of not seeing the forest for the trees. Although the image of Narcissus pining hopelessly after his own reflection rests at the heart of the myth, to focus solely upon it might bespeak readers' tendencies to privilege the visual and romantic elements of a narrative at the cost of losing sight—in a story staging both literal and figurative blindness—of a larger thematic web to which reflections belong. Like Foucault's madness, which at the "degree zero" of its history was "undifferentiated experience, the still undivided experience of the division itself" (History of Madness xxvii), "Narcissus and Echo" is a story of divisions, of which reflection is just one type among others: original and image, utterance and echo, soul and body, truth and irony, innocence and knowledge, desire and object. Re-reading the myth with an eye toward bringing to the fore these issues of division, as well as problems of recognition and self-knowledge, will build a useful foundation for the comparisons and contrasts drawn in my discussion of Pale Fire and In the Heart of the Country.

Although the stories of Narcissus and Echo existed separately for some time before Ovid worked them together, this essay shall draw primarily from Ovid's retelling as the central and most culturally influential version. As E. J. Kenney says in his introduction to the Oxford edition of Metamorphoses: “Occasionally he [Ovid] combined two stories originally distinct; often, pre-eminently in the case of Narcissus and Echo, his treatment has become canonical” (Kenney xxiv).
Tiresias, a prophet whose literal blinding by Juno Jove compensates with "the gift to see / What things should come, the power of prophecy" (Melville 61), counsels Liriope that her adorable newly-born son, Narcissus, shall live to "ripe old age" so long as "he shall himself not know" (61). Narcissus grows to the age of sixteen, at which he "seem[s] both man and boy," and becomes the unattainable object of the desires of "many a youth / And many a girl" (61). He spurns all of their affections, including those of the nymph Echo, who after falling foul of Juno may no longer speak her own words, but only "double each last word, / And echo back again the voice she's heard" (62). Heartbroken, Echo retreats to a cave where "Her body shrivels," though she remains "alive, but just a sound" (63). Narcissus then spurns another youth, who, in his frustration, beseeches Nemesis: "So may he [Narcissus] love—and never win his love!" (63). Nemesis metes out the fate augured by Tiresias when one day, Narcissus, believing himself alone in the woods, lies down near a pool of water to take a drink, and, "while he slaked his thirst, another thirst / Grew" (63). He becomes infatuated with the image in the pool, and attempts to speak to, caress, and kiss his reflection. Unable to reach the object of his desires, he gives up eating, becomes frustrated, and then, in an epiphanic monologue, realizes: "Oh, I am he! Oh, now I know for sure / The image is my own; it's for myself / I burn with love . . . " (64-65). In a fit of despair, he laments, "Would that I might leave my body!" (65). Soon thereafter he withers away at the poolside, yet even in the underworld he remains transfixed by his reflection in the waters of Styx. At the site of his death there remains "no body anywhere," but instead a flower, "White petals clustered round a cup of gold" (66). The truth of Tiresias's prophetic warning reveals itself at last.
Truth, its concealment and its cost authorize and animate the narrative. Juno's punishment befalls Tiresias partially because of his access to knowledge. Having been born a man, then transformed for seven autumns into a woman, then transformed back into a man, Tiresias alone can settle Juno and Jove's disagreement about whether men or women "get more pleasure out of love" (Melville 60). Tiresias sides with Jove's position, that women get more pleasure from love, and so Juno blinds him; in recompense, Jove grants him his prophetic knowledge. Much later, in Paradise Lost, another tale that stages the cost of knowledge, John Milton would understand this exchange as that of one type of knowledge for another:

So were I equaled with them in renown,

Blind Thamyris and blind Maoenides,

And Tiresius and Phineus prophets old.

But cloud instead, and ever-during dark

Surrounds me, from the cheerful ways of men

Cut off, and for the book of knowledge fair

Presented with a universal blank

Of Nature's works to me expunged and razed,

And wisdom at one entrance quite shut out. (Milton 3.34-50)

The shutting out of wisdom "at one entrance" coincides exactly with the opening of a new aperture for knowledge: "$\ldots$ thou celestial light shine inward $\ldots$ that I may see and tell / Of things invisible to mortal sight" (3.51-55). In this way, each man pays the debt
for knowledge in the same movement wherein it is charged. Blindness causes a certain turning inward, not unlike that experienced by the so-called narcissist, and that turning inward produces knowledge.

Tiresias's simultaneous debt and payment for knowledge seem to prefigure those of Narcissus. Early in Narcissus's story, the poet suggests that the meaning of Tiresias's cryptic prophecy—that Narcissus will live long "If he shall himself not know"—will come at a steep price: "For long his words seemed vain; what they concealed / The lad's strange death and stranger love revealed" (Melville 61). One of the painful truths of Narcissus's story is that the knowledge that could save his life must come at the cost of that life; Narcissus and the readers solve the riddle of his being at the exact moment the answer loses any salvific value. The myth turns upon the division between irony (language veiling meaning) and truth (the meaning unveiled), as well as that between innocence and knowledge. At sixteen, Narcissus precariously straddles the division between boyhood and manhood. The development of his desire for his image signals his irrevocable crossing of that division into manhood, a crossing that will result in the division of himself.

Narcissus's endeavors to traverse the division between self and reflection result not, as he would wish, in consummation, but in the revelation of a fulgurating unanimity, which at once becomes yet another division. Ovid stages the interplay between self and reflection through self-reflexive language, mirror-like verse:

All he admires that all admire in him,

Himself he longs for, longs unwittingly,
Praising is praised, desiring is desired,
And love he kindles while with love he burns.² (Melville 63)

The active and passive verb forms, in both the English and the Latin, approximate linguistically the relationship between Narcissus and his reflection. Such perfect reciprocity cannot, unfortunately, extend as far as Narcissus would want. He and his reflection may seem to express the same desires for each other, but their mutual approach stops asymptotically short of the point of contact: "A little water sunders us . . . so slight the thing that thwarts our love" (Melville 64). Narcissus's repeated attempts to know himself in a perhaps Biblical sense lead to him knowing himself in the sense of recognition and self-knowledge, a trespass of the exact injunction Tiresias warned would cut short his life before old age: "si se non noverit" (Ovid 3.348). In a self-destructive fit of despair, Narcissus lets fly something like a prayer—"O utinam a nostro secedere corpore possem!"—which receives an answer in the form of his death (3.467). Strangely, in his translation, Melville translates this line as "Would that I could leave my body!", when a more faithful rendering would be "Would that I could leave our [nostro] body [corpore, still singular]." This pronoun, a small yet decisive detail, serves as the first indication of Narcissus's having internalized the division of selfhood he wishes would be an external reality, for if he were divided, he could approach himself as a lover. Further in the passage, the poet again indicates Narcissus's fractured self, which Melville this

² This self-reflexive, mirroring poetic device is not an amelioration contrived by A. D. Melville through his translation, but appears also in Ovid's original: “cunctaque miratur, quibus est mirabilis ipse: se cupit inprudens et, qui probat, ipse probatur / dumque petit, petitur, pariterque accendit et ardet” (Ovid 3.424-26). The additional etymological coincidence here, only cryptically visible in Melville’s translation (admire), is that “miratur” and “mirabilis” are both forms of mīror (to wonder, to be astonished at; to admire, to look on with admiration), from which modern English derives, via Middle English and Old French, mirror (Cassell’s Latin Dictionary, “mīror”).
time translates faithfully: "But now we two—one soul—one death will die" (Melville 65). Though still bitter from having been spurned by him, Echo grieves for Narcissus, and likewise bears witness to the divorce of his soul from his body: "Nor longer lasts the body Echo loved" (65 emphasis added).

Echo's appearance at Narcissus's death should remind readers that Narcissus is not alone in suffering a violence to the unity of selfhood that in turn results in disembodiment. One of the reasons why Ovid's combination of the myth of Narcissus and the myth of Echo works so well is because Echo's doubling of others' words serves as the sonic complement to Narcissus's visual reflection, though with some caveats. Whereas Narcissus sees himself reflected, Echo echoes others, not herself; in this sense, she serves as a complement to the reflecting pool more than she does to Narcissus. What she does share with him, however, is forced transcendence of the body. In her cave retreat, she does not die but rather leaves her body:

Her body shrivels, all its moisture dries;
Only her voice and bones are left; at last
Only her voice, her bones are turned to stone.
So in the woods she hides and hills around,
For all to hear, alive, but just a sound. (Melville 63)

Thus, Echo also harbors a fissure in her selfhood, which curiously allows her to function with something like omnipresence. While Narcissus could flee embodied Echo, he cannot escape Echo in her vocal, delocalized form.
Narcissus's inability to escape the attention of disembodied Echo means that up until the very moment of his death, he receives an excess of recognition. This trait ultimately serves to distinguish him from the so-called narcissists who, in many works of literature, including *Pale Fire* and *In the Heart of the Country*, lapse into obsessive self-concern because they receive only their own recognition. "[M]any a youth / And many a girl desired him," as does Echo who makes advances toward him while still embodied, and so too does the unnamed youth whose prayer Nemesis sets into fateful action (Melville 61). Even in the seemingly solitudinous forest grove with the pool, "[w]hither no shepherd came nor any herd, / Nor mountain goat. . ." (63), Echo watches on in secret, echoing Narcissus's "sad sounds of woe" and his final "farewell" before he passes on to the underworld (65-66). Narcissus, throughout his short life, is recognized by many, yet reciprocates only the false recognition of his own image.

Although Freud did not coin the term *narcissist*, borrowing it, as he admits, from Paul Näcke, (and Samuel Taylor Coleridge used *narcissism* as early as 1822), he was the first to develop the term at any length in the 1914 "On Narcissism: An Introduction." In this seminal work, he distinguishes primary narcissism from secondary narcissism, only the latter being an instance of pathology. Primary narcissism describes the self-preserving drives of childhood that are redirected, after childhood, into ego development by the formation of an ideal self. Perversion and homosexuality, on the other hand, types of secondary narcissism, occur when subjects seek "themselves as a love-object" (Freud 88). As the *Oxford English Dictionary* indicates, the term *narcissist* describes only someone

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3 In a letter, Coleridge writes, “Of course, I am glad to be able to correct my fears as far as public Balls, Concerts, and Time-murder in Narcissism” (“narcissism,” *OED Online*).
with what Freud would call secondary narcissism, since all children have primary narcissism—the drive to preserve and satisfy the self—making it a typical stage of development instead of a pathological anomaly.

As elucidated in the reading above, however, much more is at stake in the original myth than self-love. In a trenchant criticism of the whole discourse of sexuality revolving around Freud's version of narcissism, Michael Warner highlights a telling tension between Freud's theory and Ovid's myth. For Freud, homosexuality is a species of narcissism. Unlike the heterosexual who invests his erotic desires in the female Other, the homosexual fails to translate his initial autoeroticism into desire for another. In order to slough off the shame of not having moved beyond autoeroticism late in his development, the homosexual invests his desire into another male, exploiting that second male as a projection of himself. For Freud, homosexuality is just a redirected expression of desire for the self. What Freud's description of narcissism leaves unexplained for Warner is why, in "Narcissus and Echo," "Ovid tells us that Narcissus rejects not just the girls who love him, but also the boys. Those boys, then, have an interest in other persons, if not in the other gender, and the myth of Narcissus does not collapse the two. What warrants the forgetting of this difference [between narcissism and homosexuality], which becomes a nondifference, sameness?" (Warner 193). Such a misreading is neither innocent nor harmless. Not only does Freud speak "with an unmistakable tone of condescension

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4 The second OED definition describes the psychological phenomenon: “The condition of gaining emotional or erotic gratification from self-contemplation, sometimes regarded as a stage in the normal psychological development of children which may be reverted to in adulthood during mental illness.” “In later use an extended application” of the above definition gives colloquial speech is common usage: “Excessive self-love or vanity; self-admiration, self-centredness” (“narcissism,” OED Online).
toward the homosexuals who are really seeking themselves" (193), but that condescension congeals into pathologizing: "He concludes that homosexual desire reduces to narcissism without significant remainder and hence is a developmental misdirection" (194). Even though colloquial usage is narrower than Freud's usage, one should not understand the tone of moral condemnation in the colloquial usage as a distortion of Freud's original; Freud invested it with that tone all along.

Not only Michael Warner, but also Julia Kristeva finds occasion to quibble with narcissism. In her exploration of the centrality of Narcissus and narcissism to the development of Western Christian subjectivity, she understands self-centered introspection as a necessary step toward self-knowledge. Such a step is "Narcissan if you wish, but violently antinarcissistic" (Kristeva 108). Her distinction between Narcissan and narcissistic implies that the latter has diverged so greatly from the canonical Narcissus so as no longer to describe his likeness. Further on she writes: "Nineteenth-century German psychiatry has retained the perverse aspect of Narcissus' myth: the love of the subject for his own body" (116). Like Warner, Kristeva acutely observes the difference between Freud's narcissist and Ovid's Narcissus. To the extent that the term narcissist draws its authority from the myth of Narcissus, the differences critics have found between Freud's narcissist and Ovid's Narcissus threaten to destabilize the former. Narcissus might not recognize his reflection in the narcissist any better than he recognized it the forest spring, not, in this instance, because of any lack of self-knowledge, but because of a misalignment of concepts.
Lastly, insofar as narcissism suggests turning inward, self-concern, and reflection, metafiction might, as others have suggested, constitute a type of narcissistic narrative. In 1984, Linda Hutcheon released *Narcissistic Narrative* as an exploration of the implications of the novelistic self-scrutiny of metafiction. Grant Stirling uses Hutcheon's work as a starting point from which to "examine . . . the potential relationship between the psychoanalytic concept of narcissism and the literary genre of metafiction" (Stirling 81). According to him, narcissism contains no less of a negative charge when it describes narrative than when it describes a character type: "The defining quality of narcissism clearly resonates with the self-reflexive turn of metafictional literature and has paved the way for a rather loose and often pejorative invocation of the term 'narcissistic' to characterize metafiction as a genre" (80). Instead of rebuking such claims, Stirling voices optimism that such narcissistic narrative "can emerge as a potent means of cultural contestation in which the narrative strategies of metafictional texts operate to assert dissident cultural values" (82). Self-consciousness in narrative does not, therefore, imply self-centered political quietism, but rather provides a staging ground for incisive critique. The denaturalization of and disillusionment with cultural traces operated through the distancing effects of metafictional narrative praxis help objectify those traces for the work of analysis and critique.

While Tiresias may have predicted that Narcissus's self-knowledge would eventuate in his death, and while "metafiction [has been] commonly viewed as the death of the novel genre" (Stirling 100), metafictional narrative allows these novels to stage critiques at the level of discourse because they demonstrate awareness of their own
discursive practices instead of, as in the case of typical narrative, taking discursive conventions for granted. The problem of the intersection of moral condemnation and pathology under the signifier *narcissist* is at heart a problem of discourse; colloquial speech employs the term as a moral judgment, yet the roots of that moral dimension stretch back into the history and pre-history of psychiatry. In the chapters that follow, I will demonstrate how *Pale Fire* and *In the Heart of the Country* avail themselves of metafiction's putatively narcissistic qualities in order to deconstruct the term *narcissist* by exposing its divergence from the originary myth and by complicating (in Nabokov) or suspending (in Coetzee) readers' moral assessment of what the colloquial speaker (and even some critics) would call narcissistic narrators. My readings of these novels will depend upon and make reference to points highlighted in the above analysis of Ovid's myth.
CHAPTER THREE: "NO REAL DOUBLES": FALSE REFLECTIONS IN VLADIMIR NABOKOV’S *PALE FIRE*

Imbued throughout with a complex thematic web of reflection at the levels of structure, lexicon, imagery, character relationships, and as self-directed thought, *Pale Fire* consistently seems to evoke the pathology of narcissism and the myth of Narcissus, even going so far as explicitly naming both Narcissus and Echo at different points in the text. Firstly, John Shade, in "Pale Fire," declares his "sensual love for the *consonne d'appui*," referring to the practice in French poetry of rhyming not only the end of a syllable in verse but also its "onset consonant," a practice which, through apposition, he calls "Echo's fey child" (68). Secondly, Kinbote, in a scene to be revisited below, refers to Gordon Krummholz, a young piano prodigy with whom Kinbote seems to have had (likely imaginary) relations, as "Narcissus" (202). While several critics have described the narrator, Dr. Kinbote, as narcissistic, an acute pursuit of the novel's themes of reflection demonstrates the extent to which Nabokov creates distance between Kinbote and Narcissus. Additionally, although Nabokov's representation of Kinbote—like his representation of any homosexual—cannot be read entirely sympathetically, he does imbed clues into *Pale Fire* that suggest Kinbote's narcissism derives not completely from character fault, but also from trauma, psychic deterioration, and impending suicide.

Published in 1962, Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* appeared at a time when the homosexual served as an additional link between madness and both Narcissus and

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5 Critics descriptions of Kinbote as a narcissist are common: Brian Boyd comments upon his “megalomaniac narcissism" (Boyd 60); and Steven Bruhm describes Kinbote's “narcissistic self-promotion” and provides a list of other critics who make “a diagnosis of narcissism” (Bruhm 281).
narcissism. As Freud unwittingly demonstrates, one could easily miscomprehend homosexuality as an attempt to redirect self-centered libidinal drives toward a same-sex Other. Until the end of the twentieth century, homosexuality appeared on the horizon of madness, as one of its figures, either as a form it could take or as the perverse symptom of a more thoroughly enmeshed pathology. Although contemporary historicist practice makes a principle of not anachronistically applying today's categories of thought to cultures antedating those very categories, and therefore although a contemporary thinker would not think of Narcissus as a homosexual because such a category did not exist for Ovid in the way it does for readers today, Freud did not abide by any such epistemic boundaries. He read the myth of Narcissus at least in part as a story of homosexual desire directed toward the self. By extension, he variously understands homosexuality as a variant, consequence, or cause of narcissism.

An examination of the place "homosexual" occupies in various editions of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) contemporary with the publication of *Pale Fire* indicates the complex relationship and history homosexuality has with madness. In the first DSM (1952), homosexuality is a "Mental Disorder," more specifically, a species of "Sexual deviation": "The term includes most of the cases formerly classes as 'psychopathic personality with pathological sexuality.' The diagnosis will specify the type of the pathologic behavior, such as homosexuality, transvestism, pedophilia, fetishism and sexual sadism (including rape, sexual assault, mutilation)" (DSM-I 38-39); homosexuality thus belonged to the same genus as rape. The first six printings of the DSM-II (1968-73) would also include homosexuality as an instance of
pathology because it failed to fall under the purifying aegis of potential procreativity:
"This category [sexual deviations] is for individuals whose sexual interests are directed
primarily toward objects other than people of the opposite sex . . ." (DSM-II.1 44). In
1973, after six printings of the DSM-II, heated debate prompted DSM board members to
accept a proposal removing homosexuality from its list of pathologies because "many
homosexuals are quite satisfied with their sexual orientation and demonstrate no
generalized impairment in social effectiveness or functioning" ("Homosexuality" 2). In
its place, later printings of the DSM-II would list "Sexual Orientation Disturbance" for
homosexuals "who are either disturbed by, in conflict with, or wish to change their sexual
orientation" (DSM-II.7 44). Shadows of homosexuality's affiliation with madness would
continue to appear even in the DSM-III, under the etiology of "Gender Identity
Disorders," where "Sexual Orientation Disturbance" reappears as "Ego-dystonic
Homosexuality" (DSM-III 265; 281). Although gay liberation movements were well
underway in the early sixties, at the time Pale Fire was published, homosexuality still
had not completely severed its ties with pathology, nor has it necessarily today.

Although Nabokov frequently makes clear his disdain for psychoanalysis
(especially as a literary approach), and his disregard for Freud, he also makes clear his
aversion toward homosexuality. In response to a critic, "Mr. Rowe," who reads sexual
symbols into Nabokov's work, Nabokov writes: "What I object to is Mr. Rowe's
manipulating my most innocent words so as to introduce sexual 'symbols' into them. The
notion of symbol itself has always been abhorrent to me . . . 'Wickedly folded moth'
suggests 'wick' to Mr. Rowe, and 'wick,' as we Freulians know, is the Male Organ"
Elsewhere, in an interview, when asked about parodies of Freud in *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*, he dismisses the question: "Oh, I am not up to discussing again that figure of fun . . . Let the credulous and the vulgar continue to believe that all mental woes can be cured by a daily application of old Greek myths to their private parts. I really do not care" (66). Nevertheless, like Freud, Nabokov still saw homosexuality as aberrant. In his posthumously published revised autobiography, *Speak, Memory*, he alludes cryptically to the homosexuality of his brother, Sergei. "For various reasons I find it inordinately hard to speak about my older brother," writes Nabokov, "... a page from [Sergei's] diary that I found on his desk and read, and in stupid wonder showed to my tutor, who promptly showed it to my father, abruptly provided a retroactive clarification of certain oddities of behavior on his part" (*Speak, Memory* 257-58). In this way, although he rejects Freud, Nabokov still partakes in twentieth-century cultural homophobia. Critic Steven Belletto endeavors to eschew Nabokov's homophobia by reading *Pale Fire* as a narrative "destabilizing the staid homophobic narrative" of the Cold War era (Belletto 758), yet his argument does not hold up well in the face of Nabokov's comments about "books [he] hate[s] on first sight: the earnest case histories of minority groups, the sorrows of homosexuals" (qtd. in Bruhm 281). The various portrayals of homosexuals throughout Nabokov's oeuvre should not be read as sympathetic.

Conducting a reading of *Pale Fire* focused upon the issues of madness and narcissism therefore requires, on the one hand, remaining sensitive to Nabokov's critical appraisal of psychoanalysis, and on the other hand, accommodating the difficult
meanings he attributes to homosexuality. One could do worse than to read *Pale Fire* as a thematic reprisal of *Lolita* in a minor key insofar as the narrators of both novels are sexual predators whose unparalleled rhetorical charms threaten to override readers' moral assessments of them. Nabokov states in an interview that part of the challenge of writing *Lolita* was that it "treated of a theme which was so distant, so remote, from [his] own emotional life that it gave [him] a special pleasure to use [his] combinatorial talent to make it real" (*Strong Opinions* 12). While the theme in question in *Lolita* is pedophilia, one could imagine that Nabokov conceives of writing from the perspective of a homosexual as a comparable exercise. The difference between pedophilia and homosexuality is, of course, that the latter has become far more accepted since *Pale Fire*’s publication, and so not as many readers today would have contempt for Kinbote's homosexuality alone. Like Humbert Humbert, he does seem to favor younger paramours, but the objects of his affection are college students instead of pubescent children.

For a contemporary reader who does not share Nabokov's homophobia, then, reading *Pale Fire* becomes a complex activity of shuffling between reading with and reading against the grain. On the one hand, part of the contempt Nabokov holds for Dr. Kinbote stems from the latter's homosexuality, and, not partaking in that prejudice, the contemporary reader might, in some senses, suspend his or her analysis of *Pale Fire* as "Literature" in order to appraise it as a textual trace that reflects the prejudices of its cultural moment. Yet on the other hand, if *Pale Fire* does enact what Leona Toker recognizes in *Lolita* as "the rhetoric of reader entrapment" (qtd. in De La Durantaye 8), then to find oneself sympathetic to Dr. Kinbote might turn out to be reading with
Nabokov's grain all along—perhaps enthusiastically—by approaching the text already with a willingness to read Dr. Kinbote sympathetically, with or without the need for rhetorical showmanship. As a methodological guide, readers should train themselves to hold potentially conflicting readings together at once: reading against Nabokov's homophobia, yet reading his rhetoric in relation to it; holding characters responsible for their actions, yet taking into account the forces that shape them.

What initially strike readers most about *Pale Fire* are its singular structure and its mode of delivery. Formally, it presents itself as a parody of literary scholarship: a Foreword preceding a 999-line poem in four cantos ("Pale Fire") by the late poet John Shade, followed by an extensive commentary by Dr. Kinbote of Zembla. In spite of the scholarly, objective veneer, Kinbote early on goes so far as to claim that "without [his] notes Shade's text simply has no human reality at all" (28). Moreover, he acknowledges that "To this statement [his] dear poet would probably not have subscribed, but, for better or worse, it is the commentator who has the last word" (29). Throughout the Foreword, Dr. Kinbote gives readers countless reasons not to trust his annotations, including personal bias, breeches of professionalism, and an ostensible instability of mind. The *soi-disant* Commentary reveals, along with the plot of *Pale Fire*, further evidence that Dr. Kinbote fabricates much of his narrative, misreads Shade's poem, possibly replaces parts of Shade's poem with his own lines, and is descending all the while into a self-destructive madness. After the Commentary comes a brief Index, which brings with it a new set of small-scale peculiarities, including even more evidence against Kinbote. Together the closed structure of *Pale Fire* and the unreliability of its narrator beset readers with
considerable hermeneutic difficulties. In lieu of positive knowledge about the plot, the characters, and the real origins of the poem "Pale Fire," readers can, at best, develop only "strong opinions."

Because readers can trust Kinbote neither as scholar nor as narrator, knocking together a description of him remains, to an extent, a guessing game, or, to use Nabokov's preferred metaphor for novels, a chess game. One must distinguish between what Kinbote intentionally reveals of himself and what he reveals in spite of himself. What Kinbote attempts to steer readers toward believing is that he is the exiled King Charles Xavier II of Zembla, close friend of John Shade, pursued by political assassin Jacob Gradus. Who Kinbote really is and if he really exists remains the central puzzle of much criticism around *Pale Fire*. In his useful overview of the critical landscape surrounding the novel, Brian Boyd divides critics into four groups:

Some have suggested that Shade has written the whole of *Pale Fire*, not just the poem; others have argued instead that Kinbote must have written the entire volume, poem included; still others maintain that Nabokov undermines the apparent dual authorship but deliberately leaves the attribution question unresolved, so that while there is evidence that either Shade or Kinbote could have written the whole, the reader... cannot settle on a single stable response. Most Nabokov readers, however, reject with disgust and exasperation the claim that a single internal author may be responsible for all of *Pale Fire*. (Boyd 114) Even reading conservatively, one will at least notice that Kinbote is not who he says or believes he is, and that his reading of "Pale Fire" serves more as a crutch for the
development of his own fantastical identity than as a commemorative act of literary
criticism. In effect, he attempts—with increasing desperation—to inscribe himself within
the mirror-text of "Pale Fire."

The poem "Pale Fire," like the entirety of the novel Pale Fire, takes reflection as
its theme and as its organizing structure. The poem begins: "I was the shadow of the
waxwing slain / By the false azure in the windowpane" (33). As Kinbote writes, the
image here "evidently refers to a bird knocking itself out, in full flight, against the outer
surface of a glass pane in which a mirrored sky . . . presents the illusion of continued
space" (73). Reflection is at play here, but as with the relationship between the faulty
Commentary and the poem, reflection here is not innocent: it misleads, and in this
instance, among others in the novel, it results in death. According to one of Kinbote's few
potentially lucid insights into the poem,6 "Pale Fire," once completed, would have been a
symmetrical work:

Nay, I shall even assert . . . that there remained to be written only one line of the
poem (namely verse 1000) which would have been identical to line 1 and would
have completed the symmetry of the structure, with its identical central parts,
solid and ample, forming together with the shorter flanks twin wings of five

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6 Readers may give Kinbote some credence here because, shortly before his death, John Shade remarks
about his poem: “A few trifles to settle and . . . I’ve swung it, by God” (Pale Fire 288). Because this
dialogue reaches readers, like the rest of the novel, through Kinbote, one might suspect him of tampering
with it, yet parts of the remainder of this dialogue, where Shade denies his place in the poem, seem
unflattering to Kinbote, so, if anything, his interest would be in omitting the dialogue altogether. Even in
the event that Kinbote does misunderstand the poem and provide false dialogue to support his claim, his
insight imbues readers’ perceptions of the poem with the themes of reflection, whether or not such a
structure was part of Shade’s original plan.
hundred verses each . . . I cannot imagine that he intended to deform the faces of his crystal by meddling with its predictable growth. (15)

Formally, one half of the poem would reflect the structure of the other, taking as center the break between Cantos Two and Three, the exact moment where Hazel Shade, John's daughter, "stepped off the reedy bank / Into a crackling, gulping swamp, and sank" (51), dying a watery death like Narcissus, though for precisely the opposite reason—physical unattractiveness leading to non-recognition. After recalling his daughter's premature death, John Shade writes about the "Hereafter" (52), and so the line of reflection between the two "crystal" halves of the poem serves as the line between life and death.

Complementary to this symmetry, one recalls John Shade's predilection for "word golf": "hate-love in three, lass-male in four, and live-dead in five (with 'lend' in the middle)" (262). Through clever tricks of language, Shade sets up life and death as reflective opposites of each other.

The mythical Zembla, upon which so much of Kinbote's fantasy depends, is itself a land of reflections. Kinbote ferrets out a first reference to it as "that crystal land" in line twelve of Shade's poem (74), yet readers learn toward the end of the novel, as Kinbote descends into madness, that "the two lines given in that note [to line twelve] are distorted and tainted by wistful thinking" (227-28). Further on, Kinbote provides the history of the name of Zembla as "a corruption not of the Russian zemlya, but of Semblerland, a land of reflections" (265). Its language, Zemblan, Kinbote calls "the tongue of the mirror" (242). Even the large revolution there, which deposes King Charles Xavier and forces him to abscond to the United States as Kinbote, "flicker[s] first" in a Glass Factory (120).
Brian Boyd's recursive, metaphysical, and vehemently anti-postmodern reading of the novel posits a system of reflections between scenes and details from the Appalachian storyline, where Dr. Kinbote lives in New Wye next to John Shade and his wife, and those from the Zemblan storyline, where Dr. Kinbote claims to have reigned as king. Boyd finds the inspirational sources of Dr. Kinbote's fantastical Zembla within the New Wye community. For a small-scale example, some of the alphabetically-named members of Zembla's royal family—"King Alfin, Queen Blenda, their son Charles and his queen Disa" (Boyd 97)—are prefigured by the daughters of the judge whose house Dr. Kinbote occupies for the summer: "Alphina (9), Betty (10), Candida (12), and Dee (14)" (Pale Fire 83). In a larger, more ambitious examples, Boyd detects a reflection between, on the one hand, "the tunnel episode," with the twice-travelled tunnel connecting Kinbote's room to actress Iris Acht's dressing room at a theater, and on the other hand, "[Hazel's] own experience of the Haunted Barn" (Boyd 186). In this way, conspicuous similarities between not only small, telling details, but also entire segments of narrative suggest that the two major plot lines of Pale Fire—the New Wye of the present and the Zembla of Kinbote's imagined past—maintain a relationship of reflection.

Nabokov thus saturated Pale Fire through and through with reflective imagery, themes, word games, thought and structures, yet readers should hesitate before arriving at an overfacile interpretation of such reflections. For starters, the "waxwing slain / By the false azure in the windowpane" should serve as a signal that reflections can deceive and even kill. Additionally, the multiplicity of reflections introduces interesting interpretive conundrums because the novel sets up multiple possible reflections for certain elements
in the story. Taking Kinbote as the most obvious example, one might read King Charles Xavier II as his imaginary reflection, or "Pale Fire" the text as a reflection in which he endeavors to read himself, or Professor Botkin whose name reflects his and who suspiciously appears prominently in the Index in spite of his meager role in the Commentary, or, as shall be seen, even Hazel Shade who resembles Kinbote "in certain respects" might serve as a reflection of sorts (193). Troubling readers further, Nabokov once stated in an interview with Alfred Appel that "There are no 'real' doubles in [his] novels" (Appel 145), yet in the version of this interview reprinted in Strong Opinions, both this comment and the question that prompted it seem to have been excised. Does this removal reflect a rethinking on behalf of Nabokov, or did he simply edit it out to move along more quickly to meatier matters since "[t]he Doppelgänger subject is a frightful bore"? (145).

The pervasive theme of reflections, coupled with Dr. Kinbote's endeavor to read himself into John Shade's "Pale Fire," might seem to allude to both Narcissus and narcissism, but readers familiar with Nabokov's complex and sometimes deceptive narrative praxis know better than to interpret such allusions straightforwardly. As Leland de la Durantaye points out, "The role of deception in Nabokov's vision of the world is then twofold: he is both a creature in a deceptive creation, and a creator of deceptive creations" (156). Nabokov discerns behind the complexity of the living world the hand of a wily creator (belonging not to any organized religion), and takes such a creator as a model for the successful artist. A more prudent apprehension of the evocation of Narcissus and narcissism would therefore be to investigate how, through Dr. Kinbote,
Nabokov creates distance between Narcissus and narcissism. Such an exegetical exercise aligns itself to Nabokov's glib criticism, cited above, that psychoanalysis and psychoanalytical approaches to literature entail "the daily application of old Greek myths to . . . private parts" (Strong Opinions 66). More specifically, Dr. Kinbote, whom many critics call a narcissist, distinguishes himself from Narcissus in two major ways. Firstly, whereas Narcissus failed to recognize his reflection where it does exist, Dr. Kinbote endeavors to inscribe a faulty reflection of himself in Shade's "Pale Fire," where it does not exist. Secondly, Kinbote recognizes another (possibly made-up) character, Gordon Krummholz, as Narcissus, thus "Othering" Narcissus by transgressing the axiom that Narcissus cannot recognize himself.

At the outset of his Commentary, as early as his annotations to lines one through four, Dr. Kinbote gleefully undertakes the project of inscribing himself within "Pale Fire." In the image of "the waxwing slain" he discerns one of the "three heraldic creatures . . . in the armorial bearings of the Zemblan King, Charles the Beloved," whom Kinbote will later reveal to be himself, and "whose glorious misfortunes [he] discusse[s] so often" with Shade (Pale Fire 73-74). Such talks with Shade are the principle means by which Kinbote believes he inspires the poet to commemorate his contrived past. After several months of "mesmeriz[ing]" and "saturat[ing]" Shade with stories, he claims: "At length I knew he was ripe with my Zembla, bursting with suitable rhymes, ready to spurt at the brush of an eyelash" (80). Readers witness the process by which, before long, Kinbote's analysis of "Pale Fire" quickly degenerates from an analysis of Zembla's place in the poem to the story of Kinbote's struggle against finding the poem "deliberately and
drastically drained of every trace of the material [he] contributed" (81). Unable to believe that John Shade would exclude his Zemblan material on purpose, he blames its omission upon his wife, Sybil Shade: ". . . she made him tone down or remove from his Fair Copy everything connected with the magnificent Zemblan theme with which I kept furnishing him and which, without knowing much about the growing work, I fondly believed would become the main rich thread in its weave!" (91). In spite of his efforts, Kinbote cannot carry on for long the pretense of reading "Pale Fire" as a poem directly concerning Zembla.

Kinbote's responds to the absence of his Zemblan theme not by desisting his reading, but by insisting upon his pertinence to the text and its pertinence to him. Such moments in the text build the foundation upon which so many critics make the case for Kinbote's narcissism. Referring back to the text of "Pale Fire" while reading the Commentary makes clear Kinbote's insensitive desperation to inscribe himself within the poem. When, for example, John Shade writes about his childhood seizures, dismissed by a doctor as "growing pains" (38), Kinbote transitions rapidly from Shade's experience to his own boyhood which "was too happy and healthy to contain anything remotely like the fainting fits experienced by Shade" (147). Later in the text, and even more appallingly, Kinbote uses the death of John Shade's daughter, Hazel Shade, who "took her poor young life" (50), as a point of departure for his own thoughts on suicide. As will be seen further below, his "simple and sober description of a spiritual situation" reveals details that will make careful readers more sympathetic to Kinbote, but upon the first reading his annotation to Hazel Shade's suicide—its superficially narcissistic with her withdrawal
from externality and her choice of watery death—seems callous, tasteless, and unforgivably self-centered (219).

In writing his Commentary to "Pale Fire," Kinbote cannot avoid retelling the moment after John Shade's death when he first reads the poem, as well as his initial disappointment followed by the desperation that leads him to attempt to project his reflection upon the work. When, upon a visit to the Shade household, John Shade reveals that he has finished "practically the entire product," Kinbote, bursting with eagerness to read what he thinks will be his contrived life-story in poetic form, invites John to his rented house for "half a gallon of Tokay" (288)—which appeals to John because he must hide his alcoholism from Sybil—and to discuss his place in the poem over dinner. Kinbote intends to reveal his identity to John at last: "I promise to divulge to you why I gave you, or rather who gave you, your theme" (288). Shade, thirsting for drink and therefore unwilling to confirm or deny Kinbote's place in the poem, responds: "I think I guessed your secret quite some time ago. But all the same I shall sample your wine with pleasure" (288). Together they set out upon the walk to the house Kinbote rents, during which Gradus, who is really escaped criminal Jack Grey, shoots and kills John Shade in an effort to fell Kinbote, mistaking him for the judge who sentenced him to prison in the first place.

After John Shade's death, Kinbote seems to skip mourning his lost friend and instead uses the opportunity to read "Pale Fire" as soon as possible. He relates in full his response to that first reading:
We know how firmly, how stupidly I believed that Shade was composing a poem, a kind of *romaunt*, about the King of Zembla. We have been prepared for the horrible disappointment in store for me. Oh, I did not expect him to devote himself completely to that theme! . . . I read faster and faster. I sped through it, snarling, as a furious young heir through an old deceiver's testament . . . Nothing of it was there! (296)

Just as, in *Lolita*, Humbert Humbert faithfully recreates the emotional experiences he felt in the presence of Dolores Haze as if he were still feeling them and in spite of his writing retrospectively, so too does Kinbote retrospectively reenact here, in vivid detail, his theatrical disappointment upon not finding his Zemblan theme, that is, not finding his own reflection, inscribed within *Pale Fire.* Faced with such devastation, which amounts to the loss of the crutch upon which he had planned to construct a new past and new identity for himself, he endeavors not to cope, but rather to redouble his efforts to find traces of his imaginary past in the text. "I reread *Pale Fire* more carefully," he writes: "I liked it better when expecting less . . . And what was that? What was that dim distant music, those vestiges of color in the air? Here and there I discovered in it and especially, especially in the invaluable variants, echoes and spangles of my mind, a long ripplewake of my glory" (297). By this point in the narrative, however, even first-time readers have a sense of the extent of Kinbote's psychic derangement, and they suspect that even those "invaluable variants," Kinbote's last bastion of hope, may very well be—like line twelve of the poem—his own falsifications. The final entry of the Index, the entry for "Zembla, a distant northern land," curiously bereft of citations despite Kinbote's initial insistence.
upon its thematic centrality, seems to symbolize at last the absence of Zembla from John Shade's text, as well as Kinbote's likely suicide.

Among those potential falsifications and Index entries readers also find "Krummholz, Gordon, b. 1944, a musical prodigy and an amusing pet," who, real or imagined, serves as a second point of contrast to create distance between Narcissus and Kinbote, the so-called narcissist (Pale Fire 310). Gradus meets Krummholz at Libitina, the villa of Joseph S. Lavender, from whom Gradus believes he might "pick up clues to the King's whereabouts" (197). With Lavender in absentia, and not wanting to appear hurried, Gradus consents to follow Krummholz on a tour of the garden. Gradus plays along, hiding his boredom and frustration, until an "elderly footman" appears, informing Gradus that Lavender would like to speak with him on the phone. Lavender mistakes him for a reporter, a "mucking snooping son of a bitch" (201), which Gradus uses as a signal to end his visit.

Nabokov distinguishes Kinbote-as-narcissist from the Krummholz-as-Narcissus through the latter's beauty and through his figural substitution for Narcissus. Kinbote describes Krummholz as "a slender but strong-looking lad of fourteen or fifteen dyed a nectarine hue by the sun" (199). The "lad" is "graceful" and has a "lovely bestial face" and "avid lips" (200). Throughout the remainder of the scene, Kinbote plays narrative dress-up with Krummholz: at first he wears "a leopard-spotted loincloth" (199), then he is "wreathed about the loins with ivy" (200), then he has "black bathing trunks" (200), followed by "white tennis shorts" (201), and lastly, he stretches out, like Narcissus, "supine on the pool's marble margin" with his "Tarzan brief . . . cast aside on the turf"
Krummholz, even and perhaps especially if he exists only in Kinbote's mind, clearly possesses the beauty Kinbote lacks (Gerald Emerald describes the latter as "the Great Beaver" and Sybil describes him as "an elephantine tick; a king-sized botfly; a macaco worm") (Pale Fire 24; 171-72). To round off and make explicit the mythical evocation, Kinbote describes Gradus stealing one last glance at Libitia from "a higher level on the hillside," where he sees, "a part of the lawn and a segment of the pool, and [he] even distinguishes a pair of sandals on its marble rim—all the remained of Narcissus" (202). Though Kinbote focalizes this scene through the perspective of Gradus, the epithet "Narcissus" is his assessment. In recognizing Narcissus as another, Kinbote transgresses the mythical axiom that Narcissus cannot recognize himself. Kinbote's description of the boy's beauty, together with what amounts to his narrative striptease of him, suggests Kinbote's potential desire for him, which a few details suggest may have been fulfilled: the "dark stain" on the orange nylon on the cot in the garden grove suggests some kind of sexual activity, and the inscription "The King was here," seems to name the culprit. Even though this entire scene is likely a fantasy on Kinbote's part, even imagined consummation with the object of his desire would distinguish Kinbote from the eternally frustrated Narcissus.

As stated above, plenty of critics have conceived of Kinbote as a narcissist, deploying the term without subjecting it to scrutiny, and thereby neglecting both the likelihood that Nabokov would reject to an unqualified Freudian term and the problems inherent in the term itself. Just as readers could not acquit Humbert Humbert for his trespasses and his abuses, so too can readers not entirely acquit Kinbote. Similarly, just as
readers feel themselves sympathetic toward Humbert Humbert—to the extent of discomfort—so too might they find sympathy for Kinbote, and not only because of his pyrotechnic prose. Nabokov intersperses many clues throughout *Pale Fire* that provide readers opportunities to catch glimpses of the psychic distress behind Kinbote's impossible effort to read himself into "Pale Fire." These clues interact with the leitmotif of reflection and the deceptive allusions to Narcissus and narcissism, and this interaction eventuates in his finding something of a real reflection in Hazel Shade instead of a false reflection in "Pale Fire" as text.

Kinbote's similarities with Hazel Shade, upon revisiting the text, become the grounds for readers to sympathize with Kinbote. In navigating the labyrinth of *Pale Fire* for the first time, readers must struggle to decide which parts of the narrative, if any, have any grounding in reality. A productive task for further readings is to uncover Kinbote's motives for trying to mislead his readers and himself, shifting from *what* is fabricated to *why* it is fabricated. In his annotation to the passage of "Pale Fire" where Hazel Shade commits suicide, Kinbote's self-centeredness takes over as it does throughout the remainder of the Commentary, yet in this particular annotation, a "simple and sober description of a spiritual situation," Kinbote unwittingly provides a starting point for finding out his motives for falsely reading himself into Shade's poem (219). He describes a faith in Providence, and therefore "spiritual survival," asking how "[w]hen the soul adores Him Who guides it through mortal life, when it distinguishes His sign at every turn of the trail . . . how can one doubt that He will also preserve us through all eternity?" (221-22). On this point, Kinbote expresses rare disapproval of Shade, whose "flippancy"
toward "certain aspects of spiritual hope which religion alone can fulfill" clearly strikes a raw nerve (223). Kinbote embarks upon a description of suicide methods, from "a brace of pistols" to the supreme method of "falling, falling, falling," the length and detail of which indicates how much thought Kinbote invests in self-destruction. He closes the passage with a solemn plaint that raises further questions: "We who burrow in filth every day may be forgiven perhaps the one sin that ends all sins" (222).

The obvious source of such filth would seem, upon first readings, to be his lechery, since he is always thinking about "another boy, another boy," yet this source seems unlikely for several reasons (23). All of Kinbote's romantic advances in New Wye fail, while all those in Zembla succeed, a fact which amounts to saying Kinbote's romantic life is essentially imagined. From the roomer who "betray[s] [his] trust by . . . entertaining a fiery-haired whore" in the Foreword to the "too talkative and completely impotent" gardener of the final Commentary entries, Kinbote tries repeatedly, yet never succeeds in seducing anyone in New Wye. In Zembla, by contrast, he enjoys the company and pleasures of "boy-girls and girl-boys" (104), Oleg, a "regular faunlet" who serves as an analogue to Humbert Humbert's "nymphets" (123), and a whole "band of Eton-collared, sweet-voiced minions imported from England" (209). Beyond his male admirers, he has a wife with whom he never manages to "lawfully engender an heir" (173), who nonetheless loves him so much that he feels guilt about his indifference toward her, eventually having a dream that is "a constant refutation of his not loving her" (210). In Zembla, especially before the revolution, Kinbote receives an excess of
romantic and sexual attention at complete odds with his involuntary celibacy in Appalachia.

Additionally, romantic and sexual failures form only one of the bars of Kinbote's larger cell of exclusion in New Wye. Running into a colleague at a grocery store, for example, a lady says to Kinbote, "You are a remarkably disagreeable person. I fail to see how John and Sybil can stand you . . . What's more, you are insane" (25). To have included Sybil amongst those who "can stand" Kinbote turns out to be mistake as, in his annotation on Sybil's appearance in "Pale fire," Kinbote remarks that "from the very first she disliked and distrusted" him, and at the end of this note, he appends one of the doleful breaks in tone that signal his distress: "I pardon her—her and everybody" (172). Even John Shade, who tolerates Kinbote the most, deals Kinbote "a bad hurt," which, if readers follow Kinbote's advice to "see, frequently see, note to line 181," turns out to be when the Shades failed to invite Kinbote to John's last birthday before his death (169). Elsewhere, Kinbote's social exclusion reacts with his mental instability when someone dresses the cat of the house he watches over with a neck bow: "It is so easy for a cruel person to make the victim of his ingenuity believe that he has persecution mania, or is really being stalked by a killer, or is suffering from hallucinations" (97-98).

Not having anything like the Foreword of Lolita, wherein one "John Ray, Jr., Ph.D." informs readers that Humbert Humbert "died in legal captivity, of coronary thrombosis," thus confirming the narrator's death, readers of Pale Fire can never know for certain if Kinbote commits suicide, yet the evidence from the novel and from Nabokov's own comments in an interview seems to indicate that he does take his own life.
(Lolita 3). In response to a question about the significance of October 19, the day Kinbote signs his Foreword, Nabokov responds: "the day on which Kinbote committed suicide (and he certainly did after putting the last touches to his edition of the poem)" (Strong Opinions 74). Michael Wood, for whom Roland Barthes's "Death of the Author" has not yet died, dismisses this comment entirely. "This is authorial trespassing," he writes, "and we don't have to pay attention to it" (Wood 186). Brian Boyd, however, amasses many clues corroborating Nabokov's claims, and suggests that "Nabokov's interview merely corroborates what Pale Fire already establishes" (Boyd 106). In the end, even if Kinbote does not commit suicide, his meditation upon suicide in the text, his affinities with Hazel Shade, and other symptoms of derangement demonstrate that he is at least suicidal.

The emotive closing passages of Kinbote's Commentary, which may very well also serve as his last words, belie two conflicting impulses: the impulse to live and to recreate himself yet again, and the impulse to surrender himself to that "intolerable temptation" of suicide he describes in his annotation to Hazel Shade's death in "Pale Fire" (Pale Fire 222). These conflicting impulses parade themselves most clearly at the head of the ultimate paragraph:

God will help me, I trust, to rid myself of any desire to follow the example of two other characters in this work. I shall continue to exist. I may assume other disguises, other forms, but I shall try to exist. I may turn up yet, on another campus, as an old, happy, healthy, heterosexual Russian, a writer in exile, sans fame, sans future, sans audience, sans anything but his art. (300-01)
Careful readers know that "God help me" is no casual or rhetorical turn of phrase because Kinbote makes clear that he follows the "Zemblan brand of Protestantism" (224), and that for him "the Name of God has priority" (227), whence stems his fear of committing "the terrible sin implicit in self-destruction" (219). These fears, unfortunately, cannot stave off the impulse "to follow the example of two other characters," as indicated by the intertextual reference to Shakespeare's *As You Like It*. "[S]ans fame, sans future, sans audience, sans anything but his art," echoes Jacques's description of the seventh and final act and age of man's life: ". . . second childishness and mere oblivion, / Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything" (Shakespeare II.vii 175-76). Kinbote knows the last act of his life is drawing to a close, as he loses everything, even in spite of religion which, in his Index, directs readers to "see Suicide" (*Pale Fire* 312).

The plaintive, plangent tones of Kinbote's final paragraphs resonate with the closing passages of *Lolita*. Kinbote writes: "My notes and self are petering out" (*Pale Fire* 300). Humbert Humbert writes: ". . . I feel my slippery self eluding me, gliding into deeper and darker waters than I care to probe" (*Lolita* 308). In many places, the narrators could exchange sentences with no break in tone, which attests to the similarity between Nabokov's project in both novels. In his study of *Lolita*, Leland de la Durantaye helps make sense of Nabokov's seemingly contradictory statements that the novel has "no moral in tow" yet is "a moral book" (de la Durantaye 189), by suggesting that the former statement evokes the idea of a book with a moral attached to it, following it, or somehow exterior to it, while the latter is more faithful to Nabokov's style, a style in which "moral form and moral content [are] indissoluble" (191). In spite of Humbert Humbert's moral
depravity, his closing paragraphs (just before his death, just like Kinbote), bespeak remorse and perhaps even epiphany. In these final passages, Nabokov's characteristically rich wordplay shifts from a method of rhetorical distancing and irony to a full employment of linguistic resources to foreground the human dimension of morally troubling characters. Even if Nabokov incorporates Kinbote's homosexuality in order to belittle him in readers' eyes, doing so raises the stakes of his moral recuperation. Readers cannot excuse Kinbote for his falsifications and his predations, but paying close attention to the stylistic, moral weave of *Pale Fire*, they can discern depths below the surface of his difficult image, and they can begin to understand him. The closest thing Kinbote finds to a reflection, then, is not the text of "Pale Fire" as a commemoration of his life, but the person of Hazel Shade. Like Kinbote, the "Great Beaver" who has trouble forming meaningful human bonds, partially because of his unattractiveness, Hazel Shade ends her life when being stiffed during a blind date serves as the last straw after a life of appearing in school plays not like the other children who play "elves and fairies," but as "Mother Time, / A bent charwoman with slop pail and broom" (*Pale Fire* 44), and sitting "On the library steps" to "read or knit" while other college students went to games (45). The inwardness Hazel Shade and Kinbote experience is not the narcissism of moral fault, but the result of complete social exclusion, a dearth of recognition in lieu of the excess received by Narcissus.
CHAPTER FOUR: "WITHOUT COURTING THE FATE OF NARCISSUS":
MADNESS AS TROPE IN J. M. COETZEE’S IN THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

"The indifference of South African historiography to the question of madness . . . should arouse nothing but mistrust, and make us redouble rather than abate our efforts to call up and interrogate the demons of the past."

--J. M. Coetzee, Giving Offense

In spite of Magda's repeated descriptions of herself as "mad" (IHC 8; 10; 79; 123; 124),7 "melancholy" (3; 7), "crazed" (50), and "crazy" (6, 138), the issue of madness receives inadequate attention in the critical discussion surrounding J. M. Coetzee. In the first place, IHC continues to occupy an obscure position in Coetzee's oeuvre, likely because it was his second novel (1977) and, even amongst the likes of The Life & Times of Michael K with its inscrutable protagonist and Diary of a Bad Year with its multigeneric and multivocal textual apparatus, it presents innumerable hermeneutic difficulties to readers. Secondly, and far more tellingly, IHC’s relationship with its cultural moment is difficult to formulate. Because literary production under apartheid in South Africa was overdetermined by, from one part of the political spectrum, rigorous censorship legislation, and from another, an expectation that literature should respond directly and unambiguously to its cultural moment, much of the critical landscape surrounding Coetzee worked toward determining whether his novels constitute an

7 Because of its many appearances, I abbreviate In the Heart of the Country as IHC throughout the end of this chapter.
adequate response to the historical exigencies of his cultural and political milieu. Variously articulating the pertinence of Coetzee's novels to their cultural moment as "situational metafiction" (Attwell 3), "Lacanian allegories" (Dovey), "middle-voice fictions" (Macaskill), and "stag[ings] of otherness" (Attridge xii), critics have effectively demonstrated that, in spite of his self-consciously oblique and erudite narrative praxis, his work does manifest a thoroughgoing critique of not only South African apartheid, but also of the entire genus of political hegemony of which apartheid is only one species. Further, the obliquity achieved by cloaking the novels' political engagement in seemingly modernist formal innovations turns out, as those critics claim, to be essential to their incisiveness; as Derek Attridge argues, "Formal innovation (of the sort that matters in literature) is innovation in meaning, and is therefore a kind of ethical testing and experiment," which poses a challenge to readers "that goes to the heart of the ethical and political" (11-12).

By catching themselves up in historicism, the critics defend Coetzee against charges of historical quietism, yet the trajectory of Coetzee's corpus might suggest that the critical conversation should also move beyond the South African context. After the election of 1994, in which the African National Congress (ANC) headed by Nelson Mandela took the majority of seats in the National Assembly, apartheid dissolved in South Africa. Five years later, J. M. Coetzee published Disgrace, widely considered his masterpiece, in which he addresses—among other things—race relations in South Africa after apartheid. Following the publication of Disgrace (1999), Coetzee retired in 2011 to Australia, in which his next three novels (Elizabeth Costello, Slow Man, Diary of a Bad
Year) are staged in whole or in part. Thus, a torsion in Coetzee's corpus signals that he has moved—literally and literarily—beyond the South Africa context. Critics have continued to follow the texts' engagement with the possibilities and limits of representation of outsiders, though with this torsion, issues of color have moved, to an extent, to the background, and other issues have irrupted into the foreground: ageing, disability, and animal rights, to name a few. Such a shift sheds the first novels in a new light, and retroactively redirects attention previously focused upon race relationships toward other representations of alterity. Part of what Derek Attridge claims makes for an effective reading strategy of Coetzee is a willingness to recognize and capitalize upon a "potential for reinterpretation, for grafting into new contexts, for fission and fusion" (10).

Following this potential for reinterpretation through IHC with an eye toward the relationship between madness and Narcissus, one sees that in spite of her similarities with Narcissus and her affinities with the narcissist, Magda explicitly rejects Narcissus, and her superficial narcissism turns out to be the result of radically displaced subjectivity instead of pathology or moral fault. Further, such a reading reveals that, far from interfering with or distracting from the social and political context of the novel, madness is essential to its understanding. Fleshing out Magda's madness will require first a discussion of her peculiar textual ontology to determine the extent to which it rests upon her status as a character in a novel. Having some intuition of her textuality, she endeavors to manipulate her life-story by projecting herself into different literary tropes. Thus, my

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8 The obvious exception to this trend is of course Summertime (2009), which, being the third installment of what he would call his autreiobiographical trilogy, Scenes from the Provincial Life, the first two entries of which appeared in 1997 and 2002, must necessarily take part—at least partially—in South Africa.
discussion of her madness accommodates the determining influence of those tropes, and acknowledges the extent to which madness is itself a trope she inhabits. Lastly, and following suit, her rejection of Narcissus takes the form of the rejection of a narrative trope.

Because of some peculiarities specific to *In the Heart of the Country*, a responsible reading of Magda and her situation should begin with some discussion of her ontology. Her mode of *being mad* is dependent upon her mode of *being* in general. Coetzee has an established record of foregrounding the textuality of his novels, frequently in ways that suggest a double existence: readers hold the text before them, yet that text often exists also in the very fictive realm it conjures. Throughout his oeuvre, Coetzee variously portrays, calls into question, undercuts and exposes the limitations of the conventions that allow his narrators to write with such novelistic precision. Not only does Magda write in an impossible present tense, as do narrators in *Dusklands* and *Waiting for the Barbarians*, but she also occasionally indicates some awareness of her

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9 Although discernable shifts occur across Coetzee’s corpus, the emphasis on textuality remains constant. “The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee,” which constitutes the second major section of his début novel, *Dusklands*, presents itself as “an integral translation of the Dutch of Jacobus Coetzee’s narrative” (55), documenting a 1760 expedition into “the land of the Great Namaqua” (121). A later endeavor, *Age of Iron*, takes the form of an epistle from the narrator, Elizabeth Curren, a retired classics professor dying of cancer in apartheid South Africa, to her estranged daughter in America: “To me this letter will forever be words committed to the waves: a message in a bottle with the stamps of the Republic of South Africa on it, and your name” (32). More recently, *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007) approximates, across three textual strata, the “Strong Opinions” of a retired academic, Señor C, his diary, and the diary of the “tetchy young woman,” Anya, whom he hires to type out his opinions for a German publication (1; 39). In each of the above examples, serving here as representatives of the early, middle, and late stages of Coetzee’s corpus, the discursive conventions remind readers of the limitations of textual mediation.

10 In what might be considered one of the brief lapses, in *Dusklands*, from self-reflexive awareness into typical metafiction, Eugene Dawn writes, seemingly in the middle of losing consciousness during his apprehension by police: “A convention allows me to record these details” (42). *Waiting for the Barbarians* contains no explicit reference to the impossibility of its present tense, but the problem still presents itself strongly when torturers hang the Magistrate so that “as [his] feet leave the ground [he] feel[s] a terrible tearing in [his] shoulders as though whole sheets of muscle are giving way” (121).
own *writtenness*—her status as the product of a discourse of which she may not be the sole author. Further, her writing is divided into 266 numbered sections, not all of which are continuous, and some of which blatantly contradict others. Thus, because her ontology is tied up with her textuality, manifestations of doubt in her text (at the level of narrative, vocabulary, and even etymology) are *a fortiori* manifestations of doubt in her very being.

If Magda's *writtenness* is proper not only to the material world in which *In the Heart of the Country* exists as a novel, but also to the fictive heart of the country narrated by Magda, then her ontology is bound up in the upset of one of several categorical binaries she disrupts: writing/written. Brian Macaskill, in "Charting Coetzee's Middle Voice," explores Magda's medial position with regard to these binaries, especially writing/written, in light of Coetzee's 1984 "A Note on Writing." In "A Note on Writing," Coetzee, drawing upon Emile Benveniste via Roland Barthes, briefly considers the implications of writing in the linguistic middle voice, that is, writing not as a subject independent of object and verb, writing neither completely actively nor passively, but doing writing "with reference to the self" (94-95). Macaskill persuasively contends that Coetzee's writing (or "doing-writing"), especially *In the Heart of the Country*, "resonates with properties of the linguistic middle voice" (Macaskill 466). According to him, "Coetzee writes Magda into being both as 'real' person and as paper entity, shaping her—and allowing her to shape herself—between the demands of the verisimilitude valued by historical materialism and the discursive play practiced by poststructural theories of language" (460). She exists as a paper being in the fashion common to most
fictional(ized) characters, yet she distinguishes her mode of being from both conventional narrators' ignorance of their own textuality and typical metafictional narrators' overtly self-aware address to readers. Following suit anent her relationship to other binaries spuriously naturalized by Western thought, she positions herself between textual transcendence and immanence; she "create[s] [her]self in the words that create [her]" (IHC 8).

She arrives at the possibility of her textual ontology via her dismissal of a procreative genesis. The only memories she has of a mother are those "such as any girl in [her] position would be likely to make up for herself," thus rendering them unreliable (IHC 2). Likewise, after seeing her father's genitals "almost lost in a bush of black hair straggling up to the navel," she claims that "[i]t is not possible to believe [she] came from there" (69). Alternatively, she suggests that she is "better explained as an idea [she herself] had . . . and [has] been unable to shake off" (69). She prolongs her existence through her monologue, "mak[ing] it all up in order that it shall make [her] up" (73).

In spite of the seemingly autonomous self-reflexivity of Magda's ontological statements, she indicates elsewhere an intuition, which to her remains unaffirmed, of her writtenness. For instance, when her father sleeps with Hendrik's bride, Klein-Anna, Magda views her own actions as different from those of a "woman determined to be the author of her own life," a term afforded considerable attention throughout Coetzee's corpus (62 emphasis added). The closest she comes to showing full comprehension of

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11 For one example of the prominence of the problem of authorship in Coetzee's work, one might turn to Diary of a Bad Year, in which Señor C opines that "the great authors [like Tolstoy] are masters of authority" (151).
her *writtenness* is after the textual aporia in which her father dies and Hendrik and Klein-Anna reconcile. She gestures toward the margin separating sections 148 and 149: "A day must have intervened here. Where there is a blank there must have been a day . . ." (79).

She concludes in the following section that she "suspect[s] the day the day was missing [she] was not there," and that she "seem[s] to exist more and more intermittently" (80). Magda thus suspects a link between her ontology and her textuality, yet she never steps entirely into metafiction by positing the existence of an overdetermining authorial agent.

One last caveat further complicating Magda's ontology as derived from her textuality is that not everything—and perhaps not anything—she writes can be securely granted truth value. In this way, Coetzee's indebtedness to Samuel Beckett manifests itself in *In the Heart of the Country* through epistemic, syntactic and linguistic figurations of doubt.

Remarking upon the narrative premises of Beckett's late fiction, Coetzee observes that the narrators' situations are "well described by [Martin] Heidegger's term *Geworfenheit*: being thrown without explanation into an existence governed by obscure rules" (*Inner Workings* 171). Elsewhere Coetzee describes Beckett's textual practice as "phrase-by-phrase self-creation and self-annihilation" ("Samuel Beckett" 44).

In *The Unnamable*, Beckett demonstrates both his telltale syntactic manifestations of doubt and what Coetzee thinks of as *Geworfenheit*. The narrator, an unnamed voice, sustains himself through a monologue in which each positive statement receives, if not a full negation, then at least some annuling, minimizing, or questioning qualifier. For example, the following passage, itself an example, effaces itself thoroughly, and more
clearly than some of the other passages in which patterns of assertion and annulment span pages:

For example, to begin with, his breathing. There he is now with breath in his nostrils, it only remains for him to suffocate. The thorax rises and falls, the wear and tear are in full spring, the rot spreads downwards, soon he'll have legs, the possibility of crawling. More lies, he doesn't breathe yet, he'll never breathe. Then what is this faint noise, as of air stealthily stirred, recalling the breath of life, to those whom it corrodes? It's a bad example. (Beckett 355)

This example of the voice's "example" asserts the breathing of an unnamed individual, denounces that assertion as "[m]ore lies," and then decries itself as "a bad example." One pattern of affirmation and negation enfolds another. The voice carries out this practice _ad nauseum_ because he knows, as much as his frenetic epistemology allows him to know anything, that he must never lapse into silence; he "must go on . . . must say words, as long as there are any" (414).

Magda, more so than any of Coetzee's other narrators, is also aptly described by _Geworfenheit_, especially because she too exhibits Beckettian autodestructive tendencies at the level of individual sentences and throughout the narrative at large. For instance, she begins her narrative with two declarative sentences: "Today my father brought home his new bride. They came clip-clop across the flats in a dog-cart drawn by a horse with an ostrich-plume waving on its forehead, dusty after the long haul" (_IHC_ 1). She immediately casts doubt upon the second of this pair of sentences with a third: "Or perhaps they were drawn by two plumed donkeys, that is also possible" (1). The first
Coetzee orchestrates Magda's auto-annulment so thoroughly that when she claims that she extracts "a faint grey image" of her putative mother from "one of the farthest oubliettes of memory" (2), she executes self-cancellation at the level of etymology. *Oubliette* clearly derives from the French *oublier*, "to forget," and so preemptively invalidates the value of this "memory." Magda also checks readers' confidence that she even has a firm grasp over her own vocabulary. For example, she suspects that she may be a "ghost or a vapour" held in suspension until "somewhere a castle crumbles into a tarn, whatever that may be" (17). Because she makes herself up and is made up by her discourse, her lack of control over her diction here indicates also a lack of control over the terms that constitute her, but this particular slip up reveals something else about her discourse. The image of a "castle crumbl[ing] into a tarn" recalls the well-known image from Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher," where the narrator describes how "the deep and dank tarn at [his] feet closed sullenly and silently over the fragments of the 'House of Usher,'" which has just fissured and collapsed (Poe 727). For Magda to evoke a similar image with similar language, and then to reveal that she does not have full control over that language suggests that some other influence is at play.

Because she has at least some intuition of her textual ontology, Magda also understands the determining powers of tropes upon her destiny as a literary character, and
so she attempts to manipulate her fate by either projecting herself into literary tropes or rejecting them. The echo of Poe above is only one of many literary echoes throughout the text, which appear as one type of literary identification and tropological manipulation among others. Early in the narrative, for example, "[a]ching to forms the words that will translate [her] into the land of myth and hero," she links, via juxtaposition, her identity to tropes: "I am I. Character is fate" (4; 5). In an attempt at suicide, which she calls "the most literary" of "all adventures," she finds her "story coming to its end" (13). Such control is not fully in her grasp, however, since she contrasts herself with a "woman determined to be the author of her own life" (62), and she concedes that "[l]yric is her medium, not chronicle" (71). In order not to behave "like an ugly sister in a story in which only Cinderella is saved," she arranges stones to claim, in a "Spanish of pure meanings," that "CINDRLA ES MI" (132). In a novel where the terms "story," "stories," "tale," and "tales" together appear more than forty times, Magda understands that her ontology is not only textual, but also literary. If she can achieve agency, then she must do so by positioning herself in relation to the determining power of literary tropes.

Magda's self is committed to her textuality, a self-reflexive, self-creating, and self-annulling discourse. She is both writer and written, or perhaps better, written as writer. Because *In the Heart of the Country*, like much of Coetzee's corpus, resists the realist traditions from both South Africa and abroad, and thus makes no commitment to

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12 For example, Magda’s description of a child she would have, the “Antichrist of the desert,” combines with a later feeling that “[a]fter decades of sleep something is going to befall us” (*IHC* 10; 27), thus recalling William Butler Yeats’s Antichrist-like “rough beast” who after “‘twenty centuries of stony sleep” “[s]louches toward Bethlehem to be born” (*Yeats* 19-23). Elsewhere, when she imagines “[d]rowning” after she “wake[s] on the ocean floor” (*IHC* 54), she seems to echo T. S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” where “in the chambers of the sea . . . human voices wake us, and we drown” (*Eliot* 129-31).
mimesis, one cannot responsibly apply a psychological hermeneutics to Magda to establish whether or not she suffers from a medically recognized mental illness. Instead, an acute reading of Magda would accommodate her peculiar textual ontology and tropological manipulations, and avoid uncritically importing psychological discourse to describe a paper being.

In spite of his celebration, cited above, of the receptiveness of Coetzee's works to "reinterpretation" and "fission and fusion," Attridge makes a rather overfacile (Foucault might call it Cartesian) dismissal of the possibility of Magda's madness. "Fantasy or mental disorder on Magda's part seems out of the question now," he writes, "as there is no suggestion that she could have read Hegel, Blake, Pascal, Spinoza, and Rousseau" (Attridge 25). Attridge makes his assessment in the context of deciding if the airplanes Magda sees near the end of the novel, which speak "a Spanish of pure meanings such as might be dreamed of by the philosophers" (IHC 126), actually visit the veld, or if they are mere illusions or fantasies she conjures up. Firstly, there is a suggestion she has read Blake because she claims, long before the arrival of the airplanes, that she "struggle[s] with the proverbs of hell" (IHC 26). The proverbs of hell, among which is Magda's claim—verbatim albeit uncited—that "Energy is eternal delight" (101), come from Blake's The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, as do other tropes from the novel, such as Magda's preoccupation with "contraries." Secondly, even if the echoes of the other Western thinkers unavailable to Magda could serve as a useful heuristic for establishing the exteriority of those airplanes to her imagination, their existence would remain far

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13 The fourth plate of Blake’s The Marriage of Heaven and Hell introduces “THE VOICE OF THE DEVIL,” one of whose “Contraries” to the errors of the Bible is “Energy is Eternal Delight” (Blake 29).
from precluding her madness. Lastly, and perhaps most trenchantly, publishing his study in 2004, Attridge could not have known that in the 2009 *Summertime*, authorial Coetzee's character, Mr. Vincent, scholar of fictive (and fictively deceased) John Coetzee, would describe *IHC* as "about madness and parricide and so forth" (*Summertime* 234 emphasis added).

One could of course ask whether Magda really lives up to the self-bestowed diagnoses of "mad" and its variants cited at the opening of this essay. Even in literature, calling oneself mad is not necessarily a self-fulfilling speech act. One productive way of establishing Magda's madness in literary terms, especially in Coetzee's self-consciously novelistic discourse, would be to take seriously Mikhail Bakhtin's contention that the novel distinguishes itself from other genres through its representation of various languages, be they spoken languages or social, cultural or generic languages. The novel puts "novelistic images" of these languages into dialogue with each other through "interillumination" (Bakhtin 237; 240). The leading question toward a diagnosis of Magda's madness, then, is not whether or not she exhibits the behaviors of a psychologically verifiable mental disorder, but rather: does her voice constitute a novelistic image of madness? Is madness one language among several put into mutual engagement through Coetzee's discursive praxis? To think of a novelistic image of the language of madness is to conceive of it, in the style of Magda's thinking, as a trope.

Other critics and theorists, contemporary with Coetzee and the anti-psychiatry movement, have posited a relationship between madness and genre or other discursive types before. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, for example, would attribute the madness
of Magda's discourse to her "anxieties of authorship," which infects all women who attempt the pen, "struggling in isolation that feels like illness, alienation that feels like madness, [and] obscurity that feels like paralysis" (51). Further, such women experience a self-creation not unlike Magda's textual ontology: "... women themselves have the power to create themselves as characters, even perhaps the power to reach toward the woman trapped on the other side of the mirror/text and help her to climb out" (16). Shoshana Felman, working in a similar direction in *Writing and Madness*, applies Paul de Man's rhetorically focused literary approach to representations of madness in literature.\(^\text{14}\) "It becomes thus clear that this unfounded fund [madness] can by no means be *thematic,*" she writes, "that it is 'beyond control' precisely since, eluding a thematic apprehension, it is *rhetorical,* that is, consisting in the very principle of *movement,* in an endless, metaphoric transformation" (54). For Felman, while literature might not be able to speak directly for precisely the reasons revealed by Foucault and Derrida, it might yet animate a text rhetorically. Derrida himself also suggests a link between discursive types and madness. In "The Law of Genre," he elucidates—via an analysis of Maurice Blanchot's *La folie du jour* [*The Madness of the Day*]—a "principle of contamination, a law of impurity" (59), which is "the law of the law of genre" or the "counter-law" of genre, namely, that genre is made possible, "engendered," by the impossibility of its purity. Conclusively, he states that his analysis has "brought to light the madness of

\(^{14}\) One can find a representative example of de Man's rhetorical approach to literary analysis in his 1982 essay, "The Resistance to Theory," where he defines "literariness" as that which "foregrounds the rhetorical over the grammatical and logical function" of language (de Man 14). Although a purely grammatical reading of literature would result in "the mastering and the clarification of meaning," such a reading is, in de Man's view, impossible because "no grammatical decoding, however refined, could claim to reach the determining figural dimensions of a text" (15). Thus, in Felman's context, madness inhabits the text as rhetoric, not reducible to grammar or logic, but present and receptive to analysis nonetheless.
genre. Madness has given birth to and thrown light on the genre in the most dazzling, most blinding sense of the word" (81). Not only have madness and genre been thought together before, but all of these texts are contemporaneous with *IHC: The Madwoman in the Attic* appeared in 1979, though several chapters reappeared in the years before; *Writing and Madness* first appeared as *La folie et la chose litteraire* in 1978, though again some chapters appeared years earlier; and Derrida first delivered "The Law of Genre" as "La loi du genre" in 1980. In this way, the discursive madness of *IHC* must not be read as a stylistic eccentricity but rather as an entry in a larger conversation appearing at the end of anti-psychiatry movement, which Coetzee himself would revisit in "Erasmus: Madness and Rivalry," (first appearing in 1992, reprinted in *Giving Offense* in 1996)—and in which he cites Foucault, Derrida and Felman as decisive figures.

As cited in my opening, Magda calls herself "mad" six times alone, with "crazed," "crazy," and "melancholy" appearing a few times as well. Visiting some of those citations reveals that the extent to which Magda's image of her madness is particularly literary and takes the form of a trope, which—unlike so many others—she does not reject, but reaffirms. In an early example, she speculates upon her childhood: "Even through the little girl the lineaments of the crazy old lady must have glimmered" (*IHC* 6); and a few pages later: "In the cloister of my room I am the mad hag I am destined to be" (8). Both of these citations suggest some fundamental relationship between her madness and her idea of her essential self. The "lineaments of the crazy old lady" form in her childhood, continue into the present, and will continue yet into the "mad hag" she is "destined to be." Her madness has continuity with her character; unlike the contradictions of her narrative,
her madness endures. Later on, she thinks her "mad old woman's thoughts" and becomes "truly a mad old bad old woman" (79; 123). The double appearance of the epithet "woman" here suggests not only her idea of herself, but also her perspective of herself.

To say "I am mad" is to describe oneself only with reference to the self, but to say "I have become a mad woman" suggests an identification with some pre-existing category, which, considering Magda's awareness of her textual ontology, would likely be a literary category—a trope.

In this way, in spite of the impossibility of establishing Magda's madness via any psychological hermeneutics, one could still well place her in a literary category of madness in which she would constitute a novelistic image of madness through her discursive and generic eccentricities. In an effort to explore race issues within the novel, some critics, like Attridge, have overlooked, underplayed, or dismissed Magda's madness. Instead of seeing madness as a separate or even competing mode of alterity in _IHC_, those critics, who contend that Coetzee's formal innovations facilitate rather than impede his representations of otherness, should integrate her madness in their readings because it contaminates and structures her narrative. Although Coetzee elsewhere undertakes a deliberate raid upon the simplicity of allegory, especially in _The Life & Times of Michael K_, readers could do worse than to understand Magda's madness as

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15 Laura Wright, for example, in her narrowly feminist reading of several of Coetzee's novels, argues that "Magda becomes the symbolic manifestation of white female desire in South Africa, ignored and self-negating, complicit with and critical of apartheid, a motherless daughter in a political framework that would prefer her to be a son" (Wright 18). Nowhere does she take seriously the issues of madness in the novel, even though such an examination would interact productively with problems of female literary representation (à la "madwoman in the attic") instead of distract from them.

16 In _Life & Times of Michael K_, a medical officer in charge of Michael opines about him: "Your stay in the camp was merely an allegory, if you know that word. It was an allegory—speaking at the highest level—of how scandalously, how outrageously a meaning can take up residence in a system without becoming a term
allegorically or metonymically related to the madness of the colonial situation she finds so difficult to inhabit. In this light, her madness, made up of literary symptoms, is itself a symptom of a larger disorder.

Readers can find Coetzee's description of that larger disorder in *Giving Offense*, his collection of essays concerning censorship, in which he understands censorship and apartheid through madness and its cousin, paranoia. In "Apartheid Thinking," in which he gives a "following" to the work of apartheid intellectual Geoffrey Cronjé, he writes:

The indifference of South African historiography to the question of madness, and the tacit consensus in the social sciences that while madness . . . may be conceded to have a place in society, this is ontologically a place apart, a nonplace that does not entitle madness to a part in history, should arouse nothing but mistrust, and make us redouble rather than abate our efforts to call up and interrogate the demons of the past" (164).

One could easily apply such a criticism to the critics who seek to set aside the question of madness with regard to Coetzee's work, especially because such critics are so often concerned with seemingly justifying his work to the exigencies of history. Further on,

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17 *IHC* is not the only novel in which madness occupies an important role. In *Disgrace*, for example, soon-to-be-disgraced professor David Lurie, discussing Byron, asks: “What is a mad heart?” (33). This discussion of the mad heart, as Brian Macaskill demonstrates, forms parts of the thematic center of the novel: “. . . semiophagic possibilities of linguistic locution and play inaugurated by Byronic citation of that oxymoronic ‘mad heart’ whence permutations accumulate as Coetzee’s text, infected by a mad heart also, draws ever closer to the hungry heart of its matter . . .” (“Entr’acte” 169). To the extent that the heart occupies a central position in *Disgrace*, madness receives the privilege of accompanying its inaugural citations.
he claims, "My concern is thus less with Geoffrey Cronjé himself . . . than with his madness, and with the question of how madness spreads itself or is made to spread through a social body" (165). The social body in question is the apartheid state in South Africa, especially regarding censorship laws. Regarding writers producing work under censorship practices, he contends that "paranoia is there, on the inside, in their language, in their thinking . . . an invasion of the very style of the self, by a pathology for which there may be no cure" (36). He even goes so far as to make a confession: "Nor am I, as I write here, exempt . . . I detect in my own language the very pathology I discuss" (37).

Published in 1993, the particular essay in which Coetzee confesses his paranoia comes at the end of apartheid, after the censorship practices had been, *de facto* if not yet *de jure*, dissolved. *In the Heart of the Country*, on the other hand, was published in 1977, during the heyday of South African censorship. In an impressive examination of the correspondence between Coetzee and his publishers in the years leading up to *IHC*’s publication, Hermann Wittenberg reveals that "Coetzee considered the threat of censorship while writing the novel, and that, in his mind, it stood a real chance of being suppressed in South Africa" (135). One particularly exciting paradox Wittenberg uncovers is that, after its unexpected appraisal as "not undesirable" by the censors, one of the censors who passed the novel penned a favorable review for it, from which Coetzee pulled a quote for a blurb to a later edition. In this way, claims Wittenberg, "the voice of the censor thus insinuated itself into the very book that it was subjecting to scrutiny, thereby forming a bizarre and insidious circuit of simultaneous repression and endorsement" (144). To the extent that, for Coetzee, censorship and apartheid entail a
madness of the writer and of the social body, *In the Heart of the Country*, and by extension Magda whose ontology relies—in more than one sense—upon its textuality, is inscribed through and through with madness.

As I have indicated in my introduction and in my reading of *Pale Fire*, madness in twentieth-century novels appears again and again alongside the figure of Narcissus. Yet Magda, like Dr. Kinbote, adheres to the Narcissus myth only to a point, after which she recognizes and refuses it. Her "stony monologue" is replete with vignettes in which her narrative follows alongside that of Narcissus, through parallel or parody, yet at each turn it also asserts a difference. Whereas Narcissus could not escape the recognition of others and his plunge into interiority eventually led to his desire to leave his body, Magda chooses to be, or has no choice but to be, a "poetess of interiority" because she can gain recognition only from herself, and that self-reflexive consciousness prolongs her existence instead of, as in the case of Narcissus, truncating it. Speaking in literary diagnostic terms, one might say that Magda and Narcissus present with identical symptoms springing from divergent etiologies.

The myth of Narcissus is, among other things, a tale of frustrated—likely sexual—desire, not only on the part of Narcissus, but of the water nymph Echo as well. With scorn Narcissus refuses his innumerable admirers. As I indicate in my reading of Ovid's myth, even in the woods, Narcissus cannot escape recognition because Echo's disembodiment allows her to function with something like omnipresence. Essential to the interpretation of the myth is the fact that Narcissus desires his reflection before he realizes ("noverit," knows) it as himself. What transfixes him at first is desire. His
knowledge of self comes in a package with the knowledge that his desire must remain unfulfilled. His wish, ultimately a death wish, is to escape his body: "O utinam a nostro secedere corpore possem!" (Oh, that I could withdraw from our body!) (Ovid 3.467). But he wishes to escape it only in order to access it anew, to possess it in a different way, as another.

Like Narcissus, Magda suffers from frustrated sexual desire: "What huffing and puffing there would have to be before my house could be blown down!" (IHC 10). In one of her "speculative langours," she imagines what steps would be required for her to become desirable. "I have been able . . . to see myself as simply a lonely, ugly old maid, capable of redemption," she writes; for a husband to dispel her loneliness she "would vow to bend a little lower, slave for a little harder than another woman would" (42). She goes even so far in her longing "to be folded in someone's arms" that she imagines climbing "into Klein-Anna's body . . . climb[ing] down her throat while she sleeps and spread[ing] [her]self gently inside her" (108). In the same passage, the same frustrated sexual desire that drives Narcissus to wish for disembodiment finds similar expression in Magda, who "want[s] a home somewhere else, if it has to be in this body then on different terms in this body" (108). The same impulse to leave the body in order to realize some passion motivates both Narcissus and Magda, yet Magda wants not to re-access hers in order to love it, but to leave it behind entirely in search of one capable of being loved.

Like any literary narcissist, she engages with her reflection, yet not in admiration of her beauty, but rather to enumerate her physical short comings. For her, unlike
Narcissus, her reflection is not a site/sight of stultifying beauty, but a locus of potential agency. Her ugliness does not disarm her as Narcissus's attractiveness does him. Instead, she searches out possibilities for improvement: "I . . . wonder whether my glower, my rodent glower, . . . might not be cosmetically tempered if I plucked out some of that hair with tweezers" (22). Her beautifying interventions become more extreme: "And might I not be less ugly if I did something about my teeth, of which I have too many, but sacrificing some to give the others space to grow in . . .?" (22). She revisits the mirror far near the end of the novel—"The face in the mirror smiles a haggard smile . . . I still do not like myself"—and though she abandons her beauty regimen, her doing so is not a sign of lost agency, but rather relocating it in a less vain endeavor, as shall be seen below (96).

Magda's sexual frustrations form part of a larger process throughout the narrative concerning the impossibility of her entering into reciprocal relationships. David Attwell describes Magda as the first of what he calls displaced subjects, a character type Coetzee will continue to develop fully throughout the remainder of his corpus where the "narrator . . . is not one of the primary agents of colonization but . . . lives in the conditions created by such agents, and . . . endures the subjectivity this position entails" (Attwell 56).

Magda is the seemingly motherless daughter of a domineering, white colonial patriarch who "creates absence . . . the absence of himself above all—a presence so cold, so dark, so remote as to be itself an absence, a moving shadow casting a blight on the heart" (IHC 37). In his service are several servants, of which the narrative focuses on two couples who, behind a screen of obsequious behaviors, respect Magda only because she is her father's daughter—"Miss is the miss"—and who can never serve as peers for Magda (30).
Painfully naïve and effectively imprisoned in a "house shaped by destiny like an H" (3), the alienation she experiences is at least four-fold; the novel portrays her inability to enter into meaningful and reciprocal relationships at the level of family, friendship, romance, and—failing romance—even consensual sex. Unlike Narcissus who received an excess of recognition from all save his shallow image, Magda receives recognition only from herself. The fissure in her ontology between her fictive otherworldly existence and her paper existence eventually makes possible a full self-recognition, even if such a division brings its own set of problems.

While Magda's father nowhere even calls Magda by her first name, he does establish intimacy with one of the servants, Hendrik's new bride, Klein-Anna, thereby instigating much of the narrative action of *In the Heart of the Country*. When he takes Klein-Anna to bed with himself, Magda, after having knocked upon his door and been told to go to bed, stands outside of it ringing a bell until he deals her a blow that "does not hurt but . . . insults" (57). In response she commits parricide through the window with a shotgun, leading eventually to a restructuring of the pastoral power structure; once the servants figure out that Magda has no way of continuing to pay them, they begin to assert themselves over her: they wear her father's old clothes; in the South African version of the novel, where much of the dialogue is in Afrikaans, they mockingly use the intimate second-person pronoun, "jy, jy, jy" (qtd. in Macaskill 463); and eventually, Hendrik repeatedly rapes Magda.

Hendrik's sexual aggression itself further reifies the impossibility of reciprocity for Magda. In addition to the lack of reciprocity and mutual recognition involved in any
rape, Magda mentions that "He turns [her] on [her] face and does it to her from behind like an animal. Everything dies in [her] when [she] ha[s] to raise [her] ugly rear to him" (112). In this way, Hendrik denies her human recognition in the act, refusing to face her and threatening her humanity. When she asks "Am I doing it right, Hendrik?" (110), he makes no response but instead "loosens [her] fingers, not unkindly, and departs" (111).

After she finally musters up the courage to confront him and demand that he recognize her as another, she beseeches him in a page-long tirade, at the end of which she writes: "Where was it in this torrent of pleas and accusations that he walked out? Did he stay to the end?" (118). Thus, even her attempts to assert herself receive no recognition.

After her father has died and the servants have fled the farm, a young boy, Piet, only twelve years old, shows up to deliver a letter for her father regarding taxes, for which she must sign. Driven, at this point, to extreme desperation, she asks the boy, "have you ever done this?" (125), and with her hands imitates coitus. When he shakes his head, she asks, "Would you like to learn, Piet?", at which point he runs away—the last person Magda will ever see in the course of the novel. David Attwell reads Piet's appearance as an echo of the boy who visits Vladimir and Estragon at the end of Waiting for Godot. He interprets this connection as an "impl[ication] that Magda is helpless before the demands of history and is imprisoned by her own desires" (Attwell 67). This evocation also reifies readers' sense of Magda's Geworfenheit, her "being thrown without explanation into an existence governed by obscure rules" (Inner Workings 171), and the madness of the colonial power structure, which manifests itself, like an infection, as her own madness.
If Magda ever achieves something like agency, if the reader can ever have any optimism for her, then the possibility for such agency and optimism arrives when Magda forges something like self-knowledge. Earlier in the novel, before her isolation, she speaks of desire:

I am not one of the heroes of desire, what I want is not infinite or unattainable, all I ask myself, faintly, dubiously, querulously, is whether there is not something to do with desire other than striving to possess the desired in a project which must be vain, since its end can only be the annihilation of the desired . . . I know that nothing will fill me, [sic] because it is the first condition of life forever to desire, otherwise life would cease. It is a principle of life forever to be unfulfilled. Fulfilment does not fulfil. (114)

Visible in this speculative monologue are the lineaments of the thinking that will lead eventually to Magda's surrendering to the impossibility of her ever entering any reciprocal relationship, a movement that is likewise coterminous with her rejection of the figure of Narcissus as a figure for herself: "One cannot pursue a hopeless infatuation, I have said to myself, without courting the fate of Narcissus" (134). From that auto-affected ("I have said to myself") moment throughout the remainder of the novel, she begins the process of giving up on ever achieving reciprocity, resigning herself instead "to die [t]here in the petrified garden, behind locked gates, near [her] father's bones, in a space echoing with hymns [she] could have written but did not because ([she] thought) it was too easy" (139).
The ambivalence of that final passage is troubling. On the one hand, the disequilibrium introduced into the colonial power structure by Magda's father's having trespassed the line between master and slave, as well as the racial barrier, has finally played out, exhausted itself. The violence has ended at last. On the other hand, she is alone with her father's corpse, waiting for the "time to creep into [her] mausoleum and pull the door shut behind [her]" (138). Her earlier postulate that "[i]t is not speech that makes man man but the speech of others" knells bitterly throughout her closing monody. She rejects the "whole literature waiting to answer" her questions about herself and her (anti)pastoral dwelling, and prefers instead "spinning [her] answers out of [her] own bowels" (138). The figure of Narcissus, as she indicates earlier, belongs to that entire disqualified literature; her divergence from him is complete. Unlike Narcissus, whose self-knowledge results in self-destruction, Magda here attains, albeit reservedly, to what Coetzee elsewhere calls "the Apollonian 'Know Yourself,'" thereby securing a moderate, medial measure of self-determination (Giving Offense 4).
CONCLUSION

In *Style Is Matter: The Moral Art of Vladimir Nabokov*, cited earlier in this work, Leland De La Durantaye relays an anecdote about Virginia Woolf's visit one afternoon, with husband Leonard, to Sigmund Freud's Hampstead home for tea. "Upon her arrival," he writes, "Freud presented Virginia with a flower—a Narcissus—a gesture that given Woolf was to take her own life by drowning two years later, is more than a little uncanny" (119). De la Durantaye of course gestures here toward the overlap of the details of Woolf's suicide—water and self-destruction—with the image of Narcissus exhausting himself at the spring, which rests at the heart of Ovid's "Narcissus and Echo." He does not elaborate further upon the anecdote, as it serves mostly as a curious aside in a larger discussion of Nabokov's well-known loathing of Freud.

One wonders if De La Durantaye would not find even more "uncanny" the striking collision, almost literary in its symbolic economy, of meanings in this exchange, given Freud's hand in the association between madness, narcissism and guilt. Freud, whose concept of narcissism has effaced the themes of Ovid's original myth, offers a Narcissus flower to Virginia Woolf, whose severe manic-depressive symptoms will lead to her guilt-driven watery suicide before her sixtieth birthday. The long-standing kinship between Narcissus, narcissism, and mental illness here reappears not in a novel like *Lolita* written to poke fun at Freud, but in an exchange between Freud and a novelist. Perhaps even more strikingly, more uncannily yet, in the suicide note Woolf leaves before her figure converges with that of Narcissus, she seems so unlike the so-called narcissist, or, to borrow Julia Kristeva's phrase cited above, she is "Narcissan if you wish,
but violently antinarcissistic" (Kristeva 108). Woolf writes to husband Leonard, "I feel certain that I am going mad again . . . I know that I am spoiling your life, that without me you could work . . . I can't go on spoiling your life any longer" ("Virginia Woolf's"). The two determining motives behind her suicide appear lucidly in her brief note: firstly, her mental illness, and secondly, the guilt that has, according to Michel Foucault, enveloped it since no later than the Classical Age. Like Kinbote and like Magda, her internal disequilibrium reacts with external pressures, culminating in a self-destructive inward turn, and rendering her vulnerable to misreading and misunderstanding.

Elsewhere in Woolf's writings, years before her suicide, she expresses dismay that novelists do not take more seriously the struggles of illness. In *On Being Ill*, a lengthy though lesser-known essay, she opines that "it becomes strange indeed that illness has not taken its place with love and battle and jealousy among the prime themes of literature" (3-4). Given her lifelong suffering with mood disorders and her eventual suicide, readers now might expect mental illness to occupy a more prominent position in this essay, yet it appears only once, nested amongst other examples: "Those great wars which the body wages with the mind a slave to it, in the solitude of the bedroom against the assault of fever or the oncome [sic] of melancholia, are neglected" (5). Published first in 1926 in T. S. Eliot's *The Criterion*, Woolf's essay appears three years before, on the other side of the Atlantic, William Faulkner publishes *The Sound and the Fury*, which depicts, amongst other things, the struggle of a young man, Quentin Compson, with mental illness, which ends, like the myth of Narcissus, with his watery self-destruction and the appearance of a
single Narcissus flower in his wake. In this way, Faulkner's work serves as a kind of response to Woolf's observation, even if unintended and indirect.

In a similar vein, several decades later, Nabokov's *Pale Fire* and Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country* both stage the pains of mental illness upon individual subjects further embattled by social dynamics, thereby providing an image of madness as perceived in the age of the anti-psychiatry. Though neither novel names anti-psychiatry nor addresses it explicitly, Nabokov, as has been stated several times, detested Freud, and Coetzee was, according to his later essay "Erasmus: Madness and Rivalry," at least aware of the movement. In fact, critics have leveled criticisms at both authors for their seeming to privilege verbal and formal artistry and erudition at the expense of meaningful cultural critique. According to such critics, neither Nabokov nor Coetzee sufficiently addresses any aspect of his cultural moment, let alone anti-psychiatry, which would seem like a minor issue compared to the more visible Cold War and apartheid contexts readers might expect Nabokov and Coetzee to address respectively, since they come from Russia and South Africa. Such criticisms fall in line with the larger backlash against metafiction—that it is self-obsessed, politically impotent, masturbatory, elitist, bourgeois, and of course, narcissistic. Read superficially, the novels seem to concern only themselves.

Yet in a 1992 interview, David Attwell observes that *Dusklands*, the immediate predecessor to *In the Heart of the Country*, is "structurally indebted to *Pale Fire*," and follows this observation with a question: "What account would you give of your relation to Nabokov today?" (*Doubling the Point* 28). In his characteristically reticent fashion, Coetzee responds, "If I had to be brief, I would say I have no relation with Nabokov left"
(28). The "left" presents enticing interpretive conundrums: does Coetzee acknowledge that he ever felt influence from Nabokov? If so, when did it end? Turning to a much earlier essay, "Nabokov's Pale Fire and the Primacy of Art," one sees that Nabokov held Coetzee's attention at least as late as 1974, three years before the publication of In the Heart of the Country. More curiously, Coetzee structures his study of Pale Fire in a series of numbered paragraphs—the exact same format that characterizes In the Heart of the Country. Because Coetzee disavows his relationship with Nabokov, anything beyond speculation is impossible, but one might at least suggest that the affinities between the novels regarding discourse, madness and Narcissus are perhaps attributable more to direct influence than to coincidence.

Further, the critical histories of Coetzee and Nabokov share remarkable similarities. Both authors garnered attention quickly for their verbal artistry, formal experimentation, and almost Joycean erudition, yet appreciation of the social and political engagement of their works only came later. De la Durantaye puts the history of Nabokov's critical evolution concisely. Firstly, critics praised Nabokov's "escape into aesthetics," which boded well with "postmodernism on the rise" because it "privileged such concepts as metafiction, unreliable narration and play," but then "this first swing of the critical pendulum set in motion an equal and inverse movement, and the last three decades have seen ever more emphasis on the ethical underpinnings of Nabokov's densely patterned fictions" (de la Durantaye 15-16). Brian Macaskill provides a similar critical history for Coetzee, but because the historical pressures of apartheid were inhospitable to postmodernism, some critics "accused Coetzee (especially during the
early to mid 1980s) of political quietism, of writing novels that willfully turn their backs to the all-important contiguities between literary and historical-economic-political realities" ("Charting" 443), and only later was there a trend in South Africa to "speak of Coetzee's writing in terms that rely more on the registers of poststructural theory than on those of historical materialism" (444). More recently yet, critics like Derek Attridge speak of "the capacity of [Coetzee's] work to engage with—to stage, confront, apprehend, explore—otherness, and in this engagement it broaches the most fundamental and widely significant issues involved in any consideration of ethics and politics" (Attridge 6-7).

Thus, in both Nabokov and Coetzee, one sees a clear though decades-long transition from, on the one hand, an acknowledgement (artistically vogue for Nabokov, politically shameful for Coetzee) of their complex, erudite narrative praxis, much aligned with postmodernism, to, on the other hand, a belated reconsideration of the ethical, political, and social potentials of their works.

The seemingly cloaked potential of *Pale Fire* and *In the Heart of the Country* thus serves as an exemplar of the model set out by Grant Stirling in his recuperation of metafiction as "narcissistic narrative." The "metafictional self-reflexivity" of these novels "lends itself well to 'complicit critique': the kind of subversive inhabiting of cultural forms and institutions that has been identified as a privileged trope of postmodernism" (Stirling 100). The relationship *Pale Fire* and *In the Heart of the Country* have with the anti-psychiatry movement of their historical movement may be oblique, but engaging with obliquity is essential to any critical practice that endeavors to read metafiction into a
historical context. The self-concern and interiority associated with narcissism—narrative or otherwise—can still be assessed as a reflection of exterior phenomena.

Reflection, after all, has been the major stake throughout this study. On the surface, Michel Foucault's *History of Madness* provides a philosophically inflected history of the link between mental illness and moral guilt, which was forged during the Classical Age and which endured until the births of the asylum and modern psychiatry, but his work also reflects the larger upheavals of the anti-psychiatry movement it helps to inaugurate. In the final pages, he professes something like a faith (the closing claims do not have the substance of an argument) that artistic works of madness arraign the world of psychology for its violence and prejudices: "... in the oeuvre that has slumped into madness, the world is made aware of its guilt" (Foucault 537). In this light, joining Foucault's claims to Stirling's, works of metafiction like *Pale Fire* and *In the Heart of the Country*, themselves engaged in a type of reflection, arraign institutions from within, utilizing but also deconstructing the mainstays of the novel, psychiatry and other discursive practices. The term *narcissism*, doubling as both a pathology and a moral condemnation, remains one locus of the ill-conceived kinship between madness and guilt, but in the narcissistically reflexive and self-reflective works of Coetzee and Nabokov, it can be reworked into a rallying point for a critique of the discursive practices of psychiatry, as well as the insensitive pronouncements of everyday parlance. Just as, in Ovid's myth, the inward turn of blindness for Tiresias opens new apertures for knowledge, so too does the inward turn of novels through metafiction provide new
perspectives on literature and the culture it reflects. Such self-knowledge, unlike that which fell Narcissus, is not fatal but essential.
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