



Article: 'Oh, the difference to me!': Wordsworth, Lucy, and Post-Apartheid Silence in J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*

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**“Oh, the difference to me!”:
Wordsworth, Lucy, and Post-Apartheid Silence in
J.M. Coetzee’s Disgrace**

J.M. Coetzee’s work over the past decade has been structured by an ambivalence bordering on hostility to the forms in which he writes or speaks. His books arrive in the shops marked as “fiction,” but readers are more likely to find a set of essays (as in *Diary of a Bad Year*) or academic talks (as in *Elizabeth Costello*) than narrative prose. On the other hand, when asked to deliver a talk of his own – such as the Tanner Lectures at Princeton that formed the basis of *Lives of the Animals* or his Nobel Prize acceptance speech in 2003 – Coetzee has recourse to fictions. In a promotional blurb for David Shields’s 2010 anti-novelistic polemic *Reality Hunger*, Coetzee’s dissatisfaction with the conventional underpinnings of the novel as a form comes in an even more caustic form.

I, too, am sick of the well-made novel with its plot and its characters and its settings. I, too, am drawn to literature as (as Shields puts it) ‘a form of thinking, consciousness, wisdom-seeking’. I, too, like novels that don’t look like novels.¹

But what was it that made this highly respected novelist, who has won the Booker Prize twice and is a Nobel laureate, turn so starkly against his own form?

¹ Cited in, Zadie Smith, “An essay is an act of imagination. It still takes quite as much art as fiction.” *The Guardian*, 21 November 2009, Features and Reviews p.2.

The closest we can come to an answer is to be found not in Coetzee's late, generically fractured works but rather in the last generically conventional novel that he wrote. *Disgrace* most certainly is "well-made" and possesses a plot, characters, and a setting. Despite the fact that it maintains self-consistency, it also stages the collapse of the basic aesthetic attributes and stances that underwrite the novel as a form. What falls from grace in Coetzee's novel is not just its protagonist but the complex of lyricism and desire that has long formed the kernel at the heart of Western literature of whatever genre. Both Lurie and the literary collapse into lingering obsolescence under the pressures of a new South Africa, itself marked by violence and irrational "rationalization" like the apartheid-era nation that it superseded. *Disgrace* is a novel that traces the uneasy lingering on of the aesthetic and those who live in accordance with its ideologies in a situation – that of the contemporary world in general and of post-apartheid South Africa in particular – in which it seems doomed to extinction. In particular, it is the figure of the poet William Wordsworth, and the role that he plays in Lurie's life and desires, that provides the key to understanding the relationship between the aesthetic and the changing world in Coetzee's work.

Sunset at the Globe Salon

As Derek Attridge (among others) has argued, Coetzee's works have always been preoccupied with the question of alterity, of the self's relation to the other.² *Disgrace* is no exception, but what is vital to note from the start is that the matter of alterity is entangled in this novel from the start with questions about the aesthetic. At one point early in the novel, the protagonist, David Lurie, adjunct professor of communications at Cape Technical University, eavesdrops upon a rehearsal of a play in which his student and lover, Melanie Issacs, has a part:

Sunset at the Globe Salon is the name of the play they are rehearsing: a comedy of the new South Africa set in a hairdressing salon in Hillbrow, Johannesburg. On stage a hairdresser, flamboyantly gay, attends to two clients, one black, one white. Patter passes among the three of them: jokes, insults. Catharsis seems to be the presiding principle: all the coarse old prejudices brought into the light of day and washed away in gales of laughter.³

Coetzee's snapshot description of the players on the stage presents a photographic negative of the straight white male professor in the audience: multicultural, bi-gendered, and "flamboyantly gay." But this inversion only mirrors a deeper distinction between the ethico-

² As Derek Attridge writes in *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), p.12, Coetzee's works can be read as a continued, strenuous enterprise in acknowledging alterity, a project which is at once highly local in its engagement with the urgent political and social problems of South Africa – no less urgent since the end of apartheid in 1994 – and widely pertinent in its confrontation of the ethical demands of otherness, and its investigation of the relation of otherness to language, culture, and knowledge.

³ J.M. Coetzee, *Disgrace*, (New York: Viking), 1999. p.23. All further references are to this edition, with page references following quotations in parentheses.

aesthetic approaches of the play on the stage and the novel in which it is represented. In *Sunset at the Globe Salon*, catharsis and amnesty are purchased with truth and narration – it is a form of public psychotherapy for the battered communal unconscious of South Africa’s post-apartheid citizenry. Moreover, the play stands as a strange echo of the Third Way political ethics that informed the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of the 1990s. For the key words are Truth and Reconciliation, not Truth and Retribution: “all the coarse old prejudices [are] brought into the light of day and washed away in gales of laughter.”

Clearly, *Sunset at the Globe Salon* and *Disgrace* approach the situation of post-Apartheid South Africa from directions that seem to be in stark opposition. Comedy in the one case is met by tragedy (or something *beyond* tragedy) in the other, catharsis by devastation, and an end-point in “gales of laughter” by the devastated wretchedness of Lurie’s final situation. Still, however differently inflected are the aesthetic and ethical tactics of the two works, both stand as an attempt to answer the same question: the question of compromise, of staying on, making do, after the crisis – the question of how, in Lurie’s phrase, “to cleanse the city without divine help”? (91).

In a review of Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project* for the *New York Review of Books*, Coetzee makes a parenthetical reference to William Wordsworth that seems very relevant to one of the central preoccupations of *Disgrace*:

Baudelaire was central to the Arcades plan because, in Benjamin's eyes, Baudelaire in *Les Fleurs du mal* first revealed the modern city as a subject for poetry. (Benjamin seems not to have read Wordsworth, who, fifty years before Baudelaire, wrote of what it was like to be part of a street crowd, bombarded on all sides with glances, dazzled with advertisements).⁴

Coetzee has often constructed his novels in direct conversation with some past master; for instance, with Dostoevsky in *The Master of Petersburg*, Kafka in *The Life and Times of Michael K.*, and of course with Defoe in *Foe*. Our attention is therefore captured when, in a review appearing so soon after *Disgrace*, the central literary figure behind and within the novel is compared by the author to Baudelaire, especially Benjamin's Baudelaire.

Lurie as an avatar of Wordsworthianism demonstrates the same condition of "petrified unrest" that drew Benjamin so strongly in the direction of Baudelaire. And the first third of the novel, set in Cape Town and centered upon Lurie's affair with his student Melanie Issacs, is principally preoccupied with laying down the groundwork of the tragicomedy of this leftover

⁴ J. M. Coetzee, "The Marvels of Walter Benjamin." *The New York Review of Books*, January 11, 2001, p.29.

Wordsworthian in love. In a certain sense, the episode plays out exactly as we might expect. Lurie slides through Cape Town on a slick sheet of romantic rhetoric, persistently translating the materiality and the everydayness of the city into poetic discourse and auto-narrated events. He borrows sensual language from Baudelaire for his encounters with Soraya, an “exotic” prostitute with whom he has a weekly meeting. A walk down the street prompts overheated rhetoric: “He has always been a man of the city, at home amid a flux of bodies where eros stalks and glances flash like arrows” (6). And then there is the language that accompanies his first attempts to seduce Melanie. Explaining his passion for Wordsworth to her, he states that in his experience, “poetry speaks to you either at first sight or not at all. A flash of revelation and a flash of response. Like lightning. Like falling in love” (13). As the seduction scene progresses, Lurie’s rhetorical energies come to a boil. As he attempts to convince his student to spend the night with him, he mobilizes a perversely abstracted conceptualization of an economy of beauty and the woman’s “duty” within it: “Because a woman’s beauty does not belong to her alone. It is part of the bounty she brings into the world. She has a duty to share it” (16). Coetzee’s free indirect narration gives us access to Lurie’s sense of his own language during the seduction, and in doing so exposes the character’s concurrent self-consciousness and rhetorical composure. “Smooth words, as old as seduction itself. Yet at this moment he believes in them. She does not own herself. Beauty does not own itself” (16). He “believes in them,” but the statement of belief belies the stability of his confidence. Further, Lurie’s equanimity before the question of the

woman's "ownership" of herself, and of her beauty, vis à vis the male gaze will return with a vengeance in the later chapters dealing with Lucy.

In such scenes, then, Lurie behaves like an empty shell occupied by a particular strand of discourse, unable to move outside, to do anything other than reiterate the texts that "compose" him. Yet, despite such moments of the transubstantiation of the real, the everyday, and the sordid into uncompromisingly "romanticized" language, this is only half of the story of the Cape Town portion of *Disgrace*. For this version of David Lurie would only be a cardboard cutout in a clichéd allegory of Wordsworthianism; Coetzee's narrative probes much more profoundly into Lurie's predicament. At every moment of the story of his affairs with Soraya and then Melanie, Lurie's interior discourse registers both the poetic "idea" and an accompanying second-level glimpse into the "sense-experience" that Lurie is having. That is to say, the narration that follows Lurie on his slide into disgrace is a registration of the Wordsworthian dialectic at a standstill: his heart leaps up while his eyes look down, often horrified at what they find. Often, the expression of such schizophrenic ambiguity occurs in an indirectly rendered statement with an air of *protesting too much*. For instance, note the anxiousness of the "can surely not" in Lurie's reflection on the "sincerity" of Soraya's affection for him: "No doubt with other men she becomes another woman: *la donna è mobile*. Yet at the level of temperament her affinity with him can surely not be feigned" (3). In other cases,

Coetzee structures Lurie's perception as directly binocular, as in the harrowing turn from the first paragraph to the next in the following passage that describes his first sexual encounter with Melanie:

He takes her back to his house. On the living-room floor, to the sound of rain pattering against the windows, he makes love to her. Her body is clear, simple, in its way perfect; though she is passive throughout, he finds the act pleasurable, so pleasurable that from its climax he tumbles into blank oblivion.

When he comes back the rain has stopped. The girl is lying beneath him, her eyes closed, her hands slack above her head, a slight frown on her face. His own hands are under her coarse-knit sweater, on her breasts. Her tights and panties lie in a tangle on the floor; his trousers are around his ankles. *After the storm*, he thinks: straight out of George Grosz. (19)

In the first paragraph, a tumble into "oblivion," an encounter with the sublimity of sex. In the second, a cold, hard stare at physicality in disarray. If Lurie had previously adopted the lightning-bolt as an image of Romantic phenomenology ("A flash of revelation and a flash of response"), his consciousness here betrays a sense of *lightning that strikes twice*, once for the leap into linguistic oblivion, once to knock the poetic consciousness down against the animal physicality and brutality that remains untranscended. Another violent vacillation of the same type occurs later in the same episode: "*A child!* he thinks: *No more than a child! What am I doing?* Yet his heart lurches with desire" (20). Coetzee's italics materialize Lurie's double reaction as a sort typographic schizophrenia.

Finally, in the course of Lurie's penultimate sexual encounter with Melanie, we overhear an equivocation that will haunt the remainder of the novel:

Not rape, not quite that, but undesired nonetheless, undesired to the core. As though she had decided to go slack, die within herself for the duration, like a rabbit when the jaws of the fox close on its neck. So that everything done to her might be done, as it were, far away. (25)

Lurie is tightrope-walking gingerly, self-consciously, above the pit of violation; nowhere in the first part of *Disgrace* is the tense bond between idea and sensory-experience stretched more thinly. The first sentence takes us unawares, as it has the form of a response to a question or statement that has not been asked in the text: *Was it rape?* And this first sentence is a perfect example of the self-consciously dialogic nature of Lurie's interior monologue, concluding that while his sexual advances fulfill the definition of rape, being "undesired to the core," they still (for no reason that can be articulated here, that he can articulate to himself) were "not rape" or at least "not quite that." It is only with the second sentence that we catch a glimpse of the source of Lurie's perilous discursive performance before the specter of violation: his perception of Melanie as like a dying animal caught in the jaws of a predator, dying internally a moment before physical death. An encounter that began with a strike "from the quiver of Aphrodite, goddess of the foaming waves" (25) ends with Lurie afterward "overtaken with such dejection,

such dullness, that he sits slumped at the wheel [of his car] unable to move” (25). The romantic machinery, the pure imagination, is beginning to fail before “the onslaughts of reality.”

The first third of *Disgrace*, Lurie’s romantic anti-romance with Melanie in Cape Town, stands as an overture of sorts to what will follow in the work. It is a set-piece that introduces a man, his psychological situation, and the material reality which intrudes upon himself and his psychology – but plays out this drama in the bathetic atmosphere of the campus sex novel. In continual battle with a world increasingly unsympathetic to his breed, he perseveres in deploying his romantic rhetoric in an environment dominated by a new politicized rhetoric of cultural and gender sensitivity. As we have seen, however, the battle between old rhetoric and new reality is not waged simply between Lurie and the revisionists in the university administration, or even between him and the objects of his desire. Rather, the most significant struggle in these early chapters takes place within Lurie’s mind, eyes, and the interior discourse rendered in Coetzee’s prose. When he attempts to retreat into the abstract and allegorical, into words such as “Eros” and “Aphrodite,” “beauty,” “imagination,” and “oblivion,” he remains unable to purge completely his second thoughts, his own second-guessing of himself. And these second thoughts evidence a more brutal, less poetic reality that interferes with the smooth operation of the romantic, idealized, imaginary world painted upon it. “Her tights and panties lie in a tangle on the floor; his trousers are around his ankles” (19), or “like a

rabbit when the jaws of the fox close around its neck” (25). His eyes and mind register, if incompletely – if in a manner preordained for repression – what his poetic rhetoric attempts to elide.

While they occur against the melodramatically bathetic backdrop of the university campus, these moments of discursive confusion can usefully be compared to other, more politically charged dynamics of power and discourse. Lurie’s anxious phrase, “Not rape, not quite that,” for instance, calls to mind Homi Bhabha’s play on the phrase “*almost the same but not quite*” in his essay “Of Mimicry and Man.”⁵ And in fact Bhabha’s essay itself focuses on an internal and essential contradiction – the slippage in colonial discourse that revolves around the figure of the other – that is exactly parallel to Lurie’s schizophrenic fluctuation between the romanticized and the realistic. Bhabha describes the “splitting of colonial discourse so that two attitudes towards external reality persist; one takes reality into consideration while the other disavows it and replaces it by a product of desire that repeats, rearticulates ‘reality’ as mimicry” (91). And this “mimicry” is a symptom of colonial discourse that simultaneously destabilizes

⁵ The phrase from *The Location of Culture*. (New York: Routledge, 1994), is drawn from Bhabha’s initial definition of colonial mimicry as the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference. The authority of that mode of colonial discourse that I have called mimicry is therefore stricken by an indeterminacy: mimicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal. Mimicry is, thus the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline, which ‘appropriates’ the Other as it visualizes power. Mimicry is also the sign of the inappropriate, however, a difference or recalcitrance which coheres the dominant strategic function of colonial power, intensifies surveillance, and poses an immanent threat to both ‘normalized’ knowledges and disciplinary powers. p.86.

the coherence of colonial representation and provides the site of its very assertion of fixative power – its ability to continue at all, contradictions be damned. It is in this phenomenon that both the totalizing and the deconstructive tendencies of empire flash up at once. And while this first set-piece of *Disgrace* focuses on Lurie vis à vis the female other, the procedure is the same. In Bhabha's terms, "the twin figures of narcissism and paranoia [...] repeat furiously, uncontrollably" in Lurie's interior monologue, just as narcissism and paranoia could be called the polar-axes of Wordsworth's description of his encounter with Mont Blanc. The fetishization of the subjective idea over the outside world is coupled with the deep anxiety that the outside world is failing to conform – or conforming too easily – to the subjective idea. The Mont Blanc episode in the *Prelude* stands as a Wordsworthian description of the *lived experience* of Bhabha's brand of hybridity, mimicry, and the structures of power that give rise to them. And as we shall see, as the novel follows Lurie to his daughter's farm on the Eastern Cape, the tensions between language and reality, between desire-strewn poetry and the material situation, become ever more explicitly political.

The Lucy Poems

Disgrace then positions itself as a reopening of an old literary case, the case of the Wordsworthian entanglement in the dialectic of idea and material, self and other. And if the

Cape Town portion of the novel injects Lurie as a walking embodiment of Wordsworthianism into a “bourgeois comedy” (in Lurie’s phrase) with a tragic twist, the second part of *Disgrace* condenses into a primal, semi-allegorical anti-tragedy of post-Apartheid South African life. In arriving at his daughter’s farm, Lurie might expect a downsizing of life unto death, a pastoral end to a life as an aging would-be *flâneur*. But in fact he finds himself entangled only in tighter and more soul-rending reversals and foreclosures. *Disgrace* shifts from the minor-key of a university sex-comedy to a full-bore exploration of issues of voice and voicelessness, the vicissitudes of representation across the iron curtain of gender and cultural boundaries, and the accessibility of the traumatic experience. And in doing so, the lyrical impulse and the desires that underwrite it fall from grace as profoundly as David Lurie, their bearer in the novel.

It is easy enough for the reader to miss the implications of the fact that Lurie’s daughter, whose rape will form the central event in the remainder of the novel, is named *Lucy*.⁶ But why, how, could a scholar of Wordsworth name his daughter *Lucy*? The resonance of this name might be missed by the reader, but certainly not by Lurie himself. The “Lucy poems” are a

⁶ Margot Beard has written persuasively about the significance of the romantic poets within *Disgrace* in her essay “Lessons from the Dead Masters: Wordsworth and Byron in Coetzee’s *Disgrace*,” *English in Africa*. Vol. 34, No. 1. May 2007, pp.59–79, Strangely, however, though she offers readings of the *Prelude* and other works in service of a reading of Coetzee, and further, though she acknowledges the connection between Wordsworth’s Lucy and Coetzee’s (“As with the Lucy poems, the important question in *Disgrace* is how to read the enigmatic Lucy figure, for the reader, like this character’s father, is in danger of “miss[ing] the point entirely” [66]) Beard does not approach the Lucy poems themselves in the course of her essay. Peter Vermeulen, in his “Wordsworth’s *Disgrace*: The Insistence of South Africa in J.M. Coetzee’s *Boyhood* and *Youth*,” *Journal of Literary Studies*, June 2007, pp.179-199, has much of interest to say about the role of the poet in Coetzee’s works, but does not take up the question of the Lucys.

series of five poems, four of which first appeared in the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*. These works stand as a concrete instance of the collision of Wordsworth's idealizing poetic consciousness with a living object – moreover, with a living, breathing, *female* object. As with Lurie's affair with Melanie, they stand as a test-case, an emblematic performance, of Wordsworth's defense of the pure idea, the feeling, against the impositions of intractable alterity. Yet, as we see in them, when that otherness comes in the form of another human, special problems are presented to the champion of individual consciousness. In order for the feelers of subjectivity, in this case subjectivity embodied in lyric poetry, to move over its object freely and with full autonomy, the object must be thoroughly *objectified*; that is, *de-subjectified*, *thingified*.

In the Lucy poems this “objectification” of the feminine-other constantly manifests itself in the slide from a rather conventional deployment of simile in describing Lucy's naturalness into a more raw equation of the woman with the unspeaking thing. For instance, the third stanza of “Three Years She Grew in Sun and Shower”:

“She shall be sportive as the fawn
That wild with glee across the lawn,
Or up the mountain springs;
And her's shall be the breathing balm,
And her's the silence and the calm

Of mute insensate things.⁷

Or in “A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal,” death only literalizes what “Three Years” suggested were Lucy’s qualities:

A slumber did my spirit seal;
I had no human fears:
She seemed a thing that could not feel
The touch of earthly years.

No motion has she now, no force;
She neither hears nor sees;
Rolled round in earth’s diurnal course,
With rocks, and stones, and trees. (147)

If the stereotypical gesture of Romantic poetry is the positioning of the thinking mind before the cold sublimity of the natural world, in the Lucy poems Wordsworth achieves access to his human object only as an object, moreover as an object deprived of agency, lacking, as here, “motion,” “force,” hearing and vision.

Further, as we see in “A Slumber,” sometimes even the objectifying, lobotomizing representational operation is not enough; the poet must place Lucy in the realm of the dead, of dead matter –in some cases before she has actually died. But in every case, the possibility of a

⁷ William Wordsworth, *The Major Works*, edited by Stephen Gill, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) p.154. All further quotations are from this edition with the relevant page number given in parentheses.

sympathetic rendering of the girl's sufferings, any pity for her in her demise, is elided, subjugated to the lyric exploration of the effect of this death *upon the poet*. For instance, in "Strange Fits of Passion Have I Known," the poet with "fond and wayward thoughts" fantasizes that Lucy has died in his absence, and in "She Dwelt Among Untrodden Ways," constructs a lyric centered on his emotion upon the loss of his love:

She lived unknown, and few could know
When Lucy ceased to be;
But she is in her grave, and, oh,
The difference to me! (148)

Moreover, both "Strange Fits" and "She Dwelt" contain moments of uncanny ambiguity, signaling depths of which it is unclear that Wordsworth was himself aware. In the first poem, the double inflection of the word "fond" (whose earliest meaning, "foolish" or "mad" – which has been largely superseded by "affectionate," "dear" – was still available, in literary discourse and certain dialects, in the early nineteenth century) presages the climactic ambiguity of the phrase, "oh, / The difference to me!" Are the "thoughts" and the "difference" pathological or opportune (because of the fine lyric impulse they provoke) or both at the same time? Both the ambiguous deployment of "fond" and the unqualified "difference" mirror the strange *fort und da* game with Lucy's life that the entire situation of the poem represents. In the second, the description of Lucy is utterly preoccupied with describing her in terms whose hint of

uncertainty hardly cloaks the ugliness denoted: she was “A Maid whom there were none to praise / And very few to love” and is “Fair as a star, when only one / Is shining in the sky” (147). Is her death, and subsequent provocation of Wordsworth’s poetic energies, the only beautiful thing about this Lucy? And it follows that, just as Lucy is or *must be* thingified and in fact killed off in order for Wordsworth’s lyric to emerge, there is no room in the poems for any *response* on her own part – not even a single utterance or communicative gesture. In short, *Lucy does not speak in the Lucy poems.*⁸ The de-voicing of Lucy, as well as her objectification as a thing and as a dead human, seem likely focal points of revision for Coetzee in his translation of Wordsworthianism into the milieu of post-colonial South Africa.

Lucy, Lurie, and the Locked Door

⁸ This was, to some degree, a conscientious program on Wordsworth’s part in composing the poems. For instance, note the following stanza, originally at the end of “Strange Fits of Passion Have I Known” in an early version sent to Coleridge, but removed before publication:

I told her this; her laughter light
 Is ringing in my ears;
 And when I think upon that night
 My eyes are dim with tears.

William and Dorothy Wordsworth, *The Early Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, edited by Ernest de Selincourt, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1935, p.206.

One could argue that Wordsworth, in eliding this stanza, merely wanted to protect the weird uncertainty of the published final stanza of the poem. Still, it is undeniable that no matter why Wordsworth deleted it, the elimination of this stanza was also the elimination of the only intervention of Lucy’s voice (albeit a “sub verbal” voice) within the poet’s appropriation of her life and death. What is she laughing at – the “fond” thoughts of the poet or the central conceit of the poem itself, of the Lucy poems as a whole? What is it about this laughter that required Wordsworth to delete it? In the edited version of this poem, as well as the other Lucy poems, the woman remains exclusively *described*; she is not endowed with even a line of self description or response to the poet’s description of her.

The Lucy of *Disgrace* does in fact speak, but most often this speech is directed *against* “communication” itself. She negates the opportunity to represent the trauma that has befallen her, and in doing so denies her father representational access and a sense of sympathetic non-complicity in her rape. In this way, Coetzee refuses the easy path of revisionist counterpoint, disallowing the Wordsworthian cast of Lurie’s mind to be dismissed or “corrected” in any simple manner. Just as the poems described above are centrally preoccupied with the poet’s subjective apprehension of the missed experience of his lover’s death, *Disgrace* is focused upon Lurie’s efforts to wrap his mind around the traumatic event of his daughter’s rape and its aftereffects.

The first thing to note about the rape of Lucy as it regards her father is his initial absence from the event itself. In his rendering of the episode, Coetzee disrupts the reader’s sense of what is occurring as a reflection of Lurie’s disorientation as he falls into and out of consciousness at the hands of the intruders:

A blow catches him on the crown of the head. He has time to think, *If I am still conscious then I am all right*, before his limbs turn to water and he crumples. He is aware of being dragged across the kitchen floor. Then he blacks out (93).

Our sense of time and sequence is fractured along with Lurie's, and our perspective is limited, like his, to what is occurring to *him* while locked in the bathroom. The only clarity comes in moments of speculation about what is happening to his daughter; only ideas and thoughts, provisional fictions, are lucid while actual events remain clouded in a violence-induced murk. He is trapped in the bathroom and eventually set on fire by one of the intruders. As his frustration increases, the "provisional fictions" take on increasing subtlety and depth. They stand in their composure awkwardly apart from the staccato confusion of the real actions and events:

He speaks Italian, he speaks French, but Italian and French will not save him here in darkest Africa. He is helpless, an Aunt Sally, a figure from a cartoon, a missionary in cassock and topi waiting with clasped hands and upcast eyes while the savages jaw away in their own lingo preparatory to plunging him into their boiling cauldron. Mission work: what has it left behind, that huge enterprise of upliftment. Nothing that he can see (95).

The imaginative exuberance and self-possession of this paragraph stands in off-putting contrast to the ineloquent rendering of Lurie's actual perceptions and actions: "With wads of wet paper he bathes his face. His eyelids are stinging, one eyelid is already closing. He runs a hand over his head and his fingertips come away with black soot" (96).

Further the dialectical tension between the barely articulate physicality and the rhetorical exuberance of this episode stands as a development upon the intersection of Lurie's romantic thinking and bleak seeing in the Cape Town portion of the novel. In *Disgrace*, language, ideas, and especially *fictions* are what rise up when Lurie is confronted by the traumatic, the opaquely physical, and the impenetrable other. In a 1986 essay, "Into the Dark Chamber: The Writer and the South African State," Coetzee describes one mode of the novelistic approach to the "torture room" – literally, the headquarters of the Security Police in Johannesburg during apartheid but metaphorically in the context of the essay any "site of extreme human experience":

the novelist is a person who, camped before a closed door, facing an insufferable ban, creates, in the place of the scene he is forbidden to see, a representation of that scene, and a story of the actors in it and how they come to be there. [...] The dark, forbidden chamber is the origin of novelistic fantasy per se; in creating an obscenity, in enveloping it in mystery, the state unwittingly creates the preconditions for the novel to set about its work of representation.⁹

What we cannot see or experience causes us to dream, to dream of exactly that which we cannot see. The novelist writes "that which is not" in response to the "that which is" that he cannot access. Just as *Disgrace* transposes the Wordsworthian economy of perception and idealization out of poetry into the "everyday life" of David Lurie, the rape scene materializes

⁹ J. M. Coetzee, "Into the Dark Chamber: The Writer and the South Africa State." *Doubling the Point*. Edited by David Atwell. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp.363-364.

the situation described in Coetzee's essay, that of the writer "before the door" locked away from experience.

For Lurie the arrival of a horrible event forces the construction of a narrative that attempts to mitigate the shock of the real, of the tragic. As in Wordsworth's poems, the terror of the door locked before Lurie is held off for a moment by his attempt to make the situations *mean* something, even if only ambiguously and momentarily. Faced with the impingement of intractable, irrational reality upon the smooth functioning of his mental machinery, Lurie instinctively counter-parries with more language, with fictions.

This disruptive social sphere that intersects with Lurie's subjectivity has a large cast: Melanie, the university administration, Petrus and the other black South Africans encountered, Bev, the animals – all of these have a part in the coalition against Lurie's psychological equanimity. The central partner in this extended dialogue, however, is of course Lucy. How "Lucy's secret" is equivalent to Lurie's "disgrace" – and how this equivalence relates to the communication breakdown that occurs between father and daughter – informs one of the driving mysteries of *Disgrace*.

Staying On: Lucy's Silence, Lurie's Disgrace

Immediately after the rapists have left the farm, as father and daughter survey the visible damage, Lucy makes a vital statement to Lurie asserting proprietorship over her own experience and her right to tell for herself the story of what happened to her:

“David, when people ask, would you mind keeping to your own story, to what happened to you?”

He does not understand.

“You tell what happened to you, I tell what happened to me,” she repeats.

“You’re making a mistake,” he says in a voice that is fast descending to a croak.

“No I’m not,” she says.

“My child, my child!” he says, holding out his arms to her. When she does not come, he puts aside his blanket, stands up, and takes her in his arms. In his embrace she is stiff as a pole, yielding nothing (99).

This passage encapsulates the theme of the relationship between Lurie and his daughter for the remainder of the novel. Lurie’s deeply felt need to *know* the internal architecture of his daughter’s pain and to *act* towards the achievement of justice and/or safety for his daughter and himself meets in every case Lucy’s *spoken silence* head on. Time and time again, Lucy obstructs the forward progress of her father’s yearning for meaning, for the significance of the rape and their current situation, by throwing up barriers formed of articulated ambiguity in his path. For

instance, when Lurie begs her to report the matter to the police, she calls the situation “a purely private matter,” her “business, [hers] alone” (112). Or, similarly, a bit later in the novel:

Don't shout at me, David. This is my life. I am the one who has to live here. What happened to me is my business, mine alone, not yours, and if there is one right I have it is the right not to be put on trial like this, not to have to justify myself – not to you, not to anyone else (133).

When Lurie asserts that the violence will only worsen if she does not act to save herself, she answers that her personal safety is not her primary concern in the matter: “Stop it David! I don't want to hear this talk of plagues and fires. I am not just trying to save my skin. If that is what you think, you miss the point entirely” (112). What “the point” is she will not, perhaps cannot, say. Further, even when Lurie adapts to his daughter's reticence and attempts to read her silences as themselves signifying something – a gesture that he would probably think to be a more sensitive, sympathetic, approach to her situation – she denies this attempt as well, and calls him on the residual egotism of his conclusion:

Sitting across the table from him, Lucy draws a deep breath, gathers herself, then breathes out again and shakes her head.

“Can I guess?” he says. “Are you trying to remind me of something?”

“Am I trying to remind you of what?”

“Of what women undergo at the hands of men.”

“Nothing could be further from my thoughts. This has nothing to do with you, David” (112).

Most strongly, she articulates the central fact that disrupts all of Lurie's sympathetic imaginings – the fact of the impossibility of his empathetic participation in her experience, the impossibility of his *knowing* what she feels or felt:

“Stop it, David! I don't need to defend myself before you. *You don't know what happened.*”

“I don't know?”

“No, you don't begin to know. Pause and think about that” (134).

Lucy's denials, her refusal of access to the experience of her rape, to her attitude about the rape, and to the path to retribution and “justice,” stop the novel and Lurie's life in their tracks. We can visualize other possible denouements: Lucy's narration of the experience of rape enlightens Lurie on the subject of his relationship with Melanie; Lucy and Lurie seek out retribution for the crimes against them, or leave Africa and move to Holland, as Lurie repeatedly suggests they do. Further attacks upon Lucy, even her death, could have solidified the tragedy of reversals that the novel, initially, seems to have interest in enacting.¹⁰

¹⁰ It is worth noting, following Lucy Valerie Graham in her essay “Reading the Unspeakable: Rape in J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*”, *Journal of South African Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 2., June 2003, pp.433–444, that Lucy's silence not only stands as a complex updating of her Wordsworthian predecessor, but further engages with the long standing literary association of rape and silencing (Lucrece, Philomela, etc).

As I indicated earlier, the difference between Lurie as a Wordsworthian and the Wordsworth who manifests himself in the Lucy poems is a *generic* difference. Located in a novel, Lurie's fantasy of the world exists in forced dialogue with the fantasized other. We might have anticipated, along with such communications theorists as Richard Rorty and Jürgen Habermas, that the relocation of an egotistical discursive form, so tied to whiteness and maleness, into social intercourse, would break open the possibility of liberation through dialogue. Nonetheless, as we have seen, what happens in *Disgrace* is quite the opposite. Coetzee exposes Lurie's lyric-monolocicity and the desire to have access to the interiority of others only to more solidly shut the door on the possibilities of "communication" – primarily through Lucy's lockdown of her subjectivity. She speaks, but only to express that she cannot speak to *him* about such things; it is a dystopian performance of feminine voicedness. His language is now powerless against hers – he can name no definition of her situation that she will accept, can ask no question that she will answer. Her backtalk clips the wings of Lurie's internal language, straps it to the situation as she defines it. "Lucy's silence, his disgrace": it is a disgrace in *both* senses of the word: a deep shame and a *fall from grace*, the failure of Lurie's Adam-like ability to *name the things of the world, for himself and for others*. He has lost the power to name them, and have the names stick, without question.

Finally, we must note the performative nature of *Disgrace* as a whole after the rape. If David Lurie's "disgrace," the collapse of his ability to *do things with words*, represents a death-blow of sorts to the forward progress of the Western phallogentric *logos* emblemized in Wordsworthian romanticism and the desire for discursive access that underpins it, then what do we make of the presumably Western novel-*reader* into whose hands this work falls? If the function of the "aesthetic or narrative form" is, in Fredric Jameson's terms, to invent "imaginary or formal 'solutions' to unresolvable social contradictions," what is the reader to make of this anti-resolution of still blindingly urgent "social contradictions".¹¹ Some readers, such as James Wood in his review of *Disgrace* for the *Guardian*, simply read through the ambiguities, the points of non-contact:

The undeniable power and focus in Coetzee's novel lies in its ability to analyze not only two differing forms of disgrace - David's relationship with his student, which was almost rape, and Lucy's sexual humiliation - but two differing forms of penitence. David's is personal, and not easily understood by his daughter or anyone else. Lucy's is political, insofar as she seems determined to punish herself by remaining on the farm, and embracing this strange form of political penance. As she says to her uncomprehending father, it is humiliating to remain on the farm, "but perhaps that is a good point to start from again. Perhaps that is what I must learn to accept. To start at ground level. With nothing."¹²

11 Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithica, NY: Cornell University Press. 1981), p.79.

12 James Wood, "Cape Hopes." *The Guardian*, July 17, 1999, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/1999/jul/17/fiction?INTCMP=SRCH> [Accessed on 20/02/2012].

That Lucy's staying-on can be categorized simply as an act of "political penance," and arranged as an instance straightforwardly parallel with her father's "personal" penance (are we sure that "penance" is the right word for this?), is to ignore and *write over* all the reticence on the subject, all the denial of essentialising conceptualization, that Lucy has performed vis à vis her father. As she says to Lurie, "It was never safe, and it's not an idea, good or bad. I'm not going back for the sake of an idea. I'm just going back" (105).¹³ The deep irony is that the critic's fantasy of "meaning" is exactly the sort of fantasy one might expect of Lurie. Despite Wood's confidence in his ability to stare into the mind and heart of Coetzee's Lucy, we must ask ourselves, do we really ever *know* why she stays on, and especially, why she elects to marry Petrus? The novel fails to *make sense of the situation* for us – and we are left with and like Lurie, frustrated and in the dark.¹⁴

13 How can we fail to hear in this single statement of Lucy's a movement, on Coetzee's part, directed aggressively against the rational-colonial ideological tradition that is perhaps best embodied in another "idea" passage, the famous one at the opening of *Heart of Darkness*:

The conquest of the earth, which mostly means taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. What redeems it is the *idea* only. An *idea* at the back of it; not a sentimental pretence but an *idea*; and an unselfish belief in the *idea* -- something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to...

Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*. (London: Penguin Books, 1995) p.20.

14 I am not of course the first to argue that *Disgrace* is preoccupied with the incapacitation of access to the other. For instance, Mike Marais has written that Coetzee

appears to stage a particular aesthetic and ethical problem in *Disgrace*. On the one hand, this novel evinces the writer's desire for the other, that is, a desire for that which is able to disturb the monadic subject's "ontological solitude" whilst, on the other hand, it shows a self-reflexive awareness that its medium and representationalist aesthetic thwart this desire and thereby seemingly endorse the subject's isolation.

Mike Marais, "The Possibility of Ethical Action: J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*." *Scrutiny*2, 5.1., p.60.s

Petrus and Sly Civility

So far I have described, first, the heteroglossic fissuring of Lurie's discourse before the figure of Melanie and, secondly, Lucy's preemption of the possibilities of communication with her father on the subject of her rape and her actions afterward. In so doing, my discussion of *Disgrace* has focused on issues that are not by definition directly attributable to the post-apartheid context of the novel. Though questions of "living on" after the great transformations in South Africa are clearly at play, issues of race and economics, of whiteness and blackness, have not been in the forefront. In fact, the non-white characters that I have mentioned thus far in my paper, mixed-race Melanie, Soraya the "exotic" prostitute and the unnamed rapists who invade the Lurie's farmhouse, are tightly and self-consciously constructed as mere "types" of the racial other – as phantasmic cardboard embodiments of white desire and fear in "darkest Africa." They are, it would seem, simply "local color" that populate the background of the narrative. All the figures that have speaking parts in *Disgrace* are, with two (very significant) exceptions, white: Lurie, Lucy, Bev.

In this way, it might seem as if *Disgrace* were a novel more closely allied with *Madame Bovary* than, say, *Things Fall Apart*. Is it simply a late entry, a last look into the binaries of language and desire, materialism and spirituality, romantic idealization and material reality that

have dominated the European and American novel during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries? Does South Africa factor, in the words of Chinua Achebe on *Heart of Darkness*, merely as a set “of props for the break-up of one petty European mind?”¹⁵ Is the setting merely coincidental, a non-signifying exoticism or biographical coincidence that imbues the work with some shaded specificity of place? As we shall see, the final straw, as it were, in the staged collapse of Lurie and the literary ideology that informs his life and actions distinctly partakes of the national situation at hand. Still, Coetzee’s complicated counterposing of the post-apartheid situation in South Africa with the “Western tradition” (embodied by Lurie’s repetition of his master’s Romanticism) operates as much through its silences and negativities as its straightforward presentation.

Of course there *is* one black African character who “speaks” in the novel, at least in a certain sense. The names of almost every character in *Disgrace* carry some signifying weight: Lucy, Bev (with its echo of Bovary, and also its hint of the “bovine”), “David Lurie” carries both King David and the word “lyric.” Petrus, however, is the perhaps the most deliberate example. His name is at once European (giving added momentum to his “speaking back” to Lurie), means “rock” in Greek, and, of course, it is the name given to Simon /St. *Peter* by Jesus at the

¹⁵ Achebe, Chinua. “An Image of Africa.” *Research in African Literatures*. Vol. 9, No. 1. (Spring, 1978). p.9

moment of the *foundation* of the Church. “And I tell you that you are Peter [Petros], and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it” (Matt. 16: 17-19).

Working from this name alone we can begin to get an idea of what part Petrus has in the triangle with Lucy and Lurie – especially in light of some of the Wordsworth poems I have mentioned earlier. Just as Wordsworth’s anxiety comes of the image of Lucy “Rolled round in earth’s diurnal course, / With *rocks*, and *stones*, and *trees*,” Lurie feels threatened by his daughter’s absorption into what he perceives as the pure materiality of black African life, life with *Petrus*. Further, it is Petrus who provides the ultimate challenge to Lurie’s imaginative autonomy, just as the “soulless image” of that gigantic rock known as Mont Blanc intrudes upon the normative operation of Wordsworth’s imagination.

True to the Wordsworthian precedent, this pseudo-allegory of Lurie’s contact with Petrus is played out on the field of non-conversation and non-communication. Lurie’s interaction with Petrus is an encounter with a talking Rock, a thing that speaks. The stage is set right from the first conversation that the two have shortly after Lurie has arrived at Lucy’s farm:

He is left with Petrus. “You look after the dogs,” he says, to break the silence.

“I look after the dogs and I work in the garden. Yes.” Petrus gives a broad smile. “I am the gardener and the dog-man.” He reflects for a moment. “The dog-man,” he repeats, savouring the phrase.

“I have just traveled up from Cape Town. There are times when I feel anxious about my daughter all alone here. It is very isolated.”

“Yes,” says Petrus, “it is dangerous.” He pauses. “Everything is dangerous today. But she is all right, I think.” And he gives another smile (64).

Speaking to a rock will produce only an echo, and this is exactly what happens here: “You look after the dogs” yields only “I look after the dogs.” This repetition is the definition of the uncanny; it is the estranged familiar, the reiteration of what is yours with the differential surplus of the other attached. Petrus takes the repetition still further: “I am the gardener and the dog-man.” In attributing to himself these functionalized definitions, Petrus repeats the objectifying gaze to which black South Africans have so long been subjected. He *calls himself* the man who gardens, the man who takes care of the dogs (a function that slides into essence, the man as dog).¹⁶

Most importantly, in *playing at* being a rock, a thing, an echoing board, Petrus subverts the norms of *communication* in a manner parallel to that of Lucy. His grinning re-presentation of the English language disturbs Lurie’s notion of the efficacy of his native tongue:

16 Rita Barnard’s essay “J. M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace* and the South African Pastoral”, *Contemporary Literature*. Vol. 44, No. 2 (Summer, 2003), pp.199-224, presents a vivid exploration of both the specific context of the Eastern Cape and some of the local lexical issues at play in Lurie’s interactions with Petrus.

“Lucy is our benefactor,” says Petrus; and then to Lucy: “You are our benefactor.”

A distasteful word, it seems to him, double-edged, souring the moment. Yet can Petrus be blamed? The language he draws on with such aplomb is, if he only knew it, tired, friable, eaten from the inside as if by termites. Only the monosyllables can still be relied on, and not even all of them (129).

On Petrus’s tongue, the polysyllabic abstraction of the term “benefactor” inflicts upon Lurie’s mind the full brunt of the master-slave dialectic as it turns upside down. His daughter must rely on Petrus for protection; who is the benefactor of whom? Who is the master, who the slave? The word is truly double-edged, and passages such as these mark a shift in the balance of linguistic potency. He who was cut now will do the cutting. Lurie *feels* primitive, feels his language has been depleted of power:

What is to be done? Nothing that he, the one-time teacher of communications, can see. Nothing short of starting all over again with the ABC. By the time the big words come back reconstructed, purified, fit to be trusted once more, he will be long dead (129).

Just as the episode with Melanie at Cape Town demonstrated Lurie’s loss of authority to lyrically vocalize his desires – he no longer possesses, for instance, the ability to excuse his actions with a phrase such as “Eros entered,” here he encounters through Petrus’s mode of speaking a shift in cultural linguistic authority. Language, especially the abstractions of power and its implementation, are electric, if ambiguous, on Petrus’s lips. On his own, they are

meaningless. Note his indignation and frustration at his inability to draw out the story he wants to hear about Lucy's rape from Petrus:

A flurry of anger runs through him, strong enough to take him by surprise. He picks up his spade and strikes whole strips of mud and weed from the dam-bottom, flinging them over his shoulder, over the wall. *You are whipping yourself into a rage*, he admonishes himself: *Stop it!* Yet at this moment he would like to take Petrus by the throat. *If it had been your wife instead of my daughter*, he would like to say to Petrus, *you would not be tapping your pipe and weighing your words so judiciously. Violation:* that is the word he would like to force out of Petrus. *Yes, it was a violation*, he would like to hear Petrus say; *yes, it was an outrage* (119).

“Would like to” do, or say, or force out of Petrus – but he cannot. This paragraph represents a point of heteroglossic meltdown. If Bhabha's schematics of mutual mimicry, the dialogicity that infects both sides of the colonial or post-colonial exchange, were to have a *node of transference*, a moment when the balance of power and language tilts from one side to another, the narration at this moment would capture it perfectly. Petrus, through his “judicious” speech, has foreclosed the possibility of communication. Disempowered, lacking an outlet, the *quid pro quo* of Lurie's Western rationality (“*If it had been your wife instead of my daughter*”) enters into perpetual, but ineffective, motion. Pronouns spin schizophrenically out of control: “*You are whipping yourself into a rage*, he admonishes himself: *Stop it!*” As is literalized in the text by the alternation between italics and plain text, Lurie's desiring self, the self that “would like to,” and

the self that faces reality, the self that “admonishes,” are torn in two by Petrus’s ability to speak only echoes and ambiguities and to let them stand as the last word.

The Sabotage of Subjectivity

I have examined so far three instances, then, of the dismantling of Lurie’s linguistic authority: his lyrical approach and appropriation of his lover Melanie, his relationship to his daughter Lucy, and finally, his interaction with Petrus on the farm. Lurie in the pseudo-solitude of lyrical vision, Lurie in non-conversation with the feminine other, and Lurie confronted with “reality” in the form of a “new African” – each of these episodes delineates a different pathology in Lurie’s linguistic dominance and ability to frame desire in lyrical appropriation. Further, in each case, the depiction of the pathological instance prompts in turn a further exposure of the increasing disruption of the internal coherence of Lurie’s selfhood and linguistic potency – his ability to fulfill his linguistic desires and to maintain descriptive control over situations. Coetzee enacts these destabilizing moments in his text through, first, the dialogical fissuring of the lyrically-inflected thinking and desiring self with Melanie, next the foreclosure of the power to ask and be answered, to *know* the feminine other in the case of Lucy, and finally the rising tide of confusion and impotence when faced with Petrus and his ambiguous language. The world of *Disgrace* is one in which the mantle of humanity is in the process of sliding off as the complex

of power and discourse malfunctions, skips some beats, and finally breaks upon the *sabot* of the rock-like intractability of Lucy and Petrus. The power to objectify the other through language, either through sympathetic or repressive attention, rebounds upon the objectifying agent, Lurie, evacuating his own subjecthood in the process.

Early in the novel, in a fantasy about Melanie's future, Lurie constructs a reflection through the lens of the situation comedy of these "reversals" he will later undergo.

Together they contemplate the picture: the young wife with the daring clothes and gaudy jewelry striding through the front door, impatiently sniffing the air; the husband, colourless Mr Right, apronned, stirring a pot in the steaming kitchen. Reversals: the stuff of bourgeois comedy (14).

As we have seen, the "reversals" in *Disgrace* are hardly "the stuff of bourgeois comedy." This is no sit-com. But neither is it a bourgeois tragedy. Despite the intimate relation of the novelistic discourse and Lurie's mind, *Disgrace* is not constructed primarily to elicit from its reader a sympathetic attitude towards the protagonist as he falls into disgrace. After all, there is more than enough evidence against Lurie to be found in the work. Coetzee's novel is better described as *working through* the reader's identification with Lurie than *working towards* her or his empathetic attachment to him.

And it is in this light that we can understand most fully the significance of the Wordsworthian overtones and underlying discursive organization of the work. Rather than a “realistic” depiction of the experience of post-apartheid suffering in South Africa, we find a fiction self-consciously *about* the availability of that experience to literature in English, and to the English literary man. In other words, the novel becomes a fictional performance of the man before the locked door imagining, and thus draws to light the complexities of representation to the self of the “unknown” other. Further, is this not in a sense what the Lucy poems are concentrated upon as well? It all depends on how much credit we give Wordsworth, whether we believe that the speaking “I” and the writing poet are identical, and whether we believe that the poet intended us to hear the ambivalence in “oh, / The difference to me!” or not.

Either way, in putting out of order many of the procedures and stances central to its genre, and thus in staging the collapse of the aesthetic impulse and the desires that inspire it before an increasingly intractable external reality, it decisively turns against the *Sunset at the Globe Salon* that fantasize simple solutions through easy artistic catharsis. Rather, it provocatively suggests the terminal implication of artistic forms themselves, and in particular literary lyricism and the desires that it embodies, within the traumatic historical scenarios themselves.

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