

Disgrace:

A Path to Grace?

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J. M. COETZEE'S NOVEL *DISGRACE*, which won the Man Booker Prize in 1999, can be read as a political text, a post-apartheid work that deals with the difficulties confronting the white community in South Africa and with some of the choices available to them. To use with irony the ironic title of one of Coetzee's novels, the period of *Waiting for the Barbarians* is over. The central character, David Lurie, sees as mistaken the decision of his daughter, Lucy, to remain on her isolated patch of land, even after she has been gang raped by three black Africans: "Lucy, Lucy, I plead with you! You want to make up for the wrongs of the past, but this is not the way to do it." The rape itself was perpetrated with an intense personal hatred that the victim cannot understand: "But why did they hate me so? I had never set eyes on them." "It was history speaking through them," her father answers, "A history of wrong." As Fanon warned, decolonization is a difficult, violent, and often ugly process.¹ From another perspective, we see male predation and violence, and the injustice of disgrace falling on the victim rather than on her male rapists. However, *Disgrace* can also be read as an existential work (particularly in the light of Heidegger's *Being and Time*) and in the context of Hindu and Buddhist philosophy—with which Stoic thought has strong affinities. In writing about Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K*, Nadine Gordimer drew attention to his use of allegory; *Disgrace* can be read as an existential allegory, and the intention here is to suggest, and share, this perspective.

The novel employs free-indirect discourse to such an extent that it is, in effect, a first-person narrative. Overtly, there is little of Bakhtin's heteroglossia. Trapped in a selfish, egocentric subjectivity, fifty-two-year-old David Lurie does not know the thoughts, feelings, and motivations of the other characters—and neither do we as readers (near narratees). Twice-divorced Lurie teaches at Cape Town's Technical University; off and on, works on an opera based on Byron's last days in Italy; and has a weekly arrangement with "Soraya," introduced to him by Discreet Escorts. The first sentence of the novel tells us that he has "solved the problem of sex," and the paragraph describes his weekly, ninety-minute "session."

A shadow of grief falls over him . . . for [the dog] alone in her cage, for himself, for everyone.

J. M. Coetzee, *Disgrace*

Punctually at two p.m. he presses the buzzer . . . speaks his name and enters. . . . He goes straight through to the bedroom . . . and undresses. Soraya emerges from the bathroom, drops her robe, slides into bed beside him. "Have you missed me?" she asks. "I miss you all the time," he replies. He strokes her honey-brown body . . . he stretches her out, kisses her breasts; they make love. (emphases added)

The description proceeds in this manner, with the verb tense suggesting not the present and immediacy but routine and habit ("Punctually at two p.m. . . ."). It's no more than a satisfying, satisfactory, sexual arrangement. (The last clause above, "they make love," perhaps should be reformulated more accurately and truthfully as "he has sex.")

Formerly, Lurie had been a professor of modern languages, but due to a drop in enrollment and the consequent "rationalisation" exercise conducted by the university, the professor, reticent and uncommunicative by nature, is now compelled to teach communications. In his profession, he is like Soraya in hers: fulfilling his obligations but without real involvement or enthusiasm. His job provides him with a livelihood, but the students are bored, indifferent both to what he tries to teach and to him as well. There is nothing that he could "profess" to them with conviction and involvement, and the students find little of relevance and interest to them in what he teaches. Life itself, if it has a structure, has become routine: "He lives *within* his income, *within* his temperament, *within* his emotional needs" (emphases added). Half of what he pays Soraya goes to Discreet Escorts. It's "a pity," but it does not occur to him to pay her more, voluntarily: "He lives within his [professorial] income." The question "Is he happy?" echoes one asked in Auden's satirical poem, "The Unknown Citizen": "Was he happy? The question is absurd: / Had anything been wrong, we should certainly have heard."

In Lurie's case, we do hear, later. Soraya wasn't "effusive" in bed, being temperamentally "quiet and docile." "Though intense," he himself "has never been passionate," and so they are compatible. In the ambiguous words of Shakespeare's sonnet 138, "I lie with her, and she with me / And in our faults by lies we flattered be." Sex is not an

intimate relationship with another human being, an individual, but a "problem" to be solved, and the "conquest" of women is flattering to his vanity. One day, he sees Soraya with her two sons, out shopping. Without discreetly withdrawing, excited by voyeurism, by the opportunity to peep into her other life, he walks back to have another look, and Soraya sees him. She is a part-time prostitute and, by all appearances, leads a normal, "respectable" existence, disapproving of scantily clad tourists and holding that vagabonds should be rounded up and put to work. Alarmed at this invasion, this threat to her familial, bourgeois life, she withdraws her services, and David, rather than letting it go, employs a private detective to track her down, much to her outrage. "You are harassing me in my own house," she tells him.

The replacement "Soraya," also listed by the agency under "Exotic," is not satisfactory. He was old enough to be the first Soraya's father, and the substitute is even younger, about eighteen, if not less. "So what do you do?" "Export-import," replies the professor of communications. "You don't say." Lurie then sleeps with the department's new secretary, Dawn, but that too is "a failure": "Bucking and clawing, she works herself into a froth of excitement that in the end only repels him." Lacking passion himself, he finds it distasteful in his partner. After that one encounter, he abruptly avoids her, leaving her puzzled, hurt, and angry. Basically insecure, Lurie does not desire mutuality but domination, hence his relationships with women who are much younger—and passive. He is a predator, an exploiter: an attitude and behavior seen most clearly in his relationship with Melanie, one of his students.

Melanie is twenty-one, childlike in appearance, with the hips of a twelve-year-old and "neat" breasts. The relationship carries overtones of rape: she is passive throughout the act, he usurps her, forcing her sweater upward. He thrusts himself upon her, and she crumples like a marionette. Even the words he speaks into her "delicate" ear are heavy as clubs, and Melanie averts her lips and eyes, averts her self, as if she would "die within herself for the duration." (Later, Lurie's daughter, Lucy, reflecting on the gang rape she suffered, sees herself as having undergone a kind of death.) Apart from overtones of rape, there are also suggestions of incest in his relationship: Lurie makes up a bed for Melanie in his daughter's room and has sex with her in Lucy's bed. Lucy farms in the region in which Melanie grew up, and the latter is like a daughter to Lurie.

There are other indications of prurience, of what may even be termed moral sickness. For example, Lurie indulges in imagining Soraya's two little sons quietly playing in the room and covertly watching their mother "couple" with him. Sexual relationship between professors and their students is forbidden, dangerous, and, in Lurie's case, leads to

an official investigation, expulsion, and "disgrace." But Lurie, in his words, is "possessed" (a word we shall return to later) by the god Eros. Caught up in the troubles and tensions the relationship with Melanie generates, his teaching briefly acquires a new force and challenge, but it costs him his reputation and his post at the university. Again, as with Soraya, David pursues his quarry, leaving himself open to menace and humiliation at the hands of Melanie's young (leather-jacketed, motorcycle-riding) lover. Much later (later in experiential rather than in temporal terms), Lurie learns acceptance and relinquishment but, at this phase in his life, neither in his work nor in his relations with others is Professor David Lurie exemplary—and his self-indulgent life does not bring him calm, much less happiness.

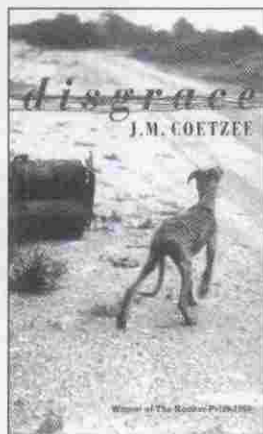
Like the romantic poet about whom he tries to compose an opera, Lurie is in disgrace, gossiped about, and ostracized. Byron fled overseas, and Lurie seeks refuge with his daughter on her farm. There he meets Bev Shaw and her husband, Bill. Lurie is a man of cultivated taste, familiar with European culture, and his initial reaction to Bev is one of condescension, if not contempt: he does not like women who make no effort to be attractive (to men, to him); the place where she works smells of cat urine, dog mange, and Jeyes fluid. And the house is as he'd expected: "rubbishy furniture, a clutter of ornaments . . . the yammer of a radio, the cheeping of birds in cages, cats everywhere." Bev herself is "a dumpy, bustling little woman with black freckles, close-cropped, wiry hair, and no neck . . . [an] ugly little woman." He is carelessly cruel, telling her there's no (sexual) temptation for him in Grahamstown, knowing full well that this is a callous thing to say to her. Lurie sees his "line" running out like water, his daughter reduced to becoming the third wife, or concubine, of African Petrus: "How humiliating. . . . Such high hopes, and to end like this." Lucy herself is more philosophical: "But perhaps that is a good point to start from again. . . . To start at ground level." Lurie, too, is at the lowest point in his life, without his professorship, in disgrace, having failed to protect his daughter, no longer able to really communicate with her and thus reach out to her, reduced to living in a tiny, rented room, hiding his identity and past.

Writing *The Consolation of Philosophy* at the beginning of the sixth century, Boethius (in political disgrace, imprisoned, and soon to be executed) reflected that fortune is consistent only in inconsistency—transience, change, is one of the most fundamental of Buddhist perceptions. A sudden and dramatic change in fortune makes disgrace Lurie's state of being, and *disgrace* is no more the opposite of *grace* than *disappoint* is of *appoint*. In other words, to fall into disgrace does not mean that one had previously attained, and been in, a state of grace. The erstwhile professor of communications is in danger of becoming a shabby old man talking to himself. The term *pleasure* in the following passage is significant: "His

pleasure in living has been snuffed out. Like a leaf on a stream, like a puffball on a breeze, he has begun to float toward his end."

What Lurie had seen as a refuge became a nightmare—when the men raped Lucy, they also beat him up and set fire to the hair on his head. Bill Shaw drives him to the hospital, stays there while he is attended to, and brings him back. This simple act of kindness and friendship embarrasses Lurie because, in similar circumstances, he would not have helped Bill to the same extent, would not have accepted that "the two of them have obligations towards each other." Bev Shaw ministers to his injury, changing the bandages and delicately anointing his eyelid and ears. They sleep together (on the floor, in the room where dogs are put to their final rest) although, even in dim light, there's nothing charming in her. She has no breasts and is "like a squat little tub"; the cruelty in the description is that of Lurie. "Never did he dream he would sleep with a Bev," thinks Lurie, with wounded vanity. (Since the narrative's focalizer is Lurie, we don't know the nature of the relationship between Bev and her husband, nor do we quite understand why Bev sleeps with Lurie.)

Sleeping with ugly Bev, in a room smelling of sickness and medicine, is the very nadir for this one-time "womanizer," a man who once "with his height, good bones, his olive skin, his flowing hair" had had sexual magnetism and enjoyed "success" with women. Yet Bev comforts him, "as a man is succoured by a woman," even as death to the dogs is a kindness, a release from their unwantedness, misery, and suffering. Soon, Lurie and Bev cease to have sex, cease "to pretend that that is what they do together." Simply lying in each other's arms is a mutual anointing, a healing that Lurie needs far more than Bev. The biblical connotations of *anoint* (and of *succour*, above) are present: anointing his physical injuries leads to a more intimate relationship, to an anointing of his self, and to the beginnings of moral regeneration. Lurie believes that "the origins of speech lie in song, and the origins of song in the need to fill out with sound the overlarge and rather empty human soul," but he makes little progress with his chamber opera, *Byron in Italy*. Giving up "lush orchestration," he settles for something "meagre," contenting himself in composing with the help of a banjo. The music does come, though in "dribs and drabs": "Plink-plunk squawks the banjo in the desolate yard in Africa." Eliot's Prufrock did not disturb the universe, and Lurie accepts that he will not return to society as a triumphant, successful composer. Similarly, in his life Lurie abandons large, "lush" designs and settles instead for modest work, meaning, and peace. Adapting words from Yeats's "The Coming of Wisdom



with Time," having waved his leaves and flowers in the sun, Lurie now withers into the truth.

Bev puts down those animals no one wants: "You don't mind?" "I do mind. I mind deeply. I wouldn't want someone doing it for me who didn't mind. Would you?" The simple know what the learned do not, according to the *Upanishads*, and the teacher is quietly taught—also by his daughter—that there is no higher life. "This is the only life there is. Which we share with animals. That's the example that people like Bev try to set [and] I try to follow."

Bev had helped to heal him after the brutal attack, and now her life, and the values by which she lives, are an example and a silent pointer, filling in (as he claimed music does) the empty spaces of the soul and human existence.

Heidegger argues that *Dasein's* destiny is bound up with those of others (and others are not separate from oneself, but those among whom one is with) and made visible by care and concern. Second, *Dasein* is to be seen in its average everydayness, "in seiner durchschnittlichen Alltäglichkeit." Heidegger recounts the classical fable in which Care, Jupiter, and Earth contend over the name to be given to a piece of shaped clay: the judgment is that Care shall possess it as long as it lives. Lurie expresses care by helping Bev in her secular ministry and by driving the corpses to the incinerator. The workers at the incinerator would dispose of them, but that would mean leaving the bodies with the waste from hospital wards. Further, rigor mortis stiffens the corpses, and the workmen beat the bags with the back of their shovels in order to be able to load them: there is no respect, no dignity, even in death, and so Lurie attends to them himself. Nature is prolific and, though there must be other, more productive ways of giving oneself to the world, there are other people to do those things.

"There is no meaning to a life unless something is worth doing," according to Peter Singer. "To decide that something is worth doing involves making an ethical judgement." Petrus tethers, on a bare patch of open ground, two sheep to be slaughtered for a feast. He is disinclined to move them to the shade, to give them something to drink or eat because they are to be slaughtered soon anyway: what difference would it make to them? Lurie is kind to the doomed animals, doing what little he can, while he can, even though "No one can take the Other's dying away from him," in Heidegger's words (emphasis in the original). In an attitude enjoined by Thomas More in his *Utopia*, what Lurie cannot put right, he tries to make as little wrong as possible: "Things will never be perfect, until human beings are perfect." The consciousness of animals is different than ours, but that doesn't give us the freedom to use them as we will and wish.² Writing in the

late eighteenth century, Jeremy Bentham drew an analogy: the nonwhiteness of someone's skin is no justification for the ill-treatment of that person. So, too, the physical differences between animals and us are insufficient grounds to treat sensitive beings unkindly. The point is that, although animals cannot reason to the degree that human beings can, although they cannot talk, they can *suffer*.

And so the novel ends with Lurie helping Bev in her work—work into which, unlike in his previous life, routine and habit do not enter. On the contrary, the more they do this kind of work, the harder, not easier, it gets. They comfort the dogs, stroke and speak to them in their final minutes, giving them “what he no longer has difficulty in calling by its proper name: love.” The word *racism* as currently used is vague, unhelpful and should be placed under Derridean “erasure.” The racism of the human race vis-à-vis all other species is termed *speciesism*, but Lurie's compassion is inclusive rather than exclusive, and the words used as the epigraph above bear repetition: “A shadow of grief falls over him . . . for [the dog] alone in her cage, for himself, for everyone.” There's a crippled dog he is particularly fond of, but the inevitable *is* inevitable, and he carries it into Bev's makeshift hospice for the final, fatal injection. And so we come to the last words of the work, words that are in sharp contrast to the opening paragraph of *Disgrace*, already cited: “I thought you would save him for another week. . . . Are you giving him up?” “Yes, I am giving him up.”

As the *Gita* says, “The wise grieve not for those who live; and they grieve not for those who die—for life and death shall pass away.” Lurie's act of giving up the dog is symbolic of relinquishment, of a surrendering of attachment, attachment and desire from which, according to the Buddha, come suffering and sorrow. In giving himself up, and in giving himself *to*, Lurie finds himself. “But whoever . . . overcomes his selfish cravings, his sorrows fall away from him, like drops of water from a lotus flower” (*Dhammapada*). The impression that Eastern philosophy advocates withdrawal, passivity, and escape is directly contradicted by words in the *Gita*: “Not by refraining from action does man attain freedom from action”; “Action is greater than inaction: perform therefore thy task in life”; better than the “surrender of work” is work done with the right motive and to good ends.

Lurie finds meaningful work, reaches acceptance, and so achieves a measure of tranquility, if not the higher serenity. A total failure in competitive—social and material—terms, he achieves moral regeneration and tranquility. The irony is that he does so in what are, superficially and externally, the most unpromising environment and circumstances. Leaving the path of pleasure for that of joy, he moves from disgrace toward grace, from the loss of social position and reputation to an individual, secular salvation. The man who once said, by way of explanation, that he had been

“possessed” by Eros now shoulders a quiet, obscure, and unglamorous responsibility and tries to possess himself: “If a man should conquer in battle a thousand, and a thousand more, and another man should conquer himself, his would be the greater victory, because the greatest of victories is the victory over oneself” (*Dhammapada*). It is not that Lurie has found complete answers and a final stance. As Heidegger writes, “There is much in being that man cannot master. There is but little that comes to be known. What is known remains inexact, what is mastered insecure.” The phrase “the plague” occurs in the novel and recalls Camus. As in that classic, allegorical text, each of us must find understanding, fashion a value-system, and strive to act and live in accordance with it. For a while at least, Lurie has found peace, peace through work. In the words of the *Gita*, “In the bonds of works I am free, because in them I am free from desires. The man who can see this truth, in his work he finds his freedom.” **WVLT**

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- 1 A treatment of the political in Coetzee's earlier novels is included in studies by such writers as David Attwell (1993), Susan VanZanten Gallagher (1991), and Rosemary Jolly (1996).
- 2 See Coetzee's *Lives of Animals*, page 44.

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