J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*: Post-Apartheid Questioning of Reconciliation

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J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace* addresses the question of racial relationships in post-apartheid South Africa. Although the novel can be read as a simple, linear and almost banal story, it proves complex in its construction and subtle in its characterization. The limpidity of style and lyricism are only a surface appearance in a text which contains numerous intertextual references as well as mythical undertones. *Disgrace* is also a plea for biological hybridity.

*Disgrace* was awarded the 1999 Booker Prize.1 The novel opens with an almost banal story of a fifty-two-year-old university professor from Cape Town, David Lurie, who after his divorce settles into a life of routine, devoting his time to his courses and to his weekly appointments with a prostitute. This ‘perfect’ schedule in a well ordered life is upset by an affair with one of his students, Melanie Isaacs. The ensuing scandal leads to his dismissal. David Lurie is transformed into a pariah and leaves for the Eastern Cape to visit his daughter Lucy whose farm has been burgled by people who raped her. In this novel, J.M. Coetzee seems to depart from the complex narrative structures of some of his previous works such as *Dusklands* or *Life & Times of Michael K*. Yet the limpidity, lyricism and simplicity of plot in Coetzee’s latest work are only a surface appearance.

The diegesis contains the complex ingredients of postcolonial writing where intertextuality enriches the literary discourse. David Lurie teaches the Romantic poets and has published works on Faust and Wordsworth. There are echoes of the chorus in *Oedipus*, of the first cantos in *Don Juan* and allusions to Lucifer and Cain, to Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, to Emile Zola’s *J’accuse*, to Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, to Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*, to the character of Casanova and to Victor Hugo’s poem on being a grandfather. Furthermore the text alludes to modern post-apartheid South African drama with the play *Sunset on the Globe Salon*. Throughout the novel, the reader is informed about David Lurie’s attempts to do some creative work in music based on *Byron in Italy*.

The mention of the Romantic poets and of *Don Juan* at the beginning of the novel stresses the period when David Lurie lives in harmony with

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1 J.M. Coetzee was awarded other literary awards such as the Booker prize in 1983, the Prix Etranger Fémina in 1985 and the Jerusalem Prize in 1987.
himself, having reached maturity and wisdom while at the same time having proved to himself that he is still sexually attractive to the young Melanie Isaacs. Madame Bovary is mentioned twice: first, when David tries to find out more about Soraya, his Indian mistress, who is married and becomes a prostitute in the afternoon, thus leading a double life like Madame Bovary; secondly, when he makes love to the middle-aged, parochial married woman Bev Shaw, who thus breaks the monotony of her dull provincial life in Salem. Her name, Bev, is connected to Bovary, a clearly deliberate choice. Zola’s *J’Accuse* is evoked when Melanie Isaacs decides to lodge an official complaint against David Lurie under the pressure of her boyfriend and relatives. At the University of Cape Town, Melanie Isaacs reads Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, an indication that the study of race issues witnesses to the open-mindedness in South African universities. The reference to the rehearsal of the play *Sunset at the Globe Salon* reflects the new political reality where ‘all the coarse old prejudices are brought into the light of day and washed away in gales of laughter’ (p. 23). A learned person, David Lurie thinks of Victor Hugo, ‘the poet of grandfatherhood’ (p. 218), when he starts accepting the idea of becoming the grandfather of a child conceived during his daughter’s rape by the black burglars. So the way these literary titles and names become part of the story implies a cultural and ideological ‘overcoding’ of the text, to use Wolfgang Karrer’s term. More than any other White South African Writer, J.M. Coetzee seems to need these ‘models of coherence’, to construct his text.

The symbolic impact of the overcoded characters’ experiences is powerful, especially in the post-apartheid context of the novel. David Lurie’s relationship with Melanie Isaacs, who could be his daughter, as well as his relationship with Lucy, his own daughter, embody his political preoccupations. In *Beginnings: Intention and Method*, Edward Said shows the importance of ‘beginnings’ in novels, arguing that they provide the key to an appropriate reading and decoding of the text. At the opening of *Disgrace*, the reference to the chorus of *Oedipus* operates as a ‘mise en abyme’ for the whole story. The omniscient narrator reports David Lurie’s thoughts: ‘He has not forgotten the last chorus of *Oedipus*: Call no man happy until he is dead’ (p. 2). David Lurie’s apparently harmonious life is going to be disrupted through his specific relations with the two ‘daughters’. The affair with Melanie becomes a paradigm for South Africa, a country sure of itself with its apartheid laws before 1991, but shaken after their abolition. Beyond David Lurie’s mid-life

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crisis, his relationship with Melanie becomes a strong allegory for the old and the new, the past and the present. There are signs which sustain this interpretation as when David thinks about changing Melanie’s name to ‘Melâni, the dark one’ (p. 18). At this point Melanie becomes a symbol for a difficult period of transition. In another episode, David in class explains the term ‘usurp’ quoted from Wordsworth’s The Prelude, which hints at their illegal/illicit affair. Wordsworth’s poem evokes the guilt which pervades the novel. David’s conscious reference to South Africa while discussing a poem set in the Alps stresses his wish to link the two geographical settings through European literature: ‘We don’t have the Alps in this country, but we have the Drakensberg, or on a smaller scale, Table Mountain, which we climb in the wake of the poets, hoping for one of those revelatory, Wordsworthian moments we have all heard about’ (p. 23). Another time, the first line of one of Byron’s poems which he discusses with his students suggests a secret wish for the emergence of a new world for the Whites: ‘He stood a stranger in this breathing world’ (p. 32). The whites must adopt a new attitude if they do not want ‘to be condemned to solitude’ (p. 34) like Byron facing Lucifer.

Even though Melanie consents to making love with David Lurie, more out of duty towards the professor than out of true love, incestuous undertones mar their relation. One of their meetings appears as a rape scene as the narrator reports: ‘A huge mistake, he has no doubt, Melanie is trying to cleanse herself of it, of him; he sees her running a bath, stepping into the water, eyes closed like a sleepwalker’ (p. 25). Melanie, a symbol of South Africa, is raped by a political system which has kept the best for the white community. A committee entitled ‘Women Against Rape, WAR,’ (p. 43) accuses David of being part of a ‘long history of exploitation’ (p. 53), sending him leaflets saying ‘your days are over, Casanova.’ (p. 43). After Melanie’s revolt, David Lurie is seen by the Board of Administration of the university as ‘a worm in the apple’ (p. 37), a ‘viper’ (p. 23), a disgraced disciple of Wordsworth (p. 46). Melanie Klein shows how rape can physically injure the body and perturb the personality of the victim, who has to learn to free herself from the father figure, from the Oedipus complex. 1 Melanie Isaacs goes through a similar process, moving away from David Lurie, abandoning her literary classes, developing fear and sadness, learning slowly to live with people of her own age, probably a process South Africa has to go through to move away from the apartheid system.

Ironically David Lurie, who is accused of ‘abuse’ (p. 53) and rape in Cape Town, witnesses in Eastern Cape the rape of his daughter, who has become a solid countrywoman, a ‘boervrou’ (p. 60), by three black men. This provokes a confrontation between David Lurie and the other South Africa, that of the farmers and the land. The white characters are faced with a history they have created. Coetzee’s story is certainly inspired by

the harsh reality of South Africa today where rape has become one of the major forms of criminality.1 Yet Lucy’s reaction differs from what studies show in most cases of rape. Generally women are ashamed to speak about the assault because they feel guilty and fear being thought to have encouraged the rape, precisely because they are women.2 Here, only the burglary is reported to the police for insurance purposes. For complex reasons, Lucy does not want the police to know about the rape:

‘As far as I am concerned, what happened to me is a purely private matter. In another time, in another place it might be held to be a public matter. But in this place, at this time, it is not. It is my business, mine alone.’

‘This place being what?’

‘This place being South Africa’. (p. 112)

The bewildered father does not comprehend the logic of such an attitude as his prejudices concerning the division of the world into ‘civilised’ and ‘uncivilised’ parts come back to the surface. He is still full of Conradian prejudices when he thinks that ‘Italian and French will not save him here in darkest Africa’ (p. 95); he also refers to Madagascar as ‘darkest Africa,’ (p. 121) in contrast to Cape Town, the white, the ‘civilised’. He believes he is still in a world of ‘savages’ (p. 95), a term he uses deliberately when he meets one of the three aggressors, ironically named Pollux: ‘That is what it is like to be a savage!’ (p. 206). He does not feel guilty for the past history of South Africa, even if he admits that his ancestors were not always right:

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. If you fail to stand up for yourself at this moment, you will never be able to hold your head up again. You may as well pack your bags and leave. (p. 133)

Lucy’s secret becomes ‘his disgrace’ (p. 109), his failure as a father to convince her to report the rape to the police and to stand up for her rights in this new era, to ensure the survival of a whole community.

Even though Lucy is shocked by the rape, especially since she is a lesbian, she shows far more distress over the personal hatred the three black men expressed during their shameful act. Here it is David Lurie who reassures his daughter by putting the event into its psychological context. He explains the rapists’ attitude as being a consequence of ‘History’: ‘It was history speaking through them. A history of wrong. Think of it that way, if it helps. It may have seemed personal, but it

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1 In South Africa, there is one burglary every minute, often with a rape to the extent that an advertisement with the actress Charlie Theron was shown on television but censored because the authorities thought it was giving a damaging image for the new South Africa. See L’Express, 27 January, 2000, pp. 101-104.
2 See Gérard Lopez, Le Viol, Chapter Three.
wasn’t. It came down from the ancestors’ (p. 156). Lucy’s analysis of the event gives meaning to her decision: ‘They see me as owing something. They see themselves as debt collectors, tax collectors. Why should I be allowed to live here without paying?’ (p. 158), the father explains, but does not forgive, which is not the case with his daughter. From that point on, the gap between them widens. He thinks that she should leave Eastern Cape for good and South Africa for a while to go to Holland ‘until things have improved in this country’ (p. 156). Yet Lucy decides to stay. Their difficult, but close, relationship at all levels goes back to her childhood, which justifies to a certain extent her rejection of men. The burglars’ assault on her helps her to break free from her Oedipus complex: ‘I cannot be a child for ever. You cannot be a father for ever. I know you mean well, but you are not the guide I need, not at this time’ (p. 161). This break conveys the idea that Lucy’s behaviour becomes a paradigm for the young generation’s understanding between black and white in South Africa.

Lucy rejects her father’s advice to have an abortion. In African literature, pregnancy has often been a sign of hope for the future as we see in Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s A Grain of Wheat and in Ayi Kwei Armah’s Osiris Rising. Lucy declares: ‘I am determined to be a good mother. A good mother and a good person’ (p. 216). Despite the tragedy, Lucy shows that concessions and compromises have to be made because the different communities are bound to live together, a fact which David Lurie admits at the end of the novel when he sees his pregnant daughter farming, ‘looking suddenly the picture of health’ (p. 218), remembering that the baby she is bearing is of mixed parenthood, or, as the future grandfather says, ‘a child of this earth’ (p. 216). Coetzee pleads here for biological hybridity in order to save the country, a ‘projected ‘rainbow country’’,¹ to use Dominic Head’s expression.

Disgrace also addresses the question of land, a major issue in Southern Africa. Interestingly, it anticipates on the current conflict between black and white Zimbabweans. In South Africa, the abolition of apartheid has brought freedom for the black people to own land if they can afford it. In Disgrace, Petrus, Lucy’s black co-owner, embodies the new world they live in. Because of decades of frustration, Petrus’ dream is to own as much land as he can. Yet much of it still belongs to the whites. David Lurie suspects Petrus of having some connection with the rapists whose acts are part of a strategy to unsettle white farmers. David Lurie knows that ‘Petrus would like to take over Lucy’s land to have Ettinger’s too, or enough of it to run a herd on’ (p. 117). Petrus agrees to be a farm manager for Lucy if she decides to have a break. The novel clearly shows how, with the many burglaries, the country is not safe anymore: ‘Too many people, too few things’ (p. 98). This situation breeds fear, so the whites buy guns to protect themselves, like the farmer

Ettinger who explains how he survives: ‘I never go anywhere without my Beretta. The best is, you save yourself, because the police are not going to save you, not any more, you can be sure’ (p. 100). In this context, Lucy’s decision to return to the farm is remarkable. As Petrus says, ‘she is a forward-looking lady, not backward-looking’ (p. 136).

Though strange, the relationship between Lucy and Petrus witnesses to a desire to live together. Through a marriage of convenience, he promises to protect her, and to make her part of the people, of the land. Lucy explains to her sceptical father: ‘He is offering an alliance, a deal. I contribute the land, in return for which I am allowed to creep in under his wing’ (p. 203). Her acceptance sounds humiliating but in the context of South Africa, Lucy’s attitude becomes a sign of wisdom, a way of facing up to the nation’s history:

‘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. No cards, no weapons, no property, no rights, no dignity.’
‘Like a dog.’
‘Yes, like a dog.’ (p. 205)

The experience is harsh for the whites, after so many years of supremacy. As Coetzee says in a recent interview, ‘at the deepest level, many still haven’t understood or accepted that life cannot go on as it did before.’ Nevertheless the scene in which David Lurie and Petrus watch a football game which ‘ends scoreless’ (p. 75) symbolizes a new start in South Africa in which there is no winner and no loser.

In Disgrace, the absence of Black South African culture as such reveals a lapse at the symbolic level even if black characters such as Petrus and Pollux are central in the psyche of the white characters. Such an absence contradicts to a certain extent the obvious desire for a harmonious world expressed by the clear-headed Lucy whose name means ‘light’. Such an idea is also endorsed by David Lurie whose name refers to the biblical story of David and Goliath, David recognizing Goliath’s rights. David Lurie, Melanie Isaacs and Lucy represent three faces of white South Africa. They express contradictory views and show signs of disarray in the face of the new social and political order which remains complex and brutal despite the post-apartheid government’s desire to be more forward looking. Coetzee’s narrative strives to untie the knots of history. The apparently simple and linear plot which expresses the author’s desire for law and order is filled with his questionings, guilt, anxiety and bewilderment. Disgrace is postmodern since it ‘stresses the tensions that exist between the pastness and absence of the past and the

2 In Scandinavia, Saint Lucy is celebrated as a festival of light on 13 December every year.
presentness and presence of the present,'¹ bearing in mind that the whites in South Africa are still in a state of shock,'² as J.M. Coetzee comments. Through literature, Coetzee tries to reconstruct a new psyche in South Africa like Desmond Tutu who was given a mission in 1995 by Nelson Mandela ‘to reconcile the whole country, to alleviate the bitterness between the communities... to carry the dream of a unified Nation.’³ This novel should speak to South Africans about ‘their present, their past and their possible futures.’⁴

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³ Sophie Pons, *Apartheid, l’aveu et le pardon*, Bayard (Paris, 2000), p. 11. ‘Réconcilier un pays tout entier, adoucir les rancœurs entre les communautés... porter à bout de bras le rêve d’une nation unifiée’ [my translation].
⁴ Dr Mike Marais, in ‘Self-fulfilling Racism’, *Mail and Guardian*, 28 April- 4 May 2000, p. 27.