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Age of Bronze, State of Grace: Music and Dogs in Coetzee's Disgrace

DEREK ATTRIDGE

"The age of iron. After which comes the age of bronze. How long, how long before the softer ages return in their cycle, the age of clay, the age of earth?" (*Age of Iron* 50). Mrs. Curren, writing to her daughter about the South Africa of the mid-1980s in which she is slowly dying of cancer, views the grim panorama of devastated communities, callous authorities, and armed children through the lens of classical myth, Hesiod's account of the successive ages of men. She performs an odd reversal on the traditional sequence, however: she places the age of bronze *after* the age of iron in which she feels she is living, and which provides J.M. Coetzee with the title of his novel.¹ Unlike every previous novel by Coetzee, *Age of Iron* is set entirely in his native country at the time of its composition, the years of emergency laws and township warfare which in retrospect we see as the death throes of apartheid but which then felt like a nightmare without foreseeable end.

In the late 1990s, we find Coetzee at work on another compelling novel set in the South Africa of the time of composition.² The struggle against the repressive, racist state is finally over, apartheid is a discredited policy of the past, and democratic government has finally been established. The age of iron is no more. Has South Africa re-entered at last one of those "softer ages" longed for by Mrs. Curren in her reinvention of Hesiod's creation narrative? The new novel, *Disgrace*, published in 1999, certainly suggests that the ten or twelve years that have passed since Mrs. Curren's dying days have indeed wrought a transformation in the country, but it's not easy to say what age we find ourselves in now. A time of rampant crime, inefficient police services, middle-classes barricaded into their fortress-homes: have we followed Mrs. Curren's inverted sequence and moved beyond iron only to reach bronze?

I wish to thank David Attwell, Rachel Bowlby, Graham Pechey, and Mark Sanders for helpful comments and conversations.

- ¹ In Hesiod's *Works and Days*, echoed by Ovid in the *Metamorphoses*, the ages come in the order gold, silver, bronze, and iron (with the age of demigods coming between the bronze and iron ages in Hesiod's scheme). The men of the age of bronze, according to Hesiod, were "a terrible and fierce race, occupied with the woeful works of Ares and with acts of violence" (*Works and Days*, line 145).
- ² We can date the events of *Disgrace* to 1997 or 1998. The main protagonist, David Lurie, who is 52 when the novel opens and whose age is given (presumably incorrectly) as 53 by the press, was born in 1945 (46).

“In this place, at this time”

Coetzee’s fiction has always had a mixed reception in South Africa, and its very success elsewhere in the world has increased the suspicion felt among some groups in his native country. Coetzee himself has insisted on the complexity of the relation between fiction and history, and his most astute critics have read the novels as in part exploring precisely that relation.³ Although he once wondered in an interview “whether it isn’t simply that vast and wholly ideological superstructure constituted by publishing, reviewing and criticism that is forcing on me the fate of being a ‘South African novelist’” (“Two Interviews” 460), there can be no question about the ceaseless, intense engagement with the country and, more specifically, with its political and social history that has marked his writing. Nor should there ever have been any doubt about his strong opposition to the policies and practices of the Nationalist government in power between 1948 and 1994 and the older colonial traditions on which they were built, even though his fiction did not take the form of straightforward “resistance writing.” In such works as “The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee” (one of the two novellas in *Dusklands*), with its memorable descriptions of colonial brutality; *Waiting for the Barbarians*, with its representation of a state apparatus relying on torture and cross-border raids; *Life & Times of Michael K*, with its imagined state of war in a future South Africa; and *Age of Iron*, with its vivid depiction of the violence in the townships and the systematic viciousness of the police, Coetzee, quite as much as any South African author, has registered for his time and for future generations the brutality, the anger, and the suffering of the apartheid era. After the democratic elections of 1994 and the sweeping ANC victory that brought Nelson Mandela from prison to the presidency, one might well have expected from his pen a novel with at least a tinge of celebration and optimism.

It’s hardly surprising, then, that mixed in with the huge acclaim that has greeted Coetzee’s far from affirmative new novel there have been expressions of annoyance and anger, especially from South African commentators.⁴ The overriding question for many readers is: does this novel, as one of the most widely disseminated and forceful representations of post-apartheid South Africa, impede the difficult enterprise of rebuilding the country? Does the largely negative picture it paints of relations between communities hinder the steps being made toward reconciliation? Is it a damagingly misleading portrait of a society that has made enormous strides in the direction of justice and peace? Even readers whose view of the artist’s responsibility is less tied to notions of instrumentalism and political efficacy than these questions imply—and I include myself among

³ See, in particular, Attwell’s *J.M. Coetzee*.

⁴ One example (admittedly among the least considered if most colorful): in a profile by Christopher Goodwin in the (London) *Sunday Times*, Athol Fugard, without having read the novel, expresses outrage that “we’ve got to accept the rape of a white woman as a gesture to all of the evil that we did in the past”: “That’s a load of bloody bullshit. That white women are going to accept being raped as penance for what was done in the past? Jesus. It’s an expression of a very morbid phenomenon, very morbid.”

these—may find the bleak image of the “new South Africa”⁵ in this work hard to take, as I confess I do.

Nor is it possible to argue that the novel makes no claim to represent or criticize ANC-governed South Africa, that it’s fundamentally the story of a group of individuals who happen to live in a particular place and time, the place and time in which the work was written. Quite apart from the fact that a novel dealing with relations between racially-defined groups set in immediately post-apartheid South Africa could hardly be read as having no interest in national issues, there are repeated references to the changed times and their impact on the way lives are now being lived. But what *is* new in this picture as Coetzee paints it, what *are* the changes that are making themselves felt in the workplace, on the farm, in the classroom? To what extent, in particular, are the assessments of the changes offered by characters in the novel interpretable as criticism of ANC policies, and of the national effort of reconciliation and regeneration more widely, as they filter through to the local level? What I propose to do by way of an introduction to some further questions about the novel and its relation to its historical and political context, and also as a way of recalling its narrative outline, is to devote some pages to an examination of a number of these references in the text to “the times” in which the characters find themselves living.

The first such moment occurs near the beginning of the novel when the fifty-two-year-old university professor David Lurie—through whose consciousness the entire work is presented—is speculating on the life lived by “Soraya,” the prostitute with whom he has a weekly arrangement: she may, he realizes, work for the escort agency only once or twice a week and otherwise have a respectable suburban existence: “That would be unusual for a Muslim, but all things are possible these days” (3). Lurie is articulating what sounds like a common experience of old certainties gone, of little left to wonder at in a rapidly altering landscape. It is hardly an expression of regret at religious breakdown—in fact, Lurie is perfectly happy to profit from such breakdown, if this is indeed what makes it possible for a Muslim woman to work as a part-time prostitute. But it does suggest at the very opening of the novel that it will be concerned with “these days” in South Africa, with changed surroundings, a new mentality, different ways of doing things. In the spheres of both religion and sex, passion and commitment appear to be giving way to organization and efficiency.

Then we learn of the contour of Lurie’s career as an academic, which signals another, related aspect of the altered world:

Once a professor of modern languages, he has been, since Classics and Modern Languages were closed down as part of the great rationalization, adjunct professor of communications....

...

⁵ Although I shall drop the quotation marks around “the new South Africa” from now on, their invisible presence may be assumed: the phrase has too many complex connotations to be used in a simple referential way.

He has never been much of a teacher; in this transformed and, to his mind, emasculated institution of learning he is more out of place than ever. But then, so are other of his colleagues from the old days, burdened with upbringings inappropriate to the tasks they are set to perform; clerks in a post-religious age.
(3-4)

The implicit critique here is aimed not at a local issue but at a global phenomenon of the end of the twentieth century; those who work in educational institutions in many parts of the world can tell their own stories of the “great rationalization,” and of course the syndrome goes well beyond the walls of the academy. If a specific attack on official South African educational policy is implied here, it’s only because those who control this policy have failed to resist a much broader shift in attitudes and expectations. In this domain the change from a racist to a democratic political system has made little difference.

The arrangement with Soraya breaks down because Lurie can’t sustain his attempt—perfectly in keeping with the times—at a rational solution to what the novel’s first sentence calls “the problem of sex” (1). Her disappearance also helps to precipitate the event that sets in motion the unfolding of the central plot: Lurie’s seduction of Melanie Isaacs, a twenty-year-old student in one of his classes. A different vision of “the times” is presented by the play in which Melanie is acting, and which Lurie surreptitiously watches in rehearsal:

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.... 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. (23)

Even before the official dismantling of apartheid, Hillbrow had become known as a suburb of Johannesburg in which middle-class “racial mixing” occurred freely. Lurie’s somewhat jaundiced description of the play’s premise no doubt reflects his view that the process of coming to terms with the legacy of apartheid will be much more painful and long-drawn-out than is suggested by this cheerful *divertissement* with its multiple (or at least dual) races and sexualities—a view that the novel does nothing to counter.⁶ After the brief liaison has come to a nasty end, Lurie, now the subject of an official sexual harassment enquiry, dines with his ex-wife: “Don’t expect sympathy from me, David,” she warns him, “and don’t expect sympathy from anyone else either. No sympathy, no mercy, not in this day and age” (44). Again, a fairly commonplace statement hints at the bitterness of the white South African who has lost the privileges her race conferred on

⁶ In her roughly contemporaneous novel, *The House Gun*, Nadine Gordimer also uses a group of young people of varying races and sexualities as a paradigm of the new South Africa, a paradigm that the older couple at the center of the novel find hard to stomach. Gordimer appears to take this instance of the new sexual and racial order more seriously than Coetzee, however.

her, but perhaps there is an echo, too, of the dehumanizing effects of the “great rationalization” of end-of-the-century global capitalism.

Forced to resign from the university, Lurie seeks refuge with his daughter Lucy on a smallholding in the Eastern Province, where she grows flowers and vegetables for the market in nearby Grahamstown and runs dog kennels. He meets Petrus, the African who assists Lucy and has recently become her co-proprietor, and expresses his concern about her isolation: “Yes,” replies Petrus, “it is dangerous ... Everything is dangerous today” (64). If this is an age of bronze, it is not just those who have lost their privileges who experience it as such. Locked as we are into Lurie’s view of things, we don’t gain much sense of what the new South Africa means to those who are poor or black or both—for the most part the new South Africa to them would seem to be much the same as the old South Africa—but this moment is a telling exception, and it introduces a new layer to the accumulating meanings of “the times.” To black as well as white, there are new fears about personal safety. Petrus, however, remains almost entirely inscrutable, and merely could be giving polite assent to Lurie’s comment; as so often in Coetzee’s fiction, the racially or socially privileged character can gain virtually no understanding of the inner world of the other who has been excluded from such privilege.⁷

A little later, Lurie and his daughter are discussing his disgrace, and his refusal to gain a reprieve by complying with the committee’s demands that he make an acceptable public confession and undergo counseling.⁸ What has precipitated Lurie’s public shaming is not his submission to the desire to fuck Melanie Isaacs—“It must go on all the time,” comments Lucy, no doubt with some justice—but his refusal to submit to these demands, a submission that in his eyes would constitute acceptance of the newly-asserted institutional rights and newly-emergent collective mores that he finds deeply repugnant. “These are puritanical times,” he says, “Private life is public business” (66). He explains to Lucy that he can’t mount a public defense of his actions: “The case you want me to make is a case that can no longer be made, *basta*. Not in our day” (89). In this new age, hitherto private details of sexual intimacy have become matter for daily public discourse, but rather than heralding a greater acceptance of sexual diversity and sexual needs, this shift marks an increase in puritanical surveillance and moralistic denunciation. (A perfect emblem of the paradox is, of course, the Clinton-Lewinsky affair.) Once more, then, this is not simply a question of changes arising from the end of apartheid, but of shifts elsewhere—notably in

⁷ One thinks of Magda and Hendrick in *In the Heart of the Country*, the Magistrate and the barbarian girl in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the medical officer and Michael K in *Life & Times of Michael K*, Susan Barton and Friday in *Foe*, and Mrs. Curren and Vercueil in *Age of Iron*. I have discussed this issue in two essays: “Oppressive Silence” and “Literary Form and the Demands of Politics.”

⁸ Sanders points out the resonances here with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, referring to “the confusion between the legal requirement of perpetrators to make a full disclosure, and the unlegislated moral pressure to express remorse, make repentance, and even ask forgiveness of victims” (“Disgrace”). See also Attridge, “J.M. Coetzee’s *Boyhood*, Confession, and Truth” 81-82.

the United States—impacting upon a South Africa becoming increasingly absorbed into a global milieu. In a recent essay on the intellectual in South Africa, Coetzee writes of “a process of intellectual colonisation going on today that ... originates in the culture factories of the United States, and can be detected in the most intimate corners of our lives, or if not in our own then in our students’ lives” (“Critic and Citizen” 111).⁹

There’s little to suggest that at the time he makes it Lurie intends his stand as a principled challenge to the entire establishment in the name of desire (the novel opens, after all, with his perfectly calculated sexual regimen), nor that he is consciously and deliberately embarking on a complete reinvention of his way of living. In its emotional resonance it seems more like a matter of pique, irritation, and hurt pride taking him willy-nilly down a road whose destination is obscure. Much of this early section of the novel reads, unusually for Coetzee, as satire, not difficult to connect with its author’s situation at the time as professor of literature in the University of Cape Town.¹⁰ The mood begins to shift and deepen when Lurie reaches the Eastern Cape, as both he and the reader begin to understand the scale of his gesture of opposition; and it is transformed when one day the smallholding is attacked by two men and a boy, all black. The dogs in the kennels are shot, Lurie is burned and his car stolen, and Lucy is gang-raped.

After this event, the novel’s representation of “the times” becomes much darker. Lurie formulates his sense of a changed moral and social landscape with characteristic angry sarcasm, which we must not be too quick to attribute to the author, but which we cannot completely dissociate from him either:

A risk to own anything: a car, a pair of shoes, a packet of cigarettes. Not enough to go around, not enough cars, shoes, cigarettes. Too many people, too few things. What there is must go into circulation, so that everyone can have a chance to be happy for a day.... That is how one must see life in this country: in its schematic aspect. Otherwise one could go mad. Cars, shoes; women too. There must be some niche in the system for women and what happens to them. (98)

To a greater degree than anything else in the novel, it is the attack by the three intruders—combined with the generally negative light in which black characters are presented—that has angered readers concerned with the image of post-

⁹ Sanders, in “Disgrace,” notes the common ground between Coetzee’s and Njabulo Ndebele’s public pronouncements on this issue and relates them interestingly to the novel.

¹⁰ In “Critic and Citizen,” Coetzee comments that the “old model of the university finds itself under attack as an increasingly economic interrogation of social institutions is carried out” (110). Sanders gives some details of the changes in Coetzee’s own institution, the University of Cape Town, which the novel echoes closely (“Disgrace”). John Banville, in his review of *Disgrace*, calls the opening section “hardly more than an overture to the main events of the novel,” and complains that there is a “new note of authorial irritation” in it (23). While this observation seems to me to underestimate the skill with which this section prepares for the remainder of the novel, there is undoubtedly some truth in it.

apartheid South Africa.¹¹ For Lurie, certainly, it is entirely representative of what has happened in the past ten years: the coming of majority rule has also meant rising expectations which can't be met, a reduction in the efficiency of the forces that previously kept criminals as well as political opponents in check, and a new sense that whites, once all-powerful, are now exposed and vulnerable. If we were to use some measure of "realism" to judge the novel, there is nothing implausible about the scene of rural crime that Coetzee introduces. More important is the question of its place in the novel and the responses to it that seem to be endorsed.

Lurie is in many ways a typical white South African of the generation that grew up with apartheid (he would have been three years old when the Nationalist government won power), even though his relatively liberal views mark him as belonging to a particular sector (predominantly English-speaking) of the white population. In the attack he can see only a crime that deserves punishment, oblivious of any parallel with his own recent sexual behavior. Lucy, to his astonishment, has a different attitude and a different sense of the new South Africa. She refuses to lay a rape charge against the men, explaining (in terms that her father might have used to defend his own actions): "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." When Lurie asks "This place being what?" she answers, "This place being South Africa" (112). Lucy is, like Petrus, a figure of the other for Lurie, though in some ways more unsettlingly so since she is a daughter to whom he has in the past, by his own account (which we have no reason to doubt), been a loving and attentive father. Where he clings to the values and habits of a lifetime, regretting their erosion or rupture, she seeks a new accommodation, even to the extent of a willingness to become Petrus's third "wife." Perhaps "seeks" is the wrong word, belonging to the Romantic vocabulary her father still tries to rely on; she *allows* a new accommodation to occur, fully conscious of the enormous price she is paying.

David Lurie's experience of changed times grows stronger as Petrus comes to play a larger and larger role in their life and in Lucy's future. It comes to seem likely that his absence during the attack was no coincidence and that his long-term plan is to reduce Lucy to a condition of dependency, a *bywoner* on his expanding farm. Lurie finds to his exasperation that in the new South Africa he has no way of dealing with this challenge. "In the old days one could have had it out with Petrus. In the old days, one could have had it out to the extent of losing

¹¹ Intriguingly, Coetzee himself, in a review published at about the same time as the novel, takes Breyten Breytenbach to task for repeating "gruesome reports ... of attacks on whites in the new, post-apartheid South Africa":

These stories make disturbing reading not only because of the psychopathic violence of the attacks themselves, but because the stories are repeated at all. For in a country plagued with violent crime which the national police force—undermanned, underfunded, demoralized—is utterly unable to control, horror stories have become a staple, particularly among whites in the countryside, where farmers have died in murders that are commonly read in the most sinister light: as politically directed, as aimed at driving whites off the land and ultimately out of the country. ("Against" 52)

one's temper and sending him packing and hiring someone in his place.... It is a new world they live in, he and Lucy and Petrus. Petrus knows it, and he knows it, and Petrus knows that he knows it" (116-17). This is the closest we get to an expression from Lurie of discontent with the passing of apartheid and its benefits to the likes of him. The distribution of power is no longer underwritten by racial difference, and the result is a new fluidity in human relations, a sense that the governing terms and conditions can, and must, be rewritten from scratch.

Although much of the discomfort Lurie experiences on the smallholding arises from traditional African farming practices that have been unaffected by the political transformation, Petrus does not represent the old ways of doing things. The story of post-apartheid South Africa we are being told is emphatically *not* the story of the technologically advanced but oppressive state sliding into backwardness under majority rule. Petrus borrows a tractor and makes short work of the ploughing, and Lurie reflects, "All very swift and businesslike; all very unlike Africa. In olden times, that is to say ten years ago, it would have taken him days with a hand-plough and oxen" (151). Although this example is a benign one, there is a hint once more of the startling pace of global change in which even rural South Africa is now participating.

One last reference to the times occurs in the final pages of the novel, when Lurie, having been for a while back in his house in Cape Town (ransacked during his absence), returns to Lucy's smallholding, then takes lodgings in Grahamstown. Lucy is pregnant from the rape and has refused an abortion, and Lurie feels more cut off from her than ever. "I am determined to be a good mother, David," she tells him, "A good mother and a good person. You should try to be a good person too." Whatever the ironies playing through this last sentence, there is clearly some seriousness beneath the irony in Lurie's answering thought: "A good person. Not a bad resolution to make, in dark times" (216).

Music and dogs

The outline I've sketched with the aid of this necklace of references to "the times" has enough ingredients to make a compelling novel, with both a personal and a political dimension: the story of a man's self-destructive opposition to a new collective insistence upon accountability and moral rectitude, of the unhappy consequences of sexual frustration and uncontrolled impulse, of the terrible aftermath of the use of sex as a weapon, of the inevitable—and inevitably painful—process of distancing whereby a daughter makes her life her own, of the difficult re-negotiation of relations between communities and individuals struggling free of a historical stranglehold. This narrative, I will insist, is not an attack on the new nation that emerged from the elections of 1994 and expresses no yearnings for the system of apartheid. Rather it portrays with immense distaste a new global age of performance indicators and outcomes measurement, of benchmarking and quality assurance, of a widespread prurience that's also an unfeeling puritanism. It explores, by means of one invented life, some of the

pains and strains of a social and economic order that reinvents itself against this background.¹²

Such a novel would be almost unrelievedly grim, lightened only by the satiric side of its hero's reflections. Like all Coetzee's novels, *Disgrace* offers the temptation of an allegorical reading (a reading, for instance, that would interpret the number of relatively unsympathetic black characters as a comment on racial differences)¹³ and at the same time undercuts it, exposing such readings as part of the mechanistic attitude the novel finds wanting.¹⁴ Its relation to the condition of post-apartheid South Africa could be better expressed, in Adorno's terms, as the "determinate negation" of the "administered world" out of which it emerges—a capacity that, for Adorno, art possesses thanks to its formal shapings of historical materials.¹⁵ My brief reading of the novel to this point has left out two major strands that don't entail reflection on "the times," and these make it a somewhat different (if no less problematic) work. The events and preoccupations that constitute these strands do not soften the work's blows or provide a way out for any of its characters, but it does lead the ethical and political issues raised by the fictional events I've sketched into different, and less certain, territory. One strand is the chamber opera which Lurie is contemplating at the beginning of the book and on which he is working in earnest when it ends; the other is the role played by animals, especially dogs, in the book's latter part. Both these themes increase in importance as the novel goes on, the space given to them on the pages reflecting their growing role in Lurie's daily existence. The main question I want to pose in the remainder of this essay is this: do *these* elements of the novel constitute a response to the private and public events that it so powerfully and dishearteningly presents in its central narrative? If so, what kind of response is it?

¹² Another novel about sexual relations between an aging white man with academic pretensions and a young girl with wide cheekbones and closely cropped black hair set in the new South Africa is André Brink's *The Rights of Desire*, published a year later than, and with a title taken from, *Disgrace*. Although the catalogue of corruption, destruction, rape, murder, and mutilation is longer than in Coetzee's work, it functions more as a continuous background to the major events of the novel and is thus both easier to read as a negative portrait of post-apartheid South Africa and less devastating in its impact on the reader.

¹³ Such a reading would need to take into account the many details suggesting that the Isaacs family are, according to apartheid race classifications, "Coloured." The resultant allegorical scheme is probably something that only South African readers schooled in the niceties of apartheid thinking would be tempted into. It is significant that at no point are we made privy to any reflection on Lurie's part about Melanie's race, or about the fact that their sexual relationship would have been a prosecutable offence for most of his life, though we are allowed to surmise that her appeal derives in part from a certain exoticism (he thinks, for instance, of her cheekbones as "almost Chinese" [11]).

¹⁴ The headline provided by the *New York Times* for Michael Gorra's review is typical of many readings of the book: "After the Fall: In J.M. Coetzee's novel, one man's humiliation mirrors the plight of South Africa." The ANC, in its submission to the Human Rights Commission investigation into racism in the media in 1999, cited *Disgrace* as a novel that relies on racist stereotypes (Coetzee and Warren 128).

¹⁵ For the fullest elaboration of this argument, see Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*.

Let me begin with the chamber opera. Having published three books of criticism, Lurie is seized—several years before the novel opens—by the idea of writing a musical work based on the life of a poet with whom he identifies (an identification that is hardly surprising given his history of sexual adventuring): “*Byron in Italy*: a meditation on love between the sexes in the form of a chamber opera” (4). He explains to Lucy that he will borrow most of the music (63), though for a long time he has been hearing in his mind snatches of the sung lines (4, 121). The opera deals with Byron during his final years, when he was living in Ravenna with his young mistress Teresa Guiccioli and her husband (87). It is only after the assault on the smallholding that Lurie starts the work, however; and once he does so, the opera refuses to remain in the form in which he had imagined it, as if in his new state the idea of the “Byronic” has lost some of its savor. Back in Cape Town, in his wrecked house, he starts yet again—this time pitching the work long after Byron’s death, when Teresa is “a dumpy little widow installed in the Villa Gamba with her aged father” calling sadly to her one-time lover, whose faint replies can just be heard (181). Instead of the borrowed music he had planned, the two characters, one alive, one dead, “demand a music of their own,” and the music slowly and fitfully comes to him (183). Finding the piano producing too rich a sound, he drags from the attic a township banjo, bought as a child’s present, and creates for Teresa a music based on the contrast between yearning song and the instrument’s “silly plink-plonk” (184). When he returns to the Eastern Province, he continues to compose with the aid of the banjo. The opera “consumes him night and day” but shows no sign of developing beyond this “long, halting cantilena hurled by Teresa into the empty air, punctuated now and then with groans and sighs from Byron offstage” (214). The last we hear of the opera is when Lurie wonders if he could add another lamenting voice to the duet: that of a dog (215).

This thought provides a transition to the second strand I omitted from my earlier summary of the novel. Apart from a reflection on the apparent sadness of castrated animals (9), there is no sign of any particular feeling for (or against) animals on Lurie’s part until he reaches his rural retreat. The first animals we meet are the dogs being kept for their owners in Lucy’s kennels. They are all watch-dogs—not a new phenomenon in South Africa but one which testifies to the general state of anxiety about crime.¹⁶ At first, they impinge on Lurie merely as a nuisance: barking that keeps him awake in the night (67). His affection is, however, gained by one of the dogs in the kennels: Katy, an abandoned bulldog with whom he senses an obscure empathy (related, no doubt, to his feeling of affinity with the widowed and loverless Teresa Guiccioli). There is no conscious change of heart; without warning, events and feelings overtake him. In a moment that combines absurdity and pathos (a moment typical of Coetzee’s narrative imagination at its most telling), he falls asleep in Katy’s cage, stretched out on the concrete beside her. The ironic parallel with all the women he has slept with needs no underlining.

¹⁶ As Katherine Herbert has pointed out in an unpublished essay, these guard dogs often were and may still be trained specifically to attack blacks.

The change of attitude crystallized in this event becomes more marked when Lurie meets an acquaintance of Lucy's, Bev Shaw, who runs an animal clinic. On hearing about this enterprise from Lucy, his initial response is a rancorous outburst at which he himself is surprised, suggesting some deeper psychic engagement of which he is unaware: "It's admirable, what you do, what she does, but to me animal-welfare people are a bit like Christians of a certain kind. Everyone is so cheerful and well-intentioned that after a while you itch to go off and do some raping and pillaging. Or to kick a cat" (73). But before long he is helping Bev Shaw regularly, "offering himself for whatever jobs call for no skill: feeding, cleaning, mopping up" (142). His altered relation to animals is further evidenced by his response to the two sheep Petrus brings back for a party to celebrate the transfer of some of Lucy's land: he can't stand seeing them tethered at a barren patch, and moves them to where there is grass. Again, he realizes only in retrospect that something has happened to him and is puzzled by it:

A bond seems to have come into existence between himself and the two Persians, he does not know how. The bond is not one of affection. It is not even a bond with these two in particular, whom he could not pick out from a mob in a field. Nevertheless, suddenly and without reason, their lot has become important to him.

He stands before them, under the sun, waiting for the buzz in his mind to settle, waiting for a sign. (126)

The powerful but baffling claim made by the sheep on him is, it seems, far from either the emotional pull experienced by the animal lover or the ethical demand acknowledged by the upholder of animal rights.

Animals and art provide the substance of Lurie's new existence. After his return from Cape Town and until the novel ends, we see him spending most of his days at the animal clinic, waiting out the time of Lucy's pregnancy among the dog-pens, carrying out chores or plucking Teresa's childish banjo. As always with Coetzee's fiction, there is no identifiable authorial voice, nothing overt to stop us from taking this culmination as a sign of Lurie's defeat, his total irrelevance to the new South Africa. By the standards of the great rationalization, he has learned nothing and is contributing nothing. There is no chamber-opera to surprise the world, and his work with animals has no value whatsoever when measured against the human needs in the country. (Lucy comments, "On the list of the nation's priorities, animals come nowhere" [73].) For a novel that has shown itself to be so aware of the demands of its time and place, the ending provides very little by way of solution or resolution.

Music and dogs not only seem to exist at a tangent to the other concerns of the novel, they also seem to have very little relation to one another. I wish to argue, however, that they are connected, both to one another and to the rest of the work. The novel's engagement with its times, however unpalatable one may find it, and however little it offers by way of remedy, is serious, committed, and responsible. It must be said that it would be very easy to misrepresent these connections, to succumb to the ever-powerful desire for reassurance, for silver linings, for utopian moments. Thus, having identified these two motifs there is a

temptation to argue that Coetzee is offering two related “solutions” to the multiple problems of the age his novel delineates: the production of art and the affirmation of animal lives. My argument, however, is that one of the novel’s great achievements (which is also one of the reasons for its rebarbateness) lies in its sharp insistence that neither of these constitutes any kind of answer or way out, while at the same time it conveys or produces an experience—beyond rationality and measured productivity—of their value.

A state of grace?

I want to approach the question I’ve raised by means of a term that might seem to court exactly the danger I’ve just warned against. Buried in the novel’s title, with its specific references to the experiences of David Lurie and his daughter, and its vaguer reference to the prevailing conditions in which they occur,¹⁷ is the word *grace*. Its actual occurrences in the novel are fairly throwaway: Lurie’s ex-wife misremembers Lucy’s lover’s name as “Grace” (187), and a particular dog at the clinic is said to have a “period of grace” during which it may be adopted (though it isn’t). Among the many verbal doublets in the novel—a tic of Lurie’s somewhat academic mental style (compliant/pliant [5], moderate/moderated [6], purgation/purge [91], kin/kind [194], drive/driven [194], and so on)—one never finds disgrace/grace. Yet it seems to me that the term is present in a ghostly way through much of the text.

“Grace” is not, as it happens, the opposite of “disgrace.” The opposite of disgrace is something like “honor”; the *OED* definition of *disgrace* links it frequently with *dishonor*. Public shame, in other words, is contrasted with and can only be canceled by public esteem, disgrace by honor. Lurie spurns the opportunity to escape disgrace by means of public confession, and he makes little attempt to regain a position of public honor after his shaming. His visit to the Isaacs family is his most significant effort in this direction, but his appeal for forgiveness is constantly undercut by the uncontrollable reassertion of desire—he even imagines Melanie and her schoolgirl sister together in bed with him, terming it “an experience fit for a king!” (164). Yet his behavior after the committee finding against him is by no means an endeavor to shrug off what has happened, to rebuild his life on a conventional bourgeois basis. It is as if in retrospect the experience with Melanie and its immediate aftermath (in particular, the stand he has found himself taking) have crystallized and clarified all his disgust at the “times”—and I must stress once more that this has much wider reference than the political and social order of post-apartheid South Africa—and taken away any remaining urge to find a compromise way of life of the sort represented by his earlier “solution” to the problem of sex. He sees no point in attempting to wash away the public disgrace, to regain honor in the eyes of the community: that would involve capitulation to the very standards he has now rejected. He

¹⁷ The word is also used of the surplus dogs: “They flatten their ears, they droop their tails, as if they too feel the disgrace of dying; locking their legs, they have to be pulled or pushed or carried over the threshold” (143).

declares to Isaacs: "I am sunk into a state of disgrace from which it will not be easy to lift myself. It is not a punishment I have refused. I do not murmur against it. On the contrary, I am living it out from day to day, trying to accept disgrace as my state of being" (172).

Although there is an element of self-dramatization here, Lurie's acceptance of his condition is not belied by his acts. With Bev Shaw he is more straightforward, if less acquiescent, telling her that he is "[i]n what I suppose one would call disgrace" (85). And he wants to learn from his invented Teresa how to manage, as she does, in a condition "past honour" (209). The disgrace into which Lurie feels himself to be sunk cannot be equated with the public disgrace his actions and words have produced: he never wholeheartedly regrets his seduction of Melanie, the memory of whom continues to stir flickers of desire, and he has no regrets at all about his behavior before the committee. What he experiences is a deeper sense of being unfit for the times in which he lives.

What is left for Lurie after his fall? Sexual relations being at an end (the inconsequential sex with Bev Shaw seems to mark the exhaustion of this aspect of Lurie's life), there remain family relations. Lurie spends the rest of the novel in a stumbling but tenacious endeavor to be a good father to Lucy, and although his protection of her is without value and his advice to her is ignored, although he understands very little of her feelings and motives, his fidelity and persistence are not to be dismissed. On their last meeting she invites him in for tea as if he were a visitor, and he thinks, falling back on one of his verbal doublets, "Good. Visitorship, visitation: a new footing, a new start" (218). This is one of the few positive mentions of the new in the novel.

But one would not call this intimation of a new relationship the achievement of grace. Grace is by definition something given, not something earned, in the way that Lurie has earned this moment of optimism in his relationship with his daughter. Grace is a blessing you do not deserve, and though you may seek for grace, it comes, if it comes at all, unsought. This sounds like a recipe for doing nothing, or doing whatever you like,¹⁸ but the paradox of the theological concept of grace that I'm borrowing is that it is not a disincentive to good works, but a spur. Coetzee makes no attempt to resolve, on this secular plane, the ancient quarrel between Augustine and Pelagius—echoed in many a later controversy—as to whether a prior gift of grace is necessary to make the individual fit to seek and receive grace, or whether the human freedom to accept or reject the offer of grace is primary. If Lurie achieves something that can be called grace—which it is my purpose to argue—we cannot say either that he finds it or that he is found by it. Rather, we have to say both.

¹⁸ Nor is it a matter of obeying every impulse: the novel represents many impulses acted upon, and they are not always productive. We may note the ironic rhyming between the moment when "[o]n an impulse" Lurie touches Bev Shaw's lips (148) and the even more blackly comic moment when "[o]n an impulse," prompted by the observation of a physical similarity between Isaacs's mouth and Melanie's, Lurie "reaches across the desk, tries to shake the man's hand, ends up by stroking the back of it" (167). The impulse that leads to Melanie's seduction, which Lurie describes in terms of the power of Eros over him (52, 89), is more complicated.

In his reaching for a register that escapes the terminology of the administered society, Coetzee has often turned to religious language, and there is a continuity among three of his characters who find that, although they apparently have no orthodox religious beliefs, they cannot talk about the lives they lead without such language: Mrs. Curren in *Age of Iron*, who asks, "How shall I be saved? By doing what I do not want to do.... I must love, first of all, the unlovable" (136); Elizabeth Costello in *The Lives of Animals*, who says of her vegetarianism that it does not come out of moral conviction but "out of a desire to save my soul" (43); and David Lurie, who does not use the terms *grace* and *salvation* but often talks of souls,¹⁹ even though, as he makes clear to Mr. Isaacs (172), he does not believe in God. Although Lurie's motives for doing what he does seem as obscure to him as they are to us, something leads him in his "state of disgrace" to undertake a life of toil in the service of others. The "others" in question, moreover, are not other people; they are, on the one hand, the partly historical, partly imagined characters in an artistic work he is inventing and, on the other hand, animals.²⁰ It is as if the conventional moral injunctions about the human community are themselves too compromised, too caught up in the age's demands, for his newly stark vision of what is truly important.

This other-directed toil is not, therefore, a question of choosing a good cause on rational grounds and getting on with it, secure in the knowledge that one is bettering one's world. It is very different from either Bev Shaw's whole-hearted commitment to the cause of animal welfare or Lucy's survival strategy of pragmatic accommodation whatever the cost. It goes with a certain openness to experience, an openness which is not simply a matter of expectation, nor even of expecting the unexpected. (We are reminded of the tortured self-communings of Coetzee's Dostoevsky of *The Master of Petersburg*: "As long as he expects what he does not expect, what he does not expect will not come" [80].)²¹ The arrival of the

¹⁹ Lurie recalls the Church Fathers' conclusion that the souls of animals "are tied to their bodies and die with them" (78; see also 161), but by the end of the book he is moved to depict the canine soul with visual and olfactory vividness; and he insists—against his daughter's commonsense skepticism—that "We are all souls. We are souls before we are born" (79). When he dreams that Lucy is calling to him to save her, he speculates that her soul might have left her body and come to him (104). Mrs. Curren also frequently uses the word: see, in particular, her description of the children with stunted souls (7), her description of the imagined effect of her letter on her daughter (129-30), her depiction of Vercueil and his dog by her side, waiting "for the soul to emerge ... neophyte, wet, blind, ignorant" (186).

²⁰ It is interesting to note that Elizabeth Costello uses the former type of other to reinforce her point about the latter. Reminding her audience that she is the author of a novel called *The House on Eccles Street*, in which Joyce's Molly Bloom is the main character, she says, "If I can think my way into the existence of a being who has never existed, then I can think my way into the existence of a bat or a chimpanzee or an oyster" (*The Lives of Animals* 35). I suspect I'm not alone in finding the logic here specious, but the strength of Costello's performance does not depend, for reasons she is very explicit about, on her reasoning (see note 26 below). Coetzee's willingness to associate aesthetic creation with other-directed acts in the world might be seen as a challenge to the view—perhaps most powerfully expressed by Thomas Mann in *Death in Venice* and *Doctor Faustus*—that the former tends inevitably toward amorality.

²¹ See Attridge, "Expecting the Unexpected," for further discussion.

unexpected, what Jacques Derrida calls the *arrivant*, may not be an event you welcome—it can take the form of three men who one day force their way into your house, set you on fire, and rape your daughter. It may, when it comes, have the feeling of something expected—locked in the toilet by the attackers, Lurie thinks, “So it has come, the day of testing” (94). It can be uncertain and ambiguous, like the desire that suddenly strikes you for the young student on the path, or the yet-to-be-born offspring of a rape. The event I am calling “grace” is the arrival of the unexpected in unexpectedly beneficent form—though I have to add immediately that classification into “good” and “bad” belongs to the system of accounting that the *arrivant* eludes and exceeds.²²

Lurie’s (and Coetzee’s) phrase “state of disgrace” clearly evokes the theological notion of a “state of grace,” the name for a condition of constant receptiveness to the divine. To claim that by the close of the novel Lurie achieves something approaching a state of grace is to claim that his daily behavior testifies to some value beyond or before the systems—moral, religious, emotional, political—of reward and punishment, of blueprint and assessment, of approbation and disapprobation that have brought about his disgrace, that he is true to an excess, an overflow, an alterity that no calculation can contain, no rule account for. (Grace, like its close companions mercy and forgiveness, has, since Paul at least, always been opposed to law.) One symptom of his state is that, in spite of the trials he faces, he does not fall into despair—in its theological sense a loss of faith in the capacity of God’s grace to exceed human deserving but evinces an obscure tenacity, not even strong or clear enough to be called faith or optimism. Although he may have forfeited the reader’s moral sympathy early in the novel, he is far from a dismissable figure at the end.

Countless artists, including Coetzee, have testified to the role of something like grace in the act or event of aesthetic creation, though it is usually given different names, such as “inspiration.” (Blanchot, in his fine pages on inspiration in *The Space of Literature*, calls it “this grace which is given and taken away” [182]).²³ David Lurie is no exception. Although he expends great effort on his musical composition, it seems to emerge, when it does so in a form which he feels is worth preserving, without his willing it (and the word *blessedly* suggests that the religious register is not inappropriate here):

And, astonishingly, in dribs and drabs, the music comes. Sometimes the contour of a phrase occurs to him before he has a hint of what the words themselves will be; sometimes the words call forth the cadence; sometimes the shade of a melody, having hovered for days on the edge of hearing, unfolds and blessedly reveals itself. As the action begins to unwind, furthermore, it calls up of its own accord modulations and transitions that he feels in his blood even when he has not the musical resources to realize them.

...

²² See Derrida, *Aporias* 33-35.

²³ For a full and revealing study of this topic, see Clark.

So this is art, he thinks, and this is how it does its work! How strange! How fascinating! (183-85)²⁴

It is important to insist once more that the novel is not proffering the work of art as a solution to or a compensation for the ills of its time. Coetzee makes *Byron in Italy*, as it comes into being, anything but a masterpiece, and Lurie has no illusions about his odd, monotonous, often ludicrous work. "It would have been nice to be returned triumphant to society as the author of an eccentric little chamber opera. But that will not be" (214). Nor is it even a matter of the artist's personal satisfaction that something genuinely new or beautiful has been created. The most he hopes for is that "somewhere from amidst the welter of sound there will dart up, like a bird, a single authentic note of immortal longing." However, he is aware that if it should, he would not recognize it. "He knows too much about art and the ways of art to expect that" (214). Art, the novel implies, may provide all sorts of pleasures and remedies and enhancements for its society, it may bring all sorts of satisfactions and insights to its creator, but these, ultimately, are not why it matters. Indeed, there is no "why," a word which belongs to the accountants and rationalizers. Art matters, and Coetzee's powerful evocation of Lurie's dogged and surprised act of creation shows, twice over, that it does.

Then there are the animals. If Lucy and Petrus are for David Lurie others whom he struggles to know, if Melanie is an other whom he wrongs by not attempting to know, animals are others whom he cannot begin to know. I want to focus on one aspect of the relation to the absolute other of the animal and to bring out its links with what I have just said about art. In doing so, there will not be space to elaborate at any length on the many interrelations between the attention given to animals in *Disgrace* and Coetzee's roughly contemporaneous Tanner Lectures, *The Lives of Animals*, nor the striking similarities between both of these and Derrida's numerous discussions of animals and animality, most notably in "L'animal que donc je suis," his contribution to the Cerisy volume, *L'animal autobiographique*.²⁵ Although Lurie's growing attachment to animals, his increasing awareness of their own singular existences, can be traced in a number of narrative developments—the two Persian sheep, the abandoned bulldog, the many animals he helps Bev Shaw to treat at the clinic—the most telling and fully-realized exemplification of this new attitude is his handling of the dogs that have to be killed. As with his treatment of artistic creation, Coetzee strips away all the conventional justifications for kindness to animals—implying not that these are empty justifications, but that they are part of the rational, humanist culture that

²⁴ I have explored this aspect of artistic creation in "Innovation, Literature, Ethics," an essay that appeared before the novel but that otherwise might have borne as an epigraph a sentence from this section of it: "He is inventing the music (or the music is inventing him)" (186).

²⁵ Other works by Derrida that discuss the animal/human boundary include *Of Spirit* (47-57), "Eating Well" (111-17), and "Force of Law" (18-19), as well as *Aporias* (see note 27 below).

doesn't get to the heart of the matter.²⁶ Indeed, the heart of the matter, the full and profound registering of animal existence that Coetzee is using his own art to evoke, constitutes, like art, a fierce challenge to that culture. In this respect, Coetzee's novel has some affinities with what Margot Norris, in *Beasts of the Modern Imagination*, terms the "biocentric" tradition in modern art: not that Coetzee creates animals in the manner of the writers she discusses, "with their animality speaking" (1), but that his work like theirs (and like hers) tries to imagine a relation to animal life outside of the worthy but limited concept of what Norris calls "responsible stewardship" (24). In one respect, his vision is even more extreme than those of Norris's chosen authors, since the most powerful writing in the novel involves the relation not to animal life but to animal death.²⁷

Let us look at a couple of relevant passages. After the attack, Lurie helps Bev Shaw at the animal clinic as often as he can, but it is Sunday afternoons that are the most intense, for it is then that she administers lethal injections to the large numbers of dogs who can't be cared for. Lurie is as mystified by his emotional involvement in this procedure as he is in the emergence of Teresa's yearning music or the sudden coursing of sexual desire at a memory of Melanie Isaacs's young body.

He had thought he would get used to it. But that is not what happens. The more killings he assists in, the more jittery he gets. One Sunday evening, driving home in Lucy's kombi, he actually has to stop at the roadside to recover himself. Tears flow down his face that he cannot stop; his hands shake.

He does not understand what is happening to him. (142-43)

Lurie's total absorption in the animals' dying is vividly described, but it his care of the corpses that marks the extreme limit of this theme in the novel. If a dog is an absolute other, what is a dead dog, and what response does it demand? It would be easy to dump the carcasses in their black bags at the incinerator on the same day, but he feels he can't simply discard them with all the other garbage: "He is not prepared to inflict such dishonour upon them" (144). (We are reminded, by contrast, of the casual slaughter of the dogs in the kennels by the intruders [95].) So, having bought a truck for the purpose, he takes the load of dead dogs to the incinerator on Monday mornings, where he loads the bags on the feeder cart, one at a time, and cranks them into the flames, while the crew whose job this is stand back and watch.

²⁶ Elizabeth Costello—who is, significantly, a novelist—also feels that all rational arguments about the treatment of animals are, finally, beside the point. She urges her audience to read the poets, "and if the poets do not move you, I urge you to walk, flank to flank, beside the beast that is prodded down the chute to his executioner" (*The Lives of Animals* 65).

²⁷ Animal death is one of the subjects treated by Derrida in *Aporias*. In this work, Derrida troubles the distinction Heidegger tries to draw between human dying (*sterben*) and animal dying (*verenden*) (30-42).

This degree of attention to the corpses is excessive by any rational accounting, but Coetzee's description of what had happened when the crew did the furnace feeding gives the reader—this reader, at least—a shudder of understanding:

Rigor mortis had stiffened the corpses overnight. The dead legs caught in the bars of the trolley, and when the trolley came back from its trip to the furnace, the dog would as often as not come riding back too, blackened and grinning, smelling of singed fur, its plastic covering burnt away. After a while the workmen began to beat the bags with the backs of their shovels before loading them, to break the rigid limbs. It was then that he intervened and took over the job himself. (144-45)

The compulsion to intervene that Lurie experiences is all the more powerfully conveyed because it is represented in Coetzee's unemotional, precisely descriptive prose. As in Lurie's reaction to the tethered sheep, this can't be termed an ethical response, nor is it really an affective reaction; it's an impulse more obscure if no less commanding than these. One can't call it a biocentric attitude in the sense of taking on the animals' perspective: the dogs feel nothing at this point, and the values that Lurie is safeguarding on their behalf—honor, dignity—are products of human culture through and through.²⁸ Yet in this absurd misapplication of the terms of human culture to dead animals there is an obstinate assertion of values more fundamental, if more enigmatic, than those embodied in the discourses of reason, politics, emotion, ethics, or religion—those discourses that govern the new South Africa and much else besides.

Lurie himself puzzles over what makes him undertake this task every Monday, incidentally modifying his earlier explanation of why he comes to the incinerator at all:

Why has he taken on this job? To lighten the burden on Bev Shaw? For that it would be enough to drop off the bags at the dump and drive away. For the sake of the dogs? But the dogs are dead; and what do dogs know of honour and dishonour anyway?

For himself, then. For his idea of the world, a world in which men do not use shovels to beat corpses into a more convenient shape for processing. (145-46)

The last sentence comes as close as any in the novel to an articulation of the value that most deeply informs it. It must be read with the previous sentence, however: this is not a practical commitment to improving the world but a profound need to preserve the integrity of the self. We may be reminded of those other characters in Coetzee's fiction whose actions, though objectively good, are ultimately grounded in a profound personal need—which, as we've seen, is often represented in a secularized version of religious language. It's this experience of finding oneself personally commanded by an inexplicable, unjustifiable, impractical commitment to an idea of a world that has room for the inconvenient, the non-

²⁸ As Derrida points out in "L'animal que donc je suis," animals are outside both shame and shamelessness: "aussi étranger à la pudeur qu'à l'impudeur" (255).

processable, that I'm calling *grace*, though it's not, nor could it be, a word that occurs to Lurie.

Another word that doesn't occur to Lurie in his protracted self-examination is *penance*: it would be a misreading of his behavior to suggest that he is taking on an existence of suffering and service as expiation for his sin. Nor does he ever make a connection between his forcing himself on Melanie at one point in their brief affair—"Not rape, not quite that, but undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core" (25)—and the sexual attack on his daughter. Only in his little speech to Isaacs does he talk of his new life as a punishment, and his rhetorical language at this point is not corroborated by any of the thoughts we are made privy to then or at other times. Whatever pain he has caused (and Melanie and her family seem to have dealt with the episode quite efficiently), Lurie's commitment to the dead dogs can't be thought of as an attempt to counterbalance the sexual wrong that began the sequence of events it culminates.

Lurie is quite clear-eyed about his dedication to a cause that, measured on any rational scale, would register as of no value, lacking even the tiny potential that his work on the opera might be said to possess:

Curious that a man as selfish as he should be offering himself to the service of dead dogs. There must be other, more productive ways of giving oneself to the world, or to an idea of the world. One could for instance work longer hours at the clinic. One could try to persuade the children at the dump not to fill their bodies with poisons. Even sitting down more purposefully with the Byron libretto might, at a pinch, be construed as a service to mankind. (146)

While he is back in Cape Town, he tries not to think about the dogs. "From Monday onward the dogs released from life within the walls of the clinic will be tossed into the fire unmarked, unmourned. For that betrayal, will he ever be forgiven?" (178). Here his service to the dead animals is understood as *marking* and *mourning*, that is to say as registering the individuality of each dog's death, of contesting the reduction of dead animals to mere accumulations of matter. Like Derrida, he resists the generalization implicit in the category "animal" ("L'animal" 280-82), preferring the impossible task of acknowledging the singularity of each individual creature.

Ian Hacking, in a review of *The Lives of Animals* that also discusses *Disgrace*, describes very well the non-systematic ethical charge of these works:

Coetzee feels the force of almost all the ideas and emotions that his characters express. He is working and living at the edge of our moral sensibilities about animals. Much is fluid, changing, being created. One positively ought to hold incompatible opinions as one works and lives one's way through to their resolution. (22)

I hope it is clear that the two strands I have isolated, the two tasks Lurie undertakes in his state of disgrace, although each can be seen as bizarre and as bizarrely conjoined in his mode of living at the end of the novel, do have a

common thread. Both manifest a dedication to a singularity that exceeds systems and computations: the singularity of every living and dead being, the singularity of the truly inventive work of art. (And this is connected to the collapse of his sexual routine when he tries to individualize “Soraya” and to his resistance to the committee whose task it is to reduce a singular erotic experience to a classifiable category.) In this dedication we find the operation of something I’ve called *grace*, and perhaps—whatever ungainliness and awkwardness we associate with Lurie—even a touch of its derivatives, *gracefulness* and *graciousness*. Where Coetzee differs from many others who have taken similar positions is his unblinking acceptance of the non-instrumental nature of this stance; at most, these elements of the novel might be understood, again in an Adornian perspective, as an “intimation of a possible future freedom” (Jarvis 100).²⁹

What, however, of the main narrative of seduction and disgrace? Can we see in the operation of desire, so central to the unfolding of the plot, a similar dedication, a similar path to possible grace? Just as Coetzee resists the conventional narratives of “artistic genius” and “devotion to animals,” so he resists the tale of profound love blossoming out of mere lust. It would be no surprise to find Lurie, steeped as he is in Romantic poetry, shaping the story of his seduction of Melanie to fit this model; yet in spite of occasional hints of a temptation to do so, the force he acknowledges over and over, referring to it as a god, naming it Eros, ascribing it to Aphrodite, is that of sheer physical desire, the desire of a fifty-two year old deprived of sexual satisfaction for an attractive, provocative twenty year old. This remains true even when the affair is over and the opportunity for romanticizing on Lurie’s part is at its greatest. One example: strolling near Lucy’s smallholding he encounters some children coming from school:

Without warning a memory of the girl comes back: of her neat little breasts with their upstanding nipples, of her smooth flat belly. A ripple of desire passes through him. Evidently whatever it was is not over yet. (65)

The words convey both the physical intensity of the desire and the puzzled helplessness of the man who experiences it. “Evidently” captures both the attempt and the failure to analyze the moment, “whatever it was,” and its lasting mystery.

Even if the story of the seduction is, like those of the opera and the dogs, a story of a man overmastered by a power that exceeds and disrupts the rationalizations of his age, and even if it is the immediate cause of Lurie’s new mode of life, we can’t say that, like numberless other fictions, it is about love as a path to grace. *Love* is used for the very different relation Lurie has to the dogs about to be put to death (219), and it also seems appropriate to his commitment to his daughter and her unknown future. It is a word he imagines on Teresa’s lips, too, long after her lover is dead. The story of Lurie and Melanie, however, is a story of

²⁹ Coetzee appears to be more positive in his public statements: he insists that “the new economic world order is not a reality” but “a huge confidence trick,” which it is the duty of intellectuals to confront “in an active, David-and-Goliath spirit” (“Critic and Citizen” 110).

desire, and desire in all Coetzee's fiction seems to be an *arrivant* that remains permanently ambiguous, testing the boundaries between "good" and "bad," enrichment (a term Lurie finds himself using) and impoverishment. Any temptation to exaggerate the positive side of this force is challenged by its other significant manifestation in the novel, the desire that—whatever other motives are at work—stiffens the penises that enter Lucy Lurie's unwilling body.

The novel ends on one of the killing Sundays. All I have said about a dedication to singularity, both in Lurie's new mode of existence and in Coetzee's art, is exemplified in these final pages, as Lurie brings in a dog of whom he has grown particularly fond and gives him up to the waiting needle. Coetzee offers no explanation of Lurie's loving dedication to surplus dogs, and certainly doesn't proffer it as a model for the new South Africa or for any reader's own conduct. If the novel succeeds in conveying something of the operation and importance of what I've been calling "grace," it conveys also that it is not a lesson to be learned or a system to be deployed.³⁰ In this way, *Disgrace* presents—by means of its forcefulness as a literary work, through its writing, sentence by chiseled sentence—its own justification for not making a direct contribution to the building of the new South Africa. It would not be inaccurate to say that it conveys something of the cost of that necessary process of national and communal construction, but to leave it at that would be—as I've tried to argue—to see only the negative aspects of the novel. It's precisely the notion of *cost*, the measurement of profit and loss, that Coetzee questions in *Disgrace*. The *political* challenge, which can only be implicit in the novel (since what is explicit is the belief that novels are not the places to mount political challenges), is to find a way of building a new, just state that is not founded on the elimination of unpredictability, singularity, excess. We might call it, if it ever comes into existence, a state of grace.

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³⁰ This is just one of the affinities between "grace" and a number of terms Derrida has explored, including the "gift," "forgiveness," "hospitality," and "love"; it also resonates with Norris's striking argument in *Beasts of the Imagination* that "biocentrism has no real practical effects" (24).

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