

# A disgraceful journey into nothingness: criticism and interpretation – South Africa in literature – culture of violence and post-apartheid through “Disgrace” from J. M. Coetzee

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**Abstract:** Set in post-apartheid and post-Truth-and-Reconciliation South Africa, Coetzee’s *Disgrace* (1999) is a disturbing novel illustrating the difficulty of erasing a culture of violence. Its central character, David Lurie undergoes the crisis of the white middle-class male intellectual living a time in history when so many minorities and oppressed groups are speaking for themselves and thus eroding the hegemony of the white knowing subject. An incarnation of the pilgrim, his journey into the new South Africa proves to be most tortuous and pushes through an unexpected territory, bearing resemblance to a rite de passage. Although David Lurie may be seen as exiting from a model and offering himself the possibility of making his own history, like the Byronic Don Juan he is rather slipping into a distorted history. Transcending textuality and humanity then sinking into nothingness, *Disgrace*’s world is a wrong(ed) history.

**Keywords:** literature, fiction, novel, South Africa, post-apartheid.

As a result of the extensive use of force in the 1980s, the term “culture of violence” became frequently used in the 1990s to refer to the high levels of violence that pervaded South Africa and which reached its peak in the early period of transition to democracy (1990-1994) although continuing to plague the country. The label meant that South African society was endorsing violence as an acceptable and legitimate means to resolve problems and achieve

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goals (VOGELMAN & SIMPSON, 1990). Coetzee's novel *Disgrace* is a peculiarly disturbing novel. It illustrates the difficulty of erasing a culture of violence. The writer's approach is direct and historical. Set in post-apartheid South Africa, the story tackles the nature of violence, no longer perpetrated by the state against its citizens but by citizens against one another and more specifically by one sex against the other. The novel reflects a post-Truth-and-Reconciliation-Commission era of displaced aggression, with individuals performing acts of retributive violence and conflicts breaking out at the local level. Undeniably, the end of apartheid marked the beginning of a stressful period for the white South African men who had become accustomed to dominating all areas of both public and private life. The time of social, political and economic reconstruction of South Africa in the 1990s coincided with the time of a crisis of legitimacy for the continued domination of white. *Disgrace's* central character David Lurie undergoes this crisis. As a white, middle-class, heterosexual man he has not inherited a world of oppression and exclusion on the basis of his sex or race. He has not gone through the experience of being historically denied the status of subject as a consequence of his sex or race. Indeed, he finds himself in the very uncomfortable position of the white middle-class heterosexual male intellectual living a time in history when so many minorities and oppressed groups are speaking for themselves, thus eroding the hegemony of the white knowing subject.

Sarcasm permeates David's discourse which is alleged to ooze "a subtle mockery". Indeed, he comments upon "all things (being) possible these days" while acknowledging that "The more things change the more they remain the same". He plays upon the relativity of duration ("In olden times, that is to say ten years ago"). He suspects an odd setting of his opera, "Will this be where the dark trio are at last brought back to life: not in Cape Town but in old Kaffraria?" and, inspired by the fascination felt by an unnamed and crippled dog for the sound of his banjo, contemplates "bring(ing) a dog into the piece". On being asked to give Petrus a hand, he replies, "I like historical piquancy. Will he pay me a wage for my labour, do you think?" He uses the romantic image of the native to exemplify deception: "Because Petrus has a beard and smokes a pipe and carries a stick, you think that Petrus is the old-style kaffir" specifying that "Once he was a boy, now he is no longer. Now he can play at being one, as Marie-Antoinette could play at being a milkmaid." He cannot

refrain from deriding the rapist's name "Not Mncedisi? Not Nqabayakhe? Nothing unpronounceable, just Pollux?" or "Pollux, What a name." Lastly, the burglary in his house is "just another incident in the great campaign of redistribution. Who is at this moment wearing his shoes? Have Beethoven and Janàcek found homes for themselves (...)?" he wonders. David's discourse partakes of the licence evinced by the jester whose freedom of speech can only be exercised through the medium of derision. Balandier (1992, p. 53) offers an interpretation of the symbolical function of the jester that also applies to David's role: "*Par cette figure (le Bouffon) s'exprime une revendication de liberté, contre les contraintes et la force de l'ordre, et de vérité, contre les illusions selon lesquelles s'organise le grand jeu des sociétés (...) (Il) libère par procuration. (...) Il est libérateur de tensions*".

Born of a political compromise, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was relatively successful at recovering the truth of the atrocities of the apartheid era. The process of reconstitution that the Commission initiated gave rise to problems around the production, nature and articulation of narratives. Truth is a slippery concept. *Disgrace's* "trial" provides an occasion for semantic acrobatics. After accepting the "truth of the charges" David accuses Rassool of wanting "not a response but a confession"; however as Swarts notes "There is a difference between pleading guilty and admitting you were wrong" whereas Rassool demands that "The statement should come from him in his own words. Then we can see if it comes from his heart"; as for Mathabane, "The criterion is not whether you are sincere (...). The criterion is where you are prepared to acknowledge your fault in a public manner and take steps to remedy it." The sexual assault on Lucy is analyzed from a juridical perspective involving reconstruction and conciliation. Lurie hears a displaced statement of past wrongdoing ("It was history speaking through them (...) A history of wrong (coming) down from the ancestors.") whereas Lucy sees a settlement in which her rape serves as compensation (the rapists are "debt collectors"). Strikingly, Lurie, "a hangover from the past", expresses his conviction that "English is an unfit medium for the truth of South Africa". The latter, a new "*boervrou*", refuses to report the rape because "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." In *Country of my Skull*, a book on the TRC Afrikaans poet Antjie Krog speaks of her people not being allowed to

tell their stories of past atrocities and gives utterance to her concern of where and how the Afrikaner will find a place in the new South Africa. Lucy – whose “mother was Dutch” – and David voice the same fear. In an essay on Byron and Wordsworth’s contemporary poet Shelley, De Man (1979, p. 64) relates the intervention of light to the violent intervention of language and its arbitrary power of reference. Undoubtedly, both light and language organise perception and representation. And indeed, it is in Lucy’s farm – a territory of light as etymologically conveyed by her name – that David perceives that the wholeness of “the whole story” is a discretionary notion and realizes that “The language he (Petrus) draws on with such aplomb is, if he only knew it, tired, friable, eaten from the inside as if by termites. Only the monosyllables can still be relied on, and not even all of them. (...). By the time the big words come back reconstructed, purified, fit to be trusted once more, he will be long dead.”. As David reckons the only certainty is “beyond him” and beyond words. “I’m going to end up in a hole in the ground (...) And so are you. So we are all”: the trace on the face of the earth represents the translation of oppression into a non-resonant language. The hole in the ground “where one leaks out of existence” blends David’s personal history with the history of all non-fictional characters.

Since “(o)nce he has made up his mind to leave, there is little to hold him back.”, David can incarnate the historical figure of the pilgrim, a figure associated with the folklore of place, who considers his daughter’s farm a location as more suitable than others for the ordering of his own thoughts and feelings about himself: “If he came for anything, it was to gather himself, gather his forces.” and, back in Cape Town, about the universe (“What will be the verdict on him, the verdict of the universe and its all seeing eye?”). Baumann (1996) sees the pilgrim as a figure that is dissatisfied with and denigrates, the present, the now. This is unquestionably true of David’s attitude, inclined as he ‘seems to spend a lot of time sighing’ and to allude to the “old days”. The journey proves to be most tortuous and pushes through an unexpected territory. He imagines that “When that is finished, he will be like a fly-casing in a spiderweb” and believes that he can’t live in Lucy’s farm because “When I am added in, we become too many. Too many in a too small space. Like spiders in a bottle.” As Beer (1983, p. 171) points out, the image of the spider triggers that of the web with its contiguous one, the labyrinth. It is possible to wonder

whether the farm does not emerge as a complex prison. The maze built by Daedalus contained a monster with a bull's head and a human body, the Minotaur. When David arrives at Lucy's smallholding he meets an ambivalent personage: "Petrus gives a broad smile. 'I am the gardener and the dog-man.' He reflects for a moment. 'The dog-man,' he repeats, savouring the phrase." The characterizing expression evinces prophetic significance as it identifies the "dog-man" and the offenders ("dogs in a pack") with shapeshifting, a mechanism of disruption and divisiveness. The dog-man is a special case of *homo economicus*. He is the mutation of an optimistic and deluding archetype: Robinson Crusoe. 'Will you be staying a while?', Lucy asks her father. So complicated was the Labyrinth that none could escape once it was entered...

David also seems to wander through life with no precise goal other than abandoning himself to his instincts and passions, being primarily defined as having "solved the problem of sex rather well." then "playing with the idea of a work on Byron.", and eventually ending up "stuck in the back of beyond, (...) losing himself day by day". He experiences bursts of adventurous energy ("As of today he is a free man, with duties to no one but to himself. Time lies before him to spend as he wishes") and flashes of inspiration although finding it difficult to organize his ideas, "putting off (...) the moment when he must face the blank page, strike the first note, see what he is worth." Seen from this angle, the assault in the farm can be interpreted as the reflection of an inner conflict within David's own being. His exit from Cape Town and his entry into the farm signal his getting into the dark chamber of his subconscious mind – another labyrinthine space. As he tries to adapt to the rural environment he is made aware of the division between the forces of reason and passion. Thus a combat breaks out in which the animal instincts attack the rationality of his person. Henceforward there is an emphasis on his sense of smell. His closeness to Lucy is measured by "the faint smell of staleness, unwashedness (that) reaches him." Back to his house "from the moment he opens the front door and smells the air he knows that there is something wrong", then "through the garden heavy with the scent of verbena and jonquil, he makes his way to the university campus." A feeling of freedom overcomes him with the "heady scent of pine" although his thoughts are still bent towards Melanie as he confesses that "deep inside him the smell of her is stored of a mate", hoping that "she can (...) smell him, smell his thoughts." Lastly, "into the clinic

building, into the theatre (...) mixed smells still linger, including one he will not yet have met with in his life: the smell of expiration, the soft short smell of the released soul." David moves nearer animal life, the primeval state of life. Closer to the dog-men?

Animality is not David's distinctive feature. Similarities between beasts and men are emphasised as the narrative teems with animal comparisons. Man cannot escape classification. Soraya is a vixen and Farodia Rassool is a "shark", Melanie becomes a rabbit a bird then a dove and shows "a weasel body". Bev has a chest "like a pouter pigeon's" and her name reminds David of a cattle. Lucy is like "one of the three chimpanzees" and "once she was only a little tadpole". She lives amongst the "eagle-eyed daughters of Grahamstown". The rapists are "dogs in a pack (...) purring" with satisfaction, Petrus is "a dog-man" and Pollux a jackal. Mr Isaacs resembles a "sharp-beaked bird". David is a serpent, a fox, a wolf, a fish or a tortoise and his ear "looks like a naked pink mollusc." Cape technical university is a "nest of vipers", David being "A viper: how can he deny it?" When he stays in Lucy's farm with "the people she lives among", they are "Like spiders in a bottle". Most animals are wild creatures: life to David as he glimpses around is half-jungle in its savagery. The present is the picture of the dehumanising effects caused by adjustments to the environment. The future is seen as a wild expedition, an expedition into the unexpected and the unknown. Obviously the domesticated are incapable to provide the energy that can shape their society and the world. However, does the choice lie with the wild beasts of using their force for evil or good? One knows how domestic beasts will behave in most circumstances, whereas one is not so sure of wild creatures. Search for survival at all costs is the essence of this life. Paradoxically, this search may lead nowhere and survival can mean nothingness. These comparisons point to a collective deconstructive process: David Lurie becomes the epitome of post-apartheid South Africans, who are faced with the destructive contradiction of trying to assert their ethnic origins while attempting to construct a communal new South African identity. "We are of a different order of creation from the animals. Not higher, necessarily, just different", David states. The animal metaphors testify to a common – rather than equal – degraded condition.

334 Both the labyrinthine space and the deconstructive mechanism are suggestive of temporary in-betweenness, a state denoting the end of an era but

preceding a new beginning as David heralds “a new footing, a new start.” Rites accompanying transitions from one state of being into another exist in all cultures. The most conspicuous of the rites de passage are probably the initiation rites of primitive peoples. As observed by the various nations of South Africa, initiation practices are meant to prepare the youth for their future roles in adult society. David’s “long ramble” somehow bears resemblance to a *rite de passage* destined to prepare him for his future role in the “new world they live in”. The first stage in the transition from childhood to adulthood involves a period of seclusion in a lodge – sometimes deep in the bush – when the initiates are introduced into the deep mysteries of the group. David’s resignation and subsequent trip to Lucy’s farm in the Eastern Cape, “some miles outside town” amount to a retirement. On his arrival he senses that “Already Cape Town is receding into the past” and through an increasing affinity and respect for Bev Shaw and her work with animals, he explores man’s relation to death as expressed by the “priestess” in her very first words, “I don’t think we are ready to die, any of us, without being escorted.” The significance of the ordeal is regarded by David as coming “down from the ancestors”. The farm presents the Cave of illusions as the Greek philosopher Plato described in the seventh book of the Republic. In Lucy’s house – the house of light (etymologically conveyed by her name) – “the man whose name is darkness” realizes the illusory nature of the union between races. This union is previously illustrated by Petrus and the rapists being introduced with no reference to racial category or ethnic identity and by the episode at the market when Petrus, David and Lucy find themselves between “Three African women” and “an old Afrikaner couple”, the juxtaposition of the adjectives “African” and “Afrikaner” blurring the divisions within the notion of Africanness.<sup>1</sup> David’s journey starts outside race polarisation but reconciliation without love is tantamount to rape. In its wake, David is haunted by demons and a “man with the face of a hawk, like a Benin mask, like Thoth.” In Egyptian mythology, Thoth is usually pictured in a funeral group taking part in the ritual of the judgement, reading the

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<sup>1</sup> Thabo Mbeki famous “I am an African” speech in 1996 following the adoption of the new constitution gave shape to the then emerging concept of *African renaissance*. In a paper entitled “What it means to be an African: Shifting identities in the South African Context”, Zakes Mda reminds the audience of the origin of *Afrikaner*: “In South Africa the first people to collectively call themselves Africans were the descendants of the Dutch and French Huguenots settlers who were known as Boers because of their agrarian culture.”

scales in which the heart of man is weighed against the feather of truth. Likewise, away from the group, the initiates are considered to be *in care of the ancestors* and transition is made possible by external forces (ancestors, good and evil spirits).

At the termination of the period the initiation shelter is set on fire, the initiates run away to the river where they wash the white clay off their bodies – a symbol of the dangerous state of in-betweenness – and their initiation blankets and clothes are burnt, thus signifying the death of “childhood”. David “runs a hand over his head and his fingertips come away with black soot.” In retiring into a house “that dates from the time of large families, of guests by the wagonful” David is figuratively withdrawing into the white colonizer’s mind. Therefore, the act of setting fire to David’s head – his shelter – symbolically aims at communicating the experience of what it means to be born without a history. Covered in black powder David seems to point to the question of what is a black man but a white man without history? The burning also appears to oppose the domination of intellect: truth cannot be realized through an intellectual eye as this mode of perception is not unfailing; his ensuing hallucinations indicate that he seems to have lost his sense of perception. He can no longer claim “I’m not a child”, he can only admit that “He is as weak as a baby” and “He recalls the (dying) goat in the clinic” before noticing that his dressings make him look “Like a mummy”: the comparisons integrate him into the ritual drama of death and rebirth or resurrection. Incidentally Dionysus, the Greek god of the vine, assumed the form of a goat and his cult observance was one of death and dismemberment and resurrection. “Wake up, David. This is the country. This is Africa”, Lucy snaps. Two days later Petrus gives a party where they are the only whites – when the initiates return to their homesteads, their changed status is celebrated with communal feasting.

David’s journey from Cape Town to Salem, from a campus to “a frontier farm” into the “old, *ländliche* way of life” is no dissidence as originally envisaged (“I’m not sure I will be permitted to come back to the university. I’m not sure I will want to.”), but a *rite de passage* signalling what Lévi-Strauss (1955, p: 39) calls an *émancipation contrôlée*: “c’est la société toute entière qui enseigne à ses membres qu’il n’est pour eux de chance, au sein de l’ordre social, qu’au prix d’une tentative absurde et désespérée de s’en sortir.” Besides, his rite of initiation is not incompatible with his performance as a jester

since Balandier (1992, p. 54-56) argues that “(Le Bouffon) montre à quoi serait soumise une société où les normes, les interdits et les codes se dissoudraient, (...). Face au pouvoir en majesté, il figure le pouvoir en grotesque et, par cela même abolit la possibilité d’une alternative acceptable.” Playing the jester is a means for the former dominant group to purge their resentments and compensate for their frustrations.

Once the rite is performed, David “re-enters Cape Town” and realizes that “the country is coming to the city”. His last words, which are supposedly referring to the unnamed and crippled dog, may also suggest that the lesson is learnt: “I’m giving him up” sounds like a surrender. The killing of this specific dog illustrates the non-acceptance and suppression of he who does not conform to established standards. Instead of being considered the locus of the subjective experience of a difference (MARZANO-PARISOLI, 2002), the disabled body is generally regarded as a deviation from “natural” normality (Canguilhem, 1966) or sociocultural norms (PARSONS, 1965). Disability ineluctably leads to stigmatisation. A condition reflected in the anonymity of the creature. The bestowal of a name has a central importance in all cultures; as an identity-label it connects the bearer with ancestry and history. Not surprisingly, the name Lurie is misspelled in the story reported in the newspaper and David is “glad that no connection is made between Ms Lourie’s elderly father and David Lurie, disciple of nature poet William Wordsworth and until recently professor at the Cape Technical University.” David produces a schizophrenic representation of himself: two personalities which do not match each other. He does not recognize his original self in the mirror of his present life. He later concedes that “Something is wrong with him, wrong in his head.” This fragmentation of the self may imply his desire for escape. But it also denotes the crumbling of his identity since the circumlocution in the newspaper denies him a definiteness of conception. His identification is based upon possession (’s), biological function (father) and age group (elderly) and relates to a wrong name (Lourie). This linguistic limbo points to a suspension of authority and the threat of annihilation – “Like a dog.” The erosion of David’s identity peaks with statelessness and exile for “he could not feel more alien among (his countrymen), more of an impostor” and “despite the time he has spent here, it feels like a foreign land.” David is unclear where he belongs. It seems that the only way to heal his own terrifying fragmentation is by composing the opera. But “The truth is that

*Byron in Italy* is going nowhere.” – The truth is that David Lurie in South Africa is going nowhere either. The opera focuses upon Teresa Guiccioli’s repeated and futile attempts to summon her beloved Byron who, having “sailed off to Greece and to his death”, actually cannot materialize. David eventually “gives his name as Lourie” and the opera “consumes him night and day.” – Lurie cannot materialize any longer. Anyway, “Nothing has to last forever.”

In assuming the name Lourie, David may be seen as exiting from a model and offering himself the possibility of making his own history, of being the first of a new line, hence standing as the founding father. The resolve can be construed as a strategy adopted in order to entangle the determining patterns of life – as the references to the spider suggest – and outwit the predicted dog-like death sentence awaiting him. In like manner, by his attempt to compose an opera Lurie is cast as an *artiste-figure*, thus inevitably conjuring up the image of the creator. But the boundaries between the creator and his creatures are dissolved: “He spends whole days in the grip of Byron and Teresa, living on black coffee and breakfast cereal. The refrigerator is empty, his bed is unmade; leaves chase across the floor from the broken window. No matter he thinks: let the dead bury their dead.” The work of art can be interpreted as a strategy for immortality. It is less a way of attracting and entrapping lasting fame, since David suspects that it is “a work that will never be performed”, than a way of producing life in the negation of death. Indeed, the opera becomes a never-ending composition, a piece eternally in the making, not a creation but rather a “creating” inasmuch as he surmises that “the music is inventing him”. Not surprisingly, this music is played on a child’s toy instrument, “the odd little seven-stringed banjo that he bought for (Lucy) ... when she was a child.” An ambivalent relationship to life and/in death can also be grasped in the metaphor of the worm which defines both David who claims to be “the worm in the apple” and the foetus whom he sees as “a worm in *his* daughter’s womb” (my emphasis) – as opposed to Lucy who “was only a little tadpole in *her* mother’s body” (my emphasis). The key to the meaning of this pattern of connections is to be found in David’s introduction as “the man whose name is darkness”, a descriptive phrase that uncoincidentally emerges between the misspelled name Lourie and its adoption. As Bhabha (1994, p. 82) explains “the pleasure-value of darkness is withdrawal in order to know nothing of the external world. Its symbolic meaning, however, is thoroughly ambivalent. Dark-

ness signifies at once birth and death; it is in all case a desire to return to the fullness of the mother, a desire for an unbroken and undifferentiated line of vision and origin.” The image of the worm clearly evokes metamorphosis. It may denote a hope for the perpetuation of dissidence. It also implies weaving – also encoded in the image of the spiders. David is related to the mythological figure of the weaver, a Penelope-like scribe uneasily placed, inside and outside South Africa, neither in harmony in the urban “desert” where “There are days when he does not know what to do with himself” – nor at home in the “rural life” for which “he has never had much an eye”, weaving his opera then undoing his work. Therefore “the blank page” that “he must face” turns out to be the virgin page of creation which contains all stories in no story, all histories in no history.

In dissolving the boundaries between the creator and his creatures, the dramatic work operates a *mise en abyme*, the reference to the “leaves... across the floor” while David is “in the grip of Byron and Teresa.” blending the pages of David’s and Byron’s voyages. Both are eventually bound for the same destination when the opera expands and overflows the outer world. In a sudden reversal of the situation, the last chapter of the book opens with Teresa. The embedded story is eventually given precedence. Hence, *Byron in Italy* is David’s creation as much as *David Lurie in South Africa* is Byron’s creation. *Disgrace* is a harrowing episode in the life of an ageing Don Juan; it can be conceived as a new episode to the drifting and planless life of Byron’s Don Juan, the eponymous hero of an unfinished poem – a quality that also applies to David’s work – started in 1818 after the poet’s exile to Italy.

The first thing to mark about David is his age implying that everything else depends on it. As it is stressed in the first line of the narrative – “For a man of his age, fifty-two” – David’s disgrace is an elderly man’s disgrace; half its poignancy would be gone otherwise. However, Coetzee does not indulge in pathos. Following the example of Byron in Canto I of *Don Juan*, in the first chapter of *Disgrace*, he establishes the half-playful and half-serious tone that is going to pervade the novel: David “has to *his mind*, solved the problem of sex rather well” (my emphasis). The solution is a ritual of mechanical gestures and unchanging words with an “entirely satisfactory” prostitute whose name Soraya, “a popular *nom de commerce*”, indicative of a mass-produced item. The standardized encounter is bombastically termed an “oasis of *luxe et volupté*.” when

he actually acknowledges that “His needs turn out to be quite light, after all, light and fleeting, like those of a butterfly.” The simile also crumbles when the repugnant cockroach emerges triggering off the painful awareness that “Soon daintily, maliciously, he will be shuddered over. It is a fate he cannot escape.” Undoubtedly, the climax is a cynical summary of David’s sex life. David is portrayed in the tradition of the classical seducer who goes merrily from one love to another until his apocalyptic fall from grace:

With his height, his good bones, his olive skin, his flowing hair he could always count on a degree of magnetism. If he looked at a woman in a certain way, with that certain intent, she would return his look, he could rely on that. That is how he lived for years, for decades, that was the backbone of his life.

Then one day it all ended. Without warning his powers fled. Glances that would once have been responded to his slid over, past, through him. Overnight he became a ghost. If he wanted a woman he had to learn to pursue her; often in one way or another, to buy her.

He existed in an anxious flurry of promiscuity. He had affairs with the wives of colleagues; he picked up tourists in bars on the waterfront or at the Club Italia; he slept with whores.

Coetzee does not condemn David, although he makes him an object of derision from the start. Besides, in the light of Byron’s poem whose canto III contains several stanzas excoriating the Lake poets, David’s claim to being a “disciple of nature poet William Wordsworth” is ineluctably tinged with amused irony. Like the Byronic character, David is swept along with the current. Deprived of his youthful handsomeness, amoral in matters of love and lacking self-control, David rapes the desirable Melanie whom he cannot buy. Couched in symbolical overtones, his intercourse with “Dawn” is a disaster indicating that he must resign himself to Dusk – to “dark times”. Having been forced to resign his professorship, the ageing Don Juan cannot boast an envious status any longer and “any day now his credit is going to dry out.” But, in Grahamstown “At least (he is) out of the way of temptation.” Chastity at last? David’s declaration seems well justified. The characterization of a Medusa-looking Bev is meant to induce repulsion: “a dumpy, bustling little woman with black freckles, close-cropped, wiry hair and no neck.” She is obviously not a source of danger to David who takes a kind of anthropological interest in her:

Her hair is a mass of little curls. Does she make the curls herself, with tongs? Unlikely: it would take hours every day. They must grow that way. The veins on her ears are visible as a filigree of red and purple. The veins of her nose too. And then a chin that comes straight out of her chest, like a pouter pigeon's.

Bev is not a monster. She is rather a carnivalesque character whose diminutive name is blatantly in inverse proportion to her physique and humorously suggestive of another species since it “reminds (David) of cattle.” Bev produces no paralyzing effect. She causes no stir either. Yet, her attraction for David seems to cost him an effort. “Can we meet at the clinic, at four”, she says. (...) Almost he asks ‘Why?’, but then has the good sense not to.” David is thrown into another illicit affair with a rather ridiculous figure who merely responds to a zero-degree pull of sexual compatibility. The clinic – not the balcony of the famous Shakespearian pair – is the setting of the love scene between Bev and “her Romeo”, the facetious details of which command the reader's laughter as they form the antithesis of the traditional pastoral (as the name of David's ex-wife Rosalind could foreshadow):

Two blankets, one pink, one grey, smuggled from her home by a woman (...) Who thinks, because he comes from the big city, because there is scandal attached to his name, that he makes love to many women and expects to be made love to by every woman who crosses his path.

The choice is between the operating table and the floor. He spreads out the blanket on the floor, the grey blanket underneath, the pink one on top. (...) Never did he dream he would sleep with a Bev.

She is lying under the blanket with only her head sticking out. Even in the dimness there is nothing charming in the sight. (...) She has no breast so to speak of. Sturdy, almost waistless, like a squat little tub.

She grasps his hand, passes him something. A contraceptive. All thought out beforehand, from beginning to end.

Of their congress he can at least say that he does his duty. Without passion but without distaste either. (...)

Let me not forget this day, he tells himself, lying beside her when they are spent. After the sweet young flesh of Melanie Isaacs, this is what I have come to. This is what I will have to get used to, this and even less than this. (...)

He pushes the blanket aside and gets up, making no effort to hide himself. Let her gaze her fill on her Romeo, he thinks, on his bowed shoulders and skinny shanks.

The encounter seems to echo Byron's digression on the misfortune of ageing, "And the sad truth which hovers o'er my desk/ Turns what was once romantic to burlesque" (CANTO IV, St. 3, l 7-8). Misfortune of one kind or another is the common lot of man and may be expected to plague old age. After the burning of his head, David placid non-refusal to have sex with Bev can be considered "Not a bad resolution to make in dark times." Although David is forced to admit that "ageing is not a graceful business", the excerpt ends with a piece of cynical advice: *Carpe Diem* in the way of pleasure – a way of soothing "the disgrace of dying".

Disgrace is not a comedy and Coetzee is skilful in keeping a tight control of the comic vein in *Disgrace*. Byron's purpose in writing *Don Juan* was to compose a satire on the abuses of the states of his society. In *Disgrace* Coetzee sketches situations and amplifies characterization to serve an analogous purpose. David plays a part in a spectacle that ranges somewhere between the "comedy of the new South Africa" where "Catharsis seems to be the presiding principle: all the coarse prejudices brought into light of day and washed away in gales of laughter" and the tragedy of the new South Africa, i.e. the hearings of the TRC meant to initiate a process of healing, where testimonies of torture, rape, murder and extortion are also brought into the public sphere and washed away in fits of weeping, shame, guilt and remorse. Interestingly David "recalls the goat in the clinic" and "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." The word tragedy is currently regarded as deriving from *tragoidia*, goat song, the chorus of goats voicing the dithyramb in Greek festivals. But David's stage dwindles away from the "committee room" of the university, past the "lavatory of Lucy's house" into "the hole in the ground" and his role fragments an unclassifiable persona – "a strange beast". They transcend textuality and humanity. Into mythology?

Set out against the famous painting by French painter David, *The Rape of the Sabine Women* (1799), which evokes the legendary foundation of Rome, the rape of Lucy has its roots in a mythological original rape and posits the creation of a new man for "a new world". But how new is this world? The last chapter of the novel presents the reader with a puzzling parallel. After the

opening scene with Teresa, her symbolical passage to David's world, the maker grieves over his creature in a tone of repentance, "Poor Teresa. Poor aching girl. He has brought her back from the grave, promised *another life*, and now he is failing her. He hopes she will find it in her heart to forgive him" (my emphasis). Like an artfully placed mirror, Lucy's child is viewed as "another existence." Thus promised a failure? David perceives himself as a monstrous creator tormented by a guilty knowledge; a product of guilt, the child is likened to a monstrous conception. If David hopes that "*Perhaps*, it will be different once the child (...) is born" (my emphasis), he then admits that only "luck" (repeated thrice) can apparently prevent the fatalistic re-enactment of a deceptive genesis. So that ambiguity creeps into David's inference, "It will be, after all, a child of this earth." – is this child to be just another creature, half-human, half-beast? an anti-Keatsian thing of hideousness destined to cause sadness forever? Although the rape and the resulting pregnancy can be read as the script of a "history of wrong", there is a sense that giving birth to the child probably means giving birth to a wrong history. In assuming the name Lourie – a malformed identity – David is not so much exiting from a model as slipping into a distorted history. "Is it too late to educate the eye?", he wonders. It seems so for Lucy "makes the offer as *if* he were a visitor. Good. Visitorship, visitation: a new footing, a new start" (my emphasis). The last scene involving David and Lucy ends up with a role-play which plunges the surrounding world into pretence. Similarly, Lucy is aestheticized by David – whose name parallels the aestheticization of the rape – who traps her into art: in a "moment of utter stillness" she is caught in "A scene ready-made for a Sergeant or a Bonnard" and "looks suddenly the *picture* of health" (my emphasis). The Surrealist painter Magritte put into relief the deceptive quality of representation and commented upon the always-present gap between words and seeing. Lucy's warning – "You keep misreading me" – does not serve any purpose. Like "a new day", the new world is not envisioned as a different world but rather as a recurring period in a cycle. Therefore, one believes that "ageing is not a graceful business" possibly because "One gets used to things getting harder; one ceases to be surprised that what used to be as hard as hard can be grows harder yet." Blindness seems to be the order of the day – still. The abrupt ending of the novel reinforces the grim disclosure. Nevertheless, it also bears a blatantly visible trace of Coetzee's working of his mind. The decision to give the crippled

dog up to death is followed by the sudden annihilation of the ink-and-paper South African world of *Disgrace*. Nothingness. As symbolically incarnated by the crippled dog, *Disgrace* is a wrong(ed) history to which the writer has given “what he no longer has difficulty in calling by its proper name: love.”

**Resumo:** Enraizado na África do Sul dos anos pós-apartheid e Pós-Comissão-Verdade-e-Reconciliação, o romance *Disgrace* (1999) de J. M. Coetzee ilustra a dificuldade de desfazer uma cultura da violência. O personagem central, David Lurie, passa por uma crise do intelectual branco da classe média experimentando uma época histórica em que minorias e grupos oprimidos começam a falar por si mesmos, portanto corroendo a hegemonia do sujeito branco detentor do saber. Sendo uma encarnação do peregrino, sua jornada através da nova África do Sul torna-se extremamente tortuosa. Abrindo caminho através de um território inopinado, ela se semelha a um rito de passagem. Embora David Lurie possa ser visto como abandonando um modelo e oferecendo-se a possibilidade de elaborar sua própria história, tal o byronico Don Juan, ele segue ao encontro de uma história distorcida. Transcendendo textualidade e humanidade, chegando à não-existência, o mundo de *Disgrace* revela uma história inapropriada.

**Palavras-chave:** literatura, ficção, romance, África do Sul, pós-apartheid.

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