

Dogged Silences: J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* and the ethics of non-confession

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Abstract

Against the prevailing critical understanding of J. M. Coetzee's 1999 novel *Disgrace*, written contemporaneously with the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings, as a politically evasive duplication of the refusal to confess it portrays in David Lurie, its protagonist, this reading purports to complicate the status of this alleged wilful silence. In reading Lurie's refusal to show contrition within the development of the narrative, it constitutes this silence as one moment in the novel's "reconfiguring of the rules of discourse" which will allow other silences, this time outright inabilities to speak, to become audible. Through Lurie's encounter with animals and his renewed experience with literature, I show, via the novel's negotiations of the works of Maurice Blanchot and Emmanuel Levinas, how it narrates the development of an ethics that no longer configures language and silence in the mutually exclusive ways the Truth and Reconciliation hearings did. If read on the terms of the redefinition of the genre of the novel it performs, *Disgrace* becomes both a critique of the ethic of expressive unconcealment underlying these hearings, and a novelistic response to the political context urging this expression.

I. Irreconcilable outsiders

The 2003 Nobel Prize jury motivated its election of John Maxwell Coetzee by praising what it termed his singular capacity for portraying "in innumerable guises" the "involvement of the outsider." This apparent overriding of the historically much more mixed reception of Coetzee's outsider-status in South Africa seems to have been facilitated by some recent factual contingencies that now more unequivocally legitimate his self-constructed and critically endorsed position as an outsider, most obviously the writer's recent move to Australia, which allows his perception as a figurehead of Commonwealth rather than of South African literature, as well as the undeniably waning international obsession with South Africa as the heart of scandalous political darkness. Nadine Gordimer, whose much more thinly disguised inside involvement won her the 1991 Prize, in those apparently more suspect times, voiced her criticism, in a review of *Life & Times of Michael K*, of what she called Coetzee's novels' "revulsion against all political and revolutionary solutions" (qtd. Attwell 1993: 92; Head 1998: 99–100), an assessment that has come to exemplify an abiding unease with Coetzee's rejection of realism "as the form capable of producing the approved analyses of historical forces" (*Doubling the Point* 335; Attwell 20), and with an outside involvement apparently too thickly disguised to be perceived as political.

Of course, any account of the timeliness of the election must also note the enabling role played by the exceptional critical and commercial success of Coetzee's 1999 novel *Disgrace* (Boehmer 2002: 342–43), written contemporaneously with the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings. Underscoring the importance of this context for the novel's reception, Elleke Boehmer notes that "one of the reasons for this [extraordinary level of critical commentary] is no doubt that the novel features a hero who notoriously refuses to say sorry for an abuse of power" (343). This hero, David Lurie, a white professor of literature at the rebaptized Cape Technical University, refuses to show contrition in a committee which demands his confession concerning his abusive sexual relationship with Melanie, supposedly a black student, though the novel never unambiguously says so.¹ In a by now monumentalized critical move (see Yeoh, Sanders, Boehmer), Lurie's refusal is referred to Coetzee's 1983 essay "Confession and Double Thoughts" (1992: 251–93), a reading of Rousseau, Tolstoy, and Dostoevsky that Coetzee has in 1992 retrospectively qualified as "pivotal" to his novelistic work (392). This essay, in a gloss by Gilbert Yeoh, "highlights how self-examination, as opposed to enabling truth-telling, drives the self into an infinite regression of moral self-doubt about its motives" (334). In it Coetzee says that:

We recognize that we are at the beginning of a potentially infinite regression of self-recognition and self-abasement in which the self-satisfied candor of each level of confession of impure motive becomes a new source of shame and each twinge of shame a new source of self-congratulation. (Coetzee 1992: 282)

In the final section of Coetzee's essay, Dostoevsky's oeuvre is invoked to exemplify how the impasse of secular confession is finally overcome by the intervention of grace:

It is possible to read *Notes from the Underground*, *The Idiot*, and Stavrogin's confession as a sequence of texts in which Dostoevsky explores the impasses of secular confession, pointing finally to the sacrament of confession as the only road to self-truth. (1992: 291)

It is then because he shares this insight into the impossibility of escaping the guilty oscillations inherent in secular confession that Lurie refuses to repent: "Repentance belongs to another world, to another universe of discourse" (D 58).² The net result of this suturing of Lurie and Coetzee has been the critical reception of this refusal as legitimate (because authorially endorsed), thus enabling the rest of the novel, in which Lurie is transplanted to his daughter's country farm where he spends most of his time ministering to dogs, trying to compose a "chamber opera" (D 4) on the life of Byron, and trying to restore his relationship to his daughter after her rape, to be understood as an advocacy of "highly private rituals of self-abnegation," instead of public confession, as the most appropriate avenue towards the called-for "expiation of past crimes" (Boehmer 344). The problem with such an understanding is that it again thinks to unearth in Coetzee a "cynical ethics of self" (Yeoh 2003: 345), shorn of any political relevance,³ and that it thus negatively pigeonholes *Disgrace* as a principled non-confession, or a refusal to comply with the ethic of truth and reconciliation. And whereas this is obviously what *Disgrace* (also) is, it is equally obvious, from the blunt fact of its appearance at such a charged moment in the history of the nation, that it also insists on being read as something more than a mere instantiation of the heroic refusal to speak which it portrays in its protagonist. I therefore propose to listen to its *other*, less heroic silences, and to pay heed to the difference between the blunt critical assessment of the novel as offering a cynically narcissistic "nothing" and what the novel on its last page terms "little enough, less than little: nothing" (D 220), a nothing that resists adequate naming as a mere "nothing" but will instead be shown to require narration (in, for instance, a novel).⁴

2. Ethics of unconcealment, heroics of reticence

Crucially, what Lurie refuses the “committee of inquiry” (D 48) assembled to assess his guilt and to recommend an appropriate penalty is precisely not his willingness to “play it by the book” (D 55), but only his recognition of its capacity to divine whether his statement “comes from his heart” (D 54). This refusal to reflect his “sincere feelings” (D 54), then, cannot satisfy the demands of an institution that, like the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, requires both full disclosure of truth and confession of guilt (Gräbe 2000: 250; John 2000: 270) in the service of what the 1990 South African Interim Constitution called “the need to consolidate democracy, to close the chapter of the past” (qtd. Dawes 1997: 30). This ethos, in the terms of a great phenomenologist of silence, Soren Kierkegaard, who will be shown to offer a crucial intertext for *Disgrace*,⁵ implies the demand of ethical communicability in the stage of life following the aesthetic: in *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard’s famous “dialectical lyric” on the silence of Abraham (narrated, appropriately, by the pseudonymous Johannes de Silencio), the philosopher writes that the citizen’s “ethical task is to develop out of his concealment and to become revealed in the universal” (Kierkegaard 1968: 91). This conception of ethics simply cannot condone a silence such as Lurie’s. In Mark Taylor’s words:

From an ethical perspective, to remain silent and to refuse to express oneself in an honest and forthright way is to negate the very possibility of moral relationships [...]. Silence is a moral transgression in which one refuses to express himself in terms of universality and clings to particularity. (180)

Lurie, to use Kierkegaard’s own words, “was silent because of his accidental particularity,” and because of its foundational commitment to a hypothesized universal communicability, “ethics cannot forgive” (122). Therefore, the committee proposes that “if [Lurie] is simply going through the motions” they must “impose the severest penalty” (D 51), which in this logic is expulsion from the ethical community.

To insist on the relevance of this Kierkegaardian intertext, Lurie refuses disclosure on pointedly *aesthetic* grounds: “Words passed between us, and at that moment something happened which, not being a poet, I will not try to describe” (D 52). We get, in other words, a conflict between a demand for ethical communicability and the necessary purposive reticence of aesthetic concealment. This latter silence is a deliberate refusal to expose oneself in the universal, and in terms of what Kierkegaard calls “deceitful” aesthetic silence, is “undertaken for the purpose of maximizing pleasure” in particular objects; the aesthetic seducer’s “aim is to fashion [the woman “as object to be manipulated for his own purposes”] into the kind of person who can fulfill his lustful desires” (Taylor 173).⁶ So Lurie, in the first scene with his future target, the student Melanie, “wills the girl to be captivated too” (D 15), precisely by carefully remaining silent on the issues most likely to obstruct that desiring objectification:

“Are you married?”

“I was. Twice. But now I’m not.” He does not say: Now I make do with what comes my way. He does not say: Now I make do with whores. “Can I offer you a liqueur?” (D 16)

The exposure of these “purposeful silences” (Taylor 171) is an unavoidable consequence of the novel’s narrative mode, its relentless third-person present-tense focalization through Lurie. As such, it exposes, and guiltily and self-consciously participates in, its protagonist’s drive for immediate sensation, which, by dint of this relentless exposure, can now be seen to

be no longer radically opposed to the will for immediate presence underlying the committee's desire for full discursive disclosure. Let us read the contiguity of both drives for immediacy in the novel's first sentence:

For a man of his age, fifty-two, divorced, he has, to his mind, solved the problem of sex rather well. (D 1)

This seems to posit the deproblematization of this drive by the asserted reduction of the infinite, properly unsubduable demand of sex to a controllable need. It becomes a problem that simply requires a solution. The reflection of this reduction in the segmented syntax of the sentence, however, immediately begs – and thus thematizes – the question whether language, or in fact any scheme, can contain this desire for immediate sensuousness. It is most emphatically the conflict between the suggestion of immediate presence in the use of the present tense and the insertion of “to his mind” as the marker of this affect's necessary linguistic mediation that, from the first sentence on, unsettles both the committee's assumption of the possibility of fully transparent expression and Lurie's wished-for capacity for retaining a properly pre-linguistic sensuous fulfillment within reflection, or, in other words, for refusing that fulfillment's unavoidable linguistic loss.⁷ It posits *Disgrace* as the site of the negotiation of these unsatisfiable demands.

Returning to the Kierkegaardian reading of language and its silences, this linguistic intervention in sensuous presence points to what Kierkegaard saw as the inability of a reflective, purposive silence to return to a preverbal sensuous–erotic immediacy. For him, “that which annuls immediacy [...] is language” (Taylor 170), and this annulment, moreover, is irrevocable. What the novel's mode, in its thematization of linguistic mediation from the very first sentence on, exposes, is the unattainability of both the extremes of verbal transparency and preverbal immediacy, of both language's full communicability and its infinite manipulability in the service of the desiring subject's escape from it; what this reflection, occurring as soon as one enters language, leaves Lurie with is the futility of his supposedly heroic resistance to the articulation of his desire in the committee hearing; this means that the terms of the cultural analysis in his defence to his daughter are thoroughly corroded:

These are puritanical times. Private life is public business. Prurience is respectable, prurience and sentiment. They wanted a spectacle: breast-beating, remorse, tears if possible ... I wouldn't oblige. (D 66)

Lucy's rejoinder to this wilful unwillingness to oblige, “It isn't heroic to be unbending” (D 66), accurately exposes the impossibility, “in this place, at this time” (D 112), of a heroic refusal to speak: the quasi-shibbolethic critical connection between “Confession and Double Thoughts” and Lurie's plight is simply not radical enough if it fails to infect the realm of the uncommunicated private, if it fails, in fact, to read Coetzee's analysis – which states explicitly that “the endless chain manifests itself as soon as self-consciousness enters” (1992: 291) – as a thorough upsetting of the private/public opposition, a lesson Lurie gets precisely half right. In Kierkegaardian terms, in language silence is also always potentially “demonic”: in Mark Taylor's gloss (which reads like an echo of just those implications of Coetzee's essay that its reception has blunted), “the attachment to one's own corruption and suffering that leads a person to guard silence and to turn his back on the possibility of forgiveness is what Kierkegaard means by the demonic” (175). A supposedly heroic refusal to own up is as corrupted and unheroic as the infinite regression of secular confession. Having portrayed this insight into Lurie's blindness, Coetzee could not remain silent. Neither could he confess. And given his professed belief in fiction's ability to “reconfigure the rules of discourse” (1992: 11), it is why he had to write a fiction.

3. Matters of indifference

If we want to trace the narrative reconfiguration of the false opposites of an imperative disclosure and a self-deluded heroic silence, the novel, through its very mode, compels us to do so via the development of Lurie. It is the burden of my argument that this is possible. I propose to do this by paying attention to *other* silences, the silences of Lurie's others, which the constraints of his desiring discourse do not yet force him to hear in the first part of the novel (a deafness which a criticism unwilling to read the reconfiguration of the rules of discourse must necessarily repeat). In a painful classroom scene, during a lecture on Byron's "Lara," whose protagonist Lurie in a patent misreading of the poem attempts to construct as his libertarian alter ego, the class meets him with what the novel terms "a dogged silence" (D 32). Such offhand animal metaphors recur regularly in Lurie's language in the first part of the novel: already in the first chapter, his relation to Soraya, the prostitute who initially solves the problem of sex by her weekly ministrations, is said to be one of "predator" to "vixen" (D 10). More drastically, and keeping in mind the problematic interaction between sensuous immediacy and linguistic reflection staged by the novel, these tropes in fact *structure* this desiring discourse: it is the notion of the animal as a non-discursive, instinctive other that makes it a privileged trope for a discourse that, as has been noted, desires just this pre-verbal immediacy. At the same time, the animal's reduction to mere metaphor within a distinctively human language allows the desiring subject to deny its own animality.

This structure, obviously, is inevitably tautological, because linguistic; the animals inconveniently retain their tropological bite: so the "vixen" metaphor disseminates itself when in the encounter with Melanie Lurie metamorphoses into a "fox" assaulting a "rabbit" (D 25), a tropological descent finally assigning him the position of the "strange beast" chased by the committee "hunters" (D 56).⁸ During the supremely dehumanizing assault on Lucy's farm (when she is gang-raped), the description of Lurie in terms similar to the ones used earlier to describe a sick dog give the lie to any remaining illusions of distinctively human linguisticity or, for that matter, bipedalism:

He throws himself about, hurling out shapeless bellows that have no words behind them, only fear. He tries to stand up and is forced down again. (D 96)

This unravelling of the discursive texture leaves Lurie without protective representations, and impels the confrontation with real animals, now released from their prisonhouse in language. Both the instrument (manipulable language) and the object (sensuous immediacy) of desire have been dramatically disgraced. Blocked out of the symbolic circuit, transplanted to his daughter's farm, Lurie finds himself confronted by another silence, this time an outright inability to speak, when he is reduced to an impotent gesturing "toward the garden, toward the house with sunlight glinting from its roof" (D 70). No longer an instrument of wilful heroism, silence strikes him as blunt facticity: "There is silence" (D 69).

The only way of overcoming this now thoroughly "dogged" silence, this despair (D 108), which Lurie can imagine, is the familiar one of insisting that Lucy "tell [...] the whole story" (D 110) of her rape, bringing the truth to light so that justice can be done (D 137). But whereas Melanie (or Meláni, as Lurie muses) could, in the old days of linguistic harmony, be imagined (in accord with the etymology of her name) as "the dark one" (D 18), and her sister Desiree, in a passage that highlights the persistence of Lurie's affliction, as "the desired one" (D 164), this linguistic consonance is now thoroughly distorted: the etymological uprooting in the country leaves Lucy, rather than the "light" which the Latinate roots of her name would guarantee, "a darker person" (D 124) whom Lurie, as a self-proclaimed lightbearing Lucifer (D 32), can no longer hope to "guide" (D 156) "from the darkness to the

light" (D 78).¹⁰ The very facticity of Lucy's rape is precisely that which resists this public symbolization, this ethic of unconcealment. It teaches, by its resistance to symbolization, the hard lesson that "bringing 'things' into the 'light of the world'" also situates them in "a human system of meaning" in which their manifestly non-human reality is necessarily "destroyed in order to be known, subjugated, communicated" (Marais 2000: 161). It teaches that "human speech is the annihilation of things *qua* things" (Critchley 1997: 53). Yet unlike the chimeric undifferentiatedness of immediate sensuality (Taylor 169–71) to which Lurie's desiring discourse attempted to break through, this "matter of indifference" (D 109) is, in the novel's description, disastrously resisting an objectified exteriority, and instead takes the place of "the blood of life," "like a gas, odourless, tasteless, without nourishment" (D 108); it is not a discursively desired and safely distanced utopia but an inescapable facticity, "as grey and even and unimportant [...] as a headache" (D 142). As such, it cannot be objectified, nor be related to intentionally, yet it is simultaneously all too present, and as such has to be bound to representations in order to be endured at all.¹¹ It has to, yet it cannot, at least not in the way desiring discourse used to, as that would simply annihilate that facticity. What is required is a radical discursive reconfiguration of the relation between language and that which resists it, of an inevitable desire for disclosure and an imperative demand for silence. Bearing in mind how *Disgrace* has addressed this issue from its first sentence, this will also point us to the novel's own way of not being nothing, of not being silent.

4. Orphic mourning

In a short text from 1969, Maurice Blanchot writes that "language, the experience of language – writing – is what leads us to sense a relation entirely other, a relation of the third kind" (73).¹² In literature, as Blanchot elaborates in his 1955 text "The Outside, the Night," the "first slope" of language, the Orphic ideal of bringing things to light, interacts with a second slope which, in contrast to the first slope's irrepressible drive for enlightenment, "is no longer a construction of the day" (1955: 166), and does not attempt illumination into meaning, but rather refuses "the annihilation of things *qua* things" (Critchley 1997: 53). In this night, "Orpheus does not want to make the invisible visible, but rather (and impossibly) to see the invisible as invisible" (43). This fascination with the darkness of things is, for Blanchot, "the gaze [...] in which blindness is still vision, vision which is no longer the possibility of seeing, but the impossibility of not seeing" (Blanchot 1969: 32).¹³ It is thus, in contrast to a desiring object-relation, a "reversed intentionality, where things [...] regard us, where the Subject dissolves into its objects," in which "I am neither myself nor the other" (Critchley 1997: 58). In the experience of writing, the relation of the third kind then allows an impossible negotiation of these two opposed slopes.

For Lurie, it is the moment in his project to write a chamber opera on the life of Byron and his mistress Teresa, at which he rhetorically asks "does he need to go on reading?" (D 121), that enables the shift of the conception of literature from self-serving desiring apologetic, as in the misreading of "Lara", to actual experience, "the experience of language – writing." Rather than achieving the originally intended "purposeful" "service to mankind" (D 146) that in classical Orphic fashion tries to bring to life (see D 122) its "young, greedy, wilful, petulant" (D 181) protagonists (who are thus still captured in the terms of the desiring paradigm), the project deteriorates into an experience that radically counters such reduction to the functionality and instrumentality of "the restricted economy of exchange" (Critchley 1997: 38). This experience of the dreadful ambiguity of the two "slopes" stages Teresa as "a dumpy little widow" whom Lurie, rather than bring to light, must follow "into her underworld" (D 184); "page after page he follows" (D 186), and this allows him to counter

the grasp of his desiring self: “He is in the opera neither as Teresa nor as Byron nor as even some blending of the two: he is held in the music itself” (*D* 184). When Lurie, before this experience, confessed that he lacks the lyrical (*D* 171), this reconception of the Orphic endeavour allows him, at the end of the book, to tentatively assert that “the lyrical impulse in him may not be dead, but after decades of starvation it can crawl forth from its cave only pinched, stunted, deformed” (*D* 214).

The project is never finished; at the end of the novel, it still, in a phrase that carries all the tropological overtones just explored, “consumes [Lurie] *night and day*” (*D* 214; italics mine). But rather than a heroic refusal, Lurie now faces the sheer impossibility of “the total realization of meaning in an artwork.” In fact, in this renewed conception of the literary experience, “the possibility of literature is found in the radical impossibility of creating a complete work” (Critchley 1997: 36). The earlier mutually exclusive demands of the total illumination and the immediate sensuous consummation of darkness – or, in Blanchot’s words, of, on the first slope, “adequation and identification,” and on the other “ecstasy, fusion, fruition” (1969: 66) – have been impossibly converted into a “relation of the third kind,” like Teresa “embracing the darkness, embracing what it will bring” (*D* 213–14).

This “situation of literature,” then, is for Blanchot the dreadful ambiguity of “this *partage* between two slopes” (Critchley 1997: 62). It is emphatically “not an indecision between these two modes, but rather a possibility of saying that would say without saying and without denying it either” (Blanchot 1969: 73). It is the embrace of “the impossible–paradoxical situation of the night” (Ten Kate 144)¹⁴ which allows a suspension of the unchecked dominance of desiring objectification. In its simultaneous assertion and cancellation of the subject’s sovereignty (Blanchot 1969: 66) it is both its highest possibility and its most disabling impossibility. And by dint of this radical negotiation of intentionality, it inevitably also leads to the thought of death as what “is ungraspable and exceeds both intentionality and the correlative structures of phenomenology” (Critchley 1997: 26). In the words of Simon Critchley’s gloss on Blanchot, “ambiguity is ultimately an ambiguity about death, where the writer is suspended between two rights to death, *death as possibility and death as impossibility*” (1997: 66).

Via the detour of literary experience, then, Lurie can escape his initial conception of death as a viable possibility, when he still pondered castration as a “proper” preparation for death and thus reduced the latter to the noematic correlative of a volitional intention (see *D* 9), and as this experience also suspends the objectification of animals, it makes him susceptible to their dying:¹⁵ in the shift from his earlier disgusted “impulse [...] to pull away” from the dog that tries to lick his hand (*D* 143) to the acceptance of the sniffing and licking of the dog in the final scene (*D* 220), Lurie regains a passivity which seems to leave room for the role of the non-desiring tactility of “the nakedness of a skin presented to contact, to the caress” – in the words of Emmanuel Levinas” (1987: 146). The formulation of this sensibility emphatically allows for the extension of this care to non-human others, and for an accommodation of the terrain desperately vacated after the demise of linguisticity. In Simon Critchley’s words, “the original language of proximity whereby the self is related to the Other is achieved in non-verbal sensibility [...] it is the nudity and aponia of the skin” (1992: 180). It is this “immediacy on the surface of the skin” (Gibson 165) that enables the disgraced self to be restructured by the mortal other: the ultimate alterity of “the facticity of dying structures the self as Being-for-the-other [...] which also means that death is not revealed in a relation to my death but rather in the alterity of death or the death of the other” (Critchley 1997: 75). Thus when Lurie notes that the animal’s lot, which exists in “waiting their turn” (*D* 85), “suddenly and without reason [...] has become important to

him" (D 126), and when he allows his whole being to be gripped by their dying "as if they too feel the disgrace of dying" (D 143), they figure crucially in his own struggle "to accept disgrace as [his] state of being" (D 172).

This acceptance, however, in order to avoid the silent despair which, as it cannot be objectified, threatens to overwhelm the subject, also requires reconstructed representations; it impels its binding by the renewed ethic's "conditions of formulation" (Harpham 57), or, in the context of Coetzee's own activity, a reconfiguration of the rules of discourse. The threat of this return to discourse is that discursive desire "may again become infinite," thus presenting this reconfigured discourse with the challenge of "how to orient and perhaps limit desire, which is inherently indeterminate and possibly limitless" (LaCapra 708). This points to the foundational role of the experience of the animals' dying in the recreation of discourse, a recreation which, as the "situation of literature" has taught, need *not* annihilate this sensible foundation. The death of the other, which cannot be related to as to a noematic correlative and as such cannot be the object of desire, must become a necessary tacit dimension of a discursivization that cancels the threat of a relapse into limitless desire. In the words of Simon Critchley's comment on Levinas, "the original *logos* of ethics from which the experience of obligation derives can be shown to be rooted in the non-verbal and consequently non-logocentric [...] sensible relation to the other" (1992: 103).

What is required, in other words, is a discourse founded on the death of the other that, because it cannot be related to intentionally, resists narcissistic introjection and can only be mourned, or be harboured as "something that is greater and other than [‘a me or an us’]" (Derrida 33). Moreover, as Derrida has it in his discussion of mourning in his *Mémoires: For Paul de Man*, "the 'me' or the 'us' of which we speak then arise and are delimited in the way that they are only through this experience of the other, and of the other as other who can die" (33). In that sense, "being-in-me or being-in-us is constituted out of the possibility of mourning" (34). In this mournful disgrace as "a state of being", the desperate inability to speak is simultaneously acknowledged and "worked through": impossibly, "the trace is interiorized *in* mourning as that which can no longer be interiorized" (Derrida 38). This urges, in other words, a self-conscious reconstruction of a necessarily impure discourse, which guiltily incorporates a tacit dimension. On these terms, the metaphorization of animals can again take place, but this time it must be allowed to resist restless sublation, without a trace, "unmarked, unmourned" (D 178), in this discourse's smooth texture. In *Disgrace*, this re-inscription in a discourse that limits desire tentatively takes the form of explicit similes: in contrast to the violence of the earlier animal metaphors, Lucy will start again "with nothing," "like a dog" (D 205); Lurie sacrifices the dog, in the final scene, "like a lamb" (D 220; italics mine). It is the performance of this recreation of consoling representations which shows how the absolute singularity of the other's death not only reveals its irreducible separateness from the self, but also that its inscription in a recreated self at the same time allows for a sense of negative community. Even the term "disgrace," in contrast to the dreadfully silent despair, can be said, in its morphological make-up, to bear the trace of "something that ought to be there but is missing" (LaCapra 703), thus managing to speak the loss involved in language and therefore signifying dogged silence, a "doggedness" that is now also able to speak the ambiguity of the two slopes of literature. "It will be little enough, less than little: nothing" (D 220), but it at least manages to speak the violence inherent in saying "nothing," both in Lurie's refusal to speak and in the committee's dismissal of silence as nothing, which means its failure to condone a "freedom to remain silent" within its illusory "freedom of speech" (D 188).

5. Truth and Remembrance

The terms in which *Disgrace*, as we have seen, describes Lurie's re-emerging lyrical impulse ("stunted, deformed") – which will give rise to a reconstructed ethics on the far side of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's imperative of full and honest disclosure – are the same in which Coetzee, in his 1987 Jerusalem Prize acceptance speech, captured the influence of Apartheid on the inner life: "The deformed and stunted relations between human beings that was created under colonialism and exacerbated under what is loosely called apartheid have their psychic representation in a deformed and stunted inner life" (1992: 90). As must be clear by now, the fact that *Disgrace*'s repeated questioning of English in similar terms – it is said to be a language "tired, friable, eaten from the inside as if by termites" (D 129), "an unfit *medium* for the *truth* of South Africa" (D 117, italics mine) – occurs in *English* is a paradox the novel can deal with on the terms of the reconfiguration of the rules of discourse it has performed. More accurately, it can deal with it precisely as a novel, which has reconfigured language as no longer merely an instrumentalizable medium, and truth as no longer a matter of apophantic unconcealment.¹⁶ In *White Writing*, his 1988 collection of essays on South African literature, Coetzee, discussing the desire for a language capable of speaking the truth of Africa, wrote on the status of English in South Africa that:

Dissatisfaction with English would in truth hold for any other language, since the language being sought after is a natural or Adamic language, one in which Africa will naturally express itself, that is to say, a language in which there is no split between signifier and signified, and things and their names. (8–9)

Given this ineradicable discontent, the challenge of reconfiguration becomes the task of redressing the very instance "whereby things are killed in order to enter the daylight of language and cognition" (Critchley 1997: 60) so that it can, while performing this murder, simultaneously show how this wound can "at least in part be compensated for, worked through, and even to some extent overcome" (LaCapra 712). In contrast to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's absolutation of truthful disclosure, its struggle for "the victory of memory over forgetting" whose "rationale for sacrificing justice for truth is the need to [...] close the chapter of the past" (Kader Asmal; qtd. Dawes 30), *Disgrace* constitutes, in the words of Samuel Durrant, an effort at articulating "how we might learn to live in remembrance of this forgetting" (448), a negotiation which it manages to lodge even in the tense structure of the language: the frequent oscillations between the present perfect and the simple past – "Burned, burnt" (D 97); "I have lived, I lived" (D 71) – manage to speak the undecidable necessity of relating the loss of the simply past and simultaneously acknowledging its remembrance in the present. I have attempted to show how the narrative of *Disgrace*, on the one hand, manages to heed "the imperative of breaking silences" (Attwell and Harlow 3), which is equivalent with the political imperative to take the nation "decisively from a traumatized past to a reconstructed future" (Attwell and Harlow 2), while on the other it questions the TRC's unproblematic "restoration of narrative" (Heyns 44) as the privileged means to that end. Stunted and deformed, it has accepted disgrace as the novel's "state of being." *Disgrace*: a novel, or vice versa.

Notes

1. Already on the novel's first page, a similar reticence is exercised in the description of Soraya, the prostitute Lurie visits every Thursday afternoon: "He strokes her honey-brown body, unmarked by the sun" (Coetzee 1999: 1). Also, in the first sentence (which I will discuss later), the marker of race is remarkably absent in the description of Lurie. While this echoes the undecidability of the race of

the protagonist of Coetzee's *Michael K*, which contributed to Nadine Gordimer's dismissal of that character as "not a human spirit but an amoeba, from whose life we can draw neither example nor warning" (qtd. Attwell 92), I want to show, in the rest of this article, how this crucially connects to *Disgrace's* ethics of representation, whose resistance to full disclosure is transmitted through these blanks in the representation which force a negotiation of this resistance onto the reader, who, while necessarily supposing Melanie's blackness, is never allowed to confirm that it is more than a supposition.

2. All references to *Disgrace* in my text are preceded by the title's initial.

3. For a good account of *Disgrace's* political reception in South Africa, see McDonald.

4. For a similar point made in a different way, see Sanders (370–72). Sanders also configures the relation between the "Confessions" essay and *Disgrace* in a way congenial to mine.

5. The critical literature on Coetzee abounds in illustrations of his fiction's mediation of a European intellectual tradition, which will later also warrant my invocation of Levinas and Blanchot. This mediation goes to the very core of Coetzee's redefinition of the novel as a genre, an issue I will address later. In *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee remarks: "I am concerned to write the kind of novel – to work in the kind of novel form – in which one is not unduly handicapped (compared with the philosopher) when one plays (or works) with ideas" (1992: 246).

6. Kierkegaard distinguishes "four primary forms of silence that are typical of the reflective pole of the aesthetic stage" (Taylor 174). For the discussion of Coetzee's essay, the most relevant are "deceitful" and "demonic" silence, in which the latter is one further step on the ladder of infinitizing self-consciousness, "when one becomes attached to his corruption and the unhappiness it brings": "this understanding of the inward suffering occasioned by deceitful deeds can lead to demonic silence" (Taylor 174–75).

7. The implications of the frequent third-person present-tense narration in Coetzee have been best described by Teresa Dovey. According to her, it approximates "the interior monologue, in which the combination of an autodiegetic narrator and present verb forms indicate [*sic*] that the reader is being granted apparently unmediated access to thoughts and states of consciousness" (213). In *Disgrace*, the misfit between the temporal deixis of the verbs and that of the temporal adjunct – for instance: "All of the next morning, Lucy avoids him" (*D* 136) – and the impossibility of attributing narrative authority in sentences such as "He has forgotten how cold winter mornings can be in the uplands of the Eastern Cape" (*D* 68) qualify the use of the present tense as "a mockery of presence in the text" (Dovey 151n16). This allows us to read Lurie's desire for immediate sensuousness and the committee's insistence on full disclosure as complementary invocations of false immediacy: they both bracket the crucial role of reflection. This also explains how all the reform *Disgrace* can aim at is turning this inescapable reflection into a properly literary one. For this dialectic of false immediacies, the crucial text is Theodor Adorno's "Wozu noch Philosophie," in his *Eingriffe*.

8. In a paragraph that aptly exposes demonic confession as impelled by the desire for preverbal immediacy: "Confessions, apologies: why this thirst for abasement? A hush falls. They circle around him like hunters who have cornered a strange beast and do not know how to finish it off" (*D* 56).

9. See the description of the dog in the chapter preceding the assault: "A low, gurgling snarl comes from [the dog's] throat; its powerful hindquarters strain. Awkwardly [Lurie] joins in the tussle, pressing the dog's hind legs together, forcing it to sit on its haunches [...] for a moment its eyes, full of rage and fear, glare into his" (*D* 80–81). For the reference to the eyes, see note 13 below.

10. For the novel's remarkably similar descriptions of Lucy and Melanie in terms of death and darkness, see Marais (2000: 175).

11. For the secularization of Kierkegaard's religious stage, on which the continuity of my argument from Kierkegaard to Blanchot and Levinas hinges, see Visker (2003). Visker there characterizes Abraham's outright inability to speak in terms of Lyotard's notion of the *différend*, a move that in its turn relies on the translation of Lyotard's notion from a silence caused by "the inevitability of linkage" to one caused by an "inability to link", as articulated in Visker (1995).

12. See Coetzee commenting, in *Doubling the Point*, on the distinction between critical reading and critical writing: “My experience is that it is not reading that takes me into the last twist of the burrow, but writing” (199).

13. *Disgrace* consistently tropes this gaze in connection to Lurie’s imperialist and desiring objectifications. The “desiring gaze” is introduced as a “weight” and thus as part of the “burden” of Lurie’s “upbringings inappropriate to the tasks [he is] set to perform” (*D* 12; 4). In the narrative, this gaze, as “emblematic of the habitual economy and its tendency to grasp and possess” (Robbins 6), is countered by the inverted intentionality figured in the animals’ staring back (*D* 81; 85; 142). The question at the end of the novel is then if it is “too late to educate the eye?” (*D* 218). For the image of the “imperial gaze” in Coetzee, see Marais (1996: 71). For Coetzee’s most extended discussion of this gaze, see the chapter “Reading the South African landscape” in *White Writing* (163–67), which also offers some clues to *Disgrace*’s complex critique of Wordsworth.

14. The translation from the Dutch is mine.

15. As death is no longer my utmost possibility, the singularizing Heideggerian “possibility of impossibility,” man, in Derrida’s words, “never has a relation to death as such, but only to perishing, to demising, and to the death of the other” (qtd. Schuster). The only thing one can experience is then not “death” so much as (the other’s) “dying.” This chimes well with what Mark Sanders brilliantly reads as “the interminable quality of disgrace” (371), its staging as a “temporal predicament” (369), as “resisting the perfective” (364). According to this reading, “the book’s ending may not be an end” (369).

16. See Coetzee about the truth in writing: “Writing, then, involves the interplay between the push into the future that takes you to the blank page in the first place, and a resistance [...]. Out of the interplay there emerges, if you are lucky, what you recognize or hope to recognize as the true” (1992: 18).

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J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* and the Task of the Imagination. Article. Mar 2006.Â Informed by Rushdie's non-fiction, the social history of photography in India, and the work of Debord and Sontag, in this reading of *Midnight's Children*, I contend that Rushdie uses fictional photographs to stage a realist satire of colonial and nationalist ideologies, thus countering various attempts to label *Midnight's Children* as magic realism or exoticism. Read more. Chapter. *Speech and Silence in the Fictions of J. M. Coetzee*. January 1996. Benita Parry.