

Like A Dog: Constitutionalism in J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*

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1 The Problems of Constitutionalism

Coetzee's *Disgrace* can be read as an engagement with the post apartheid constitution of South Africa. However, the novel does not focus on a legal text. It draws attention to what could be called an ethics of social being or the psychic life of constitutionalism. *Disgrace* thus resonates with the broader argument that a constitution is a complex of political, social and psychic economies that are bound up with (and in certain senses prior) to positive law. Any proper elaboration of these themes cannot be made from within the terms of legal discourse itself, at least as presently composed.¹ This paper is therefore an exercise in deconstruction² or, an attempt to develop a "language that is foreign to what [a] community can already hear or understand only too well"³; a practice that will allow a cultural unconscious to speak through the text of Coetzee's novel. But this problematic is not simply a question of language. An ethics of social being is also necessary. A culture must be held responsible for the symbolic forms of the secrets that it holds. How can we think about this strange matter? Our first task will be to engage with notions of being and social life that have not generally been deployed in constitutional discourse. We will then see how these terms relate to a psychoanalytic account of constitution at both a political and a personal level. The final section of this paper will be a reading of *Disgrace*.

By means of an introduction, let us consider the plot of the novel. *Disgrace* is a novel organised around an interruption, a breaking open and apart of the main character's life. David Lurie is a 52-year-old divorcee, a professor at 'the Cape Technical University, formerly Cape Town University College.'⁴ Lurie teaches a course on Romantic poetry, and intends to write a book on Byron. He wants to believe in a culture of art and passion. Bored by his teaching, barely inspired by his research, he seeks solace in a relationship with a prostitute, Soraya, and then, engages in a disastrous affair with one of his students. After failing (or refusing) to defend himself before a disciplinary board, he is dismissed and, in disgrace, heads out to his daughter Lucy's smallholding near Grahamstown in the Eastern Cape.

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¹ This rather sweeping statement needs to be clarified. It is primarily a criticism of a form of constitutional discourse that limits itself to the study of the sources of constitutional law; and ignores wider problems of political belonging and political community. Elaborating this position would require a study of 'English' and South African constitutional scholarship, and the influence of positivism in these jurisdictions.

² Deconstruction is best understood as a way of reading texts. It has always been concerned with the way in which meanings are brought into being and governed. The later phases of Derrida's work, and the philosophy of Jean Luc Nancy, address the singularity of human being and questions of ethics and community. For an elaboration of these terms in the South African context, see Van der Walt, below, n 10.

³ J Derrida *The Gift of Death* (1985) 74.

⁴ JM Coetzee *Disgrace* (1999) 3.

Entering into the routines of the country, assisting with farm work and helping out at an animal sanctuary, Lurie finds something of a new life. He has an affair with the woman who runs the sanctuary, Bev Shaw, and achieves a kind of stoic detachment from himself and his problems. Lurie is humbled by Bev Shaw's compassion for the animals she has to treat, but mostly, to put down or destroy. Alongside these concerns, the novel plots Lurie's relationship with his daughter; and his attempts to understand her sexuality. The novel hinges around a terrible incident, an attack by three strangers on Lurie and his daughter. Lurie is beaten up and set on fire; his daughter raped. Unwilling to leave her smallholding, Lucy falls under the protection of her former employee and neighbour, Petrus. Although the attackers are relatives of Petrus, Lucy persuades her father that the law must not be involved. She enters into a compromise where, in exchange for Petrus' ongoing protection, she becomes his second wife. She also decides not to have an abortion, and to keep the child. Unable to influence events, Lurie leaves the farm. The novel concludes with a strained cordiality between him and his daughter. The closing scene is Lurie's decision to put down a dog that he had been hoping to keep alive for a little longer.

The constitution: men, women, things and animals.

1.1 Social Being and Singularity

We need to begin with an issue that appears obliquely in constitutional discourse: how the self relates to others.⁵ An account of social being that draws on deconstruction understands the self as singular and irreplaceable. This necessitates an engagement with the notion of being towards death. In turn this figure will be related to the possibility of ethics. We will return more explicitly to this statement at the end of this section. The self, then, is always on its way: always between birth and death. If this seems somewhat obscure, remember that we are trying to develop a set of terms for a reading of *Disgrace*, and (as we will see) the concern with death makes its appearance on the very first page of the novel.

Death (to the extent that 'it is' at all) is always your own; no one can die in your place. One can give one's life in the place of another - but this is never a 'substitution'⁶ because the other must still go to his or her own death in his or her own time. A proper elaboration of this theme would take us to the animal that can be offered in sacrifice. We will return to this concern presently. The thesis so far can be reconstructed as follows: if I cannot take the other's death from him/her, but I can die in his/her place, my death is the 'irreplaceability' that I must understand if I am to comprehend myself. Interiority, and indeed responsibility, is thus founded on what no one can take from me or do for me.⁷

We need to consider the figure of the animal, as it is essential to the constitution of the human self. How is the man different from the beast? From within the Heideggerian resource, where we have begun posing this question, the animal is not understood to

⁵ In the interests of space, it is necessary to write in a kind of short hand. One of the primary reference points for this idea of self is Heidegger's notion of Dasein. For a more thorough development of this theme, see Costas Douzinas and Adam Gearey (2005) *Critical Jurisprudence*, Chapter 1.

⁶ Derrida (n3 above) 43.

⁷ Derrida (n3 above) 44.

experience death. But, does this resolve the issue? The following long quotation from Derrida is worth reading in full:

Against, or without, Heidegger, one could point to a thousand signs that show that animals also *die*. Although the innumerable structural differences that separate one “species” from another should make us vigilant about any discourse on animality or bestiality *in general*, one can say that animals have a very significant relation to death...even if they have neither a relation to death nor to the “name” of death as such, nor, by the same token, to the other as such.⁸

This is the question that both *Disgrace* and deconstruction force upon us. That animals die is, at one level, an entirely obvious statement. The question only becomes interesting when one addresses the symbolic relevance of death. If human being is constituted through anxiety towards death, and anxiety is based on language, then the statement that animals do not die begins to make sense. To be without language is to be incapable of representing death. Death thus has no meaning. By the same token, it would appear that animals do not have relations to each other as such. This takes us back to the same point about social being as peculiar to the creature that has language. Animal relationships are presumably matters of pure instinct. These assumptions beg a great deal of other questions about animal behaviour and intelligence that cannot be addressed here. Suffice to say that such distinctions between the animal and the human are at least contentious. Our primary concern, however, is what Derrida has called ‘carnophallogocentrism’ or, a ‘sacrificial structure’ that allows the ‘noncriminal putting to death’ of animals.⁹

How do we understand this rather convoluted term? It brings together references to the eating of meat and to the phallus. ‘Logocentrism, at least as far as this paper is concerned, can be understood as the centrality of the logos or language to the definition of the human. Carnophallogocentrism suggests that this manifold of language, psychic structure, sacrifice and carnivorousness constitutes both law and social being. A later section will engage with the psychoanalytic context of this statement, as the essential point is that human order is constituted by the sacrifice of the animal. In part this is an anthropological point. Human civilisation is marked by animal sacrifice as the creation of the properly human. Evidence would suggest that although animal sacrifice takes many different forms, it could be linked with the way in which the sacrificed creature takes death upon itself. To the extent that the sacrifice is an offering to the gods, it is an exchange, a bargain that attempts to preserve the fortunes or the viability of the human community. The human *is* to the extent that the animal can die in its place. The Derridean notion of the carnophallogocentric would also suggest that this sacrificial logic is what underlies the civilised as a legal order. Johan van der Walt has convincingly applied this logic to South African law¹⁰, but we cannot reconstruct his thesis here, as we need to return to the key issue raised by the question of animal sacrifice, the singularity of the human subject.

Realising the reality of my own death allows me to comprehend my singularity and the possibilities of my life. In order to understand this logic as it relates to constitutionalism and *Disgrace*, we need to realise that death is part of a broader figure of the secret and the exchange; the problematic of something that cannot be shared or articulated, but which nevertheless demands articulation. The secret

⁸ J Derrida *Aporias* (1993) 75-6.

⁹ C Wolfe *Zoontologies* (2003) 66.

¹⁰ J van der Walt, *Law and Sacrifice: Towards a Post-Apartheid Theory of Law* (2005).

ultimately relates to human interiority, and is thus perhaps just another way of thinking about the human being as the creature who creates and conceals meanings. However, the secret can take a variety of forms (as we will see) and need not simply be a fear of death. It is specific to what an individual holds in his or her heart, in shame, celebration or disgrace, and which, although it might not be sayable, motivates actions and creates effects in the world. However, as is observed in *Disgrace*, the 'heart' of the individual is dark. No one has access to it. To what extent does the secret open the question of ethics? It would suggest that social exchange is founded on something that cannot enter into circulation. Ethics, then, is the taking upon oneself the responsibility for the singularity of one's own life. This includes taking a responsibility for the meanings that one creates and the consequences of these meanings as they affect others.

All this is very well- but how does it relate to a 'thicker' notion of social being? The individual is always part of a community and a history- and the choices and options open to the individual make sense against this background. The ethical demand is not a jurisdiction to answer to a particular summons, to be compelled to appear in a court to answer to charges, but to face an impossible decision or demand within a particular context. This is precisely the problematic that *Disgrace* traces. Already this needs to be clarified. The ethical law is inscribed within individual consciousness- the 'banished one', (the one in disgrace?), the one expelled from a particular legal order, is 'turned over to the absolute of the law.'¹¹ What do we make of this? The ethical law is heard as a demand within the life of an individual being. The individual is separated from, clipped from the dumb repetition of his/her own days and stands alone amongst other beings. Abandoned by positive law, ethical law requires that one confronts the singularity of one's being and the values of one life.

In summary, the question posed by *Disgrace*: can you give what you cannot afford?

1.1.1 Psychoanalysis and the constitution: men, women and animals.

In order to think about the relationship between the ethics of social being and the constitution of the self and the nation, to build a 'thicker' understanding of social being, it is necessary to make a brief digression through psychoanalytic theory.

Psychoanalysis shares an essential concern with ethical economy as it is founded on a contradiction: human desire is always for something unobtainable. Precisely for this reason, desire appears to the subject as a series of equivalences, substitutions and exchanges. It is this process that allows us to link together personal and social constitution. Obviously, this is complex, and can only be given in briefest outline here. However, what is so interesting about Coetzee's novel is its miming of the psychic economy, the movement between the personal and the political. Indeed, the novel works by setting up the terms of equivalence between orders of race, gender and species that a culture creates. The text's own economy operates by juxtaposing and problematising oppositions and/or possible exchanges. But, as we will see, the relationship between people and things are never quite as simple as this sketch might suggest.

¹¹ JN Nancy *Being Singular Plural* (2000) 44.

The famous statement that the unconscious is structured like a language is a way of understanding the operation of substitution at a psychic level. The unconscious is not something hidden which comes to the surface. On the contrary, it could be understood as separation from instinctual life (do animals have an unconscious?) The unconscious and culture go hand in hand. Indeed, the civilised subject is the subject who lacks, who is divided from a source of being. Once within the world, the subject becomes aware both of being an object of desire and of him or herself having recurring desires that cannot be satisfied. For psychoanalysis, desire is always for complete identification with the mother.¹² At the moment that one enters language, when one acquires subjectivity, the subject experiences a disjuncture, a gap where the unconscious could be 'located'. In this sentence 'locate' has to appear in quotation marks, as it is strictly impossible to speak of the unconscious. It is the 'unrealised.' Unconscious symptoms are attempts to articulate a reconnection with something that is inaccessible to the subject.

Thus, the unconscious seems to exist on a plane with desire. Indeed the condition of desire is related to the existence of an unconscious. This, in turn can be compared to language (to such an extent that we can argue that the unconscious is structured like a language). When the child becomes a speaking/thinking subject in language, identification between it and the signifier is not possible, because the signifier only receives its identity in the series of signifiers that make up language, the system of differences. If desire is always desire for something else, something other, and the structure of the subject is such that it is always forced to desire, it is 'at home' in language which permanently defers. Just as the contents of the world, objects and people, can only appear meaningfully in language, language is the place where the subject must deploy and locate their desire.

The formation of personality propels the subject towards a more profound identification with language. A more complex sense of the self is made to correspond with the name and with personal and impersonal pronouns. To have a social identity, the individual has to become a being in and of language. The social being must master the basic separation that allows any human subject to enter into the symbolic order. To become a mature speaker of words means accepting that to speak of yourself is to represent yourself, and thus, in a very real sense, to be absent from your words. Language employs signs or words that represent or replace absent 'things.' The separation of the self from the self, which allows the self to become an object to the self, is the basic and fundamental structure of subjectivity. It has to include the loss of something that might always be nothing (what one was before one could speak). At the same time there is a desire for unity and for a sense of being a complete self.

To enter the social world is to be castrated. This can be understood as suggesting that prior to the human subject is a function that produces them, a wound that goes before them and makes them what they are. It accords with a fundamental sense of loss, the void, finitude, limitedness or tragedy that lies behind what we do, and has always informed the great religious, aesthetic and legal structures that have defined culture and provided rituals and supports to sustain life. As far as law is concerned, we could speak of the constitution, and indeed the entire system of rights and duties provided

¹² Desire for the mother can be more broadly understood as a desire for complete being; for an end to the torment of singularity. It is of course impossible.

by law as the legal phantasm that mandates ideas of title, right, inheritance as structures into which one fits. It defines social life in essentially legal terms, effectively providing a grid that articulates relationships between people.

This account of the legal phantasm would need to be clarified through a study of the detailed ways in which legal systems operate. However, at a general level, psychoanalytic theory posits that the order of law is essentially a male or phallic order. The primordial law is found in the imposition of culture on nature in the form of the incest taboo that treats the mother and the sister as forbidden objects. The name of the father and the structure of kinship come together to create the prohibition that allows genealogy and lineage. In technical terms, then, we could refer to the phallic order of the law. This complex topic will be developed by reference to a particular example of legal signification. The woman's position in relation to the phallus is not the same as the man's. The man takes up the universal position of paternity by identifying with other men. Take, for instance, the idea of a legal right. These are essentially the rights of men. Feminists have pointed out that the historical declarations and catalogues of rights presuppose a male, rather than a female subject. To be a citizen is thus to be considered as like other male citizens, a bearer of certain inviolable rights that define your place.

The social relationship (to the extent that it is founded through the symbolic order which includes the law) is essentially the sexual relationship. What, then, would we make of the claim that, as there is no sexual relationship, there can be no social relationship? This claim is as much about the logic of representation and signification as it is about physical and emotional attachments. One of the consequences of having language is to be forever separated from the other, unable to coincide with them. But this failure opens the space of relationship anyway; "what makes up for" the [sexual] relationship begins from the impossibility of its 'taking place.'¹³ Relationship, then, presupposes a greater dissonance where there can be no return to a resolution of the same and the other. In psychoanalytic theory this is related to the notion of the real. The real occupies a complex position. At a therapeutic level it can be linked to the symptoms that are the speech of the unconscious. From the present perspective, the real is that which will always return to the point when an order of discourse is challenged by what it has no way of articulating. Thus, a symbolic order is never entirely coherent with the events of the world that it tries to categorise. It may be the case that the interruption can be normalised, that the symbolic order can generate concepts or symbols to incorporate the anomaly and reduce its threat, but the threat can always return.

What sense can we make of this? The way in which we live with others is always, in part, determined by the symbolic structures that characterise any given social world. We also need to consider the exclusions, the values put out of play, denigrated, marginalized or expelled from the symbolic order. These exclusions would, in psychoanalytic terms, be seen as prone to return as eruptions or interruptions in the symbolic order that the law sets up for itself. South African law was based on the exclusion, or indeed the sacrifice of the rights of the majority to create a symbolic and political order that preserved the rights of the minority. Within this structure of exclusion, one could also map the points at which women were either deprived of

¹³ J Lacan *Seminar XX* (1998), 2.

rights or brought within a constitutional structure depending on the legal definition of their race. Clearly the constitution of the new South Africa seeks to undo this structured racism and sexism. The triumph of the liberation struggle could be understood in psychoanalytic terms, as the return of the real.

The return of the real must always make for events that may or may not take symbolic forms. In this sense, the democratic constitution would represent a new symbolic order for South Africa, but one in which old forms still circulated. To return to the contention that 'there can be no political relationship' would mean that that politics, like the relationship between the sexes, is always founded on a fundamental and necessary mis-recognition between people. This is not to say that there is no way of choosing between political values. It is to suggest that any politics, any symbolic structure, will always work through a series of substitutions, elisions or deferrals. Indeed, any new symbolic order will be haunted by 'returns' from the old order. For complex reasons, these returns, and the practical effects that they create, can no more be definitively represented as any other aspect of language. Quite how they appear, and the effects that they have, is always a broader cultural question. From a political, or indeed constitutional perspective, it is, then a question of the personal and communal psychic structures that either do or, do not correspond with the public and political ones.

This is the psychic setting of *Disgrace*. David Lurie represents himself, and is also represented by the novel, as one of the 'old order': a man whose life has been lived, for the most part, within apartheid. Lurie's worldview, as reflected by the novel, operates through a series of symbolic equivalences- or- as we will see, a series of mis-recognitions. The point the novel repeatedly makes is that Lurie's understandings and values and the effects that they give rise to, are not necessarily congruent with the new political reality. Lurie's psychic life sets up a series of equivalences between men, animals and women. The way in which he plays out the tensions of his own constitution is to find the validation of his desire, and hence himself, in a series of sexual 'exchanges'. Lurie attempts to assert a 'secret', a 'soul' something that cannot be seen or subjected to judgment. In some ways this is a response to the symbolic terms of the new order. Lurie's refusal to speak at key moments in the novel, or to assert an invisible 'romantic' essence come up against the 'real' of the new South Africa. This leads Lurie to a form of psychic paralysis. He is unable to create a structure that allows him to understand the events of the novel: the rape of his daughter, and her marriage to Petrus.

At this point, we have to turn from the representation of Lurie to the representative structure of the novel itself. At the level of the novel, there is a slippage between animal and species, or more specifically, between animal and race. Is Coetzee suggesting that the relationship between blacks and whites in South Africa is equivalent to the relationship between animals and humans? The way in which the novel addresses the terms of this new constitution is to confront Lurie with the most brutal manifestation of the new order; which is in fact still the real of the political order: black exclusion from property and power. But what 'message' is drawn from this fact? The next section will argue that the novel prevents us from answering this question: indeed, it provokes us in the most powerful way because it cannot resolve the relationships between the very terms that it sets up for itself. Does *Disgrace* ever articulate its own secrets?

Disgrace

What follows is a description of the constitution of David Lurie; a recreation of his inner monologue:

He lives within his income, within his temperament, within his emotional means. Is he happy? By most measurements, yes, he believes he is. However, he has not forgotten the last chorus of Oedipus: Call no man happy until he is dead.¹⁴

Lurie is a man who lives within his means. This complacency is undercut by the stark final sentence that functions as a reminder of a different economy: one measured by the extreme of finitude: the happiness of the dead. This is a peculiar happiness; presumably that of stasis, of forgetting- of being at rest; a cancelling out of life and emotion; a zero point. For Lurie this is the authentic measure that must judge all. This exercise in self-assessment is Lurie realising the impossible measure of his singularity. However, singularity of being is not simply this being towards death. Our singularity always brings us into contact with others.

As the novel opens, Lurie is enjoying his dalliance with a prostitute called Soraya (probably 'not her real name'¹⁵). Lurie's problems are suggested by the Oedipal overtones of this relationship: '[t]echnically he is old enough to be her father; but then, technically, one can be a father at twelve.'¹⁶ Lurie's affair with Soraya, an exchange of money for sex that has become affection, plays itself out on the screen of the father's desire for the daughter. From the Freudian perspective this is the structure that both reflects and founds the differences between the sexes. We cannot trace the complexities of this process- but- in summary, it creates the standard of normal sexuality as essentially male. The female is bereft of the penis, and perhaps even of libido as well. For Freud, this leads to the inscrutable mystery: what does woman want? The daughter resolves her dilemma by trying to win her father's love, and thus competing with the mother. In the most general sense, (as outlined in the section above) it is what founds the social as the community of men; a society based on the exchange of women; thus, a society of exchange based on the value of something that remains a mystery; a secret. Sure enough, there is no recognition that passes between Lurie and Soraya. She 'reveals nothing.'¹⁷ He has to pay a private detective to track her down when she leaves the Discrete Escorts Agency. In receipt of her private number, he rings her up:

A long silence before she speaks. "I don't know who you are," she says, "You are harassing me in my own house. I demand you will never phone me here again, never."¹⁸

A non correspondence- a failure of communication; a breakdown of recognition. Lurie has already confessed to her: 'I miss you all the time.'¹⁹ What prompts the breakdown of their relationship is a chance encounter. He spies her on the streets of Cape Town with her children. Neither mentions the encounter, 'Your secret is safe

¹⁴ Coetzee (n3 above) 2.

¹⁵ Coetzee (n3 above) 3.

¹⁶ Coetzee (n3 above) 1.

¹⁷ Coetzee (n3 above) 3.

¹⁸ Coetzee (n3 above) 10.

¹⁹ Coetzee (n3 above) 1.

with me, he would like to say.’²⁰ But what is this secret? That Lurie is the owner of the phallus? This does not lead to a relationship. It produces a non correspondence; a failure of exchange and proportion. Perhaps the real secret is that of the impotence of the father.

This failure of correspondence is a pattern that carries itself forward into Lurie’s relationship with his student Melanie Isaac. His encounter with Melanie is an interruption in the ‘featureless’ passage of time; once again, the same Oedipal scene plays itself out. She is “thirty years his junior”²¹ and later ‘a child he thinks: no more than a child! What am I doing?’²²; later still, ‘[h]e makes love her one more time, on the bed in his daughter’s room.’²³ The father desiring the daughter. Lurie seeks the community and intimacy that love can bring. It is a ‘flash of revelation and a flash of response’; a question of ‘passion.’²⁴ Is this Lurie’s fantasy? Even as he seduces her, it is as if he is playing out a fantasy. His fantasy is structured on the idea that he is potent, that he is as desirable to her as she is to him. It is based on the possibility of exchange; that their desire for each other has some value; values set up and perpetuated by a culture of romantic love:

“Stay. Spend the night with me.”

Across the rim of the cup she regards him steadily. “Why?”

“Because you ought to.”

“Why ought I to?”

“Why? Because a woman’s beauty does not belong to her alone. It is part of the bounty she brings into the world. She has a duty to share it.”²⁵

The currency the lovers spend. Her obligations are to beauty and love. The prose itself, the way that it is ‘scored’, suggest that this is always already a failure. An old man talking to a young woman. She is regarding him across the rim of the cup with suspicion. The allusions are lost on her; no references are shared. Later on, when Lurie quotes a Shakespearian Sonnet, this attempt to speak the language of love only ‘estranges.’²⁶ Why does it ring so hollow? It is not that Lurie is entirely self-deceiving. He knows that he is playing out a scene; he has this much self-knowledge. But is there something hidden from him? He does not, in the end, know why he does ‘it’. At least in terms of the seduction scene, it does not work because it is so one sided- it is based on assumptions not shared. So, when he finally has sex with her (she remains ‘passive’)- he ‘tumbles into a blank oblivion.’²⁷

Throughout this section of the novel, Melanie herself remains blank. We are not privy to her thoughts, just as Lurie is not. The text repeats her inscrutability. It repeats her secret. Lurie tries to end the affair, and re-assert the student-teacher relationship. He imagines her saying:

“You have cut me off from everyone... You have made me bear your secret....”²⁸

²⁰ Coetzee (n3 above) 6.

²¹ Coetzee (n3 above) 12.

²² Coetzee (n3 above) 20.

²³ Coetzee (n3 above) 29.

²⁴ Coetzee (n3 above) 13.

²⁵ Coetzee (n3 above) 16.

²⁶ Coetzee (n3 above) 16.

²⁷ Coetzee (n3 above) 19.

²⁸ Coetzee (n3 above) 34.

Melanie's words echo those from the passage above. The relationship has not led to any sharing, any reciprocity. Moreover, the obligation, the duty has come from Lurie. The secret, it would seem, is this isolation: 'you have cut me off from everyone'—but—this is still not her secret- as it is Lurie's own estimation, his own imagination of her words (which, when they come, are far more prosaic). He must even create an inner life for her: one that mirrors his own:

She rises, slings her bag over her shoulder.

"Melanie, I have responsibilities....Don't make the situation more complicated than it need be."
Responsibilities: she does not dignify the word with a reply.²⁹

So—the affair ends with Lurie appreciating his responsibilities- their necessary complications. Melanie's final silence, in fact this is her last appearance in the text as such, is to refuse to respond. If Lurie's responsibilities have any meaning, they have to meet this silence, this refusal to engage, because there is no language that he shares with her.

The great focus of this first part of the novel is the description of the disciplinary hearing that meets to consider Lurie's case after Melanie makes an allegation of sexual harassment against him. It would be tempting to see this as a representation of 'law' in the novel. However, the disciplinary panel, as it explains itself to Lurie, has 'no power', it 'merely makes recommendations.'³⁰ Secondly, if law is the figure of truth and revelation, nothing is revealed. Indeed, one of the panel members protests, in the face of Lurie's 'evasions', that the 'wider community' is 'entitled to know'³¹ the truth about the affair; a secret that Lurie will not reveal. The scene pits the law, or at least this quasi law against a different logic. When Lurie is asked if he has any legal objection to the composition of the panel, he states he has 'reservations of a philosophical kind.'³² His strategy is to plead guilty to the harassment charge, and, despite his colleagues and friends who want to 'save' him, to reveal his own interiority, his own secret:

"What goes on in my mind is my business....Frankly, what you want from me is not a response but a confession. Well, I make no confession. I put forward a plea, as is my right. Guilty as charged. That is my plea. That is as far as I am prepared to go."³³

He retells the narrative:

"Our paths crossed. Words passed between us, and at that moment something happened which, not being a poet, I will not try to describe. Suffice to say that Eros entered. After that I was not the same...I was not myself. I was no longer a fifty year old divorcee at a loose end. I became a servant of eros."³⁴

How does the text ask us to judge Lurie? If his defiance of the panel is presented as a kind of heroic stupidity, an attempt to oppose his own truth to that of the law, then, he must be judged as self-deceiving. The point is that he was precisely the same as himself. As a serial seducer of women, he was not so much the servant of eros, as

²⁹ Coetzee (n3 above) 35.

³⁰ Coetzee (n3 above) 47.

³¹ Coetzee (n3 above) 50.

³² Coetzee (n3 above) 47-8.

³³ Coetzee (n3 above) 51.

³⁴ Coetzee (n3 above) 52.

playing out a scene in which he knew he did not believe. When Lurie is asked by a member of the panel if he regrets his affair with the student, he persists:

“Are you sorry?...
No, he says, I was enriched by the experience.”³⁵

The operative word, a word that Lurie repeats later is “enriched”. His belief is that his relationship with the student is an experience of beauty. However, this view makes sense only in Lurie’s ‘economy of the same’; his ego supporting itself in a fantasy of being out of control that in fact conceals his own impotence. This connects with the final exchange of the chapter:

“...we went through the repentance business yesterday. I told you what I thought. I wont do it. I appeared before an officially constituted tribunal, before a branch of the law. Before that secular tribunal I pleaded guilty, a secular plea. That plea should suffice. Repentance is neither here nor there. Repentance belongs to another world, to another universe of discourse.”³⁶

If Lurie is withholding repentance for his acts, if repentance is, in part, the secret, where does it ‘belong’? Is this linked to the statement about the happiness of death on the first page? Does this suggest a different order, invisible to the characters, but increasingly put into circulation by the plot of the novel? This is why this scene is so central. The reader senses (at least on re-reading) that this scene of judgement triggers everything that happens in the remainder of the novel. It opens onto an economy where there is no leniency, where there is no formalism, where it simply appears that ‘things happen’-or- where Lurie is forced to confront his desire and his decisions; where he is forced to repent.

The ‘central’ part of the novel, the sections that cover the period after Lurie leaves Cape Town, and before the attack, focus on his relationship with his daughter. We become aware of a wider history; a sense of the broader politics of South Africa. Indeed, Lurie ponders that ‘history had the larger share’ in her upbringing and her desire to return to the land. As critics have commentated, the book sets up something of a pastoral. The earlier themes are repeated in a minor key. Although Lurie has tended to see his affairs with women in terms of father/daughter relationships- his own relationship with his daughter is not particularly characterised by intimacy. He fails to understand his own desire, and that of his daughter. Thinking of Lucy’s partner, Helen, who has ‘returned to Johannesburg.’ Lurie reflects:

And what does he know about these two in particular, Lucy and Helen? Perhaps they sleep together merely as children do, cuddling, touching, giggling, reliving girlhood –sisters more than lovers.³⁷

Lucy confronts her father over the affair with his student. In replying to her, he appreciates that his behaviour before the panel was hysterical. However, this is not accompanied by a more profound self-realisation; and if anything, the time that he spends with his daughter confirms his prejudices. He feels that she has made the wrong choices. Lucy is, however, compassionate towards her father. He is invited to stay on the farm for as long as is necessary. The theme of compassion is linked to the Bev Shaw character and her work at the animal sanctuary. Ultimately, this takes us to

³⁵ Coetzee (n3 above) 52.

³⁶ Coetzee (n3 above) 58.

³⁷ Coetzee (n3 above) 86.

the theme of life in common; what it means to live together. Responding to her father's 'dislike' of Bev Shaw, because, in Lurie's words, '[she is] not going to lead me to a higher life', Lucy states:

"...the reason is that there is no higher life. This is the only life that there is. Which we share with animals. That's the example that people like Bev try to set. That's the example I want to follow. To share some of our human privileges with the animals."³⁸

Critics have argued that the theme of compassion for animals is the moral centre of the book. It sets up the theme of a life that is shared, albeit on radically different terms; and suggests that the suffering of animals is part of the more general circuit of cruelty against other human beings. But, if we look more closely at this theme, where does it take us? Lurie comes to learn from Bev Shaw that animals suffer. He helps Bev Shaw administer the injections that will destroy the unwanted dogs:

He has thought that he would get used to it. But that is not what happens. The more killings he assists in, the more jittery he gets. On 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.³⁹

If animals do fear death, do sense what is happening and fear it and despise it, then at the centre of the book is a crime that is perhaps far greater than those committed against Lurie and his daughter. Does the book suggest that this is where compassion and responsibility has to start? Perhaps Lurie has recovered his moral compass.

The attack on Lurie and his daughter must remain within the terms of the book. But it is the central event, the terrible axis on which the novel turns. It points directly to the question of economy:

A risk to own anything: a car, a pair of shoes, a packet of cigarettes. Not enough to go round, not enough cars, shoes, cigarettes. Too many people, too few things. What there is must go into circulation, so that everybody can have a chance to be happy for a day. That is the theory...Not human evil, just a vast circulatory system, to whose workings pity and terror are irrelevant. 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.⁴⁰

It is as if the novel has its own hierarchy of creation: men, women, animals and things. What Lurie perceives in the passage above is the reduction of a person to an object. His daughter has been raped, used, treated like a thing, or an animal. She has become part of the 'vast circulatory' system that, as the novel will come to suggest, includes the history of the country and the way the crimes of the past become crimes of the present. The "vast circulatory" system, history itself, inscribes us in its processes. Our agency is largely irrelevant. In place of the earlier verdict of law, of legal process, there are now only historical processes. Random events. The actions of strangers: 'it happens every day, every hour, every minute, he tells himself, in every quarter of the country.'

The secret comes to circulate in this economy:

³⁸ Coetzee (n3 above) 74.

³⁹ Coetzee (n3 above) 143.

⁴⁰ Coetzee (n3 above) 98.

“David, when people ask, would you mind keeping to your own story. To what happened to you?”
He does not understand
“You tell what happened to you, I tell what happened to me,”
She repeats...⁴¹

What they both know must not be spoken. A different kind of silence to the ones that opened the book, a silence that creates its own economy; indeed, that brings in the new political order.⁴² The secret cannot be exchanged between father and daughter. Indeed, each comes to a resolution that is opposed to the other. Lurie demands a police investigation. For Lucy, it is a private affair, ‘her business’⁴³, there is no point ‘involving the law’. Is this an attempt to create a “private salvation” an expiation ‘for the crimes of the past’⁴⁴?

How, then, do we read the conclusion of the novel? It is presented as a choice that Lurie faces. Does he save a dog to which he has become attached from being put down? He anticipates the scene of taking the dog into the surgery, helping Bev administer the injection, and then putting it into a black bag and taking it to the incinerator: ‘[i]t will be little enough, less than little: nothing’⁴⁵:

Bearing him in his arms like a lamb, he re-enters the surgery. “I thought you were saving him for another week”, says Bev Shaw. “Are you giving him up?”
“Yes I am giving him up.”⁴⁶

It is hard to relate this ending to the book with any sense of completion; how does this point a conclusion?

Lucy bears the rapist’s child and marries Petrus against Lurie’s wishes. Already this event is open to multiple interpretations. One could re-imagine the events of the novel re-told from Lucy’s perspective. Indeed, it may even be that Lucy’s act forms the ethical centre of the novel; a perspective obscured by the narrative focus on Lurie. This reading would be qualified by returning to the point that her position is very much one of compromise and exchange. In bearing the child she places Petrus under an obligation to bring her into his family and to protect her. At a symbolic level, arguing that Lucy’s act provides the necessary reconciliation is also problematic. It would be tantamount to asserting equivalence between rape and the possibility of a new social order. To some extent this would fit in with the logic of sacrifice discussed above. Lucy has been sacrificed, or has sacrificed herself for the new order. The daughter must bear the sins of her fathers. Although there is some suggestion that Lucy’s act is some ‘expiation’ for historic crimes, it does not seem to be a sensible way of reading the novel.

Lurie himself remains in Grahamstown growing older. What does his sacrifice of the dog suggest? It can be read as implying that there must then be some relationship between the abuse of animals and the crimes of the apartheid order. Can this equation be made? What does it suggest about the novelistic consciousness that has set this

⁴¹ Coetzee (n3 above) 99.

⁴² Coetzee (n3 above) 112-3.

⁴³ Coetzee (n3 above) 133.

⁴⁴ Coetzee (n3 above) 112.

⁴⁵ Coetzee (n3 above) 220.

⁴⁶ Coetzee (n3 above) 220.

narrative up? It is, at best, a very problematic way of understanding apartheid- and opens up a set of difficult questions about whether crimes against humanity can be related to crimes against animals. What makes it necessary to think this way? It would be tempting to assume that these are the values of Coetzee himself. Can a relationship between species really equate to that between races? It could be argued that this is an evasion of the issue. Cultural oppression has been transformed into a ‘philosophical’ question of animal suffering. Surely human suffering has to be seen precisely as human suffering. Furthermore, equating apartheid and cruelty against animals would lead to a further problem: the representation of cruelty in the novel. Cruelty against animals may be common to both white and black characters, but the novel does dwell upon the ways in which the poor black farmers and workers mistreat their animals. It is difficult to draw any simple conclusion, although, it is hard to avoid the sense that, once again, a form of racial cruelty has been sidelined. These complicated questions are themselves returned to in the later text, Elizabeth Costello; perhaps suggesting that they are left deliberately unresolved in *Disgrace*. However, there is another interpretation.

less than little: nothing

Does, then, the novel retain its own secret? What does the secret force us to articulate: less than little: nothing?

We run risks in saying that the novel says the unsayable about post apartheid- given- as argued- that the social order is always based on miss-recognition. From this perspective, how can we read the conclusion? Ultimately, the book resists any simple reading. What then is this “less than little: nothing”, is it the secret? Is it the secret of compassion, of knowing that there is no real communication, no real exchange between others, between men, between men and women, but that is what “fellowship” is based upon?

Something very little, nothing, that we share between us? Men, women and animals.

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