

# **Enabling Violence: The Ethics of Writing and Reading Rape in South Africa**

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the  
requirements for the degree of

**Master of Arts**

in the Department of English  
at Rhodes University

by

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February 2020

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## Abstract

This thesis is concerned with describing the stakes of reading, writing and criticising fictional depictions of rape in a country plagued by high levels of sexual violence. I consider the capacity of rape representations to cause harm to women and rape survivors, and worsen the various injuries suffered by survivors as a direct or indirect consequence of rape. The possibility of such harm prompts me to examine the role and responsibilities of readers and critics in facilitating or preventing such harm. I further discuss the potential strategies of harm prevention that readers of novelistic portrayals of rape might adopt as well as the positive outcomes that such reading strategies make possible, and which might balance out the risks that accompany them. My description of the potential harm of rape representations combines postmodern critical feminist analysis with Miranda Fricker's work on epistemic justice and Judith Herman's work on trauma in order to illustrate the way that these representations shape our conception of rape in a manner that affects everything from how it is enacted to our treatment of survivors to the possibility of their recovery from post-traumatic stress disorder. In order to situate my analysis in the context of South African literature and to explore the notion of responsibility in relation to the writing of scenes of rape, I utilise a close reading of J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*. Furthermore, I discuss the utility and limits of the critical feminist strategy of using a normative critical approach to rape representations in order to prevent harm. Ultimately, I argue that the use of such a strategy, along with the development of a purpose-honed adaptive critical style, is essential to the fulfilment of our responsibilities as readers and to the prevention of further suffering.

## **Acknowledgments**

I would like to thank my supervisors, Professor Mike Marais and Dr. Minesh Dass, for all the time, energy and careful thought they put into the supervision of this thesis. Without their patience, direction and assistance I would not have completed this thesis, and I am truly grateful to have had the privilege of working with them. I would also like to thank my family for all their support. Lastly I want to thank my wife, Regina, for her patience, kindness and support, to which I owe as much as anything the successful completion of this project.

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## Introduction

This thesis is my attempt to find a way to productively respond to the unacceptably high levels of sexual violence in South Africa from within the bounds of the discipline of literary studies. It is driven by my desire to contribute, in an admittedly small and necessarily niche manner, to the discussion of violence against women in South Africa, in the hopes that this discussion will hasten the cultural change needed to combat the ongoing rape crisis. My discussion of rape within these pages rests on the belief that rape culture extends to and includes our literary and critical writings, and that, therefore, the post-apartheid literary novel is one of many sites of ideological struggle over the meaning of rape. Rape is, after all, not an uncommon subject of South African literature, and even where it is not directly represented, the novelistic treatment of gender, sex and the society and culture(s) of the 'new South Africa' all have some bearing on how South Africans think, treat, and respond to rape and rape survivors. My hope is that, through the kind of discussions I stage in this dissertation, critics and academics can cultivate a critical and literary community which is responsive to the crisis of rape and to the pressing needs of survivors and those at risk of rape, and which does its part to reform South African discourse with the aim of fostering meaningful and lasting change, and eventually ending the rape crisis. I am not naive enough to assume that this thesis will have much effect on South African literary discourse, but it has nonetheless provided me with a means of reforming and honing my own thinking on the relationship between literature, representation, criticism and rape, and I hope that the understanding I have cultivated will, in the future, find a more public outlet and thus have a better chance at reshaping the conversation about rape and literature.

Before moving on, I wish to demonstrate, as best as I can, the extent of the rape crisis in contemporary South Africa, in order to indicate just how urgently reform and progressive interventions of all kinds are needed. In total, 41,583 rapes were reported to the police between 2018 and 2019. The national rape rate in the same period was 72.1 cases of reported rape per 100,000 people, an increase of 3.9% over the previous period (South African Police Service). These statistics, however, represent only a fraction of the actual numbers of rape

committed in South Africa each year. Although no nationally representative studies of the prevalence of rape have been conducted recently, older studies suggest that most rapes go unreported and that the actual incidence of rape is far higher than the reported rape rate implies. One 2010 study conducted in Gauteng found that 25.3% of women had been raped whilst 37.4% of male respondents admitted to raping a woman (Machisa et al, *The War at Home* 41). In the same study, only 3.9% of the rape survivors interviewed reported their rape to the police (41). It seems reasonable to conclude from such data that rape remains pervasive in South Africa. More distressing still, a recent report found that rape cases face a very high rate of attrition. The 2017 report, also based on studies conducted in Gauteng, found that of the fraction of rapes that are reported only 18.5% make it to trial, with as low as 8.6% of reported cases being finalised with a guilty verdict (Machisa et al, *Rape Justice in South Africa* 13). The high prevalence of rape is thus matched by a low rate of conviction, with the vast majority of rapes going unreported, and the majority of those that are reported not even making it to trial.

Statistics such as those I have just presented have an uncanny tendency to abstract the human suffering they represent. As such, it is worth reflecting that for each of those 41,583 reported rapes, and for all the countless rapes that go unreported, a person's life was interrupted by violation, violence and trauma. The vast majority of those survivors will have had to deal with post-traumatic stress disorder. Their psychological wellbeing will have been severely disrupted. Their trust in the world and sense of safety will have been shattered. Their relationship to sex and the gender of their rapist will have been irrevocably impacted. As I discuss in the first chapter of this thesis, their basic sense of self, their subjectivity and sense of agency, will have been destabilised, and will have to be carefully rebuilt. Other aspects of survivors' lives are also undoubtedly affected. They may lose their jobs or drop out of university as result of the psychological strain caused by their violation. Their work performance or grades may drop, causing them to miss out on opportunities they would otherwise have had. They may lose friends and whole communities as they struggle (and, all too often, fail) to find the support and understanding they need in order to adequately deal with their experience of violation. Their literal mobility, their ability to travel to certain places

by themselves, at certain times of the day, may be compromised by fears of having traumatic episodes or being victimised again. Furthermore, they are unlikely to get justice, should they pursue it. Indeed, they are more likely to go through an alienating and often re-traumatising series of legal and law enforcement procedures that typically end without a conviction for their rapist. Although it is, perhaps, reductive, it is not at all an exaggeration to say that rape can be, and for most people is, a life-shattering occurrence.

Rape's effects go beyond the direct damage done to survivors. The mere fact of rape, and the knowledge of its high prevalence in South Africa, has a variety of damaging effects, specifically on women, who are, overwhelmingly, the target of rape. Women seldom travel alone at night, are often wary of male strangers, and in many cases live with a persistent fear of violation and violent objectification that shapes their daily lives because of the prevalence of stranger rape. The frequent reporting by the media of high profile and often particularly horrific cases of rape, sometimes accompanied by torture or ending in murder, may also impress upon women a gender-specific sense of vulnerability which may cause anxiety and generally undermine their psychological wellbeing. In a more general sense, rape and the fear of rape play an important part in the social and discursive processes through which gender inequality is maintained.

Rape is, after all, a social problem. It is both a symptom and a central part of patriarchy: that system of beliefs, conventions, institutions and actions whereby male dominance is secured over and above the freedom, independence and wellbeing of women. Through its function within the patriarchal social order, rape and the threat of rape serve as a means of intimidating and corraling women. Rape works in concert with a variety of other patriarchal strategies to coerce women into prescribed and generally subservient gender roles (in the house, bedroom and workplace) organised around male expectations and desires. To fully understand the harmful effects of rape, one must therefore examine a variety of deeply rooted social problems, such as gender inequality, patriarchy and misogyny that are in part effects of the prevalence of the act.

The work of ending South Africa's rape crisis thus requires far-reaching social change which can only be achieved by serious introspection at every level of society. This thesis is an

attempt to do some of this work in the context of South African literature and criticism. More specifically, it is an attempt to theorise the potential harm of literary representations of rape and to consider means of preventing this harm. For, as I discuss in Chapter One, fiction and criticism that deal with rape necessarily have an ethically evaluable effect on rape discourse, which shapes our understanding of the act and thus shapes our responses and reactions to the act and the problem of rape more generally. Accordingly, South African literature and criticism can affect questions of justice, both social and legal, as well as our attempts to support survivors and ameliorate the harm done to them. Rape discourse is also the condition, in a certain sense, of individual enactments of the violation itself, as both perpetrators and survivors of rape derive their understanding of rape – of what it is, what it does to its victim, and how it is done – from the prevalent social conceptions of the act that make up rape discourse. Thus South African literature and criticism, insofar as it affects rape discourse in general, even has an indirect effect on the enactment of the violation. That said, I do not wish to overstate this relationship. English literature and criticism are but small parts of South Africa's national discourse about sexual violence. Nonetheless, as literary critics and readers and writers of fiction which deals with rape, the relationship between the work we do, the works we study and the crisis of rape deserves our attention, at least insofar as we are concerned with the suffering of those affected by rape, and the effects of sexual violence on South Africa in general.

My approach to the relationship between literature, criticism, discourse and rape is distinctly antifoundationalist. Taking my lead from poststructuralists like Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, as well as pragmatists like Richard Rorty, I try to avoid appealing to the unconditional and non-relational kind of concepts – such as Reason, Truth, Order, Nature, Essence and God – that are the hallmark of the Western metaphysical traditions. Like the aforementioned theorists, I have serious doubts that something is or ever could be 'non-relational' and thus beyond the reach of time and change. Therefore I undertake to conduct my arguments in terms of and in response to particular cultural conventions which I do my best to articulate. My intention in so doing is to abandon what I see as the fruitless and misguided quest for transcultural 'objective' moral and epistemological 'Truth' in favour of



offering particular and contextual practical recommendations. As far as the content of these recommendations is concerned, my work is heavily indebted to the critical feminist tradition, which has, in my view, already provided us with richly detailed and nuanced answers to questions of our responsibilities as readers, writers and critics of fictional representations of rape. One of my goals in this dissertation is to reaffirm some of the key insights and contentions of critical feminism, and to offer additional theoretical support for these insights from an antifoundationalist perspective.

This study is of course, an ethical one. My chief concern, the one which motivated the project, is with the ethics of reading, writing and doing criticism of fictional portrayals of sexual violence. However I do my best not to lean too heavily on a notion of an assumed, shared morality in my discussion of normative issues. Instead, I try to appeal directly to the specific values and concerns that I believe my audience will share with me, chiefly due to the prevalence of such values and concerns within the kind of moralities that enjoy popularity in mostly liberal, Christian-influenced democratic societies such as South Africa's. No doubt some people do not share the values and concerns that I appeal to, but such are the limits of ethical rhetoric. I think, however, that the chances are good that the reader will, for instance, share my belief that rape is wrong and that cruelty is bad, even if we disagree on the why of the matter or on other issues.

This thesis consists of three chapters. In the first, I discuss how fictional representations of rape can cause harm by contributing to the discursive and symbolic enabling conditions of rape and related harms. I begin by drawing on the work of Teresa Ebert, Louise du Toit and Sharon Marcus in order to sketch a picture of the symbolic causes of rape, specifically focusing on the relationship between rape, gender and subjectivity. Texts which feature rape, I argue, necessarily have a morally significant relation to these causes, one being the patriarchal symbolisation of male and female subjectivity which is rape's condition of possibility. I describe how representations of rape either contest or subvert such symbolisation, and are thus benign (at the least), or else reproduce or support such symbolisation, and are thus implicated in the primary harm of the violation itself. In order to discuss the relationship between literature, social heuristics (such as stereotypes) and rape, I

turn to the work of Miranda Fricker. My central contention here is that literary texts provide, support, resist or subvert stereotypes and scripts about rape, and are thus able to shift or reinforce popular conceptions of rape in ways that affect survivors' treatment in the courtroom and in their communities. The final part of the chapter deals with trauma and recovery, and draws on the work of psychologist Judith Herman to explore how the potential harm of literary representations of rape may impact the recovery process, and contribute to the persistence or worsening of traumatic symptoms.

Having outlined the potential harm of literature which depicts rape, I, in Chapter Two, attempt to demonstrate how the foregoing analysis may be applied to post-apartheid South African novels via a close reading of J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*. My reading is preceded by a discussion of the controversy that arose over the novel's racial politics and the way in which this controversy caused the novel's gender politics and treatment of rape to be overlooked by many critics and public commentators. My analysis of the novel focusses on the compromised, self-deceiving character of David Lurie, and on the novel's treatment of rape. Much of the controversy surrounding the novel is predicated on readings which assume that Coetzee shares, to some extent, the views of his protagonist, and so in response to this controversy I discuss the novel's use of irony to distance itself from Lurie, whose character and views are continually subject to a critical scrutiny beyond that which he himself is capable of. Where rape is concerned, I argue that the text's careful use of omission and ellipsis in the two scenes of rape, and the intentional foregrounding of the resultant absences, help it avoid reproducing or affirming problematic scripts, stereotypes and tropes about rape and rape survivors. I also discuss the way in which the novel's juxtaposition of these two rapes, along with its symbolism, links Lurie, who rapes his student Melanie, to the men who rape his daughter, despite the stark differences in race, class, culture and background between them. This link, I suggest, expresses a thematic concern with the violent force of unrestrained male desire – a force which is not particular to any one culture or race but which, on the contrary, cuts through such differences and is exerted by men of all of kinds in South Africa. *Disgrace*, I argue, illuminates how patriarchy makes allies of men where the treatment of women is

concerned, despite the racial, social and economic differences which elsewhere force them into tense relations of opposition and competition.

The critical and public response to *Disgrace* – specifically the fact that the majority of commentators overlooked its treatment of gender relations and sexual violence – indicates how certain aspects of South Africa’s cultural context work against the possibility of preventing the rape-related harm contributed to by the reading, writing and criticism of literary representations of rape. This fact is further evidenced by the failure of certain progressive and even feminist critics to identify Lurie’s violation of Melanie as rape, a failure which stands in stark contrast with the values and aims of said critics. Thus, in the final chapter of my thesis I turn to the issue of harm prevention and the problems that face it. I argue that feminist criticism and theory have already provided us with an invaluable means of harm prevention – normative critical interventions – but that this approach faces several epistemic and ethical challenges, some of which are general and others that are specific to the employment of normative rhetoric in criticism. More specifically, I discuss the impact poststructuralist theory has had on contemporary critical praxis, and the way in which such theory greatly complicates our understanding of interpretation and text, thus rendering somewhat ambiguous the status of the epistemic claims and assumptions of our criticism. I also discuss the way in which the simple act of recognising rape is complicated by the ambiguity of text (specifically as understood since the poststructuralist turn), the open-ended, cautious nature of much contemporary criticism and the conventional processes of literary interpretation. As a solution to these problems, I argue for the use of what I call strategic conventionalism: considered, qualified appeals to certain popular conventions for the purposes of making the kind of strong, declarative statements about scenes of rape upon which meaningful and effective normative criticism of rape depends.

Normative approaches are invariably vulnerable to the charge of arbitrariness; if poststructuralism and other forms of antifoundationalism have shown knowledge to be conventional and contextual, then they have done the same for morality. Thus, in Chapter Three I also discuss the question of normative criticism’s moral authority. I argue against the Kantian notion of universal, transcultural moral obligations, and in favour of a notion of moral

obligation as the product of culturally specific conventions and practices. Normative criticism, I concede, must necessarily enshrine a particular ethics, and thus will have limited persuasiveness where one's audience has radically different values than oneself. However, I suggest that this limit to the efficacy of normative criticism does not stop such criticism from preventing harm, especially within communities which widely share certain values. Such limits are, I go on to say, the sign of an argument's normativity and to think otherwise, to believe that good ethical arguments should or could be universal, is to fall back into a Kantian mindset that ignores manifest cultural and ethical differences in accordance with an ethnocentric and violently exclusive doctrine of ethical universalism which treats as absolute and necessary the conditional and contingent values of the Judeo-Christian moral tradition. I conclude the chapter with a consideration of our responsibility as readers of rape, given that our reading risks contributing to rape-related harm. There I offer an antifoundationalist negotiation of responsibility as the attempt to meet certain, culturally specific and conventional expectations of conduct, the meeting of which is the condition of one's membership of a certain community. I also detail how the fulfilling of our responsibilities as readers, so understood, requires that we read attentively and with a deliberate, sustained awareness of how our beliefs, expectations and values inform our interpretation, that we seek out and defer, in our interpretive decisions and judgements, to the views and desires of rape survivors with regard to rape, and that we err on the side of making positive identifications of rape, rather than equivocating about ambiguous scenes of sex where force is present or consent may be absent.

Having outlined the structure and content of my thesis, I must now make a few qualifications and comments. I have chosen to focus, in general, on male-on-female rape. However, for reasons of style, I have decided not to repeat the qualifier 'male-on-female' every time I mention rape, and instead ask my reader to assume that I am referring to male-on-female rape except where I indicate otherwise. I by no means intend this focus to imply that men are not raped, or that male-on-male and female-on-male rape is somehow less concerning or deserving of attention. I am all too aware that the exemption of these forms of rape from discussions about the violation can work together with certain patriarchal myths

about the inviolability of men to have a silencing effect on male survivors of sexual violence, and I can only hope that my choice of focus has not contributed to this effect. However, this thesis by necessity has a limited scope, and although I would have liked to discuss other forms of rape I decided that I would need do much more research in order to do so adequately, and so I concluded that it would be best to leave such discussions for future work. Despite the fact that they share the name of rape, male-on-male, female-on-male and female-on-female forms of rape differ in significant ways from male-on-female rape, both in their exact meaning and in their discursive and symbolic conditions, as well as their broader social effects. I simply did not have the space here to adequately deal with all of them, and so I chose to deal with the most prevalent form of rape. I hope the reader will understand my reasons for doing so.

At the outset of my dissertation, I would also like to make it clear that I understand the limits of this project. Going into it I knew, for example, that certain, critical knowledge was directly inaccessible to me as a male. My identity means that I do not, and cannot, truly know what it is like to live with the threat of rape as woman. I also lack direct knowledge of what it is like to be raped, or to live with the consequences of rape. To borrow a phrase from Bertrand Russell, the knowledge I have of rape is knowledge by description, rather than knowledge by acquaintance. This necessarily puts a limit on the kinds of claims I can make, and I do my best not to speak beyond my capacity to know. Instead, I have relied upon the testimony of rape survivors, and the work of feminist theorists, some of whom are survivors themselves, for my account of rape. In lieu of making claims of my own on this matter, I have used these accounts as the basis for my arguments about the relationship between literature, discourse and rape.

Lastly, I understand that a reader of a certain mind may be concerned by the fact that this project was undertaken by a white man. Such a reader might think to him or herself that it is not my place to offer prescriptions about rape, which overwhelmingly affects women of colour in South Africa. To such a reader I can only say that I think that the problem of rape can only be solved through mutual, respectful engagement across the divisions of class, race, sex and culture, and that I have done my best to be respectful in my engagement, and to remain aware of the limitations of my perspective. As I have already alluded to, I avoid

offering prescriptions to women about how to deal with or understand rape or the threat thereof. Instead, I offer an analysis predicated on the work of feminist philosophers, in the hopes of strengthening their positions and building upon their contributions to the field.

## Chapter 1

# Understanding the Potential Harm of Literary Representations of Rape

### 1.1 The Discursive and Symbolic Conditions of Rape

I am guided in this study by the belief that literary representations of rape can and frequently do cause harm, and the desire to prevent or at least mitigate such harms. This belief, which I share with feminist critics, seems to me to be entailed by the larger belief, which just about every person subscribes to, that representations can and do affect people, and that there is no special reason why such emotional effects cannot be negative. It seems equally uncontroversial to say that the emotional effects of representations, especially those of literary works, depend on the particulars and context of the affected witness and that representations can therefore affect particular groups of people, such as survivors of rape, in negative ways that have to do with their status and context *as* rape survivors. Moreover, the entire literary project seems based on a rough consensus about the ability of literature to *change* us. That is to say, it seems obvious that literary representations can ‘do’ harm, and this potential for harm arises from their capacity to affect us – not just in a temporary and superficially emotional way, but in a manner which often leaves us with a different, and sometimes unwanted, conception of ourselves, others, and our shared world. This radical intersubjective potential is what drives us to read and write about literature, and even the most fervent anti-moralist critic would, I imagine, concede that literature, at least the ‘good’ (that is, affective) kind, can change us. To my mind, there does not seem to be anything particularly controversial in going one-step further, as feminist critics do, and pointing out that this change can be negative or positive and that it therefore may be subject to meaningful moral evaluation.<sup>1</sup>

To claim that the intersubjective moment of reading might be harmful as well as beneficial is not to say that the morally relevant effects of literary representations are limited

to the private domain. Although we might conceive of reading as an individual and deeply personal act, often intentionally engaged in away from others, it nonetheless facilitates a profoundly social process. Relayed in the public medium of language, texts necessarily engage us within the socially encoded relations of signification that are its context and condition of possibility. Our ability to make sense of a piece of literature depends upon our access to publicly circulated, socially provided discursive terms, and our use of these terms to realise (that is, to read) a text reciprocally allows the symbols and language of the text to take hold in our mind. To behold a text in a meaningful way is to engage in an intersubjective process of sense-making somewhat similar to listening, wherein the thoughts of another intermingle with one's own in the mutually understood, public terms of our shared community. Reading is in this sense always a social act, being one of the various ways by which meaning is shaped and organised in literate societies. Literary representations, then, whilst able to harm the individual in a personal capacity – that is, in a way that depends on the specific identity and experiences of said individual – can also harm persons in a systemic way that does not depend on these particularities. In such cases, we can say that the harmed individual has suffered as a result of the production and dissemination of pernicious discourse in which certain representations have played a morally significant part. In other words, representations are capable of harming individuals in both a direct and personal fashion, by affecting the reader negatively in the moment of reading, and in a less direct, systemic manner, by proliferating damaging ideas and beliefs about certain 'types' of individuals and experiences. This second kind of harm does not require of harmed individuals that they have ever read or even heard of the harmful representation, as the damage may be done by others acting in accordance with beliefs shaped by their engagement with said representation.

Where the depiction of male-on-female rape is concerned, the potential for systemic harm lies in the ability of such portrayals to affect how we conceive of and think about rape survivors, rapists and gender. Texts trade in types – insofar as they represent persons, they suggest what it means to be a person, and what it means to be a certain *kind* of person. Characters are written in terms of socially prevalent expectations and categorisations of kinds of persons and therefore always either affirm or contest the veracity of these expectations



and categories. Literature is thus able to reproduce negative stereotypes about survivors, many of whom are women, which, as I discuss later, disempower women and enact a secondary violence on female survivors of rape. Texts also trade in scripts and tropes, with the organisation of a scene of violation (and any subsequent scenes that have to do with this violation) depending on generic and typically inadequate schemas which can, in their construal of rape, trivialise the apparent suffering of the victim and otherwise work to conceal the damages caused to her. Both stereotypes and scripts about rape can also work to naturalise rape, by implying that the potential for rape depends on the immutability of something or other 'about' women, men, sex or power. Rape is in this way implied to be inevitable, to have always already happened, to paraphrase Sharon Marcus, thereby foreclosing on the possibility of rape prevention (386). Moreover, where the harm suffered by the victim is concealed, through the deployment of egregious scripts or stereotypes, the apparent wrongfulness of the act is minimised, which can lead to further personal harm and legal injustice.

We might call the kinds of causes of harm I have just outlined 'discursive causes' as they are a function of language and its various products – the discrete and communicable arguments, terms and definitions of which speech and writing consist. We might distinguish these discursive causes from a set of causes that are 'pre-discursive' in the sense that they underlie and ontologically precede discourse by establishing the terms and boundaries of intelligible meaning. These causes proceed from what Jacques Lacan terms the symbolic order which, in the words of Teresa Ebert, "is synonymous with language yet exceeds it; it is the economy of signification through which the subject is constituted, reality made intelligible, and the limits on allowable meaning are set" (24). An example of a symbolic cause, and one which I will discuss at some length, is the existence of gender-differentiated subjectivities, which function as a necessary condition and cause of rape, and without which 'male-on-female rape' would be unthinkable. In contrast, an example of a discursive cause is the specious belief that women somehow 'desire' rape. Note how this discursive cause, whilst not being entailed by the aforementioned symbolic cause, nonetheless depends on it: we cannot speak of the 'desires of women' without the symbolic framework in which the term

'women' acquires meaning and is ascribed the capacity for mental states like desires. At the same time, this symbolic framework always and only imputes meaning via the discursive terms that express it. The symbolisation of 'woman' is a condition of discourse about women, but this discourse invariably affects the symbolic relations that underlie the term 'woman.' The relationship between these two examples is emblematic of the relationship between what I have here called discursive and symbolic causes.

I discuss discursive causes more fully later in this chapter. In what follows, I refer to the work of Teresa Ebert, Louise du Toit and Sharon Marcus to sketch a picture of the symbolic causes of rape, specifically focusing on the production and delimitation of subjectivity. For Ebert, subjectivity is always a product of an ideologically organised, and therefore historically contingent, totalising economy of signification that produces and regulates subject positions in accordance with the needs of the prevailing economic system and the desires of the dominant socio-political order. Du Toit adds to this the idea that rape is an attack on the subjectivity of the victim. She sees the harm of rape as having to do with how it accrues meaning in relation to subjectivity and argues that the patriarchal symbolic order produces and regulates subjectivities that enable and 'justify' the violence of rape whilst simultaneously concealing its damage. Rape is also one of the means by which patriarchy re-inscribes itself, as Marcus points out. Marcus argues that rape regulates gender identity by 'scripting' its subjects, positioning the female survivor as powerless and lacking sexual autonomy and the male rapist as powerful and sexually dominant. Her argument, along with that of Du Toit, further illustrates how the symbolic and discursive are related, and makes clear the manner in which they underlie the material violence and concrete injustices faced by rape survivors.

Arguably, subjectivity is a slippery term because it is a self-defining phenomenon, and thus prone to providing unhelpfully self-referential and narrowly circular definitions, or perhaps merely because the processes of consciousness and identification that underlie it, and their biological bases, are not yet sufficiently understood. Theorists frequently use the term to denote a variety of different but related processes and phenomena, often contradicting one another (and even themselves) and often without noting these contradictions. I do not have the space here to detail the various unresolved philosophical

problems and scientific questions that face even our firmest intuitions about consciousness, subjectivity and related processes. However, in the interests of clarity I will briefly sketch my understanding of the term before continuing. I take subjectivity to be distinct from consciousness, which is in my view a much broader term that accompanies a variety of associated, but different, processes. Subjectivity, in my usage, denotes consciousness as it emerges in language and society – that is, in signification. It encompasses the narrative, social and identity aspects of consciousness, and is what makes a person distinct, identifiable, and intelligible both to him or herself and within a community of others. It is that which produces, continually, the 'I' of selfhood and ties this 'I' to various internal physiological and psychological states, and external actions, over time. Subjectivity is thus the basic condition of self-awareness and personal identity, and is a fundamentally symbolic and sociolinguistic phenomenon, the content and structure of which depends on its environment and the terms in which it is expressed and through which it is understood. To be labelled a subject, on this view, is nothing more than to *be identified* as possessing subjectivity. Nothing in this definition entails that subjectivity need be expressed or structured identically or even similarly in every subject, and, in practice, there are different forms of subjectivity, and therefore different kinds of subjects within a single society and between societies.

Subjectivity is concerned, fundamentally, with differentiation. To the extent that a distinct self emerges from subjective processes, relations of difference have been enacted between the emergent self and all that is other to it – that it has deemed not-self. Sexual difference is one such relation, with any and all anatomical differences being immediately subsumed into a broader culturally-conditioned schema of imaginary and symbolic difference which is mobilised to realise and secure the self's distinctness. Out of this process, gender-differentiated subjectivities emerge. The key contribution of feminists, whether writing in the fields of philosophy, psychoanalysis or critical theory, to our understanding of subjectivity, has been the observation that these gender-differentiated subjectivities are subject to relations of power coded in terms of this difference from the very moment of their emergence and at the deepest levels of the unconscious. That is, in the iconic phrasing of Simone de Beauvoir,

One is not born, but rather becomes, woman. No biological, psychic, or economic destiny defines the figure that the human female takes on in society; it is civilization as a whole that elaborates this intermediary product between the male and the eunuch that is called feminine. (283)

Moreover, as Ebert points out, “[o]ne acquires specific subject positions – that is, existence in meaning, in social relations – by being constituted in ideologically structured discursive acts” (23). In other words, not only are we subject to power relations from the very moment we enter into social relations, our very subjectivity is produced by these relations, which operate through the symbolic to maintain particular roles and identities in accordance with the needs of the dominant economic and socio-political order. Subjectivity, then, is the effect of ideology.

To say that subjectivity is the product of ideology and therefore always produced by and subject to specific power relations, is to discard the humanist assumption that we all share the same kind of subjectivity. At any given period in time, various subject positions will be ‘available’ within a particular society, and these subjectivities will be defined as having different qualities and capabilities. Moreover, since the processes of self-identification that underlie the emergence of a subject depend on an ideologically organised logic of differentiation, subjects will be produced in accordance with a definitional hierarchy in which certain differences are instantiated, sustained and emphasised in such a manner as to symbolically secure the dominant subject positions. So it is that the categories of female, woman, feminine – the bricks and mortar out of which female subjectivity and identity are constructed – are defined negatively in relation to those of male, man, masculine, in order to facilitate and affirm the realisation of male subjectivity. Du Toit, drawing on the work of Jacques Lacan and Luce Irigaray, makes this same point, specifically stating that, within the Western symbolic order, the feminine functions to delineate the bounds of (male) subjectivity. She contends that in the terms of this order, ‘woman’ does not denote a specific kind of subject, sexually differentiated from the male kind, while nonetheless possessing subjectivity,

but rather denotes the boundary line of male subjectivity: an object-like entity that affirms and delimits masculine selfhood. In a formulation that recalls de Beauvoir, Du Toit states that, in the terms of the Western symbolic order, “woman serves as man’s primary object for reflecting himself – she is his mirror of self-affirming subjectivity” (27). The inference here is not simply that men do not conceive of women as proper subjects, but that women tend to conceive of themselves in these same terms – as ‘insecure’ subjects who only conditionally possess a limited form of proper (that is, male) subjectivity.

There is, of course, nothing essential about this partial subjectivity. It does not follow on from any biological fact or metaphysical truth but, as Ebert points out, is as historically contingent and subject to change as the patriarchal conditions which produce it. On the one hand, this understanding provides hope to those of us concerned with the emancipation of women as it suggests that critical interventions and other forms of discursive resistance can undermine the patriarchal symbolic order (insofar as they affect the thinking of society as a whole). On the other hand, it points to the fact that the dominant symbolic order is the sum of a continuous struggle over signification, rather than a static network of fixed meanings. As Ebert remarks, “[p]atriarchal ideology tries to assert a positivistic, fixed relation of one signified [e.g. ‘not man’] for one signifier [e.g. ‘woman’] in an effort to limit the slipping of signifiers, but such relations are continually struggled over and, consequently, unstable and sliding” (35).

Within this context, texts are sites of ideological struggle, with representations always bearing meaning in relation to a variety of conflicting relations of signification that are either reiterated and reinforced or resisted by a particular representation.<sup>2</sup> Whether or not a depiction of rape is systemically harmful will therefore depend on the relation of the depiction and its constituent symbolic terms to the symbolic order *in toto*. The existence of this relation implicates rape representation in the repressive engendering of women and the enforcement of masculine hegemony that this engendering facilitates, in addition to the specific harms we typically associate with rape.

Unfortunately, the inessential character of patriarchal subjectivity does not preclude it from enabling, facilitating and implicitly justifying rape. The act of male-on-female rape,

however else it is understood or scripted, always, as the qualifier *male-on-female* indicates, consists of two gendered subjects in a relation of forceful sexual domination and involuntary subjection. That is to say, subjectivity, as described above, is one of rape's conditions of possibility. Writing on the relationship between gender, subjectivity and rape, du Toit writes that rape is "(experienced as) an attack on the very conditions of being a self and a subject in the world" (6). Conveying a similar sentiment, Marcus argues that rape scripts take their form from a set of rules and structures that set out proper gender roles in relation to violence which she calls the "*gendered grammar of violence*" (392). This grammar of violence, in her account, "induces men [. . .] to recognise their gendered selves in images and narratives of aggression in which they are agents of violence" and, conversely, "reflects back to women images which conflate female victimisation and female value" and "encourages women to become subjects by imagining ourselves as objects" (393). Both theorists voice a common theme in feminist writing on rape – the idea that the damage of rape depends on the structure and character of female subjectivity and that this subjectivity is enforced by the threat of rape and violently re-inscribed by the act of rape.

Du Toit understands rape "as the symbolic destruction of female subjecthood" which is prefigured by the symbolic denial of female subjectivity (6). "Rape," she states "drives a wedge between female embodiment (sexuality) and female subjecthood (selfhood), placing them in a destructive opposition" (6). Du Toit understands this dichotomy to be a function of the symbolic order materially enacted by rape, and so, at least on my reading, we should not take her words to mean that rape is the origin of these relations. Nevertheless, as Du Toit herself points out, female subjectivity is never 'fully' realised within the dominant symbolic order in the first place but effectively functions as the shadow of male subjectivity, the potential of which is corseted by the dictates of male hegemony. It is hard, therefore, to know what to make of her claim of erasure. Either what is erased is a distinctly limited and patriarchal form of subjectivity that in the first place never ascribed sexual autonomy to women, or it is some kind of ontologically 'prior' subjectivity which exists outside of language and therefore outside of social relations and yet which still somehow provides women with a practically relevant degree of sexual autonomy. In the former case, it is unclear why such an

erasure would be necessary: the symbolic order would have *already* secured women as *objects* of male desire via the same patriarchal forms of subjectivity drawn upon and destroyed by the act of rape. In the latter case, we are confronted with a mysterious and almost mythical notion of subjectivity that appears deprived of content and causative power because of its existence outside of the social relations that practically secure a person's autonomy, identity and agency in a community of others.

What is at stake, I think, in the act of rape is not so much the destruction of female subjectivity, but the violent and traumatising reification of the impoverished subjectivity ascribed to women under patriarchy. It is of course true that this ritualistic re-inscription of patriarchal subjectivity pre-emptively disrupts and destabilises any resistant conceptions of the female self and female other that might emerge, but this is not quite the same as the destruction of one's subjectivity. Despite what is, I think, a significant flaw in Du Toit's conception of subjectivity, she does nonetheless elucidate the symbolic relations that underlie the act of rape, helpfully steering us away from naively materialist conceptions and towards one that is able to account for the interrelation of the symbolisation, representation, discussion and enacting of rape and its constitutive terms.

Marcus, I think, is closer to the mark when she writes that

Masculine power and feminine powerless neither simply precede nor cause rape; rather, rape is one of culture's many modes of feminising women. A rapist chooses his target because he recognises her to be a woman, but a rapist also strives to imprint the gender identity of feminine victim on his target. Rape thus imposes as well as presupposes misogynist inequalities. (391)

Rape, as Marcus here points out, is simultaneously a consequence and cause of the inhibited subjectivity ascribed to women and the patriarchal conditions of this ascription. It is one of the "microstrategies of oppression" through which patriarchy acquires its consistency despite its inessential and contingent nature (391). That is to say, it operates alongside and in terms of the other behaviours, injunctions, norms and beliefs of which patriarchy consists. Rape is

one of several means by which the symbolic relations of patriarchy are continually renewed; it attempts to overcome the slippage of signification by re-inscribing gender difference, sexual hierarchy and male dominance through the ritualistic, material subjugation of women. For Marcus, these rituals follow a certain script and seek to impose this script on victims. Rape is not, on her view, an incomprehensible and spontaneous act, but a discursively mediated one performed in accordance with socially prevalent scripts that imply what it is, how it is done and what its effects are. These scripts both inform and depend on certain assumptions about the male rapist and the female survivor, such as their unequal power and capacity for violence.

On both Marcus's and Du Toit's accounts, representations are implicated in the harm of rape insofar as they facilitate rape's symbolic conditions of possibility, either by expressing and reproducing the patriarchal symbolisation of female subjectivity that pre-empts rape, or by providing and reinforcing scripts of rape. Moreover, the arguments of both theorists suggest that representation is specifically implicated in the primary harm of violation and subsequent trauma. The discursive organisation of material rape underlined by Marcus means that representations play a substantive part both in how we conceive of the process of rape (as a sequence of actions and behaviours) and how actual acts of rape are performed (that is, what must be done and in what sequence *to* rape or for one *to be* raped, according to one's society). For Du Toit, the symbolic organisation of our concepts of rape and its constituent symbols, such as those that underlie 'man,' 'woman' and 'sex,' informs the terrible meaning of rape and the trauma that it causes.

The textual production and regulation of subjectivity plays a significant part in the secondary harms that follow on from the primary violation of rape. As Du Toit points out, the 'compromised' state of female subjectivity within the patriarchal symbolic order underlies the consistent misrecognition of rape and its harms. In her view, rape is often egregiously misidentified as nothing more than 'sex' or trivialised as 'not that bad' because women are seldom understood as possessing sexual agency in the first place. The symbolisation of the feminine as an object-like mirror that realises and delimits masculine subjectivity obviously does not entail an appreciation of women as fully sexually autonomous agents. At best, such a conception accommodates a troubling (mis)understanding of rape as the misuse of bodily



property. As Du Toit aptly demonstrates, this is precisely the kind of understanding that has been dominant in the West, historically. She reminds her readers that the word rape is derived from the Latin word, *rapio*, which denotes the act of snatching or grabbing something for oneself, and was originally used to refer to the theft of any live 'property' such as women, children, slaves or livestock (35). Understood as equivalent to theft, rape was also "framed wholly within a context of male ownership of female sexuality" – in other words, the rape of women was (and often still is) understood only in terms of what was taken from the survivor's father or husband (35). This model of ownership, Du Toit contends, is an example of the kind of inadequate conception of rape entailed by a symbolic order that presents female sexual autonomy as "borderline, impossible or at least ambiguous and unstable" (33).

The property model of rape endures today, as Du Toit goes on to show. She argues that we can see in contemporary legal history the same absence of female agency from definitions of rape, which until quite recently still implied that rape was the violation of property and that women only conditionally own this property. She cites, for example, the fact that marital rape only became a criminal offense in South Africa in 1994, arguing that if women had been understood as the rightful, unconditional owners of their 'bodily property' then the criminality of one's husband 'using' this 'property' without permission should have been self-evident since rape was first recognised as a crime. These kinds of problems do not disappear even when women are deemed the owners of their bodily property. As late as 2007 the South African legal definition of rape implied that normal sex is a "one-sided action done by man on the body of the woman" and that even the presence of "force or the threat of force" in the act by itself does not constitute rape (37). Rather, it was the presence or absence of consent, even in the face of force, that determined whether an act was 'normal sex' or rape. In the courts, cases of alleged rape therefore turned on, as they often still do, whether it could be proved by the alleged victim that she did not in fact 'lend' her body to the accused. The result, which by now is well documented, was that women were (as they typically still are) 'put on trial' by the defendant's attorneys, with women who have just gone through the trauma and shock of rape now being subjected to arguments designed to undermine their apparent moral character, state of mind, decision-making ability and sexual agency.

## 1.2 The 'Misrepresentation' of Rape as an Epistemic Injustice

One way of conceptualising the harmful potential of literary depictions of rape is in the poststructuralist fashion outlined in the preceding section. Such a view sees the systemic harm of rape representation in terms of its contribution to the general semiotic conditions that make rape thinkable and therefore possible. Another way to talk of this capacity for harm is with reference to the socio-epistemic function of representations. Representations catalogue and provide us with social heuristics: cognitively 'cheap' interpretive 'shortcuts' that allow for quick judgments and decision-making with minimal deliberation in social contexts. Social heuristics include stereotyping, profiling, intuitive judgments, scripts and tropes, as well as more dense concepts like common sense. Considered from within the bounds of the preceding argument, these heuristics are but a few of the many ways the patriarchal symbolic order continually asserts and re-inscribes itself in our language and thought and, thereby, material circumstances. However, a closer examination of their functioning reveals their relevance to questions of justice and moral responsibility, even when considered outside of a poststructuralist framework. In this section, I discuss the work of Miranda Fricker, who demonstrates how the function of heuristics and our dependence on them for sense-making and spontaneous action makes possible an epistemic species of harms. I argue that these harms and their causes overlap with the general conditions outlined in the preceding section and with the other, more intuitive forms of injustice suffered by rape survivors. My core contention concerning literary representations is that the logic of culturally dominant social heuristics is embedded within the representational objects of that culture and that these objects are therefore implicated in the harms that proceed from the application of these heuristics.

Fricker outlines "two forms of epistemic injustice" that consist "most fundamentally, in a wrong done to someone specifically in their capacity as a knower" which she names "*testimonial injustice* and *hermeneutical injustice*" (1). She explains that:

[t]estimonial injustice occurs when prejudice causes a hearer to give a deflated level of credibility to a speaker's word; hermeneutical injustice occurs at a prior stage, when a gap in collective interpretive resources puts someone at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of their social experiences. An example of the first might be that the police do not believe you because you are black; an example of the second might be that you suffer sexual harassment in a culture that still lacks that critical concept. We might say that testimonial injustice is caused by prejudice in the economy of credibility and that hermeneutical injustice is caused by structural prejudice in the economy of collective hermeneutical resources. (1)

Both testimonial and hermeneutical forms of epistemic injustice are the result of the unequal distribution of what Fricker terms "social power" which she defines as "a practically socially situated capacity to control others' actions, where this capacity may be exercised (actively or passively) by particular social agents, or alternatively, it may operate purely structurally" (13). She distinguishes between agential or dyadic operations of power – those in which a specific agent exercises some degree of control or influence over the actions of others – and purely structural operations of power – those in which no single, specific agent is personally responsible for the control that is nonetheless being exercised over a certain person or group. Importantly, even in agential operations of power, "power is already a structural phenomenon, for [it] is always dependent on practical co-ordination with other social agents" (11).

Testimonial injustice is caused by agential operations of power and is specifically made possible by differences in "a subspecies of social power" which Fricker calls "identity power – a form of social power which is directly dependent upon the shared *social-imaginative conceptions* of the identities of those implicated in the particular operation of power" (4, my emphasis). The dominance men have historically exerted over women is an example of identity power. Identity power is distinct from other examples of social power as it is derived from "conceptions" in "the collective social imagination that govern" social

identity and that determine, for example, "what it is or means to be a woman or a man" in a given society (15). In the terms of the 'post-Lacanian' feminist view presented by Ebert and Du Toit, we might say that identity power is the expression of the dominant symbolic order – that which Fricker speaks of as "the collective social imagination." Fricker proposes that identity power is invoked in the moment of testimonial injustice due to "the need for hearers [in a testimonial exchange] to use social stereotypes in their spontaneous assessments of their interlocutor's credibility" (14). Which social stereotypes are available to the hearer, their content and social currency, is determined by the relative identity power of the social types depicted in these stereotypes. As a result, testimonial injustice is often systemic in nature: it is frequently accompanied by other injustices, all of which derive from the same operations of identity power. The prejudice with which the hearer treats the speaker in the moment of testimonial injustice will likely be the same prejudice that is responsible for the speaker's depreciated social status. To return to Fricker's given example of testimonial injustice: it is because of the historical operations of social power, specifically in the form of identity power, that individuals who are identified as 'black' have faced economic and socio-political forms of injustice. Those same operations of power produce epistemic forms of injustice, such as the testimonial injustice the black individual experiences when the police doubt his or her version of events due to identity prejudice.

Unlike testimonial injustice, which is made possible by the exercise of agential power, hermeneutical injustice is an example of a purely structural operation of power. Whereas there is an identifiable guilty party in all cases of testimonial injustice, with hermeneutical injustice it is the "*situated hermeneutic inequality*" of the victim that is the cause of wrong (Fricker 147). Fricker defines situated hermeneutic inequality as "the prejudicial flaws in shared interpretive resources [which] prevent the subject from making sense of an experience which it is strongly in her interests to render intelligible" (148). As with testimonial injustice, hermeneutical injustice is intimately connected to the other societal injustices faced by a particular social group. In the case of hermeneutical injustice, it is the concrete, material injustices which result in an unequal participation in the social production of meaning, and it is the blind spots or lacunae, in the culturally available hermeneutical repertoire that result

from this hermeneutical marginalisation which render the experiences of the marginalised unintelligible – both to themselves and others. Furthermore, because of the nature of identity prejudice, hermeneutical injustice will tend to be compounded by testimonial injustice. When individuals from a hermeneutically marginalised group attempt to articulate their barely understood experiences, “their word already warrants a low prima facie credibility judgement owing to its low intelligibility” and this already depreciated credibility judgement may be further deflated if they are “also a subject of identity prejudice” (159). Ultimately, those who are hermeneutically marginalised due to historical inequality, such as women, will find their attempts to articulate barely understood experiences, or to provide the interpretative resources needed to render such experiences intelligible to others, further compounded by testimonial injustice.

Fricker’s account illuminates a species of injustice that typically follows rape, and makes possible a clear and coherent description of the relationship between discursive treatments of rape and the material injustices suffered by rape survivors and those who live with the fear of rape. Returning to Du Toit’s account, we might say that one of the mechanisms by which the symbolic order conceals the harm of rape is through heuristics like stereotypes that imply that rape survivors’ reports of their own experiences are not credible. Specious but nonetheless common stereotypes of women as being ‘less logical’ and ‘more emotional’ than men and being especially ‘irrational’ when distressed mean they are subject to low judgments of credibility, even when speaking about their own experiences. Other pernicious stereotypes about survivors of trauma and rape, which imply their incorrigible ‘hysteria’ or ‘irrationality’ further decreases the credibility of rape survivors. This already low credibility attribution is then compounded by the low intelligibility of the experience to those who have not experienced rape and whose common sense understanding of rape grossly understates its harmfulness and its damage to the subject’s sense of bodily autonomy and selfhood. Where the uniqueness of a real instance of rape departs from the expectations of listeners – whose notions of what rape is, what counts as rape, and how rape happens depends on popular scripts of the act – they are likely to treat rape survivor’s accounts with even more scepticism. Rape survivors are therefore often subjected to a demeaning and

almost impenetrable incredulity that arises not from any actual analysis of their testimony but from culturally dominant modes of interpretation that presuppose a great deal about this testimony and the testifier.

On the one hand, the phenomenon of epistemic injustice can be taken to suggest we have a positive moral duty to develop and refine interpretive methods which avoid these kinds of pitfalls by resisting the impulse to quickly 'make sense' of novel events in generic terms. On the other hand, it implies that discursive and representative acts can usefully be subjected to judgements of responsibility or irresponsibility to the extent that they produce, reproduce or otherwise affirm methods of interpretation that result in the epistemic and legal injustices that typically follow the violation of rape. Because texts depend on, trade in, and invariably reproduce certain interpretive methods or social heuristics in order to represent persons and phenomena, they always have some morally evaluable effect on the pool of interpretive resources that we draw upon when attempting to make sense of instances of sexual violence. That is to say, books of all kinds depend upon the same social heuristics as we do in everyday life in order to 'make sense' – in order to produce narratives that are intelligible and, moreover, believable and easily accessible to readers. In appealing to conventions of genre or theme, novels reproduce expected conclusions about the world based on commonly accepted and circulated heuristics, and are judged to 'succeed' or 'fail' insofar as they successfully make use of, or subvert, the tropes and stereotypes that are native to the genre in which they are written. In so doing, they either reify or undermine the heuristics they draw upon, thereby contributing to an interpretive economy in which those heuristics, and the harms they cause, are either more or less prevalent.

The significance of testimony to issues of rape and justice does not derive merely from its legal function. The legal injustice to which rape survivors are frequently subjected is undoubtedly one of our most distressing moral failures, and one which urgently requires political and social solutions. However, testimony is also a matter of more broadly social and epistemic forms of justice – we want and expect to be believed when we talk earnestly of our experiences, especially those that have been particularly harmful and damaging. To have our narratives of these experiences rejected out of hand owing to identity prejudice or

deficiencies in the available hermeneutical resources is invariably psychologically distressing and a significant harm in its own right. When we consider the fact that this silencing often reminds speakers that the society they find themselves in is hostile to them and the claims which underlie their testimony, and in which they are frequently barred from epistemic contribution, the harm appears even more dire. In the case of rape survivors, the re-realisation of the hostility of their social environment, which was so recently and painfully revealed by the actions of their assailant, can deepen the trauma of their experience and confirm the deeply distressing meanings imputed by the act of rape. Depending on how we define the term, we might also say that epistemic injustice acts as a significant obstruction to personal *recovery* from this trauma. The implications of testimonial injustice and its bedfellow, hermeneutical injustice, clearly exceed the already egregious legal injustices suffered by survivors, and point to the personal and direct harms made possible by discursive entities, such as social heuristics and the texts which reproduce them, and, in a more general sense, the patriarchal symbolic order.

### **1.3 Trauma, Community and the Possibility of 'Recovery'**

One of the cruellest aspects of rape is the way it 'imprints' itself on the victim. Judith Herman describes how rape survivors are haunted by their violation, with a host of traumatic symptoms continually 'returning' them to the unbearable moment of rape (37).<sup>3</sup> They typically experience severe depression, anxiety and other mood disorders not only in the days or weeks immediately following their violation, but for months and even years, with these symptoms often suddenly and unexpectedly recurring much later in life and despite any and all efforts to 'move on' (35). Attempts to alleviate these symptoms through personal, communal or therapeutic interventions are complicated and often stymied by a complex combination of dissociation, repression, guilt and shame (42). Trauma victims' suffering is multiplied by an acute sense of social disconnection, wherein they feel cut-off from any pre-existing support structures, abandoned by the world and out of reach of their friends and family (51). Worse still, the feelings of guilt and shame which trauma causes are often

‘validated’ or ‘legitimated’ by a society that treats the victim’s rape as something she is somehow ‘responsible’ for, that she ‘allowed’ to happen. The tendency of trauma victims to blame themselves in a maladaptive attempt to regain a sense of self-control is seized upon by a social order which already always presumes the blameworthiness of women for the negative experiences, feelings, and responses caused in them by the actions of men.<sup>4</sup> Any shame the victim feels is reinforced by a variety of social responses that seem to ‘confirm’ the shameful of her victimisation. Feelings of disconnection and alienation tend to be deepened by the social stigmatisation and active alienation of the survivor in a community that may not believe her, choosing instead to come to the defence of the rapist (who may very well enjoy higher social standing) or otherwise might blame her for the rape.

One might be tempted, here, to adopt a naively positivistic stance, and to dismiss representations as irrelevant to the processes of trauma. After all, discursive entities, such as literary and popular representations, obviously do not play a *direct* part in the physiological aspects of trauma. Some studies, for example, suggest that hormonal stress responses are the main cause of changes in the encoding and recording of traumatic memory that are responsible for many of the intrusive and dissociative effects of trauma (Herman 38, 44). Additionally, the generalised anxiety that follows a traumatic event is thought to have its origins in long-term changes in the functioning of the central nervous system (resulting, in part, from the failure of the ‘fight-or-flight’ response to terminate normally after the triggering threat passes) (Herman 35-36). There is undoubtedly little space here to theorise about how high-level cognitive entities like representations and discourse might spontaneously intercede in the autonomous and non-cognitive physiological processes that underlie traumatic responses. However, threat-perception, and cognitive responses to threats in the events leading up to and during a traumatic event, as well as the entire psychological character of the aftermath of trauma and the cognitive distortions that accompany it quite obviously *are* mediated by discourse and pre-discursive symbolism. More pressingly, social responses to trauma, which play such an irreducibly significant part in either compounding or alleviating the symptoms and suffering of rape survivors, are constrained by the economy of signification that governs the rhetoric and ideation of a community.



Representations, by producing, maintaining, affecting, or resisting the discursive norms and symbolic logic of a society, inform and condition personal and social responses to, and conceptions of, rape trauma.<sup>5</sup>

In terms of the critical feminist view presented earlier, we might say that symbolism and discourse, although not supervening directly on the neurophysiological causes of trauma, nevertheless influence trauma by conditioning the cognition of trauma and traumatic responses. Survivors can only make sense of their symptoms in the terms available to them, and the terms available to them will determine the psychological character of their trauma, their understanding of what is and has happened to them, and how distressing they find their situation. People who witness the primary trauma or its psychological aftermath likewise are restricted to the meanings in circulation in their community in their attempts to understand what has and is happening to the survivor, and how they ought to respond. The rapist, too, draws his understanding of the trauma he is inflicting not from neuropsychology, but from the stories about rape and trauma in his community. To the extent that he consciously intends to terrorise his victim, he will act out a script of rape that 'weaponises' his community's beliefs about the psychological effects of rape.

As Cathy Caruth points out, trauma, "the wound of the mind – the breach in the mind's experience of time, self, and the world – is not, like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event" (4). Psychological trauma, unlike the physical trauma from whence it gets its name, does not give itself over to straightforward notions of recovery or healing nor to metaphors which imply the possibility of a 'return' to some prior state of 'health.' Because the psychic event of trauma shatters the inner schemata and subjective processes that constituted the victim's sense of self-in-the-world prior to the trauma, 'recovery' cannot promise restoration. Recovery, in the context of psychological trauma, denotes a process of adaptation aimed at alleviating and managing the disruptive and distressing effects of trauma and reconstructing a positive, empowered and continuous sense of self-in-the-world.

For Herman, recovery in the above sense depends greatly on the victim's community. Trauma, in her account, overturns the basic assumptions that underlie our sense of selfhood and our social interaction. The individual's sense of bodily integrity, personal agency, efficacy,

and inviolability are compromised by the threat or fact of extreme bodily harm, physical restraint, violation and helplessness. The schemata by which one's self-understanding was organised, and through which one's intentions form and solidify into projects and deliberate, motivated actions, are essentially shattered by a reality that refuses to be assimilated into them (51). Victims of trauma typically express an extreme loss of self-esteem and self-efficacy, and a lasting sense of shame, doubt and guilt. In a phrase, the psychological conditions of a sense of empowered, continuous and meaningful selfhood seem to be undone by trauma. Deeply held convictions formed in early childhood – convictions upon which the individual's social attitudes and worldview typically depend – such as the common (if often unconscious) belief in a caring world, or that others can be trusted, or in the ability to avoid or protect oneself from harm seldom remain intact following the traumatic event (51). As Herman puts it, “[t]he traumatic event [. . .] destroys the belief that one can *be oneself* in relations to other” (53).

Recovery, therefore, is dependent on reacquiring a secure sense of connection with others, and as a result, the members of a victim's community have “the power to influence the eventual outcome of trauma” (61). Research shows that trauma victims who find themselves, despite their feelings of doubt, fear and uncertainty, surrounded by an understanding and supportive community tend to report recovery more quickly, with or without clinical intervention, and are generally more resilient to trauma in the first place, and vice versa (Herman 57, 61). As Mary R. Harvey, who presents an ecological view of trauma, points out, “each individual's reaction to violent and traumatic events will be influenced by the combined attributes of those communities to which s/he belongs and from which s/he draws identity” (5).<sup>6</sup> Obviously, the receptiveness and understanding of a survivor's community, and their ability to support, or alternatively, their potential to alienate, the survivor, will necessarily depend on the conditions outlined in the first section of this chapter. In communities where women are not conceived of as full subjects, where sexual autonomy and female selfhood are symbolically divorced – where, in Du Toit's parlance, rape cannot appear as what it is – the attempts of even sincerely sympathetic and well-meaning friends, family and peers will often have injurious effect. As Herman notes, social reassurance and

support that fail to properly acknowledge or account for the nature and extent of the harm and terror of the survivor's experience tend to deepen his or her sense of alienation (69). More worryingly, in such situations, the survivor is more likely to be met with hostile and unsympathetic responses. Members of his or her community may be unable to make sense of or accept his or her claims of trauma and victimisation, and consequently assume the survivor is 'hysterical,' 'overreacting' or even a 'troublemaker' whose claims of victimisation are imagined to serve some personal agenda. Such responses are catastrophic to survivors' attempts to recover, and can effectively 're-traumatise' them, worsening their neurophysiological symptoms and psychological distress (66).

Even communities characterised by active resistance to the socially predominating logic of patriarchy, such as feminist or feminist-influenced social circles, may nevertheless fail survivors as a result of their unavoidable dependence on the general terms of the dominant symbolic order for meaning-making. This is in part due to the insidious nature of the symbolic order. Even if we consciously resist and reject the organisational principles of the order, we nevertheless depend on it in order to construct and express intelligible meaning. Our responses to trauma will therefore often be 'infected' by images, implications and assumptions that ironically insist on the culpability of the victim and undermine his or her experience despite our good intentions. This will be especially true in cases where members of the community derive their conception of trauma from conventional 'common sense' beliefs and canonical stories, or where such concepts are scarce or absent in the first place.

The use of social heuristics and narrative imagination to engage with experiences beyond the bounds of our knowledge and experience means that survivors' invariably have to contend with various forms of epistemic injustice. Epistemic injustices not only constitute a further insult to survivors, but also actively undermine their attempts to recover. Testimonial injustice, for example, which is frequently suffered by rape survivors in the aftermath of their trauma, both implies the epistemic unreliability of survivors and obstructs their attempts at recovery by driving a wedge of doubt between their community and themselves, as well as diminishing their epistemic confidence. Hermeneutical injustice, on the

other hand, directly impedes survivors' ability to make sense of their experience and to understand and clearly express what is happening to them in its aftermath.

Psychological recovery from trauma generally involves the construction and sharing of a trauma-narrative by the victim. Herman, for example, states that "[s]haring the traumatic experience with others is a precondition for the restitution of a meaningful world." (71). Her outline of traumatic recovery involves the construction of a "trauma story" – an "organised, detailed, verbal account, orientated in time and historical context" that integrates the "fragmented components of frozen imagery and sensation," which is typical of the intrusive, and unassimilated traumatic memory (177). This narrative is progressively furnished with emotional, affective and semantic detail, facilitated in part by a "systematic review of the meaning of the event, both to the patient *and to the important people in her life*" (178, my emphasis). The construction of the trauma story is intended to reduce or eliminate intrusive and dissociative symptoms by integrating traumatic memory into one's life narrative, and to facilitate "the mourning of traumatic loss" and social reconnection (188, 197). Roberta Culbertson, in the aptly titled *Embodied Memory, Transcendence and Telling: Recounting Trauma, Re-establishing the Self*, similarly states that "[t]o return fully to the self as socially defined, to establish a relationship again with the world, the survivor must tell what happened" (179). For Culbertson, this is a complex task that involves a difficult negotiation between the lived experience and a socially constructed reality in which the transcendent personal 'truth' of the traumatic experience cannot ever be fully and accurately expressed, and so can only emerge as part-fiction, but is nonetheless an essential step in returning to "normalcy" (190).

The difficulty that faces victims here is that they must necessarily construct this story, which attempts to recount the inexpressible particularity of their trauma, in the words of others. The first problem here is philosophical: how can a distinct, personal and idiosyncratic experience like trauma be sufficiently expressed in the general, public medium of language?<sup>7</sup> This seemingly abstract problem becomes urgently concrete for trauma victims, whose attempts to express their experience to others (and thereby solicit the understanding and support they so desperately need) are often confounded by their sense that the general terms available to them prevent them from doing so. Fortunately, for victims of trauma this problem

is, in a sense, 'merely' philosophical. That is to say, by most accounts it does not necessarily prevent victims from producing an adequate trauma story that aids their recovery. Some victims are not bothered by this problem at all, whilst others, like Culbertson do not think the constraints of language diminish the necessity, possibility or utility of the trauma story. It does, however, mean that trauma stories, as Wendy Hesford points out, are necessarily subject to the strictures of genre and convention and that their believability is often times not self-evident, but dependent on how well they conform to the expectations and assumptions of the reader or listener.

The second and more pressing problem arising from the negotiation between traumatic experience and language has to do with the phenomenon of hermeneutical marginalisation.<sup>8</sup> As discussed earlier, the situated hermeneutical inequality of women and rape survivors in the patriarchal societies where rape frequently occurs invariably results in epistemic lacunae around the experiences of these subjects, both generally and with specific reference to rape. In the context of trauma, these lacunae become obstructions to recovery, depriving women of the means to make adequate, intelligible sense of their trauma. Without the required concepts, survivors will be unable to recognise their experience *as* rape, and their feelings and symptoms in its aftermath as trauma. If they possess these concepts, they will still often have great difficulty putting their rape and resultant trauma into words, not just because of the nature of language and trauma, but because of severe deficiencies in the pool of relevant, socially accepted discursive terms in their community.<sup>9</sup>

Finding themselves in an unknown and, in a sense, unknowable area of experience, women are typically forced either into silence and self-isolation, or into expressing themselves in the same terms that form the symbolic and discursive conditions of their oppression. As a result, survivors often experience dissonance between their feelings, thoughts and expression where their rape is concerned, or otherwise internalise, to some extent, the damaging misogynistic beliefs that characterise the patriarchal symbolic order. As Michelle LaFrance and Suzanne McKenzie-Mohr observed in a 2011 study, rape survivors and women suffering from depression often experience what they call "linguistic incongruence" (49). They report that, due to the "absence of helpful and empowering narratives" within

their cultural contexts, women are frequently forced to draw upon (invariably patriarchal) “master narratives” which are either simply inadequate or actively detrimental to their attempts to alleviate their feelings of distress (50). Consequently, even when women are not proscribed from epistemic contribution (as in cases of hermeneutical marginalisation), “remnants of dominant assumptions and inadequate language [will] undermine [their] efforts to construct helpful counternarratives” (65).

Put in terms of the argument presented in the first part of this chapter, the dependence of rape survivors on a public vocabulary in their attempts to construct a trauma story forces them to draw meaning from the same prejudicial economy of signification that implies the absence of their sexual autonomy and the partial, dependent nature of their personhood. In the process of trying to testify to the harmfulness and wrongfulness of the violation carried out against her, the rape survivor is forced to express themselves within a discursive and symbolic context which undermines these claims. That is to say, survivors often find that the very words they use turn against them, implicitly contradicting and undermining the story they are using them to try to tell. The survivor has little recourse here: she cannot step ‘outside’ of the bounds of normative meaning without becoming unintelligible, and she cannot dispense entirely with dominant scripts of rape without seeming either unreliable or simply mistaken about the nature of her experience. In the process of testimony, of constructing a trauma story, survivors will therefore have to contend with discursive implications, embedded in the words out of which they construct their narrative, that imply their guilt, shame and weakness whilst vindicating the rapist and undermining the believability and apparent social facticity of their rape.

Whatever difficulty the survivor faces in constructing a narrative of her trauma, she will then have to contend with the undue incredulity of interlocutors whose judgments are informed by prejudicial assumptions about her as a woman, and alleged rape victim. Because social reconnection, testimony, recognition, acceptance and social and legal justice are all such important factors in recovery, testimonial injustice can be extremely damaging to survivors of rape. Moreover, the hermeneutical marginalisation of survivors, the low or incomplete intelligibility of their attempts to ‘faithfully’ recount their experience and describe

its effects, and their reliance on crude and inadequate master narratives, which implicitly refute the truth of their experience, will further depreciate their apparent credibility. The combination of these factors can result in what Fricker calls a “runaway credibility deflation” wherein the apparent “implausibility of what is said creates a lens through which the personal credibility of *the speaker* may become unduly deflated, which in turn creates a lens through which the credibility of *what is said* may come to be even more deflated, and so on” (160, my emphasis).

Outside of its direct impact on their recovery, epistemic injustice has an injurious effect on the epistemic confidence of survivors generally (Fricker 63). As I noted earlier, we tend to be host to a natural compulsion to understand and be understood, especially when the subject matter is of importance to us, or affects something important to us. To be treated incredulously, to be continually subjected to scepticism, even when speaking of that which one is in the best position to talk about, such as one’s own victimisation, or one’s internal experiences, is tantamount to being decreed an unfit knower. Victims of systemic forms of epistemic injustice are in this way made to doubt their ability to competently interpret, or ‘know,’ things in certain areas or situations, which may lead to a more general doubt in their ability to make sense of the world and their experiences. Alternatively, they may internalise the judgements made against them and come to believe that, no matter how sure they feel, they are simply not the kind of person whose certainty counts for anything. They may defer to more ‘authoritative’ sources of knowledge and meaning, or simply be subject to an enduring (and erroneous) belief that they are not ‘capable’ of making adequate sense of anything. In the case of rape, this is yet another way in which the general confidence and sense of empowerment of the victim is eroded, and constitutes a serious threat to his or her recovery – whatever form that recovery might take. Aside from its significance to recovery, epistemic confidence is a key aspect of selfhood, growth and self-knowledge, and so we might say that epistemic injustice is so disruptive to recovery precisely because it further impedes the basic processes of self-creation that are interrupted by trauma, and that must be restarted in the course of recovery.

As with rape itself, trauma is discursively constituted within the dominant symbolic order and in terms of the hegemonic discourse of patriarchy. That is to say, trauma occurs and can only be understood within the economy of signification that constitutes the self who experiences it, and which organises its cultural context. As with the act that causes it, then, the meanings, experience and processes of rape trauma are intertwined with those of subjectivity and its categories, and the social and symbolic order more generally. In the same way that how we write on rape affects not only how it is perceived, but also how it is carried out and experienced, our writings on rape, and on the trauma that follows, contribute to the discursive mediation of individual and communal experiences of, reactions to, and beliefs about rape trauma. In the broadest sense, fiction, alongside other cultural productions, is implicated in the harms that befall trauma victims due to its role in circumscribing the limits of intelligible meaning. That is to say, literature is often, in practice, one of the means by which the black shroud of unintelligibility is kept in place over women's experiences (of rape and trauma, specifically) in communities around the world, whilst at the same time being one of the means by which this shroud may be unveiled. This understanding is a key part of the motivation behind projects such as this one, as it infers the susceptibility of the symbolic order to changes originating in literary (and other cultural) practices.

In this section I have argued that recovery, defined minimally as the alleviation or elimination of traumatic symptoms and the achievement of a sense of well-being due to the restoration of an empowered, continuous sense of self, is dependent on a person's social context in at least two ways. Firstly, both recovery from and resistance to trauma are dependent on the support and understanding of the victim's community. Secondly, both resistance and recovery depend on the contents and 'completeness' of the interpretive reservoir and vocabulary available to victims as a result of their membership of the various communities that define them. I suggested that the degree of support received by victims, and the usefulness and extent of the hermeneutical resources available to them would obviously be linked to the beliefs, conventions, assumptions and expectations of the victims' communities. I went on to briefly describe how communities can fail survivors, and how social prejudice and the hermeneutical marginalisation of survivors *qua* rape survivors and *qua*



women make possible testimonial and hermeneutical harms which can obstruct recovery and greatly compound the suffering of rape survivors. I supported this description with the contention that the authoring and recounting of a trauma story is a crucial aspect of traumatic recovery, which I argued is complicated by the survivors' dependence on language for these purposes. I then proposed that these factors, together, form a cruel dilemma for the rape survivor. This dilemma consists of having to choose between remaining silent about one's rape and resulting trauma, expressing oneself unintelligibly, or expressing oneself in grossly inadequate normative patriarchal language which undermines one's selfhood and experiences.

#### **1.4 The Potential Harms of Rape Representation**

Expressed in the most general terms, deleterious representations cause harm either by supporting a status quo which perpetuates certain forms of violence against rape survivors, or by effecting changes to the status quo that increase the harm or likelihood of harm being inflicted upon survivors. As I have argued, this harm manifests through changes in the symbolic, discursive, hermeneutical and social context of survivors. Symbolically, harmful representations of rape unironically deploy and thereby (intentionally or unintentionally) affirm patriarchal significations of female subjectivity as an object-like mirror of male subjectivity, which is itself always marked by the lack of real bodily or sexual autonomy. These patriarchal significations make male-on-female rape possible and prevent it from being easily recognised as the violation of bodily and sexual autonomy, and the violent regulation of female subjectivity in terms of male desires. The resulting blind spot both mitigates the apparent harmfulness of rape, and plays a significant role in the failure of judicial and legislative processes to deliver justice to survivors of sexual violence. Discursively, harmful representations catalogue, convey and affirm a variety of uncritical beliefs, social heuristics and explanations. As with the symbolic causes of harm, these discursive causes contribute to legal and social injustice. Moreover, they contribute to the hostility of survivors' social context, their hermeneutical and social marginalisation, and the identity prejudice that is responsible

for these forms of marginalisation and the testimonial injustice to which they are frequently subjected. As was discussed in the preceding section, the aforementioned effects of harmful representations also worsen the trauma and impede the recovery of survivors, whilst inflicting upon them additional shame and guilt, and dashing their epistemic confidence.

In my view, then, there is little room for debating the moral relevance of literature to rape and rape culture. Whilst there are concerns about what this relevance means for literary culture (which I discuss in subsequent chapters), they ultimately have no bearing on the fact that literary works can and often do indirectly contribute to the violence and harms of male-on-female rape. Importantly, the possibility of harm poses less straightforward questions about responsibility and culpability with regard to literary representations. Is the author entirely or even mostly to blame for the effects of his or her text, or does the nature of interpretation shift some of the responsibility to the reader? What does it mean for a representation to be benign, and what kinds of representations avoid the kinds of harms described above? These kinds of questions form the basis for the following chapters.

## Chapter 2

### ***Disgrace* and the Violence of Representation**

In the preceding chapter, I discussed how the relationship between the text, its signs, and their shared cultural context is such that fictional literary representations of rape cannot but influence the materiality, politics and psychological effects of rape. That is to say, literary representations always have some ethically relevant qualities and effects. In the course of my argument, I outlined the various ways in which representations might indirectly cause harm.

My chief aim in this chapter is to contextualise my argument and practically demonstrate how we might go about applying this kind of ethical analysis to the post-apartheid, South African novel. In order to do so, I provide a close reading of *Disgrace* that pays specific attention to the way in which the novel frames and thematises its depictions of sexual violence. I start by outlining the enduring controversy surrounding the text's portrayal of race, with the intention of illustrating some of the peculiar shortcomings that have heretofore marked local criticism where matters of politics and ethics are concerned – a topic I take up again in the next chapter. In particular, I discuss the kinds of realist readings which have resulted in its ostensible racial politics dominating critical discussions of the novel. I then address the relative lack of critical interest in the text's treatment of gender and rape, before offering my own analysis of the novel's representation of these issues. My reading opens with a discussion of the compromised character of the protagonist, Romantic scholar David Lurie, from whose point of view the narrative unfolds. I focus on what I believe is all too often missed by readers, including those outraged by the novel's publication – that is, the ironic distance between the narrator and the protagonist, and the implications of being (mostly) confined, as readers, to the perspective and thoughts of a man prone to bad faith, self-deception and gross self-justification. I then move onto the two scenes of rape – the titular 'disgraces' – so as to offer some considerations on how we might make sense of the 'ethics' of such representations.

## 2.1 Context: *Disgrace* and the Politics of Literary Representation in South Africa

Few post-apartheid novels have caused as much controversy and outrage as *Disgrace*. Shortly after its publication, several commentators criticised the text on moral grounds. Some, reading the text as realist, claimed that its depictions of black people are racist or, at least, problematic. The most notable of these critics was the African National Congress, who referred to the novel in their submission to the South African Human Rights Commission's Inquiry into Racism in the Media in 2000. Jeff Radebe, speaking as "the vocal head of the policy department in the ANC" at the SAHRC inquiry, stated that, in *Disgrace*, "J.M. Coetzee represents as brutally as he can white people's perception of the post-apartheid black man" and that he "makes the point that [...] white South African society continues to believe in a particular stereotype of the African [...] as immoral and amoral, a savage" and "violent" (qtd. in Attwell 333).<sup>1</sup> For the ANC, the novel, at least insofar as it deals with race, is a realist text which represents, via social mimesis, the racist views commonly held by white South Africans. Accordingly, what *Disgrace* is taken to 'reveal' is the lasting fear and distrust of blacks by the white population of South Africa. Understood in these terms, *Disgrace* is positioned as the culmination of a long and sordid tradition of white writers presenting and popularising racist stereotypes about black men in South Africa.

The ANC is not alone in this reading of the novel. Several years after its publication, Nadine Gordimer, who had praised some of Coetzee's earlier work, said in an interview that

In the novel *Disgrace* there is not one black person who is a real human being. I find it difficult to believe, indeed more than difficult, having lived here all my life and being part of everything that has happened here, that the black family protects the rapist because he's one of them. If that's the only truth he could find in the post-apartheid South Africa, I regretted this very much for him. (qtd. in Donadio 1)

Much like Radebe, Gordimer seems to read *Disgrace* as an exercise in social realism and consequently appears to understand the text as an attempt to represent the greater socio-political situation in post-apartheid South Africa. The black characters are thus ostensibly representative of (Coetzee's perception of) black South Africans, and the interaction between the black and white characters presumably functions thematically to capture an essential "truth" about race relations in post-apartheid South Africa. Gordimer, Radebe and those who share their views see *Disgrace* as a polarising exercise in realism which intimates inaccurate and troubling opinions about race relations in South Africa.

As Michael Marais observes, for some of these critics, such as Michiel Heyns, the racially problematic social realism they ascribe to *Disgrace*, as well as the interracial gang rape that serves as the centrepiece of the narrative, leads them to deride it as a "Liberal Funk" novel ("Liberal Funk" 32). Such readings suggest the text is a product of white liberal fears of marginalisation in post-apartheid South Africa. Here, the gang rape and purportedly racist characterisation of the black rapists, the setting (a rural, white-owned farm), and Lurie's own racialized and, at times, outright racist rhetoric and thinking are taken to signify Coetzee's own (implicitly racist) discomfort and fear at the changes taking place in transitional South Africa. The idea that *Disgrace* is, at bottom, a text which represents "white marginality in post-apartheid South Africa" has also been mooted by the likes of Athol Fugard (Marais 32). Speaking in an interview in 2000, Fugard said of the novel:

I haven't read it, and I'm sure the writing is excellent, [...] but I could not think of anything that would depress me more than this book by Coetzee – *Disgrace* – where we've got to accept the rape of a white woman as a gesture to all the evil we did in the past. That's a load of bloody bullshit. That white women are going to accept being raped as penance for what was done in the past? Jesus! It's an expression of a very morbid phenomenon, very morbid. (qtd. in Marais 2001)

Fugard's premature evaluation has since come to exemplify a reading of the novel in which Lucy's behaviour is taken as emblematic of the (self-)abasement and passivity whites must endure if they wish to remain in South Africa. Critics who interpret the text along these lines point to Lucy's refusal to report her rape, her willingness to marry Petrus (who is related to, and sheltering, Pollux, one of her rapists), and to trade away her land for protection as evidence that the text is a kind of pessimistic allegory of the apparent social dilemma of whites. The central claim of such interpretations is that Lucy's reaction to her rape symbolises the price whites must pay in order to stay on in South Africa after the injustices of centuries of white domination. In other words, the text is seen as advocating a particularly retributive model of justice that demands the punishment of whites for "all the evil we did in the past" (Fugard, qtd. in Marais 2001). Understood in these terms, Lucy's passivity-as-penance is ostensibly meant to be morally instructive, and the novel as a whole is understood as a particularly bleak didactic meditation on the moral dilemma facing whites after apartheid. Although the interpretation of *Disgrace* as a pessimistic political allegory depends on seeing at least part of the novel as symbolic in design, such readings nevertheless suggest that it is largely mimetic in its functioning. The events are taken as a reflection of (a possible) reality, whilst certain instances of Lurie's and Lucy's responses to events are read as symbolic. Such interpretations are predicated on the idea that the text is an exercise in realism that deploys allegory to generalise the 'truths' its mimetic representations are designed to 'uncover.'

Despite the fact that reading *Disgrace* as a primarily socially mimetic text implies that Coetzee's treatment of gender and rape is also irresponsible, neither topic initially received much critical attention. It seems that, amidst the considerable controversy surrounding the novel's alleged racial politics, its representation of gender and rape was at first overlooked – an oversight that seems bizarre considering that the two central 'disgraces' in the text both involve sexual violations perpetrated against women. Lucy Graham suggests that this omission is typical of "research on South African literature" which has been "dominated" by "a preoccupation with the politics of race" that has served to deflect "attention away from problems of gender as manifest in discourse and representation" ("Reading Rape" 10). For Graham, the absence of any reference to "rape as a fact of violence in contemporary South

Africa” in the ANC’s SAHRC submission is an analytical shortcoming that was repeated by much early *Disgrace* criticism.<sup>2</sup> The omission of gender from critical discussions of the text is particularly concerning because, if its primary function were, in fact, social mimesis, then its treatment of gender would be at least as troubling as its treatment of race. For instance, the opacity Gordimer speaks of extends to the female characters of the novel, both black and white. We are never privy to their motivations, intentions or thoughts outside of what we get from Lurie’s compromised and fallible perspective. Accordingly, they come across as essentially ‘other’ and are not afforded the sympathetic characterisation Gordimer implies is required for characters to be perceived as “real human being[s]” (qtd. in Donadio 1). Furthermore, Lurie’s self-interested approach to women leads him to stalk the prostitute Soraya well after she has terminated their commercial relationship, to rape his student Melanie, and leaves him incapable of properly sympathising with his daughter after she herself is raped. Moreover, Lurie naturalises this behaviour in terms of a Romantic sensibility which enshrines the ‘rights of desire’ above all else, and especially above the rights of the ‘object’ of desire – terms which conveniently justify his single-mindedly instrumental perception and treatment of women. Finally, as was intimated in the preceding chapter, there are serious problems facing a male author’s attempt to represent experiences of violation that he has no direct access to.

If the representations of rape in *Disgrace* are meant to be socially realist then it is hard to see how Coetzee’s treatment of rape cannot be violent. Having no experience of the depicted violation, his attempts at mimesis are bound to fail, and these failures will invariably be recuperated as stereotypes of female rape survivors by a masculinist logic that systematically conceals the harm of rape. This issue is all the more pressing when one considers that the respective violations are not directly accessible to the reader: both are purposefully obscured. In the case of Lurie’s violation of Melanie, her experience is inaccessible, since the entire episode is mediated by him, the violator, who justifies his actions as “not rape, not quite that” (Coetzee 25). In the case of Lucy’s gang rape, the reader does not ‘witness’ the rape, as Lurie, through whom the narrative is focalised, is locked in the bathroom at the time. Furthermore, because the reader, like Lurie, is not privileged with

access to Lucy's interiority (nor that of any other character), her experience of the act is ultimately inaccessible. Whilst I will later argue in support of Marais' claim that the decision not to represent Lucy's rape nor Melanie's experience of her own rape strategically avoids the violence of representation, I nonetheless wish to point out here that interpreting *Disgrace* merely as social realism amounts to conceding that Coetzee's portrayal of rape and rape survivors is wrong in the terms outlined towards the end of Chapter One.

Ultimately, however, claims that *Disgrace* is a realist text are difficult to justify. As I show in my analysis of the text, such contentions ignore or otherwise do not account for several significant aspects of its form. Whilst the novel does indeed deploy realist conventions, it does so in order to ensnare the reader by cuing a typically non-reflexive mode of reading which it subsequently problematises. In other words, *Disgrace* is a postmodern deconstruction of the realist genre which reproduces certain conventions precisely in order to involve readers in a self-reflexive critique of the genre and its epistemological assumptions. For many readers, however, the text's realist trappings are so convincing that its subversion of these elements is seemingly lost on them. The highly politicised readings that were popular around the time of *Disgrace*'s publication, for instance, uniformly failed to take notice of its postmodern aspects, presuming instead that the presence of realist norms was evidence enough of its realist ambitions. Such critical inattentiveness does not do justice to what is in fact a complex text which is very much concerned with thematising the limitations of its attempts at representation. More pressingly, such readings defang the text of its subversive potential by concealing its self-conscious problematisation of Lurie's beliefs, actions and interpretations (all of which reflect distinctly orthodox elements of [white] masculinity in South Africa).

Reading rape symbolically, however, comes with its own set of problems, as Meg Samuelson points out. She argues that "the metaphorical use of women's bodies eclipse[s] and distort[s] the social and political realities they inhabit" and that the symbolic depiction of rape often detracts from the materiality of the act itself. According to her, although *Disgrace* presents "a carefully historicised representation of rape that acknowledges the act of power being performed over women's bodies," this representation at times "slides out of view" as



“the novel slips [...] into a symbolic reading of rape” (88, 92). Samuelson proposes that the setting, which recalls The Frontier Wars in which the local Xhosa and Khoi peoples were first dispossessed, and the linking of the rape and Petrus’s desire for (Lucy’s) land, suggest that Lucy’s rape is allegorical of her subsequent dispossession by the previously dispossessed. Furthermore, she contends that Lucy’s pregnancy, a result of the rape, carries disturbing symbolic overtones. “[T]he language used to describe Lucy’s rape, which has ‘marked,’ ‘soiled’ and ‘darkened’ her,” she reasons, “foregrounds the white womb as a racial boundary marker” (93). Ultimately, although she takes issue with the symbolic saturation of Lucy’s rape with themes of historical injustice, dispossession, and white guilt, Samuelson nevertheless ends her analysis ambivalently, claiming that there is not sufficient evidence in the text to condemn its symbolism in the same terms as Heyns, or to praise it as an attempt to evade the “master narrative of rape in South Africa” (94).

Samuelson’s ambivalence towards the representation of rape in *Disgrace* is shared by Elleke Boehmer who also favours a partially symbolic reading of the novel. She reads the novel as establishing the grounds for a kind of secular atonement in accordance with a distinctly Levinasian ethics. Unlike Samuelson, however, Boehmer reads the symbolisation of sexual violation as self-referential (that is, as signifying issues intrinsic to sexual violation). She suggests that, rather than detracting from the issues surrounding rape, the text’s diptych structure implicitly “sets up an internal debate on what it means adequately to respond to an experience of disgrace and bodily violation for perpetrator as well as for victim” (344), and thereby probes the reader’s own responses to rape, rape survivors and rapists. Boehmer’s reading is decidedly sympathetic to what she infers are Coetzee’s ethical concerns. Her ambivalence, however, lies with the way in which the text, in her view, aligns Lurie’s self-abnegation as perpetrator with Lucy’s abjection as victim. Whilst Lurie’s self-abjection, his acceptance of the status of “dog-man” (Coetzee 146), and his attempt to realise a passive state of extreme subjectivity are acceptable to Boehmer as the price of atoning for his transgressions, the suggestion that Lucy must undergo a similar process, despite her victimisation and the historical silencing and forceful abjection of women, is, for the critic, much less palatable. It is ultimately the representation of the aftermath of rape, of Lucy-as-

victim, rather than the rape itself, which Boehmer finds problematic. Her ambivalence towards the novel's symbolic strategies therefore proceeds from the way in which Lucy, like Melanie and Soraya, ultimately "embeds in herself, her body, the stereotype of the wronged and muted woman, the abused and to-be-again-abused of history" and "becomes, in a phrase, the figure of a double silence" (Boehmer 349).

As the literature indicates, by utilising, at least nominally, certain realist conventions, alongside more postmodern techniques, *Disgrace* presents a narrative that can be read in both a realist and symbolic manner and which demands of the reader an exceptional degree of reflexivity.<sup>3</sup> The absence of sufficient reflexivity, or an uncritical reliance on typical reading habits despite the specific demands of the text, invariably leads to the kinds of narrowly realist readings proffered most significantly by the ANC, but echoed to a lesser extent by various critics.<sup>4</sup> Although such criticism tends to focus exclusively on the supposedly problematic representation of race, its logic nevertheless implies that the text's treatment of rape and gender face similar issues. On the other hand, according to Boehmer, Graham, Samuelson and others, even the most reflexive reading can still lend itself to a metaphorical interpretation of rape which appropriates, and thereby conceals, the materiality of rape for thematic ends.

To express this dilemma in terms of the argument presented in the previous chapter, realist representations of rape present themselves, as a matter of convention, as true or typical of the violation and, in so doing, work to produce and support stereotypes about the act and its victims. The mimetic pretensions of the realist mode, for example, mean that its fictionalisation of rape frequently serves to detract from the specificity of survivors' actual experiences. Worse yet, realist texts often repudiate these experiences by presenting exclusionary and stereotypical scripts of rape and how it is experienced by survivors. Social mimesis urges the reader to accept its depiction of reality as authentic. In so doing, the socially mimetic text positions representations at odds with its own as inauthentic, or, at least, less authentic.

By claiming insight into the essential reality of experiences, the epistemic economy of the realist novel prescribes a distinct set of archetypes to which our experiences and

representation of experiences must conform in order to be recognised as 'real.' In a phrase, realism deals in essentialisms and 'objective' truths, and is therefore profoundly exclusionary: those experiences and depictions which do not fit within the narrow bounds of its schematisation of reality are rejected as 'false.' Indeed, the epistemic assumptions of realism seem irreconcilable with accounts of the radically subjective and irreducibly particular nature of personal experiences, especially those of violence, trauma and violation. Of course, in practice, many realist accounts are deemed by survivors to be authentic 'enough' to do justice to their experiences, or at least to serve ethical purposes. However, it seems equally obvious that a mode of writing that takes so much of human experience for granted will always run the risk of making exclusionary, essentialist pronouncements about deeply idiosyncratic traumas resulting from particular experiences of violation. Whilst this risk seems palatable, and perhaps even necessary, when taken by those who wish to speak of their experiences of rape, it is hard to see how someone like Coetzee might justify a similar decision. In the case of the female rape survivor, such risks are unavoidable if she wishes to speak out. In the case of male novelists such as Coetzee, who does not stand to suffer from the negative consequences that will likely result from his decision, the taking of such a risk would resemble the sort of recklessness that we normally deem unethical. On the other hand, representations that reject realism, or that subvert it by disrupting the mimetic illusion created by its conventions, depend on symbolic narrative strategies which often displace the significance of the act of rape onto the themes invoked by its portrayal. In a society wherein the harms of rape are already concealed, any representation which further detracts from the materiality of rape is invariably harmful. Furthermore, although metaphorical approaches to rape do not come with the epistemic baggage of realist approaches, they may still cause harm by presenting and reifying damaging stereotypes about rape and rape survivors.

How, then, does *Disgrace* overcome the representational dilemma the literature suggests it faces? In what follows, I provide my own reading of the novel. Following in the footsteps of Marais, and James Meffan and Kim L. Worthington, I argue that Coetzee's aim is not to produce in his readers a distinct political response, but rather to engage them in a self-critique of their interpretive and perceptual habits.

## 2.2 The “Great Self-Deceiver”

*Disgrace* begins by describing the relationship the protagonist, fifty-two-year-old English professor and self-professed "womaniser" David Lurie, has with the prostitute Soraya, whose services he describes himself as using to solve "the problem of sex" (6, 1). His relationship with Soraya reveals at once his problematic relationship with women, his self-absorbed nature and his penchant for self-justification, especially when it comes to sex. Lurie's narcissism soon finds him believing that, despite the strictly commercial and professional nature of the relationship they share, the "affection" for Soraya which has "grown up in him" is "reciprocated" by her (2). We are presented with no evidence in support of this belief, and the events that follow swiftly confirm the initially aroused suspicion that it is merely the product of self-delusion. As we soon learn, Lurie's hamartia is his weakness to self-deception. He is, and has always been, according to his ex-wife, Rosalind, "a great self-deceiver. A great deceiver and a great self-deceiver" (188). The extent of Lurie's self-deception is revealed when Soraya terminates their relationship after they happen to meet in public whilst she is shopping with her sons. Not willing to accept the end of their 'relationship,' he effectively stalks her, hiring a detective agency to track her down after the establishment she works for refuses to put him in contact with her. Seemingly blind to, or perhaps simply unconcerned with, her desire to end their interactions, he proceeds to phone her at her place of residence. Their exchange is brief. Soraya, clearly feeling threatened, ends their relationship with the following words: "[y]ou are harassing me into my own house. I demand you will never phone me here again, never" (10). Reflecting on the call immediately after, Lurie offers an unnervingly shrewd assessment of his behaviour in which he describes himself as a "predator" who "intrude[d] into the vixen's nest, into her home of cubs" (10). His self-delusion, it seems, does not prevent him from appreciating the unsavoury nature of his behaviour – even if this appreciation does not produce in him the remorse or shame one might expect to follow from such an insight.

Crucially, Lurie's harassment of Soraya, which takes place within the first ten pages of the novel, signals to the reader the unreliable nature of Lurie's focalisation of the narrative. The events themselves, as well as the thoughts and motivations of the other characters, are rendered accessible only through Lurie's interpretations of them, interpretations which the text repeatedly undermines. As Marais puts it, "[g]iven his solipsism, and the propensity for self-delusion it engenders, the reader cannot but question Lurie's interpretations of both his actions and those of others" ("The Task of the Imagination" 165). The novel, by exposing its focaliser's fallibility, attempts to provoke a critical attentiveness on the part of the reader to matters of representation, reading and interpretation. By intimating the flawed nature of Lurie's perspective, and confining us largely to this perspective, the novel prompts a scepticism of Lurie's understanding of events, and, consequently, of the reader's own interpretive efforts – both in relation to the text and more generally. As Marais notes, through "Coetzee's alignment of the reader of the text with Lurie, the reader-figure in the text," the novel "attempt[s] to secure a performative elaboration of the notion of reading [. . .]" (183).<sup>5</sup> The text thus does not require of readers that they identify with Lurie, and resists their attempts to align his thoughts and beliefs with the concerns of the (implied) author.<sup>6</sup> On the contrary, the novel deliberately develops an ironic distance between the author and protagonist. The very fact that the text thematises the limitations of Lurie's perspective of events ought to preclude the reader from understanding his concerns as exactly coextensive with the concerns of the novel as a whole (and, indeed, as coextensive with Coetzee's beliefs).

Having established the limitations of Lurie's perspective and demonstrated his self-entitled attitude towards sex and women, the text proceeds to detail his pursuit, coercion and violation of one of his students, Melanie Isaacs. After crossing paths with her on his way home, the loss of his weekly liaisons with Soraya fresh in his mind, Lurie invites Melanie over to his house "for a drink" (Coetzee 12). She, who is described as "cautious," hesitates before accepting his invite (12). Later, when he stares at her lustfully as she enters his house, she is described as lowering her eyes and "offering" an "evasive and *perhaps even* coquettish little smile" (12, my emphasis). Such descriptions, which litter Lurie's account of his pursuit of Melanie, invite suspicion as we have already been made distinctly aware of his penchant for

self-delusion, especially where women are concerned. What is certain, according to his evaluation of her body language, is that she is “evasive.” His suggestion that this evasiveness is “coquettish,” on the other hand, is signified as uncertain by the qualifying phrase “perhaps even.” Lurie himself, it seems, is somewhat aware that such an evaluation is presumptuous, that it assumes knowledge of Melanie’s unstated motivations. It is not exactly clear what her evasive smile might indicate; it is, however, clear what he believes (or wants to believe) it indicates. Moreover, he is also fairly cognizant of how his sexual desire is informing his interpretation of her behaviour. This self-awareness is rendered all the more apparent as he, reflecting on the courting “ritual” he is performing, notes that “the girl he has brought home is not just thirty years his junior: she is a student, his student, under his tutelage. No matter what passes between them now they will have to meet again as teacher and pupil” (12). He then asks himself whether he is “prepared for that” (12). The question is left unanswered, perhaps because Lurie is simply unsure of the answer, but most likely because the answer that suggests itself reveals the shallowness of his self-justification: he is not ready for the consequences of his actions. His sole concern is satisfying his immediate sexual desires. Either way, it is clear that he understands the potentially transgressive nature of his advances. His subsequent deployment of a Romantic sentimentalism in his attempts to justify his claim that Melanie “ought to” “spend the night” with him is thus as much an endeavour to hide from himself the unseemly selfishness of his desires as it is an attempt to persuade her to give in to these same desires (16).

What is particularly striking about Lurie’s rhetoric is how closely his logic resembles the masculinist models of female sexuality discussed in the preceding chapter. Invoking the *carpe diem* argument presented in Shakespeare’s “Sonnet 1,” Lurie tells Melanie that “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” and, in a self-serving departure from the sonnet, claims that, if she already shares it, she “should share it more widely” (16). The notion that Melanie, as a bearer of “beauty,” “does not own herself” and has a “duty to share” her beauty – that is, her body – “widely” is clearly rooted in a conception of female sexuality as property (16). Lurie’s rather explicit implication is that male desire, construed as an objective and legitimate

determinant of aesthetic value, demands that women share their beauty (as constructed by male desire) through acquiescence to male sexual advances. Consent is here erased in accordance with a depiction of sex as something which is owned and, following a peculiar mandate of communal circulation, must be shared, especially by those who are physically desirable. Lurie's argument reveals the extent of his egocentric self-justification whilst simultaneously evoking a history of female sexual subjection. The objectifying logic of his rhetoric and self-justification, rendered entirely transparent by phrases such as "She does not own herself," prefigure his subsequent violation of Melanie by placing him firmly within the context of a history of violation and transgression. (16). His subsequent raping of Melanie thus serves as a jarring confirmation of what the text has already intimated: his attitude and actions towards women are part of a "long history of exploitation" carried out in accordance with the demands of the masculine ego (53).

### **2.3 Melanie's Silence**

What can be said of the text's depiction of Lurie's rape of Melanie? More importantly, what *should* be said? First, it must be noted that the depiction's status as 'rape' is contested, both in the text and the critical literature. The scene itself juxtaposes descriptions of the forceful and intrusive nature of Lurie's actions alongside a seemingly contradictory justification of the act as "not quite" rape (25). Lurie, for example, is described (describes himself?) as an "intruder" who, without warning, proceeds to "thrust himself upon" Melanie, who is "too surprised to resist" (24). Also noteworthy is her cry of "No! Not now," followed as it is by the statement "[b]ut nothing will stop him" (25). Such details seem, surely, irreconcilable with the notion that what is being described is in some way consensual. And yet these seemingly damning particulars are followed by the assertion that what Lurie is doing to Melanie is

Not rape. Not quite that, but undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core. As though she had decided to go slack, die within herself for the duration, like a

rabbit when the jaws of the fox close on its neck. So that everything done to her might be done, as it were, far away. (Coetzee 25)

As Meffan and Worthington rightly point out, “the self-condemnation implied in the image [of predation] suggests an admission of guilt that cuts against the qualifier ‘not quite’” (140). On their reading, this (self-)justification is a product of Lurie’s bad faith; he is self-consciously hiding the truth from himself and, in turn, the reader. In this regard, the recurring image of predation, which Lurie previously used to describe his harassment of Soraya, is particularly revealing as it suggests that he has enough self-knowledge to understand that his actions are part of a pattern of preying on vulnerable women. The image, then, both “cuts against” the preceding qualification and demonstrates the extent of Lurie’s guilt: he is able, but unwilling, to recognise the violent nature of his actions. To accept, then, his self-justification as proof that he is innocent of the crime of rape, or otherwise unable to understand that what he is doing is raping, is to indulge his bad faith and to share in his refusal to confront the uncomfortable fact that Melanie simply does not consent (“No, not now!”). If, on the other hand, readers assume the suggestion that what Lurie is doing “to” Melanie is “not quite” rape, is for some reason not attributable to Lurie’s thoughts, then they are obliged to judge the veracity of this claim for themselves (Coetzee 25). Here, the ethical dangers of reading *Disgrace* in a narrowly realist way are quite clear. If readers assume, in accordance with realist conventions, that there is always a clear separation between narrator and protagonist, and that the former is omniscient, they will find themselves prompted to accept that a penetrative sexual act “done to” someone who actively does not consent and “die[s] within herself for the duration” is somehow “not quite” rape (25). The fact that Melanie clearly expresses that she does not consent to Lurie’s advances should be enough, I think, to disqualify any interpretation that labels his actions anything other than rape. Moreover, the description of Melanie’s reaction is an eloquent but nonetheless almost ‘textbook’ description of the dissociation reported by rape survivors (See Herman, and Edna B. Foa and Diana Hearst-Ikeda). Ultimately, neither reading acquits Lurie and, as such, the purpose of the paragraph, despite its content, cannot be the justification of his actions. Indeed, this apparent attempt



at mitigation, juxtaposed as it is against the contradictory details which immediately precede it, ought to invite scepticism from the reader. One might well surmise that what is expected from the reader here is not the unthinking acceptance of the self-contradicting justification we are given, but rather a reflexive attentiveness to the terms in which the entire scene is conveyed (by, notably, the perpetrator), and, particularly, to the obvious absence of the victim's voice.

Troublingly, many critics who rebuke narrowly realist interpretations of the text nevertheless seem to accept Lurie's self-serving gloss of his behaviour as "not quite" rape (25). David Attwell, despite acknowledging that "the authorial ironies extend well beyond what Lurie is capable of recognising," equivocally refers to "[t]he rape – if that is what it is – of Melanie" (337, 338). Whilst I do not here wish to claim that my own reading of this scene is somehow less contingent and subjective than Attwell's, I nevertheless find it worrying that he does not offer any considered explanation for his equivocation which, per my reading, seems to ignore clear indications of Melanie's non-consent. Similarly, Samuelson and Boehmer, whose analyses are directly concerned with issues of rape and gender, are unable or unwilling to call Lurie's actions here 'rape.' Boehmer refers to the "near-rape" of Melanie, thereby implying, seemingly, that her non-consent alone does not qualify her "violation" as rape and that, presumably, some other feature(s) of their prior and subsequent interaction somehow erase or dissolve her non-consent in this scene (357, 344). Samuelson, in an article about rape representation, says of Lurie's "sexual relations" with Melanie only that they are "subsequently labelled abuse" with her phrasing suggesting, at best, that she is ambivalent about the accuracy of this label (91). I cannot divine why these critics opted not to call Melanie's violation rape. It is, however, worth noting just how easily critical readings, even those produced with the best of intentions, can further contribute to the mystification of rape and its harms. The mistake of such critics, I believe, is an inattentiveness to the consequences of the absence of Melanie's interiority from the scene of her violation.

The absence of Melanie's interiority has important implications for our reading of her violation. As Meffan and Worthington point out, "in the absence of what might be called [Melanie's] 'voice' [...] the reader is left to interpret her actions and is thus as open to charges

of (mis)appropriation of her motives and desires as is the protagonist” (140). Certainly, it seems clear that the absence of Melanie’s ‘voice’ forces readers to produce their own judgements, despite the extremely limited perspective to which they, like Lurie, are restricted. Moreover, Meffan and Worthington’s observation that the text here aligns readers with Lurie and thereby implies that they are complicit in the harms of their own interpretations, is especially percipient. I do, however, think that a stronger claim needs to be made: where readers accept the given justification, they are not merely misappropriating Melanie’s desires and motives but are in fact participating in the same discursive economy which makes Lurie’s denial possible. To accept that a scene of sexual penetration without consent is ‘not quite rape’ is to participate in the ongoing mystification of rape and its harms. Moreover, to reproduce this reading, either in academic criticism or in informal discussions with others, is to reify the symbolic structures which marginalise survivors and excuse perpetrators. To even talk of misappropriation here seems strange: we are told that Lurie’s sexual advances are “undesired to the core” by Melanie. We are told that she does not consent. Although we do not have access to her interiority, we are nevertheless given all the information we need to judge that Melanie does not desire, want, accept or agree to Lurie’s sexual advances. To understand this scene as something other than rape is not to misappropriate Melanie’s motives and desires, but to completely ignore them. In a word, what is at issue is the *silencing* of Melanie (by interpretations which deny or overlook her resistance and her subjectivity), rather than just the misappropriation of her motives.

The absence of Melanie’s ‘voice,’ of her experience and interpretation of her violation from its depiction, far from being irresponsible, amounts to a rejection of normative and determinate readings of rape. By refusing to represent Melanie’s interiority, Coetzee avoids reproducing a stereotypical and essentialist image of the “rape victim” and instead, through the opacity of her character, imparts a sense of the irreducible alterity of the Other. Furthermore, by aligning readers with the perpetrator, both in terms of perspective and as producers of flawed interpretations, the text is able to problematise our reading and interpreting processes, specifically in relation to scenes of trauma and violence against the Other. “The lesson,” Meffan and Worthington rightly observe, “is one familiar to Coetzee’s

readers: how readily the narrative of another, particularly a silent Other, can be conscripted to meet the requirements of one's own story, one's own interpretation" (140). Such lessons are all the more important when one considers that, in matters of discriminatory violence, our interpretations are never neutral: they always function either normatively to reflect dominant beliefs or subversively to reject or problematise such beliefs. If reading rape ethically involves paying attention to what Lynn Higgins and Brenda Silver refer to as the "conspicuous absence" (of aspects) of rape from its depiction, then texts which foreground these absences and engage the reader with the implications of the resulting lacunae can, in this regard, be called responsible (2). *Disgrace's* purposeful and self-aware attentiveness to the elliptical structure of its representation of Melanie's rape thus works to mitigate the potential harms of its considered omission of the victim's voice. Coetzee here acknowledges the limits of his perspective and of representation in general by refusing to speak *for* rape survivors or directly *of* their radically subjective experiences of rape. At the same time, by foregrounding the narrative lacuna left by this refusal, he also attempts to resist the kinds of readings which might take his incomplete representations as somehow instructive of reality or true.

Immediately following his rape of Melanie, Lurie is "overtaken with such dejection, such dullness, that he sits slumped at the wheel [of his car] unable to move" (Coetzee 25). He describes his actions as "a mistake, a huge mistake" and "has no doubt" that "[a]t this moment, she, Melanie, is trying to cleanse herself of it, of him. He [imagines] her running a bath, stepping into the water, eyes closed like a sleepwalker's" (25). It is unclear what precisely causes his sudden feelings of dejection. Although it seems reasonable to conclude they are the product of a sudden realisation of guilt, there is no direct textual evidence that he actually feels guilty or remorseful.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, aside from an obligatory and particularly insincere admission of guilt during his disciplinary hearing, Lurie never so much as refers to the event in a manner that suggests his culpability. He is, however, aware that his actions were transgressive: the image of cleansing tells us as much. Given its context, the imagined act of Melanie "cleans[ing] herself [...] of him" is predominantly symbolic, since it suggests an attempt to reclaim a sense of bodily integrity and autonomy, after her bodily integrity has

been contravened and her autonomy denied by an act of sexual violation. The fact that Lurie envisions this act, a common trope in representations of the aftermath of sexual violation, further supports the notion, put forward earlier, that he is aware of the harm he has caused. His refusal to accept blame and his subsequent avoidance of terms that imply his blameworthiness thus seem to be attempts to preserve his sense of self from the hostile realisation that he is, in fact, a rapist. In a phrase, Lurie's self-concern, his attachment to a certain self-regard, is greater than his sense of responsibility.

Strikingly, the image of a traumatised Melanie bathing finds a parallel in Lucy's rape, as she bathes immediately after her ordeal just as Lurie imagines Melanie does.<sup>8</sup> This recurrent image is but one part of a symbolic apparatus that uses corresponding sets of signs to forge thematic links between the two rape scenes. Another such image is fire, which is used by Lurie to describe the desire that motivated his pursuit of Melanie to her father (Coetzee 166). In an attempt to justify his behaviour through an appeal to passion, Lurie, who is literally set aflame when his own daughter is raped, says the following to Melanie's father:

'something unexpected happened. I think of it as a fire. She struck up a fire in me.'

[...]

'A fire: what is remarkable about that? If a fire goes out, you strike a match and start a new one. That is how I used to think, yet in the olden days people worshipped fire. They thought twice before letting a flame die, a flame-god. It was that kind of flame your daughter kindled in me. Not hot enough to burn me up, but real: a real fire.'

Burned – burnt – burnt up. (166)

Of particular interest here is Lurie's reflection on the different past tense forms of the verb "burn," which echoes a thought he has upon examining his fresh burn wounds while he is locked in the lavatory (as his daughter is being raped): "his whole scalp is tender. Everything is tender, everything is burned. Burned, burnt" (96). Furthermore, his comparison of his desire

for Melanie to a “kind of flame [...] [n]ot hot enough to burn [him] up but real: real fire” recalls the “cool blue flame” of the methylated spirits used by Lucy’s rapists to set him alight, the relatively low temperature of which is “not hot enough” to “burn him up” but which nevertheless leaves him “burnt” (166, 96). These recurrent symbols, along with the text’s diptych structure, convey the equivalence of certain aspects of each scene of rape, and point to the continuity of the concerns they respectively raise. In other words, the recurrence of the images mirrors the recurrence of the themes which they in part signify, despite the differences in their usage and context. For example, the repeated use of the image of bathing in the aftermath of Lucy’s rape recalls Melanie’s rape whilst also reminding the reader of Lurie’s culpability and complicity as a perpetrator of both symbolic (that is, rhetorical and discursive) and literal (that is, physical and material) violence against women. Along with the other recurring symbols and corresponding signs, the repetition of the image of cleansing indicates that, although the two instances of rape are distinct and, in a sense, incomparable, they are nevertheless both acts of transgressive sexual violence carried out by men in accordance with a phallogocentric worldview.<sup>9</sup> The symbolism here works against the problematic tropes that seem to be evoked by the novel’s deployment of race by associating Lurie with the rapists despite the difference in their identities, contexts and, presumably, motivations. Whereas the fact that Lurie is white and middle-class leads him (and many readers) to overlook his own violation whilst condemning the same crime carried out, albeit in a more aggravated manner, by working-class black men, the symbolic correspondence between the two scenes suggests the similarity of their crimes, and thus foregrounds his hypocrisy. Far from emphasising the racial differences in the respective perpetrators, the novel’s imagery works to indicate precisely how much Lurie has in common with the men who rape his daughter: all are rapists who use what power they have at their disposal to violently enforce their will on women, and all of them draw the justification for their actions from a masculinist lexicon produced by millennia of male dominance.

#### **2.4 “You weren’t there” – Lucy and the ‘Voice’ of History**

Following a disciplinary inquiry into his rape of Melanie that results in his dismissal, Lurie seeks refuge from the scandal with his daughter in the rural village of Salem in the Eastern Cape. Through his initial interactions with his daughter, it soon becomes clear that his self-absorption is not limited to his sexual relations but also has a profound effect on his relations and views in general. In many ways, Lucy is precisely what Lurie is not: humble, female, young, progressive, homosexual and desirous of a simple, practical life. While she is relatively accepting of the arrogant, exceedingly male, old, and, by his own admission, old-fashioned, intellectual that is her father, he seems unable or unwilling to fully accept who his daughter has become or the life she has chosen for herself. Lurie is critical of Lucy's lifestyle, her lesbianism, her previous lover and her friends. As a result, despite her patience and tolerance, the first few days of his stay see a degree of distance developing between the two. Lurie's failure to sympathise with his daughter after the rape, due to his masculine self-absorption, is in this way telegraphed to the reader in the pages prior to the violation – the aftermath of which ultimately reveals the depth of his failure. As with Melanie's violation, Coetzee depicts Lucy's violation elliptically. As mentioned earlier, whereas the text earlier avoids the violence of representation by omitting Melanie's voice from the scene of her violation, here the scene of sexual violence is itself absent. Lurie is locked in the lavatory and the gang rape of Lucy thus occurs 'offstage,' as it were. Aside from Lucy's reflections some time after her violation, most of the details about the rape are implied, or otherwise fabricated by Lurie's imagination, and all of them are provided post factum. Furthermore, the novel spends a great deal of the remaining narrative actively thematising the absence of Lurie and, by association, the reader, from the actual scene of rape. After Lucy encounters one of her rapists, the child Pollux, at Petrus's party, and it is discovered that he is in Petrus's care, Lurie, for neither the first nor last time, urges his daughter to report her rape to the police. When he presses her, she responds with the following words: "I do not need to defend myself before you. *You don't know what happened*" (134). Troubled, Lurie later angrily reacts to Bev Shaw's statement that Lucy "has been through such a lot" by saying "I know what Lucy has been through. I was there," to which Bev replies "[b]ut, you weren't there, David. She told me. You weren't" (140). Bev's meaning, of course, is quite literal: Lurie did not witness his daughter's rape, he does

not know what exactly happened, and is left to imagine the events for himself. Crucially, as a male who remains committed to a patriarchal symbolic order, and who has only ever experienced rape as a perpetrator, he cannot, as Marais puts it, “imagine himself into her position” (170). He can, however, imagine himself into the rapists’ position. According to the narrator, Lurie “can, if he concentrates, if he loses himself, be there, be the men, inhabit them, fill them with the ghost of himself” (Coetzee 160). The text here again emphasises the similarities between Lurie and his daughter’s rapists and further indicates that these similarities are the chief cause of the seemingly irreconcilable differences between himself and his daughter. Lurie’s subsequent “outrage” at Bev’s words thus ironically only confirms that which it rails against, namely the fundamental alterity of Lucy’s experience and his inability to properly sympathise with his daughter:

*You weren’t there. You don’t know what happened. Where, according to Bev Shaw, was he not? In the room where the intruders were committing their outrages? Do they think he does not know what rape is? Do they think he has not suffered with his daughter? What more could he have witnessed than he is capable of imagining? Or do they think that, where rape is concerned, no man can be where the woman is? Whatever the answer, he is outraged, outraged at being treated like an outsider. (140)*

Each rhetorical question here suggests an answer which contradicts the intended implication of the question. Lurie was not “[i]n the room.” He does not truly “know what rape is,” as is clear from his inability to recognise that he has committed this very crime against Melanie. Whilst he has suffered, he has not “suffered with” Lucy because he does not share her experience of trauma and is unable to develop the sympathetic imagination necessary to share in her suffering despite the inaccessibility of her experiences. Because of the aforementioned limits to his imaginative abilities, had he been in the room he would in fact “have witnessed [far] more than he is capable of imagining.” Even if he were able to imagine

himself in her position, his imaginings could not supplant the experience of the act itself. The very function of his abstractions is to provide a workable mental representation in the absence of experience. Indeed, his dependence on his imagination to construct a version of the unseen event indicates how much more he *could* have witnessed. Finally, where male-on-female rape is concerned, obviously “no man can be where the woman is.” Moreover, the generality of this question belies the specificity of Bev’s and Lucy’s respective statements. While his maleness is what prevents him from having any idea of what it is to be raped as a woman, it is Lurie’s specific choices, his selection of beliefs and self-absorption which prevent him even beginning to understand Lucy’s experience.

The fact that Lurie is unable to sympathise properly with Lucy is relatively unsurprising. He is, after all, a rapist himself, and remains committed to the same self-serving and misogynist Romantic sentimentalism through which he attempts to justify his harassment of Soraya and abuse of Melanie. Indeed, his commitment to a symbolic order which reduces female sexual subjectivity to a function of male desire precludes him from understanding what has happened to his daughter, just as it allows him to avoid the truth of what he has done to Melanie. In every way that matters, Lurie is compromised: he is only able to interpret his daughter’s rape in terms of details extraneous to the violation itself, as acknowledging the fundamental nature of the trauma would involve acknowledging that he has himself enacted this trauma on another. As such, his response to his daughter’s rape is invariably as paternalistic as his relation to her in general: he understands her trauma in terms of what has been done to *his* daughter, and thereby what has been done to *him* (through her).

Initially, Lurie is entirely unable to think about Lucy’s rape in terms of what has been done to her as a subject and can only relate to her as he relates to all women – that is, as an object for and of his affection(s). This sexually objectifying relation is intimated repeatedly prior to the rape: upon first arriving at the farm, Lurie, on meeting his daughter, thinks “she has put on weight” (59). He reflects on how her “hips and breasts are now [...] ample,” and subsequently observes that “*ample* is a kind word for Lucy. Soon she will be positively heavy. Letting herself go, as happens when one withdraws from love” (59, 65). For Lurie, who “does not like women who make no effort to be attractive,” Lucy’s weight gain is regrettable as, to



his mind, a woman's attractiveness is fundamental to her value (72). Perhaps to reassert to himself her worth, he later reflects on how she is a "woman in the flower of her years, attractive despite the heaviness, despite the unflattering clothes" (76). He goes on to lament the fact that, being a lesbian, she is "lost to men" – an unhappy thought to a man who understands women's worth chiefly in terms of male desire (76). Tellingly, after she teases him, he notes the sharpness of her wit and how "he has always been attracted to women of wit. Wit and beauty. With all the best will in the world he could not find wit with Melanie. But plenty of beauty" (78). Again, such thoughts reveal how Lurie is seemingly unable to relate to women, even his own daughter, without reference to his own (sexual) desires. The fact that his appreciation in Lucy of a quality he finds attractive immediately leads him to think back to his most recent sexual encounter and to feel "a shudder of voluptuousness," which he is "not [...] able to conceal" from his daughter, is especially revealing in this regard (78). The links between Lurie's previous sexual endeavours (or, rather, transgressions) and his perception of his daughter demonstrate how his paternalistic affection towards Lucy also operates in terms of his desires and is merely a variation of the sexual desires which guide his relation to women more generally.

Significantly, Lurie's slavish commitment to his carnal cravings works to blur even those boundaries that typically exist between filial and sexual relations. This is most obviously conveyed in the opening of the chapter in which Lucy is raped:

It is Wednesday. He gets up early, but Lucy is up before him. He finds her watching the wild geese on the dam.

'Aren't they lovely,' she says. 'They come back every year. The same three. I feel so lucky to be visited. To be the one chosen.'

Three. That would be a solution of sorts. He and Lucy and Melanie. Or he and Melanie and Soraya. (88)

In what is perhaps the most symbolically saturated passage in the novel, the text here links Lucy's impending gang rape by three men to her father's sexual fantasies. Given the context,

it is hard not to read the three geese as a metaphorical foreshadowing of Lucy's imminent rape (see Samuelson 92). It is unclear what we are meant to make of her declaration that she feels "lucky" to be "visited. To be the one chosen," although I must admit I find the irony of her words, which are an exact reversal of how she no doubt feels about being "chosen" by the "three" rapists who "visit" her in the events that follow, somewhat distasteful. The text here seems to me altogether too taken up with its own narrative form, to the point where its symbolism seems to be designed to 'tantalise' the reader with the impending attack. Regardless, the fact that this symbolism suggests to Lurie a "solution of sorts" to, presumably, "the problem of sex" with which he is perpetually concerned, is particularly striking (Coetzee 88, 1). Is he toying with the idea of having sexual relations with his daughter (and Melanie)? Certainly the subsequent sentence, which clearly signifies a ménage-a-trois of one kind or another, seems to suggest so. It is also striking that, earlier in the novel, Melanie sleeps in Lucy's bed, and is repeatedly likened to a child.<sup>10</sup> The filial bond here is figuratively broken by the force of unrestrained male sexual desire as Lurie flirts with taboo, just as this same force is about to manifest itself through the three rapists, whose crime results in the severing of the filial bond in a more literal sense. This passage then, serves to signpost the central theme of the latter half of the novel: the complicity of Lurie in the historical forces which "speak through" his daughter's rapists (156).

Importantly, history also speaks through the reader, and the thematic concern with Lurie's complicity in the violation of his daughter is mirrored by a concern with readers' complicity in the perpetuation of similar historical forces through their readings. Reading is, of course, always an historical act: our context (and the past events of which it is the sum) delimits the possibilities of our interpretations and provides, in the form of culture and language, the very means by which we produce and express meaning. Where the object of our interpretation is ironically omitted from its own representation, as is the case with the rape of Lucy, our consequent reading inevitably reflects more about the historically afforded cultural-linguistic apparatus with which we apprehend the depiction than it does about the (absent) object of said depiction. What we make of Melanie's reaction to her own violation, for instance, is invariably a product of our normative constructs, as we have no access to her

interiority and only an extremely limited window into her life. If we find her choice to spend another night with Lurie runs against the notion that he has raped her, or if we mentally castigate her for not being more forceful in the rejection of his advances, or for entertaining his interest at all, what we are giving voice to is a particular logic that inheres in those parts of our culture which inform our interpretation. We cannot know why she returned to her rapist, cannot justify our assumption that her relative passivity in the face of his sexual aggressiveness indicates whatever we might take it to indicate: we simply do not know her mind, nor the greater context of her behaviour. What we are left with is a series of judgements that reflects our own interpretative habits (and the cultural norms that they reflect). The same is of course true of Lucy's violation. Without access to her interiority, and with only severely limited access to a scant selection of reflections on her experience, we are forced, like Lurie, to imagine for ourselves the brutalities of her experience and the effect this trauma has on her sense of self. Like Lurie, what we as readers make of her experience, and her demonstrable reaction to her experience, is largely a product of the historical forces which are speaking through us, which we have *allowed* to speak through us. Marais, citing a particularly revealing excerpt from the novel, says the following of Lurie:

In his very own estimation, his mind has been taken over, is inhabited, even colonised, by patterns of thought that preclude him from respecting other beings. It 'has become a refuge for old thoughts, idle, indigent, with nowhere else to go'. While he knows that 'He ought to chase them out, sweep the premises clean,' Lurie 'does not care to do so, or does not care enough.'

(168)

The task the narrative sets up for Lurie, and by association, the reader, in Marais' view, is the development of a sympathetic imagination – a task that is ironically undermined by the novel even as it thematises this possibility. To adapt his terms for the purposes of the present discussion, one might well say that, in reflecting back at readers their interpretation with all

of its attendant normative assumptions, the text prompts them to scrutinise these assumptions and their interpretation as a whole. Carine Mardorossian makes a similar point in her defence of the ethics of the text, stating that

through his characteristically skilful use of narration and juxtaposition, Coetzee takes a horrific scene of violence and urges readers to view it not as the black hole of analysis, but as an opportunity to overhaul normative approaches to rape, justice, and human relationships. (74)

In other words, the text urges us to “care enough” to purge from our minds the “idle, indigent” “old thoughts” which prevent us from appreciating the sublimity of the Other (Coetzee 72). As such, my reading of the text, alongside that of Marais, Mardorossian, Meffan and Worthington, and Graham, implies that it shares the ethical concerns which inform this thesis. In terms of the ethics of rape representation, the implication laid out by the text is that we must, even in reading its own fictional accounts of the transgression, resist the normative assumptions which colour our interpretations. Such assumptions, which make use of socio-epistemic heuristics such as tropes, social scripts and types, attempt to ‘complete’ any given account by ‘filling in’ the gaps left by its unavoidably limited representational strategy. In reading or responding to a scene of violence (whether fictional or real), using such heuristics to ‘seal up’ the lacunae left by our attempts to convey our incommensurable experiences amounts to reducing the specificity of those experiences to generality. Such generality, of course, denies the actuality of experience, and is therefore erroneous insofar as it is presented or, through its form, presents itself as ‘true.’ More pressingly, as was discussed in the preceding chapter, the assumptions of which such generalised understandings of rape are comprised are often distinctly patriarchal in nature. Like Lurie’s ‘rights of desire’ rhetoric, the dominant symbolic order is organised around male sexual desire and is thus largely in opposition to female sexual autonomy. It should, I hope, be excruciatingly clear why the specific experiences of female rape survivors should not be understood or expressed in the general terms provided by the self-same structures which erode the very concept of female

sexual autonomy. The form of *Disgrace*, then, not only works against the damaging normative assumptions of rape which, for some, are invited by its decision to represent the subject matter, but also actively thematises the ethical issues that surround its choice of content, and which face the representation and interpretation of violence and trauma in general. Whilst the text stops short of providing hard answers to the questions it engages with, it nevertheless seeks to engage the reader in these questions and, in this capacity, might be called ethically productive.

## 2.5 Conclusion

*Disgrace* is undoubtedly a provocative text, one which – no matter how it is read – poses challenging questions about uncomfortable issues. It is also, given its subject matter and setting (and, unfortunately, the identity and reputation of its author) a perfect catalyst for controversy. This fact, however, suggests more about our interpretive practices and national context than it does about the text itself. The great irony of *Disgrace* is that the very elements which allow it to resist a violently normative discursive economy have seen it subjected to readings which operate purely in terms of this economy. The text's careful deployment of ambiguity, omission and self-reference and its thematic concern with its own narrative limitations allow it to deal with the trauma of rape and the complexities of race without reproducing ethically problematic scripts, tropes or stereotypes. Whilst the text does reproduce some of the discursive formations that are instrumental in the justification of rape and the concealment of its harms, it does so precisely in order to reveal the violent and self-serving logic of such rhetoric. The form of *Disgrace* allows it to present the reader with the flawed perspective of a perpetrator and perpetuator of symbolic and material violence whilst simultaneously working *against* the cruel historical forces which inform this perspective by dissecting it and revealing the ironies and bald self-justifications that form its sordid heart.

The controversy that has surrounded the text shows that local literary and political culture is still very much informed by and dependent upon narrowly prescriptive criteria which evaluate fiction primarily in terms of its (apparent) political utility. Coetzee's lifelong

refusal to use his work to support the dominant political views of the day continues to find him maligned by those who read this refusal as an acceptance of the status quo. Readers who expect literary fiction to make unambiguous normative statements about the political context and social issues it ostensibly deals with predictably see the absence of such didacticism in *Disgrace* as proof of its morally irresponsible nature. Accordingly, the ambiguities of the text – which, I have argued, allow it to circumvent the violence of representation – are often ironically cited as evidence of its representational irresponsibility. Indeed, if one believes that what is politically prudent is somehow always identical to that which is ethically responsible then one cannot help but read Coetzee in such a manner. It is, however, precisely the dangers of conscripting our ethics to the forces of history (as most transparently expressed through our politics) with which Coetzee has always been concerned.

## Chapter 3

### 'Responsible' Reading and the Limits of Normative Criticism

#### 3.1 Introduction

Having discussed in Chapter One the potential of literary depictions of rape to cause harm, in this chapter I turn to the question of how we might prevent this harm, and of what might complicate our attempts at harm prevention. Feminist criticism and theory has, to my mind, already produced a satisfactory answer to this question, which can be put as follows: *the potential harm of representations of rape can be prevented through the employment of deliberately normative reading strategies which aim to resist the patriarchal logic of one's culture, as it is reproduced in and by the text.* As I argued in Chapter One, this patriarchal logic is the condition of rape and the related harms made possible by the depiction of the act. Breaking with this logic is thus the necessary precondition of criticism that ameliorates and prevents, rather than enables or causes, rape-related suffering.

This answer is, I think, the best we can do within our contemporary discursive framework, but it is not without its problems. Firstly, the poststructuralist turn has greatly complicated talk of 'reading,' 'interpretation' and cognate terms. Secondly, the aforementioned answer seems to assume that there is something stable and distinct called a 'text' when much contemporary critical theory has, for the last couple of decades, argued that such an idea is merely an effect of convention, that not only is the category 'text' itself wholly ambiguous, but that which it circumscribes, the 'texts' of literary criticism, cannot be 'fixed' in relations of signification such that we might talk of an immutable, determinate object containing certain content and bearing certain meanings. Thirdly, it is not exactly clear how, from within the bounds of a patriarchal social order, and in the invariably patriarchal discursive terms of this order, one might take up a meaningfully resistant – that is, negative – relation to the order itself. Finally, in its call for deliberately and explicitly ethical readings, the aforementioned answer seems to be asking critics to read in a manner that is determinate enough to support normative operations such as moral judgement, which seems at odds with

a general body of theory and mode of critical praxis predicated on the ambiguity of interpretation and the indeterminacy of text.

Each of these problems, which are discussed in detail in the next section, might be understood in relation to two more general problems which face epistemic and specifically interpretative activity: those of recognition and justification. For the idea that harm prevention consists in engaging with texts featuring rape in a deliberately normative fashion assumes that we are able to both recognise rape depictions in literary texts and meaningfully justify our claims of identification to others. For readers of a certain persuasion, this will seem a trivial matter, but as I try to show in my discussion of interpretation, once one accepts the antifoundationalist premises of contemporary critical theory and continental philosophy, the notion of recognition becomes unstable and ambiguous, and the very idea of justification comes into question. Especially concerning is the way in which the idea of textual indeterminacy and interpretive openness which is taken for granted by much contemporary criticism, seems, *prima facie*, to entail the possibility of a text featuring rape on one reading and something other than rape on another, equally valid, reading. As I try to show, this jars with the broadly feminist project of preventing rape and related harms which requires, especially in the specific formulation offered above, that we make it our first task to demystify rape – that is, to adopt a less equivocal, more inflexible language about rape in order to lay plain the harm it causes and afford it the critical social attention and responsiveness it demands.

Problems with recognition lead us back to the more general problem of descriptive justification. For once the identity of a depiction comes into question, we must find some means of selecting between competing identity claims, or of justifying our own claims over those of others. I offer an antifoundationalist view of justification, one which, on the one hand, sees it as the effect of a set of highly technical conventions and rules prescribed and enforced by influential institutions such as universities, and, on the other hand, understands it in more general terms as a psychosocial phenomenon which bears at best a somewhat arbitrary and contingent relation to the aforementioned technical prescriptions and conventions. I argue that whilst the descriptive claims of those who, like antifoundationalist



feminist critics, question the utility and coherence of the epistemic conventions of the Western philosophical tradition will necessarily seem unjustified or even unjustifiable in the eyes of those who subscribe to said tradition, such claims may nonetheless find justification in the more general psychosocial sense by selectively appealing to the beliefs, commonsense assumptions and understandings of a particular audience.

Once one moves past the problems of recognition and descriptive justification, one finds oneself faced with a host of familiar concerns with the justifiability of the norms invoked by the feminist critic. If, as I have suggested, we are always able to put into question the descriptive justifications that underlie statements of recognition as well as justification, then this is even more the case where morality is concerned. Normative claims necessarily depend on some set of descriptive assumptions, and so are as vulnerable as these assumptions to the dissolving effects of persistent inquiry, but normative claims also depend upon a set of values that are generally taken for granted by the claimant. At bottom, all normative arguments depend on unquestioned prior positions for which no rational justification can be given, because, as I later discuss, they are merely derivations of the communal values and practices which one has (typically unconsciously) internalised over the course of one's life. Thus we might ask of normative criticism of any kind on what grounds it can presume to know the moral status of its dynamic literary subject matter. What, that is to say, makes a critic's normative claims 'right' — and for whom, exactly? This formulation, I hope, indicates how general meta-ethical questions that have been left open since the linguistic turn are frequently (if, as I try to argue in this chapter, somewhat unfairly) levied against normative criticism, which is often assumed to have claimed or attempted to claim for itself the special authority (we generally assume is) required for moral judgements to be taken seriously.

Whilst we need not, in making ethical judgements, actually claim any special authority, not doing so leaves us open to charges of arbitrariness and partiality. Moreover, if we admit that our normative criticism has no special authority, then we are left with serious questions about how moral disagreements might be resolved. For if no special authority privileges one moral claim over another, then we would appear to have no means to peacefully resolve normative disputes, no motivating reason to offer our audience or

interlocutor to accept our judgements, especially if they clash with their own. If normative critical interventions are an effective means of preventing rape-related harms, then their efficacy as such necessarily depends on their accessibility and persuasiveness, and so these kinds of broad meta-ethical concerns are not merely philosophical: they constitute yet another complication that must be dealt with in order for us to succeed in the prevention of any avoidable harms related to our reading of rape.

Thus in considering what complicates the business of harm prevention in the literary field, we find ourselves inexorably drawn to what is, in my view, the central question of contemporary critical theory: *what makes a reading authoritative?* The answer to this question undoubtedly depends upon the particular conditions of its enunciation, but to say even this is to suggest a general answer of the following sort: the authority of a reading is a function of its position within a discursive order that is itself produced by the shifting relations between the various bodies and modes of discourse taken for granted by a particular community. For the sake of clarity, my answer to this question is split into two parts, comprising the first and second thirds of the body of this chapter. In the first part, I discuss the authority and justifications of the descriptive content of interpretations, whereas in the second I discuss the conditions of a normative reading possessing moral authority.<sup>1</sup>

My discussion of descriptive authority consists in a critique of the contemporary epistemic context of literary criticism and an analysis of the concepts (for example, 'textual indeterminacy' and 'interpretative openness') which problematise harm prevention by complicating the recognition of rape. The matter of moral authority, on the other hand, requires a somewhat more involved approach, as the meaning of the term itself depends upon the meta-ethical framework from within which one speaks, and so an honest discussion here requires disclosure of this framework – which, of course, itself merits scrutiny. In my case, this involves a brief recounting of antifoundationalist objections to the neo-Kantian notion of universal moral obligation, and a discussion of what moral justification looks like once one drops this notion. I ultimately argue that ethical justification is a matter of convention, and that the authority of one's judgements therefore depends upon the general values and practices of one's audience. Moral authority is in this way an effect of the social

order, and this poses a further problem for our thesis of harm prevention, as insofar as our moral rhetoric actually resists the patriarchal normative elements of this order, it will tend to be regarded as unjustified (because it breaks with the conventions through which moral claims are generally justified) and illegitimate by conventionally-minded audiences (because it stands in a negative relation to that which is made legitimate by convention, and even to those conventions from whence authority and legitimacy derives).

I conclude the chapter with a consideration of reading and responsibility. I argue that the recognition that reading literary depictions of rape risks causing rape would seem to imply that simply desisting from reading and writing about rape would be the safest way to prevent harm. But we feminist critics obviously think that reading and writing has a special kind of normative utility which justifies our choice to engage in such activities, so we need to defend ourselves against the charge of irresponsibility. We need, in other words, to account for our choice to take such risks, to choose to read or write about fictional depictions of rape. We are, in short, obliged to account for our choices. But to say this is to assume a certain notion of responsibility – one with neo-Kantian, foundationalist baggage. I therefore proceed to discuss, with the help of the work of Judith Butler, the problems with the conventional account of responsibility and its assumptions about subjectivity. Thereafter, I use the work of Butler to provide a revised, antifoundationalist conception of ethical obligation and responsibility. Having provided an account of responsibility, I offer a defence of reading and writing about rape as a means of harm prevention, before elaborating on our responsibilities as readers and writers about rape. Finally, I conclude the chapter with a consideration of some of the habits and practices we might undertake in order to fulfil our responsibilities as readers to those we risk harming.

### **3.2 Epistemic Problems of Normative Criticism**

In what follows, I discuss the epistemic problems that face normative criticism of literature which depicts sexual violence. My aim is to detail the horizons of the critical feminist project in light of some the key challenges facing criticism and literary theory since the

poststructuralist turn. But before discussing these problems, I should make it clear just what I mean by knowledge. For although the term still denotes a monolithic, world-disclosing body of Truth for certain analytic philosophers, scientists and, perhaps, most lay people, it has acquired an altogether more diverse and tenuous set of meanings in continental and literary theory.

The work of those thinkers who (perhaps too quickly) tend to be grouped together under the heading of 'poststructuralism,' thinkers like Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida (themselves influenced by the likes of Nietzsche and Heidegger), have furnished us with serious critiques of the still largely hegemonic Western philosophical story of Truth and Knowledge that emerged, as a refinement of a metaphysical tradition dating back to Plato, during the Enlightenment. Foucault's genealogical accounts of the operation of knowledge and power, of the operation of knowledge as power, help us to place the concept of knowledge back within its historical context. By historicising the notion of truth and the practices which produce it, Foucault helped to unveil the myth of Truth being based in something beyond the reach of time and change, something which can only be discovered by specialists blessed with the power to penetrate appearances and thereby uncover the true nature of reality. His body of work presents an alternative story of knowledge as a good produced by a network of institutions granted truth-making power by a particular and historically contingent social order.

Foucault's account of knowledge reveals the metaphysical slant of the prevailing Enlightenment account to be the product of a long-running tradition, heavily influenced by Christian doctrine and originating with early Greek philosophical assumptions, which conveniently masks the operation of power – the production of Truth – in the guise of an unassailable logic grounded in unconditional and therefore trans-historical principles. It is this guise which the early writing of Derrida works to deconstruct by exposing the constitutive contradictions of the Western metaphysical tradition, and the foundations of Western philosophy as a whole.

Derrida, in works like *Of Grammatology*, recounts how the linguistic turn marks the end of an "historico-metaphysical epoch" during which the relationality of 'knowledge' and

'truth' and inquiry as a whole, was obscured and displaced by a metaphysics of presence (4). His colourful critique of the Western philosophical tradition reveals how the very idea of metaphysics, of transcendence, of an outside to language, depends, paradoxically, on a system of signification which merely effaces — that is, denies and conceals (if only ever partially) — its own origins in language.

If Foucault's genealogical account reveals the historical and contextual character of knowledge, and thereby casts doubt upon the notion of knowledge having transcendental foundations, then Derrida's early work shows how these foundations, that which constitutes the *logos*, are themselves not foundational — that is, not prior to the language in which they are articulated. Indeed, they only appear foundational as a result of a continual, forceful insistence, facilitated by the effacement of the signs in which they consist, an insistence that the true nature of these principles, of the 'foundations' of Western metaphysics, lies beyond the reach of the sign, outside of language, accessible only by some kind of primordial, primary experience 'unmediated' by the 'veil' of language.

Thanks to the efforts of antifoundationalists like Foucault and Derrida, the notion of knowledge as acquaintance with a reality which lies behind appearance, and is prior to the relations of language, has, for the most part, fallen out of fashion in continental and literary theory. What, then, is left of the notion of knowledge, and what do I mean by the phrase 'epistemic problems of normative criticism?' Richard Rorty, the late American pragmatist, provided us with an antifoundationalist account of knowledge. According to Rorty, if one accepts the poststructuralist, historicist critique of the likes of Foucault and Derrida, as he thinks we should, one must make do with a notion of knowledge as expediency in the way of believing (*Philosophy and Social Hope* viii). He argues that we should interpret statements like 'the sum of two plus two *is* four' and 'I *know* that two plus two equals four' as meaning just that it is best — that is, most useful for certain ends — to act as though  $2+2=4$ . To ask more of descriptive statements is, in his view, to fall back into the Platonist metaphysical hole that the likes of Derrida and John Dewey have helped us climb out of. We might reconcile the pragmatist suggestion that 'truth is merely the expedient in the way of believing' with Foucault's critique of the relationship between power and knowledge by pointing out, with

Derrida, that the authority of the institutions and social operations of power that work to produce the epistemic horizons of a given community typically depends upon the effacement of truth's practical, social origins. Upon, that is, the treatment of certain social constructions *as if* they had a basis in some absolute, unconditional principle or being.

My discussion of epistemic problems, then, is predicated on the pragmatist view that truth is just a name for those beliefs it is most useful to hold for the particular ends we have in mind, and that knowledge is the name for that body of discourse that is rendered authoritative by a network of social institutions and individuals within a certain social order. The epistemic problems I have in mind are thus instances in which there is disagreement or confusion about what it is most useful to believe for a certain end, or where what it seems most useful to believe comes into conflict with what is generally believed, or what is considered to be true within a certain discursive order or *episteme*.

In the first chapter, I argued that literary depictions of rape can both enable and cause harm related to rape. In the second chapter, I tried to show that this potential for harm is not obvious to readers, or even critics. I discussed, for instance, how many critics and commentators writing in the years following *Disgrace*'s publication found its depiction of rape significant chiefly by virtue of what it was taken to imply about race relations in post-apartheid South Africa, whilst its significance with regard to rape, rape culture and gender relations was frequently understood - if recognised at all — as a mechanistic element of a story that was nonetheless fundamentally 'about' race and cultural difference. I also briefly outlined how a balanced and rigorous critical approach to sexual violence does not necessarily ensure positive outcomes. Attwell, Samuelson and Boehmer, in their respective criticism, all discuss *Disgrace* with the kind of careful consideration and analysis merited by the text's complexity and the seriousness of its subject matter, and yet all three nevertheless equivocate about whether Lurie's rape of Melanie counts as such. Moreover, they do so in spite of their values, views and critical agendas; their equivocation is at odds with the rest of their analysis, and, if I were to guess, their intentions. There seem, therefore, to be several factors at work here, which together serve to complicate the business of harm prevention at

the level of interpretation. The first of these has to do with the contemporary character of literary criticism since the linguistic turn.

Around the middle of the previous century, an idea took hold that radically changed the way literary theory and criticism was practised and understood: the idea that language is entirely relational and that there can therefore be no unquestionable criteria for interpretation. More or less since this idea was first taken seriously, academic critics, especially those who are acquainted with contemporary literary theory, have tended away from strong descriptive claims about fictional prose, and towards a more cautious and ironic interpretive approach, which attempts to foreground the openness and dynamism of texts, and of discourse more generally, and, coincidentally, if sometimes conveniently, makes it harder for one's peers to accuse one of misunderstanding or misrepresenting a text or the meaning thereof, or the notion of text, discourse or anything else within the purview of language (that is, in a sense, everything). This move has, on the whole, made literary criticism more interesting and less elitist. It has served to democratise the academic literary establishment by underlining the relativity of its standards, criteria and conventions, and thus paved the way for an increasingly diverse body of criticism, theory, and literature. It has also enabled the co-existence of various disparate and sometimes contradictory practices, methodologies, focuses and values under the same departmental roof. Finally this move has led to the revitalisation of ethical discourse in relation to literature and reading – the very ethical turn which paved the way for papers which, like this thesis, direct their attention to the relationship between literature, reading and violence.<sup>2</sup>

Keeping all this in mind, it nonetheless seems to me that the interpretive caution favoured by many critics since the linguistic turn has, in certain cases, diminished the effectiveness with which they might engage with particular issues, such as sexual violence. To the extent that one attempts to allude to the interpretive possibilities which exceed those realised by one's own reading, one effectively undermines the legitimacy of one's reading by signifying that one's conclusions are, like all conclusions, questionable. If one's writing points to or takes for granted the idea that all interpretation is contextual and relative, and thus questionable, then one should not be surprised if one's own interpretation comes into

question. There is, in principle, no problem here: it is the undermining of one's own reading, of the very idea of an unquestionable hierarchy of interpretive authority which might secure or authorise one's reading, that constitutes the utility of this style of criticism: it works to erode the foundations of authoritarianism and the (self-)justifications of violence by foregrounding the contingency and relativity of all claims to authority and all justifications. In its hesitancy, self-awareness and irony, such criticism self-consciously motions toward the contingent interests, conventions and desires which, always and everywhere, give direction to the operation of power, whether in the form of a claim to authority, higher justification, or whatever else.

Where rape is specifically concerned, however, the openness of such an approach (which allows that what is being read as rape, what 'seems' to the critic to be a depiction of rape may, on a another reading, not be rape) has a troubling effect with respect to rape discourse. In concert with the kinds of patriarchal relations discussed in Chapter One, it may be read as signifying the questionable and ambiguous character of sexual violation, rather than, or in addition to, the questionable and ambiguous character of all interpretations and descriptive claims. There is, of course, an abstract academic sense in which one might say that rape, being a discursive term, is necessarily as relational and contingent as any other discursive term, and I would not be read as arguing otherwise. My concern lies solely with the way in which the signification of this relationality can, under certain conditions, contribute to the mystification of rape. It is not, that is to say, a question of whether the concept of rape is contingent, which it of course is, but of what effect rhetorical gestures towards this contingency may have on our conception of rape in general. When Attwell refers, for instance, to "The rape – if that is what it is – of Melanie" he is probably just trying to signal that, given the nuance and ambiguity of the terms in which Lurie's relationship with Melanie is related, and the contingency of critical interpretation in general, (and, perhaps also, his own uncertainty) he does not count out the possibility of equally coherent and thus equally valid interpretations which, like those of Samuelson and Boehmer, do not quite read this scene as rape (338). However, his equivocation – if that is what it is – has unintended effects: as he does not make clear the reasons for his qualification, it cannot but signify the ambiguity of



rape as a concept. Intentions aside, Attwell's equivocation puts into question whether the actions of Lurie, which certainly fit the legal definition of rape, *actually* count as rape, thereby also putting into question our definitions of rape.

I cannot, of course, say with any certainty what the effect of such signification has been, but given that the problem of rape – our society's continuous failure to prevent it or to even meet the needs of those affected by it – seems to be, in part, a symptom of a lack of broad consensus about what counts as rape, I do not think that more ambiguity and uncertainty on these topics is what is needed. More pointedly, insofar as we agree with du Toit that this widespread confusion about rape is a product of an intentional systemic blind-spot within the patriarchal order, anything that widens this blind-spot, that further mystifies the act and its effects, must be said to be part of the problem. Such a statement need not be read as a condemnation or judgment of Attwell, or anyone else for that matter – indeed, punitive moralistic rhetoric is often ineffectual and almost always violent, as I discuss in the second half of this chapter. Rather it can be taken just as an example of the relationship between certain aspects and instances of contemporary critical praxis and the discursive apparatus of patriarchy. My point, in other words, is to call for more scrutiny of our criticism where rape is concerned, and to foreground the recuperative processes by which the very totalising and self-authorising discourses which we write in opposition to may nonetheless appropriate our writing.

I can sum up by saying that it seems to me that critical and literary theory since the linguistic turn has made us (academic critics, that is) wary of strong descriptive claims, suspicious of the possibility of certainty, and sceptical of the relevance of notions of validity, correctness and accuracy to the activity of literary interpretation. This in turn has been reflected in contemporary criticism, which, on the whole, tends to be more cautious, ambivalent and open minded than its antecedents. Where rape is concerned this caution and ambivalence can work in the favour of patriarchal interests by further muddying the waters of rape discourse, thereby making it yet more difficult to prevent harm related to rape, and to achieve the social change required in order to end the on-going rape crisis in South Africa. There is thus a need to revise our critical praxis where our engagements with rape are

concerned if we want to avoid harm, although how exactly this can be done without returning to an old and outmoded language of essences and context-free determinate meanings remains to be seen.

The failure of some critics to identify the rape of Melanie as such thus indicates the way in which some of the critical habits that we academics have formed as a response to the challenges of doing literary criticism after the poststructuralist turn have deleterious effects where the reading of rape is concerned. That is to say, certain aspects of contemporary critical practices seem inappropriate to the subject matter of sexual violence, insofar as they may lead to harm or, at the least, make it more difficult to prevent harm through the disruption of the violent normative interpretations that present themselves by virtue of the patriarchal social order. Let me now turn to interpretation itself, specifically to the ways in which it complicates the business of harm prevention.

How one sees interpretation will necessarily depend on one's understanding of language. If one understands language as a system of reference that, when configured correctly, maps reality by providing labels for the non-linguistic, mind-independent objects and states of which reality ostensibly consists, then one will understand interpretation as the formalists did, as a process of uncovering and mapping the fundamental meaning of essentially distinct texts. If one understands language instead as the Romantics did, as a medium of expression, a means by which pre-linguistic individual experiences and mental content may be captured in communicable terms, then one will obsess over the author and his or her circumstances, presuming that the 'solution' to the meaning of a text may be found by examining the conditions, intentions and mental state of the author at the time of writing.

If, on the other hand, one rejects the dualistic idea that language is a medium (for expression or representation) because one agrees with Derrida that "There is not a single signified that escapes ... the play of signifying references that constitute language" (*Of Grammatology*, 7), and with Rorty that "Truth cannot be out there – cannot exist independently of the human mind – because sentences cannot so exist, or be out there" (*Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*, 5) and that, therefore, "anything [can] be made to look good or bad, important or unimportant, useful or useless, by being re-described" (7), then one will

see interpretation as an altogether more ambiguous set of behaviours, the character of which will vary with the text, the interpreter, his or her aims, his or her social context, and the predominant conventions of the day. Because the former views of language and interpretation are more or less outmoded in contemporary literary theory, I will focus on this last, antifoundationalist sense of interpretation in what follows.

One way to respond to the ambiguity of interpretation on the antifoundationalist view is to premise one's view of interpretation on the activity of the reader. After all, if there really is no "full presence which is beyond play," that is, if there are no foundational grounds from which we might derive objective, context-free rules of interpretation, and if in the absence of a "transcendental signified ... the domain and play of signification" is extended "indefinitely" then why not begin with the reader, whom, at first glance, appears on this account to have a previously unimagined level of influence in the creation (via the free play of interpretation) of that which he or she beholds? (Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 353, 354). One might be tempted, in other words, to draw upon the thought of Wolfgang Iser and the like in an attempt to theorise interpretation *as* reader response. But such a narrow focus invariably produces an atomised and ideal notion of an autonomous reader that, being idealised, has no place in an antifoundationalist account of interpretation, and that, being atomised, cannot be reconciled with the practical situation of actual readers, who are always enmeshed in a complex social context which enables and delimits their interpretations and their very notion of interpretation. What Iser, for instance, leaves out in his most notable phenomenological account of reading is the means by which his idealised reader comes to regard "himself" as a reader and that which is before "him" as a text which requires an operation called "the reading process" to be performed (286, 282, 285).

It is difficult to offer an account of interpretation in line with antifoundationalism not least of all because its arguments begin and end with the idea that no term has or could be given a definition that would be 'exhaustive' or 'correct.' Rorty's view, which he shares with Derrida, is exactly that there are no unconditional metaphysical principles which might provide objective criteria with which to judge the correctness of a given term (*Contingency* 7). This is not to say as many alarmists have said (and continue to say) that

antifoundationalism means ‘anything goes,’ and that, therefore, interpretation is whatever we say it is or whatever we want it to be; if antifoundationalism rejects the idea that immutable transcendental signifieds exist and can serve as the basis for criteria of correctness, it affirms in the same breath the conventionalism of all criteria. So, despite the dynamic and fluid character of language, interpretation can and does have for us a somewhat static (but *not* fixed) set of senses thanks to the conventions of our communities. Thus, of interpretation we might at least say that it is a conventional phenomenon, the character of which depends upon its social context. We might, of course, pick out particular practices and ‘methods’ of interpretation, but to do so is merely to engage in a kind of ethnography that makes explicit the implicit, taken-or-granted practices of a certain community. It does not quite amount to an articulation of different methods which might be meaningfully evaluated, as any such evaluations would invariably involve comparing the method under consideration against a culturally specific criterion produced by the interpretive practices of one’s community, and so would be question-begging. There are simply different ways of speaking and perceiving, each of which must be taken for granted by its respective community in order to facilitate interpretation.

Stanley Fish articulates the communal nature of interpretation with profound clarity in his later work. Rejecting the subject-object division that characterised the competing theories of the day, he re-situated interpretation within its social conditions. He dispenses with the ideally perceptive reader of earlier reader response theory and the determinate texts of formalism, and replaces them not with a new notion of “the reader” or “the text” but with a theory of the conditions under which one comes to see oneself as a reader and the thing before oneself as a text to be interpreted. On Fish’s account, interpretation unfolds, as I have just argued the work of Derrida and Rorty would suggest, in terms of “conventional strategies that are not finally our own but have their source in ... publicly available systems of intelligibility” (332). Fish makes possible a kind of reader response theory that can account for both the individual differences between interpretations within a community and the general points of interpretive unanimity within these same interpretations. By underlining the shared “structure of interests and understood goals” within our communities, he is able to

show how “this structure so fills our collective consciousnesses that they [are] rendered as one, immediately investing phenomena with the significance they must have, given the already in place assumptions” and so produce patterns of interpretive unanimity despite any differences in individual experiences or realisations of the text in question (333).

We might thus say that the character of interpretation complicates the business of harm prevention as follows: firstly by ensuring individual differences in how a text is interpreted and therefore understood such that there will be no monolithic, communally accessible and evaluable text and secondly, by depending on a conventional system of intelligibility which will invariably tend towards broad, but not universal, interpretive unanimities that reflect the normative beliefs and prejudices of one’s interpretive community. Given the patriarchal inflection of most cultures, these beliefs will typically include the kind of widespread assumptions of which rape culture consists.

This tension between communal consensus and individual difference in interpretation constitutes a further problem for the business of harm prevention, as it makes it harder to identify, recognise and distinguish between depictions of rape. Because consensus will, as a general rule, be an effect of the social order, and because this social order is, amongst other things, patriarchal, it seems reasonable to expect that interpretive unanimity will tend towards interpretations which support and reproduce rape culture. In some cases, such as the rape of Melanie in *Disgrace*, this involves the non-recognition of rape. In others, it consists in interpreting as benign or insignificant deleterious treatments of rape. In all cases, this trend is precisely what we feminists intend to resist and eventually change by engaging in critical interventions, and yet our opposition to this trend and the consensuses of which it consists invariably marks our writing out as ‘deviant’ and ‘irrational’ and thereby throws our ethical distinctions and the descriptive claims of identification upon which they rest into question. Moreover, even were this not the case, we would still find ourselves making yet one more descriptive claim in a sea of competing claims about what is happening in the passage we see as depicting rape. The individual differences between interpretations thus make our claims look no more authoritative than the next critic’s, and so we are faced with a double bind of sorts, in which there is, on the one hand, a consensus we would like to

disrupt, and on the other a variety of competing descriptive claims which our own critical theory and practices imply are as justifiable as our own, and thus which undermine our own claims. This double bind illustrates the core problematic facing normative critical approaches to harm prevention, and merits further analysis. Before doing so, however, let us consider how these problems look in relation to the literary text as understood from the antifoundationalist interpretive framework I have just outlined.

Since the years in which New Criticism began to enjoy popularity, it has more or less been agreed that novels are characteristically ambiguous. Whilst the extent of a particular text's ambiguity is generally thought to depend on the specific techniques it employs, it is nonetheless typically taken for granted that the novel is an ambiguous thing. Perhaps the most obvious reason for this is that novels are works of fiction: they are predicated on a break both with 'reality' and with the kind of sincere, good-faith speech which is generally considered the ideal of everyday communication. Every story begins by forfeiting any claim to literal truth, and with that forfeiture it announces its ambiguity. For in the absence of sincerity and good faith, imagination is let loose on meaning without intention to constrain it. Any interpretation becomes as good as any other, to the extent that it accounts for the uncontroversial aspects of the text's form (as supposed by or accepted within one's community) and implies intentions that it was possible for the author to have had at the time of writing (although of course the validity of this last qualification hinges on whether one[s community] follows the convention of bestowing significance on the intentions of authors, which many have famously rejected).

This generally ambiguous situation is further complicated by the fact that the disconnect between writing and writer may be mirrored within the bounds of the writing itself. The narrator may mislead the reader just as the fictional writer is sanctioned to. What actually happens in the course of a narrative may be unclear even to the most knowledgeable, practised and perceptive of readers. Characters may be written and read as saying or writing things they do not mean, or meaning what they say or write despite their claims to the contrary. Indeed, characters might even act out of step with their desires, may find, within the course of a story, that they have competing desires, and impulses which exceed their

conscious desires. So even actions, both within and outside of the bounds of narrative, may part with the expressed intentions of a character, or with the intentions implied by his or her prior behaviour.

Where confusion or disagreement about textual meaning arises, the absence of the author and the impossibility of recovering the full range of his or her intentions at the time of writing produces an irreducible uncertainty about the way in which a word, sentence or metaphor was meant. It is thus impossible to finally say which of the plurality of available denotations, connotations and implications are intended or significant.

Specific techniques, such as ellipsis, narrative fragmentation and unreliable narration all deepen the ambiguity of the texts in which they are employed. The result is that the literary text as conventionally understood is an object about which it seems hard to say anything with absolute certainty, unless, that is, one is a critical monist of some sort. But critical monism is decidedly unconventional in contemporary literary studies as it necessarily invokes the kind of absolute principles, conditions and criteria which literary studies have, in theory if not always in practice, largely moved on from. In any case, the antifoundationalist position from which I am speaking precludes the notion of universal objective validity upon which critical monism depends.

So much for the ambiguity of the literary text as conventionally conceived. I now turn to a term that lies at the heart of our contemporary theoretical vocabulary: textual indeterminacy. Before going further, let me disambiguate two overlapping kinds of indeterminacy. The first, and most commonly cited, arises as a result of the need for the reader to make specific and invariably idiosyncratic decisions about how to relate the constituent elements of the text — each word, sentence, metaphor, event and theme — in order for a narrative whole to emerge. The second kind, on the other hand, arises due to the need for the reader to utilise his or her imagination in order to realise or render concrete the narrative by filling in what is left out by the descriptive economy of the text being read. Both kinds of indeterminacy resolve into the same thing for our purposes: a situation in which textual meaning is indeterminate and reader- and context-dependent.

We can further disambiguate the uses of the term by referring to two senses in which we talk of textual indeterminacy. I will refer to these as the strong and weak versions of textual indeterminacy. The strong version holds that texts are by their nature 'open' and cannot be closed, and that they remain indeterminate even when subject to apparently determinate readings (as, for instance, some schools of deconstruction have endeavoured to show). The weak version holds that texts are in principle open and inexhaustible, but allows that texts can be subject to something like determination, if never finally, and usually not for long. This weaker version understands some level of context-specific determination to be the condition of speaking of 'a text' or an element thereof, without which it would be senseless to divide discourse up into 'texts' and 'textual elements' in the first place.

Questions of indeterminacy often turn on normative questions of whether one *should* read in a manner that tends towards strong descriptive claims or, on the contrary, that undermines the 'obvious' conventional meaning(s) of a text in order to show the openness not just of the text but of the language and discourse in which it is formed. I will, for now, leave these kinds of questions aside, for I have already touched upon them in reference to contemporary critical practices and will return to them once I have concluded my discussion of the descriptive problems facing normative criticism.

Whichever form of indeterminacy one subscribes to, and however one thinks we ought to read, Fish's notion of interpretation suggests that in any given community the force of culture and institutions will be such that there will be points of unanimity between readers about texts, and therefore, in theory at least, a most-agreeable possible interpretation which would be most authoritative. Now, this does not put into question the principle shared by both versions (and kinds) of indeterminacy — that no single interpretation can finally put the meaning of a text to rest — but it does force proponents of the strong version to show how their position might accommodate and explain the frequent determination of texts within communities. However, any such accommodation would bring the strong version that much closer to the weak version, and thus erode the distinction between the two, thereby putting into question one's preference for one over the other.



Let us return to the text itself. What is a text? What is this thing that is supposedly distinct and observable and at the same time, ambiguous and in some sense indeterminate? Moreover, what do we mean when we refer to 'the text' and do we mean the same thing as our peers when they, in their own writing, refer to 'the text?' It seems to me that our use of the word text is implicitly homonymic. When we utter the word, we are generally referring to some combination of three distinct meanings: the physical object (constituted by primary and widely shared interpretive conventions, and therefore observable to all); the body of integrated, authoritative consensuses about what the object is (for example: a romantic literary novel set in the 18th century); and a specific interpretation of the text (as an object and novel with agreed upon features). We tend to use all three meanings interchangeably, and this causes the confusion hinted at by my earlier questions. When the average English professor talks of textual indeterminacy, he or she usually has in mind the second and third senses of the word text, but usually just engages with the third. When a deconstructionist or sceptic speaks of textual indeterminacy, they may mean 'textual' to convey the first sense of the word text as well. Given these different meanings, we might ask to which of them does "textual indeterminacy" refer? If to the first, then invoking 'textual indeterminacy' is just way of gesturing to a nominalist scepticism about language that is a general feature of antifoundationalist critique, rather than a particularly literary phenomenon. If the second, then we cannot talk of 'novels' as textually indeterminate. If the third, then we are just restating the idea expressed by Iser that different individuals and different contexts make for different readings. Perhaps this is all that is meant by textual indeterminacy. Thus, if we wish to speak of the indeterminacy of the novel, we must adopt the kind of deflationary view captured by what I earlier called the weak version of textual indeterminacy, wherein the relevant sense of indeterminacy has to do with the inter-subjective character of textual experience, as put forward by Iser, rather than with some kind of infinite and irreducible potentiality that somehow subsists in spite of and therefore outside of the very conventions which allow us to see a collection of signs as 'a text' (to which we might ascribe qualities, such as indeterminacy).

In any case, it should be clear that, where the literary text is concerned, both ambiguity and any sense and degree of indeterminacy pose a problem for the project of normative critical intervention, and for criticism more generally, in that these qualities obscure the link between different readings of the same text, thereby suggesting that our references to 'the text' conceal something of an aporia. If the meaning, and, to some extent, content, of a text differs with each reading, and if these differences in part depend on the subjective input of the reader, then this would seem to imply that many of our descriptive claims are somewhat deceptive, and less useful than they appear, insofar as they purport to describe a mutually apprehensible cultural object or set of meanings but instead simply recount a distinctly individuated (and thus non-generalizable) response to a collection of ambiguous sentences.

To summarise, we have, firstly, a contemporary critical culture in which a certain degree of interpretive open-mindedness, caution, irony and ambivalence is common, and frequently taken as a mark of good criticism; secondly, an irreducible degree of specific, individual difference between interpretations of the same text set against a background of conventionalism which produces a series of interpretive unanimities in spite of these individual differences; and thirdly, ambiguous texts that are in some sense indeterminate, specifically because of the inter-subjective manner of their realisation. These conditions together complicate the recognition of rape, which obviously serves as the condition of the discussion, critique and judgement of depictions of the act. Given these conditions, each of which, by itself, constitutes a challenge for literary criticism, we might speak of a general problem that faces our efforts to prevent rape related harms: the problem of recognition.<sup>3</sup>

I say recognition, but I do not mean by this to evoke the conventional dualist metaphor in which the real identity of a distinct and essential thing is revealed by the reasoned application of the requisite knowledge. Rather, I mean only to gesture towards the kind of linguistic operation, consisting of the making of new relations in accordance with a schema of relatively stable prior relations, which must take place in order for us to be able to speak of something as an instance or depiction of something else. Putting things this way captures the normative dimensions of the processes of recognition that exceed the binary

outputs of the conventional formulation (for example, recognised or unrecognised, correctly or falsely recognised).

One might object that this way of putting things deprives us of an important sense of recognition, the sense in which it is a product of adequate knowledge of the subject matter in question. Conversely, mis-recognition, we might want to say, is not *just* the product of a disagreement about the subject matter in question, or of controversy about the relation of things; mis-recognition tends to concern us as a symptom of a deficiency in the knowledge of the perceiver about that which goes unperceived. The mis-recognition of rape, for instance, is troubling in part because it is indicative of a deeper misunderstanding about what rape is on the part of the mis-recogniser and possibly their community that may have consequences far worse than those which result from the act of mis-recognition alone. This sense of recognition, however, can be captured in the antifoundationalist vocabulary with reference to the relations between one's conceptions of a thing and one's recognition of it, and between individual acts of recognition (and the conceptions they imply) and the shared conceptions or normative ideals of a community. So, even though we have dispensed with a notion of recognition as 'seeing what is there' we might meaningfully understand the claim that a person has failed to 'see what is there' just as the claim that there is a discrepancy between either that person's conception and his or her perception of a thing, or between his or her perception (and the conception it implies) and some public conception or normative ideal. In our case, we might speak of the mis-recognition of rape as a failure to recognise depictions of rape which are consistent with contemporary legal definitions, and, more importantly, with those shared conceptions of rape which best accommodate rape survivors' experiences and are thus ideally suited to the prevention and redressing of harm related to rape. Importantly, this antifoundationalist conception allows us to see recognition as an effect of certain conventional relations, relations which might be adjusted to better prevent harm, whereas static notions of recognition as 'seeing what is there' insist upon the self-evident truthfulness of certain prevailing conceptions and conventions, thereby making it harder for these conceptions and conventions to be reformed.

The recognition of rape, so understood, cannot be regarded as neutral with respect to the possibility of rape-related harm. As I argued in the first chapter, one's pronouncements, readings and criticism, one's communicative efforts in general, always have some relation to the prevailing discourse of one's communities, and thereby have some theoretically evaluable effect on the discursive conditions of rape within those communities. More specifically, what we write and say about rape invariably has some relation to the rationale behind the act, and to the various discursive forms and strategies which make it harder to prevent the act and to support survivors. To identify a scene as rape is to say to one's readers that the details of the scene as one lays them out, and as they appear to one's readers by virtue of some mixture of convention and idiosyncratic cognition, amount to textual evidence of rape. In so doing, one affirms both an ethically significant relation (for example, 'In *Disgrace*, Melanie is raped by Lurie') and the criteria by virtue of which this relation is established ('rape is sex minus consent'). This affirmation, moreover, functions as a denial of all those criteria — that is, in this case, all those conceptions of rape — which would not have led to the same determination. Thus, the simple act of recognition always has some ethically significant effect on the prevailing definitions and public conceptions of rape in circulation at the time of recognition, in addition to whatever effect it has on the reading of a certain text (and the harm that reading may enable or cause).

Importantly, *not* recognising or identifying rape can have similar effects, although the relation that produces such effects is inverted. After all, the act of 'misrecognition' or 'non-recognition' — of specifically not relating or equating a certain word, sentence or passage with some prior discursive term — does not fail to signify. On the contrary, it has just as much signifying power as recognition, or any other discursive relation. Whereas recognition asserts and affirms the sameness or at least relatedness of two or more signs, non-recognition does the opposite. It asserts and affirms the difference and non-relatedness of the sign and thereby implies the relative validity of interpretations which likewise assume or insist upon the sign's non-relation to the field of apparently similar (but, in the final evaluation, significantly different) terms which 'suggest themselves' by virtue of the discursive conventions of one's community. As Fish puts it, "nonrelation is not a pure but a differential category — the

specification of something by enumerating what it is not; in short, nonrelation is merely one form of relation, and its perception is always situation-specific" (335). In the case of either recognition or non-recognition, the discursive terrain shifts, however slightly, towards or away from a future in which more suffering is sanctioned, ignored or justified by the linguistic conventions of our community.

We might speak of a more obvious and procedural sense in which recognition constitutes a problem for criticism and for our specific purposes here. In the terms of the conventional Platonic metaphor of appearances and essences, we might say that our ability to evaluate something depends on our identification and recognition of that thing as such, and so difficulty 'recognising' rape prevents us from avoiding or preventing harm related to our reading of rape. We might drop the appearance-reality distinction presupposed by that way of putting things by referring instead to the conventions in terms of which recognition and identification operate. Thus, in antifoundationalist fashion, we might say that the problem arises as a result of disagreements between a person's behaviour and the conventions he or she understands him or herself to be following, as well as differences between the conventions being followed by different persons, and not with some obstruction to an individual seeing things 'as they are.' Failing to recognise something one ought to recognise by virtue of the norms one follows amounts to incoherency. Not recognising something as others do owing to one's commitment to certain norms amounts to a disagreement between one's self and others about what the subject matter is.

On the one hand, the conditions of criticism (the ambiguity and indeterminacy of text, critical conventions, the processes of literary interpretation, etcetera) are such that we critics are always at risk of incoherently 'mis-recognising' a depiction of rape — that is, of overlooking some crucial aspect of the relevant passages that implies, according to our own definitions and norms, that what we have referred to by some other name is actually rape. On the other hand, there is the hard question of how differences in recognition and the wider disagreements of which they are a part, can be resolved. This is a practical problem for the prevention of rape related harm because the efficacy of critical interventions depends both on our being coherent and our ability to reach others with our arguments. But if we are writing

in opposition to conventional (and thus patriarchal) modes of interpretation, we can be sure that, if we are doing our jobs properly, there will be substantive differences between the interpretations of we feminists and some portion of our audience. Moreover, these differences will be significant insofar as they put into question the relationship between our normative criticism and the text (as interpreted by others). This can have a deleterious effect on our efforts to prevent harm in two ways. Firstly, members of our audience might regard our criticism as incoherent, and thus illegitimate, to the extent that our descriptions conflict with certain bedrock assumptions they hold or with their interpretation and the conventions and assumptions which inform it. Secondly, the gap between our interpretations and those of our audience may be large enough to obstruct meaningful engagement; a sufficient degree of difference between two readings puts into question whether what is said on the basis of one rightly applies to the other.

Problems with recognition direct us back to the more general problem of descriptive justification of which they are subsets, and which emerged with the linguistic turn. For once one accepts that there is no getting outside of language *with* language, one is immediately faced with the question of how one might justify to others what one is saying, or, put another way, what makes a claim appear justified. A substantive, rigorous answer to this question is beyond the scope of this thesis, but its relevance to the question of normative criticism's conditions of possibility and efficacy should be obvious. Let me therefore offer a few necessarily cursory remarks on the matter.

As my discussion thus far has hopefully made clear, the exact conditions of a statement or claim appearing justified is a matter of convention — of the rules of the particular language game being played. Thus, justification, in the epistemological sense, might be understood as an appeal to convention — but not just any conventions; only those norms which are privileged by the relevant institutions and structures of authority within a given society, such as the norms of the philosophical tradition as circumscribed and represented by the philosophy departments of the universities of rich and influential Western countries.

But justification in the above sense only matters within the context of a particular academic language game and has little in common with the actual reasons most people have

for accepting or seeing as justified certain statements and not others. A view of justification as a psychosocial phenomenon is better suited to the study of its occurrence outside of the highly specialised professional dialogues of academic communities. For we are obviously not, not even those of us who are professional academics, exclusively swayed by the coherency of arguments or the rules of a supremely technical language game prescribed and played by a tiny fraction of the population. On the contrary, we seem to be motivated to accept and view as justified certain claims for a variety of psychosocial reasons, many of which are deeply idiosyncratic and non-generalizable, and all of which are the precondition for our acceptance of any specific authority on, or set of rules governing, justification and argument.

We tend to agree with or at least regard favourably the claims of those with whom we identify. We routinely defer to those we trust on certain matters, thereby letting our trust act as the criterion of justification and sound argument. We believe and accept statements and arguments which legitimate our views and behaviour, affirm our identity or provide convenient justifications of our desires. We are subject to a host of competing impulses — the products of a rich and largely unconscious internal life and personal history — which drive our behaviour, typically leaving us to scramble for ad-hoc justifications of our actions after the fact. The reasons we see some statements and not others as justified thus ultimately lie outside of any particular description or criteria of argumentation, and so even mastery of the most authoritative modes of argumentation cannot necessarily ensure that our statements will appear justified.

If the authoritative, institutional and conventional character of epistemology casts doubt on the justifiability of antifoundationalist arguments against the Western epistemological canon, as well as poststructuralist normative literary claims, then the psychosocial dimension of justification as a social phenomenon lends weight to the idea that one can find enough justification outside of the specifically privileged epistemological discourse of the day to persuade others to accept the very arguments which this discourse is intended to de-legitimise. However, even beyond the realm of institutional discourse, the force of normativity is such that wherever our claims or statements depart from or clash with conventional wisdom — wisdom which is patriarchal insofar as patriarchy is conventional —

they will generally appear less justified. There are, after all, structures of authority which govern everyday life that, whilst not necessarily identical to or even continuous with the technical, institutional structures of our society, are nonetheless influenced by them. Thus questions about justification are invariably questions about epistemic authority and the socio-epistemic social order of the society in question.

I began this chapter with the contention that the feminist strategy of normative critical interventionism is the best tool we have for the job of preventing rape-related harm in the literary arena. But, as I there noted, this strategy has its own problems. For the sake of clarity, let me briefly list here the problems I have drawn attention to so far. I began by discussing how the contemporary character of critical theory and praxis, particularly of that which is informed by the antifoundationalism of poststructuralist thought, has resulted in a variety of critical tendencies and habits which, in their openness and ambivalence, seem inappropriate when applied to the subject matter of rape. Despite this, I noted that it is unclear how one can read rape otherwise, without, that is, reverting back to an outmoded and violent vocabulary of essences and totalising 'Truths' — the very language in which patriarchy speaks and is spoken. I then outlined an antifoundationalist view of interpretation and tried to show how, according to this view, reading produces a unique text marked by generic features which are more or less consistent throughout the reader's community. Reading, I remarked, thus places the feminist critic in a double bind. On the one hand, the idiosyncratic aspect of interpretation leaves ambiguous the relationships between individual realisations of a text, and thus puts into question the generality and relevance of critical remarks made on this basis. On the other hand, the conventional character of interpretation is such that there will indubitably be relatively static points of convergence between readings within the critic's community. These convergences, however, whilst useful points of departure for critical commentary, will often reflect the prevailing (patriarchal) social order and the conceptions and assumptions of which it consists. To the extent that these unanimities are taken for granted, the critic risks affirming, and having his or her writing recuperated by, the patriarchal order, and to the extent that he or she opposes or questions them, his or her writing will appear irrational or otherwise misguided. So, I argued, the



character of interpretation is such that it seems that we feminist critics are forced to choose between coming across as irrational and solipsistic, or affirming the normative logic of patriarchy (as it is expressed in the literary domain). In what followed, I turned to the text (as understood from a broadly poststructuralist perspective). The literary text, according to contemporary literary thought, is ambiguous and in some sense indeterminate. This complicates the simple act of recognition by depriving the critic of any objective or static criteria with which to parse the text. This both makes it harder for critics to read and criticise texts in a manner that is internally consistent (because their subject matter is inherently vague) and casts yet more doubt on the relationship between different descriptive claims about the same text. All these concerns point to two general epistemic problems facing criticism, which I proceeded to describe: the problems of recognition and descriptive justification. Recognition, as the reader will recall, is obstructed by contemporary critical conventions, individual differences in interpretation and the ambiguity and indeterminacy of literary texts. Mis-recognition and non-recognition of what appears to be rape, I wrote, both instantiate negative relations which may affirm patriarchal views of rape and undermine progressive conceptions and legal definitions, and generally prevent the critic and his or her critics from exercising the care and awareness that reading rape merits. But problems with recognition are just one (particularly worrying) aspect of the more general problem of descriptive justification (particularly as it has emerged since the linguistic turn). For once one accepts that there are no transcendent signifieds, no non-linguistic meta-criteria with which to sort different vocabularies, then one is forced to accept that justification is simply appeal to convention, and as we are concerned with contesting certain conventions, it seems that our claims, in the eyes of certain majorities, are doomed to seem somewhat less justified than the generalities against which we rail.

So much for the epistemic problems facing normative criticism. I will now try to show that none of these problems is fatal. Let us return to the question of our critical culture. Whilst the worry that dropping our anti-essentialist vocabulary where rape is concerned may lead to greater harm than it prevents is certainly warranted, it seems to me that in the absence of strong rhetorical commitments on the part of critics about (apparent) scenes of rape, such

scenes will be subject to uncontested conventional readings in which the harm or very act of rape is elided or otherwise obscured. In other words, allowing oneself to remain preoccupied with foregrounding the openness of interpretation, or the fluidity of signification, in the face of rape leaves the door open, so to speak, to normative patriarchal readings which will seize upon talk of openness and fluidity as proof of the ambiguity of rape itself. Whatever good is done by refusing to use the master's tools is in this case overshadowed by the imposition of patriarchal meanings onto this refusal. There thus seems to be case for a temporary and strategic rhetorical essentialism where rape is concerned. That is to say, it seems best, for the sake of harm prevention, to engage in a language of essences specifically in order to close the door to patriarchal readings which would interpret openness as uncertainty, and uncertainty as proof of the insubstantiality of the descriptive claims and definitions of rape in play. Thus, we ought to simply say "This *is* rape" instead of equivocating or otherwise taking the time to thematise the infinite semantic possibilities of the scene or action in question, without forgetting or conceding that statements like "x is y" are only true by virtue of convention. Indeed, this is not so much a strategic essentialism as it is a strategic conventionalism. That is to say, we need not actually grant the existence of essences in order to make strong declarative statements that reflect our convictions, we need only draw upon those epistemological norms favourable to our position. So, we might avoid the problems posed by contemporary critical culture by engaging in strategic conventionalism – a temporary suspension of our thematisation of the dynamic infinitude of language where rape is concerned for the sake of contesting and obstructing patriarchal readings of rape.

How then should we respond to the double bind of interpretation, wherein we appear forced to choose between irrationality and patriarchy-affirming conventionality? To be clear, there is no way out of this double-bind that does not involve substantial social change; it is not a problem that may be individually solved, but an expression of our position as feminist critics with respect to the dominant social order. That said, as I discussed earlier, all new ideas, metaphors and ways of speaking necessarily appear irrational from the perspective of the dominant social order. The challenge is not to overcome such appearances, but to endure despite charges of irrationality in the hope that our words might take hold in

the minds of others, over time, despite their apparent irrationality. Moreover, we might also here engage in a kind of strategic conventionalism by showing how certain entrenched norms support our case — such as the lofty notions of liberty, freedom, equal rights and fair treatment — despite the apparent irrationality of our position. In so doing we might force our interlocutors, and hopefully, eventually, our communities, to re-evaluate the normative relations by virtue of which our claims seem irrational in the first place, thus potentially sparking off the kind of widespread social change which might one day make our claims appear rational and self-evident. In any case, appearing irrational does not prevent us from preventing harm; on the contrary, by producing readings that stand out as aberrant deviations from the norm, we, at the very least, prevent our writing from being taken as justification of the patriarchal logic against which we write. The utility of our writing with respect to preventing rape-related harm in this sense endures in spite of charges of irrationality, deviance or solipsism.

What of the text? Whilst its ambiguity certainly makes interpretation and, specifically, the recognition of rape, more difficult, the remedy to this is simply more careful reading and more strategic interpretive choices. When in doubt we should err on the side of recognising questionable scenes of sex, or depictions of what might be rape, *as* rape. This approach might seem dangerously inflationary, but it seems that, if we are forced to choose, more damage is being done by non-recognition than by positive misrecognition. This may not always be the case, and, of course, criticism and critique must be subject to constant re-evaluation, but at the time of writing in the context of South Africa we do not seem at risk of ‘over-recognising’ rape, nor are we suffering from a rising wave of wrongful rape convictions — on the contrary, it is a well-known fact that rape is under prosecuted and rarely results in convictions.<sup>4</sup> Indeterminacy may be treated in a similar way, and we may further engage in what I am calling strategic conventionalism by focusing our criticism not on the texts as they idiosyncratically emerge for us, or for some other individual reader, but as they emerge as conventional literary objects within our community. By addressing certain prevalent readings, or interpretive unanimities, we can avoid self-reference and ensure our critiques engage with the overall social meaning of a text, rather than with niche meanings which will invariably

have less influence and effect on rape discourse in general. In so doing, we may appear irrational (insofar as we contest the content of these unanimities), but as I have already said, this may in some sense diminish but definitely does not exhaust the utility of such an approach.

The reader will likely appreciate that I have, in so many words, already offered solutions to the problem of recognition, but let me briefly re-iterate them for the sake of clarity. By erring on the side of the positive recognition of rape, and engaging in strategic conventionalism by centring our critiques on conventional descriptive claims, we can offset the harms of non-recognition and avoid the danger of self-referential irrelevancy.

This leaves us with the problem of descriptive justification. As I said in relation to the double bind of interpretation, the tension between seeming unjustified and seeming justified only because we appeal to and thereby support the conventions of our community may be dealt with by carefully and clearly appealing to only those conventions which support or coincide with our aims. So, for instance, we might appeal to existing legal definitions of rape, on the one hand, and to liberal norms of anti-violence and equal treatment on the other, in order to support our descriptive and moral claims, whilst at the same time rejecting patriarchal conventions. Engaging in this sort of selective justification, whereby we play one set of popular conventions and norms against another allows us to make unequivocal, justified descriptive claims that have persuasive appeal but that do not extend into endorsements of the social order *in toto*.

Although all these problems certainly have important implications for how we conceive of the utility and effects of normative critical intervention, none of them ultimately prevents such an approach from avoiding harm. One can prevent one's interpretation from causing harm by doing the following: writing in opposition to patriarchal normativity (whilst still engaging with the points of unanimity produced by this normativity); erring on the side of rape recognition rather than non-recognition; and employing a strong, unequivocal rhetorical style where rape is concerned. In so doing, one may contribute to the discursive conditions required for meaningful social change to become possible. Whilst the aforementioned problems do not eliminate the possibility of using normative critical

approaches to prevent rape-related harm, they do draw our attention to the way in which the apparent authority of a reading sets limits on its persuasiveness, (perceived) rationality and general efficacy as a means of harm prevention. If it is the dominant conventions of a community of readers that decide what is rational and what irrational, what justified and what unjustified, then it is the systems of power which divide up authority and legitimise certain conventions and convention-makers, which ultimately decide what wider effect one's criticism will have. The problems I have presented, in other words, remind us that any meaningful effort to prevent the kinds of suffering that is associated with sexual violence must be accompanied by an extensive and far-reaching social critique if it is to be effective. These problems — specifically those concerning justification — also point to a similar set of problems concerning normative justification. For just as the descriptive claims of which our criticism consists must find some justification amongst the various conventional epistemic beliefs of our audience, so too must our normative claims or assumptions find similar justification in the values and entrenched normative beliefs and frameworks of our interlocutors.

### **3.3 Ethical Problems of Normative Criticism**

What moral authority does the word of the normative critic bare? On what grounds might one presume to tell others how to think about some or other text, about the rightness or wrongness of its construction, dissemination and effects? By posing and attempting to answer these questions, I wish to address two different kinds of concerns one might have about normative criticism of the sort I am defending. The first is a general concern that has emerged since the linguistic turn about moral authority and its justifications. In short, the worry is that normative criticism, and morality more generally, are merely a self-privileging forms of social control, expressions of power which attempt to place themselves beyond critique by claiming to have a non-relational, essential source, to be based, as Derrida put it, on “a full presence which is beyond play” – God, Truth, or Reason, for example (*Writing and Difference* 353). If, on the other hand, we conceive of morality as having no such grounds, that is, as the

articulation of the particular, mutable and contingent practices and beliefs of our community, then we must ask how ethical criticism can make its claims without either hypocritically claiming for itself the same authority it denies or otherwise admitting that it has no special authority apart from that which is acceded to by those who already accept its premises. The second concern is admittedly more political: if we take for granted the idea that rape is wrong, and that discourse conditions rape, and if we should like to contest these conditions, then we must ask how we might justify the moral claims we make in pursuit of this end. More to the point, how might we do so without violently totalising our position and suppressing dissenting voices in the same manner as the patriarchal order we are attempting to resist?

The ethical tradition in the West since Plato has been shaped by a desire for moral certainty that has found expression in the enduring belief that there must be some unconditional, absolute basis for questions of right and wrong conduct. Prior to the Enlightenment, this belief found fertile ground in the Judeo-Christian conception of God, understood as the originator of all values, whose word was considered law. Right and wrong, according to such doctrine, was decided by the laws laid out by God and his emissaries, as captured in testament. All people, or, at least, all of God's chosen people, were understood to have, in their consciences, a divine ability to tell right from wrong bestowed upon them by God.

Since the Enlightenment – and the disjunction of theology and inquiry, and the accompanying birth of a new, secularised philosophical vocabulary – reference to God, by non-theological scholars of ethics and philosophy, has become unfashionable. The desire for moral certainty, on the other hand, has by no means diminished, and the possibility of moral truth offered by the idea of God has remained appealing to most scholars and lay people. So it is that, thanks to the work of thinkers like Kant, the West turned to a 'secular' metaphysics in which the offer of moral truth, of certainty, was retained in the absence of any direct reference to the god of Abraham. Kant offered us a universal human faculty called Reason to replace the Christian notion of a divine soul, a faculty which, like its divine predecessor, makes good on the promise of moral certainty by providing us with an intrinsic means of truth-finding and objective moral judgment.

In this way, the essentialist spirit of Judeo-Christian doctrine – itself sharing much in common with the Platonic metaphysics of ancient Greece – survives in a contemporary post-Kantian moral vocabulary which continues to take for granted the existence of absolute categories of Right and Wrong, as well as our possession of an in-built means of telling the difference between the two. Like its religious antecedents, this vocabulary depends upon a foundationalist framework within which dualistic distinctions between appearance and reality, the relational and the unconditional, the subjective and the objective, the relative and the absolute make sense. To these it adds a further binary opposition: morality-prudence (Rorty, *Contingency* 59).

Morality, according to this view, is metaphysically distinct from prudence as it stems from Reason as opposed to passion or self-interest. It is understood as consisting, at bottom, in a set of “ideal standards” which “antecede customs and confer their moral quality on them,” as Dewey put it (qtd. in Rorty, *Social Hope* 88). Moral inquiry therefore amounts to the application of Reason, which Rorty tells us is assumed to be able to provide “well-grounded theoretical answers” to ethical questions and “algorithms for resolving moral dilemmas” thanks to its ability to put us in contact with “an order beyond time and change which ... establishes a hierarchy of responsibilities” (*Contingency* xv).

According to the kind of view I have just described, normative critics have the authority to judge texts and their authors just insofar as they can show that their judgements follow on from ostensibly ‘non-relational’ first principles. As these principles are thought to be objective and thus universal, the critic need not worry about whether their judgements hold in all contexts and for all people as the truthfulness or falsity of such moral claims depends on their relation to these universal principles, and thus is in no way contextually bound. Either the critic is ‘right’ in that he or she has correctly identified the ‘true’ criteria of ethical conduct, which are necessarily universal and therefore true in all contexts and for all people, or he or she is wrong, in which case what he or she has to say is not true in any context or for anyone. What matters, according to this view, is whether one has correctly identified and understood the ‘essential criteria’ of morality. Moral controversy is in this way seen as resulting from errors or shortcomings in reasoning rather than differences in acculturation.

The validity of this account depends, however, on a foundational assumption that no longer holds. For as I discussed in the beginning of the previous section, since the mid-twentieth century we have been furnished with thorough-going antifoundationalist critiques by the likes of Derrida and Rorty which show the foundationalist story to be predicated on the assumption that the Truth is 'out there' just beyond the realm of appearance and the reach of relationality. This idea, of an unconditional exterior to language, of some 'Real' or otherwise metaphysical dimension which is the source of all truths and values, and which might thereby furnish us with absolute, trans-historical conditions of Right and Wrong conduct, owes its continued existence to the power of tradition. Were it not for tradition, this idea would surely have been swept away by the Saussurean realisation that language is a functional system of relations, rather than an ideal system of reference. For once one accepts a relational picture of language, talk of non-relational things inevitably begins to look ironic: such talk purports to be of something beyond linguistic relations, and by way of proof it offers yet more and more relations in language.

If everything is relational, then those parts of the ethical tradition in the West that refer to unconditional first principles and absolute criteria of proper conduct begin to come apart at the seams, and we might meaningfully ask after the practical function of these kinds of claims. That is to say, we might see both ethics and meta-ethics as questions of social organisation and control, rather than as the stipulation of, or search for, the essential criteria of goodness or righteousness. To do so is not, of course, to escape the norms which shape our lives and beliefs, but to engage in a form of situated moral critique in which we continuously scrutinise the relationships between our values, the traditions and contemporary normative order which organises and generalises these values as enforceable precepts, the means of this enforcement, and so on. Whilst such critique is obviously limited by the presuppositions which underlie our culturally specific concept of morality, we may nonetheless in this manner refine our ethical thought by measuring the normative character and mechanisms of our society against the values which define our community and, indeed, ourselves. Consequently, it is not question-begging to ask if the objectivist approach to ethics is in step with the very values it seeks to secure. Indeed, it seems to me that Rorty is right



when he argues that an insistence on the objectivity of our personal values seems to be at odds with the spirit of the liberal democratic project as a whole, and that theorists like Theodor Adorno and Butler are similarly right to question the authority of any and all such claims (Rorty, *Contingency* 52).

By trading on metaphysical assumptions about the existence of an exterior to language which is the proper source of moral truth, universal moral claims establish their authority on the basis of a justification that is never quite given, which is systematically deferred precisely because it is conceived of as coming from 'elsewhere' – as not reachable or entirely reproducible in language. There is thus something inherently repressive in the assertion of universality, an inevitable tendency towards an authoritarian ethnocentrism: such an assertion cannot survive or even be made in the first place without at the same time rejecting and denying any and all moral differences. Perhaps the best proof of this is the manner in which strong assertions of universality are often accompanied by a resort to violence which is 'legitimated' by the very 'universality' such violence is intended to secure. We might consider, in this vein, Adorno's lectures on morality in which he laments the ease with which moral traditions become acutely repressive in the face of social change, and how, "where the universal does not simply agree with the particular, it presents itself as an abstraction that fails to include the particular and hence – ignoring its rights – appears as something violent and extraneous that has no substantial reality for human beings" (19). Similarly, Judith Butler, in her discussion of these lectures, writes that

When a universal precept cannot, for social reasons, be appropriated or when – indeed, for social reasons – it must be refused, the universal precept itself becomes a site of contest, a theme and an object of democratic debate. That is to say, it loses its status as a precondition of democratic debate; if it did operate there as a precondition, as a *sine qua non* of participation, *it would impose its violence in the form of an exclusionary foreclosure.* (6-7, my emphasis)

Due to her interest in defending a particular notion of universality, Butler is more cautious in her formulation than Adorno, stating that “the problem is not with universality as such” but rather with the failure of universality, in certain instances, to “be responsive to cultural particularity” and to reform in response to changes in its social conditions (6). She ultimately goes on to suggest that our relationality and self-blindness, which she argues are universal conditions of subjectivity, might ground a conception of ethics that, whilst itself universal, is nonetheless characterised by its demand for us to remain responsive to others, and to our social conditions in general. I do not have the space here to discuss her argument in detail, but suffice it to say that I cannot imagine a universality that functions as such without contesting the validity of the particular differences that escape or refute it, nor can I imagine a universality that totally and unfailingly accounts for the particular.

Doing away with the idea of unconditional principles leaves us with a view of morality as relational through and through and therefore particular. It is particular in the sense that the meaning of moral claims and judgements is a matter of their relation to the specific context in which they are made, rather than to a metaphysical order which somehow underlies all the various and dissimilar patterns of speech and conduct in different cultures and throughout history that we lump together under the label ‘morality.’ One way to express this particularity is to say that whether or not some action is right or wrong necessarily depends on the conceptions of right and wrong conduct at work, on a certain set of values, that exist in the discourse of a community, and the vocabulary of its individual members, not as an expression of or relation to some fundamental truth, but merely as a kind of shorthand for the contingent beliefs and practices of a person’s community (Rorty, *Social Hope* xxix). Another way to express this particularity is to simply say that different people, communities and cultures throughout time and space have had (and continue to have) different beliefs about how people ought to act. There is no way to judge the correctness of any of these particular beliefs without taking it as given that some of them are correct enough to serve as criteria of judgement. That is to say, there is no way to choose between the competing moral beliefs of different communities that does not beg the question. Moral inquiry, no matter what form it takes, is unable to transcend its particularity, because, as the works of Butler,

Rorty and Adorno make clear, such inquiry always proceeds in relation to and thus in the terms of some or other moral tradition – typically the very same one which is the object of said inquiry. Moral inquiry, in other words, does not take place in a vacuum, but emerges out of culturally specific traditions, and in order to proceed, must take for granted certain notions within these traditions, and therefore cannot ‘break’ with them in a way that would allow it to transcend its particular context and acquire something like trans-cultural objectivity.

Moral authority, from an antifoundationalist perspective, is derived from one’s place within the social order and the relation of one’s words to the values and beliefs of one’s audience and the established norms of their particular moral communities. In this sense, the authority of a literary critic cannot be settled without reference to his or her specific context. We might, nonetheless, make some general remarks. Firstly, the literary critic, as a professional academic associated with an authoritative institute of knowledge, possesses a degree of epistemic authority that while not specifically moral may nonetheless cause certain members of his or her audience to take his or her moral claims more seriously than they otherwise would. Secondly, despite this, in most societies literary critics do not have any specifically moral authority in their capacity as critics. Nothing about the profession privileges one’s moral claims. If, however, the critic appeals to the currently held values of his or her audience, and to some of the established norms of this audience’s communities, then the critic does not need any special moral authority as his or her claims will seem justified, reasonable and authoritative by virtue of these relations.

The authority of a critic’s moral claims thus depends on his or her ability to relate to the moral world of his or her audience. There is however, a danger here, specifically for the kind of criticism that aims to resist patriarchal normativity and positively reform our conception of rape. For such criticism depends for its efficacy on the rejection or critique of the extant moral order and of certain norms, values and beliefs. The danger lies in the risk of recuperation: insofar as one appeals to the conventional moral beliefs of one’s audience one might be seen as affirming the moral order of which it is an expression, which would erode the reformative power of one’s criticism. Yet the persuasiveness of moral arguments and the receptiveness of one’s audience depend on such appeals. Thus we might ask how our criticism

can break with the hegemonic social (and moral) order whilst still appearing authoritative and remaining effective as a tool of moral persuasion. Of course, this way of putting things is somewhat misleading as there is no sense in which it is possible to entirely 'break with' the social order insofar as it is truly hegemonic, and, in any case, the social order is not homogeneous or even continuous; rather, it is merely the sum of the various practices, customs, habits, laws and beliefs of our society over time. The values which motivate our desire to disrupt a set of norms and behaviours do not somehow exist 'apart' from the rest of society. On the contrary, these values exist as one of the many different facets of the social order. We might, therefore, selectively and critically appeal to certain values, norms and beliefs in our criticism, thereby using them as the basis for our critique of, for instance, the norms which make up rape culture as it exists in South Africa. The question is therefore not 'how can we appeal to our audience's values without affirming the morality of which these values are a part.' The question is 'which values, beliefs, practices and norms can be appealed to as justification for the reform of those values, beliefs, practices and norms which are doing harm?'

What of those with different values, from other moral communities? What authority does or could normative criticism's moral claims have in the face of real controversy? This problem is not an easy one – it cuts to the heart of contemporary metaethical discussions – and solving it entirely is, perhaps, beyond the scope of a Masters thesis. Nonetheless, let me offer a few remarks on the matter. In the face of stark moral difference, three strategies suggest themselves. Firstly, one can try to find and appeal to common ground between one's own values and those of one's interlocutor. Secondly, one can try to make one's own values seem appealing, usually by referring to the social outcomes enabled by these values that we hope are desirable to our interlocutor, and hope that he or she is sufficiently swayed to accept or at least entertain the possible worthiness of at least some of the values. Finally, one can strategically appeal to one's interlocutor's values, beliefs and practices. It is therefore possible to use one's criticism as tool for inter-communal moral dialogue and persuasion, possible, that is, for criticism to acquire a measure of authority even in the eyes of those outside of one's specific moral community. I think, however, that such work is beyond the scope of your

average piece of literary criticism. It is not the job, nor, generally speaking, the aim of a piece of normative criticism to resolve inter-communal moral differences. Literary criticism is at best an unwieldy tool for such a purpose, which is better served either by more direct means of communication (such as conversation, discussion and dialogue) or more effective means of disclosing and positively portraying one's values (such as novels, films and television shows).

Normative criticism need not solve all moral problems, need not be authoritative in all circumstances and to all peoples, in order to be useful, and even if its persuasiveness is restricted to particular contexts, it remains a useful tool of intra-communal moral dialogue, social commentary and political resistance and reform. That said, I hope my discussion thus far has served to underline the limits of normative criticism's usefulness, specifically in relation to the question of its authority. Whilst normative criticism allows us to both avoid reproducing harmful patriarchal conventions and assumptions in our reading of rape and gender relations more generally, and to actively resist or disrupt the culture of rape which these conventions and assumptions serve, its authority – and thus its efficacy – depends on both the specific rhetorical strategies employed by the critic and the context in which it is read. The context-dependent, particular nature of all moral rhetoric is such that we can never have the kind of certainty falsely promised by the Kantian and Judeo-Christian moral traditions, neither in our criticism nor elsewhere. Our desire to avoid and prevent harm in the field of literary criticism thus cannot be fulfilled with reference to a particular, static strategy, but requires instead the development of a dynamic style of writing that is responsive to the limits and conditions of all moral rhetoric, ever conscious of the specific values of its intended audience, and adaptive to changes within the communities which serve as its context.

### **3.4 Reading & Responsibility**

My discussion of interpretation, criticism and the literary text in the first section of this chapter suggests that some degree of risk is inherent in reading and writing about literary representations of rape. This risk is a product of our productive role as readers in realising the

text through the act of reading and interpretation. For as I discussed in relation to the work of Stanley Fish, literary meaning does not sit waiting to be discovered on the pages of a novel; it arises as a result of the interpretive process – that is, the meeting of the reader’s imagination and the written text as ordained by certain interpretive conventions so as to produce a discrete interpretation. The reader is in this sense the gatekeeper of literary meaning; what a text signifies depends on the particular manner in which the reader relates its constituent parts (words, sentences, paragraphs, images, etcetera) to each other and to discourse in general. The unread text can therefore do no harm. In order for the harms described in the first chapter to be possible, texts must not only be written but also read. The safest choice, from a harm prevention point of view, would thus appear to be to simply not read or write about rape. Many of us will find this line of thinking perversely misguided; and indeed I think we have good reasons for thinking so, which I will discuss in due time. But the possibility of simply abstaining from reading or writing texts about rape, and thereby preemptively avoiding the possibility of causing harm suggests that we ought to offer some justification for our choice to read and write about the act. Thus, we might ask, ‘how can we justify our choice to read (and write) literary representations, given the risk of causing or at least enabling harm to be caused by so doing?’

The suggestion that we *ought* to justify our choice of course assumes a certain notion of responsibility, and we might thus further ask ‘in what sense are we responsible for any harms which might occur as a direct or indirect consequence of our choice to read and write about a particular literary depiction of rape?’ and, finally, ‘what responsibilities, if any, do we have as readers and critics of rape in literature?’

The point of these questions is not to re-inscribe the neo-Kantian moral framework which I have just spent some time critiquing but to address the desire that most of us have not to cause suffering, and not to be seen as irresponsible (in the sense of being apathetic or idle in the face of the possibility of our behaviour causing suffering). This desire is captured well by the Judeo-Christian rhetoric of responsibility, which is also in part the cause of this desire. But how does this rhetoric look to the antifoundationalist? In what follows, I try to provide an antifoundationalist notion of responsibility that might satisfy our moral desires

whilst at the same time dispensing with the essentialism of the tradition which played a large part in shaping these desires. I begin with a critique of the traditional notion of responsibility, specifically of its assumptions about and demands of the subject. I then proceed to discuss the utility of offering justifications for our actions, of attempting to be 'responsible,' specifically where reading and writing about fictional depictions of rape is concerned. Finally, I end the section with some practical recommendations for reading responsibly.

Moral rhetoric in the West has, since the Enlightenment at least, implied, even depended upon, the assumption of a knowing, rational agent. The central idea of responsibility is that our capacity to know and control ourselves means that we are responsible for the consequences of our actions, and that as individuals we might be praised or blamed for certain outcomes. Whilst there is considerable controversy about the proper criteria for such judgements, the commonsense view nonetheless remains that such judgements are either essential to morality or otherwise a useful and legitimate way of encouraging positive social outcomes and preventing negative ones. For at least as long as people have been making moral judgements, we have also been in the habit of demanding that people suspected or believed to have acted wrongly account for themselves and their actions. The idea, which, again, is ubiquitous enough to be common sense, is that such an account is an essential requirement of moral judgement as it is the sole means by which we might deduce the intentions of the person who is to be judged, and thus to decide, amongst other things, the extent of his or her blameworthiness for the outcome in question. So it is that it seems natural to ask of those of us who read or write about rape how we might account for our actions, given that our actions risk harming others. But as many theorists, critics and philosophers since Hegel have pointed out, there seems to be scant evidence in favour of this rational subject, which puts into question the legitimacy and value of popular notions of responsibility and the ostensibly self-disclosing accounts they demand of us. Before turning, then, to questions about what responsibility might look like in relation to reading and rape, perhaps it is best to ask on what grounds we might talk of responsibility at all.

Judith Butler addresses the question of the subject and responsibility directly in *Giving an Account of Oneself*, a text which, whilst obviously not exhaustive, is nonetheless

representative of a line of questioning typical of antifoundationalist thought. Her core proposition is that the structure and conditions of subjectivity are such that the provision of a complete, consistent and truthful account of ourselves is an impossibility and that, therefore, we ought to revise our understanding of responsibility.

Butler begins her account with the reflection that moral deliberation always takes place from the perspective of a subject conditioned by the very norms which are the instruments and objects of its inquiry. To acknowledge, as Adorno does, that “all ideas of morality or ethical behaviour must relate to an ‘I’ that acts” is to acknowledge that ethical questions must be understood in terms of their ontological context, a context, which, Butler proposes, is shaped by the content and conclusions of normative thought as a whole (qtd. in Butler, 7). Moral inquiry thus not only always presupposes a certain ontology; it also works to enable self-reflexive subjectivity.

Butler explores the enabling effect of moral discourse with reference to “the scene of address” – the inaugurating moment in which we are addressed by another and so prompted to address ourselves to them (12). She writes that it is only upon being asked by another to explain ourselves, typically to avow or disavow a causal link to some action or consequence which is to be praised or condemned, that we begin to narrate ourselves, and so are interpellated as beings which can (and must) give an account of ourselves in accordance with certain norms. Importantly, the scene of address ought not to be understood as a moment of free play, which is somehow prior to and unaffected by the system of norms in terms of which the resulting subject must live. On the contrary, the scene of address is structured and necessitated by the systems of norms which precede it – the codes and rules of behaviour which govern social life.

Subject formation, according to Butler, occurs in the context of a scene of address between the self and other and is occasioned by morality, or, more precisely, a system of norms, in terms of which this scene and the resulting subject(s) are structured. Subjectivity consists, therefore, of a system of productive relations both between the self and other and to and in terms of the abstractions of which culture consists and upon which sociality depends. Butler takes Foucault to be correct in his later work, where he argues that, in her



words, “[t]he subject forms itself in relation to a set of codes, prescriptions, or norms” (17). Foucault refers to the society-wide prescriptive system of norms of which Butler speaks as a regime of truth, and it is this regime which governs, for the French thinker, what will and will not constitute a recognisable subject, and so what modes of being will be available within a certain culture and at a certain time. This is not to say, however, that the subject is merely an effect of discourse – neither Foucault nor Butler’s point is that we are straightforwardly *determined* by our conditions. Rather, both argue that our agency is only thinkable in the context of “an enabling and limiting field of constraint” (18). This field of constraint is, of course, the cumulative result of the decisions of humans over the course of history, and is likewise changeable, if not directly or quickly, by the subjects it regulates, and it is, presumably, this possibility of reform that gives rise to the social hope which colours Butler’s work. In any case, her point is that we exist as recognisable, self-reflexive subjects by virtue of a system of abstractions produced and sustained by others, which is the condition of our agency and the limit to it, a limit which we cannot surpass or ignore without relinquishing our status as recognisable subjects.

It follows from this understanding of subjectivity that any account I attempt to give of myself will be frustrated and compromised in various ways. My singularity is established, in the first place, by “a non-narrativisable exposure” – that is, a discreteness owing to my embodiment, which I only come to know through the other, and which I cannot directly experience and which therefore lies beyond my capacity to faithfully narrate (39). The recognisable structure and mode of my singular being further depends on a system of constitutive relations – an uncountable series of internal psychological relations and external social relations between myself and others, and between others, over time, within the context of the various norms which govern these external relations. My subjectivity is therefore enabled by a social history which I cannot know or narrate in its entirety, and a personal history, the full effect of which lurks beyond the reach of my consciousness, a fact that has been captured well, Butler notes, by psychoanalysis since Freud (49). My account must, furthermore, be given in the general, substitutable terms I have received from my social context, and must remain within the bounds established by the behavioural codes that govern

this context. The forms I use to narrate myself will necessarily be general and substitutable and so work against the particularity I am trying to convey. Finally, my account will be shaped by the structure of the address – my story about myself will, always, be told to another, and the function of my self-disclosure and the presence of the other, along with the particular norms which organise our communicative exchange, will, as a matter of course, exert itself on my self-expression, such that no two tellings will be altogether the same in either meaning or effect (39).

How, then, should we think of moral obligation and responsibility? Butler suggests that we are obliged to begin giving an account of ourselves by the other, by the address of the other, as a condition of our being recognised as a subject within the normative-ontological scheme which governs sociality.<sup>5</sup> It is, she notes, of course possible to “remain silent” when addressed, to refuse the invitation or injunction to self-disclose, thereby rejecting or contesting the terms in which the address is made, and in which it attempts to induce me to self-narrate (11). To do so, she reminds us, is, however, nevertheless to take up a relation to the address and that which structures it. To acknowledge the other who acknowledges me is to acknowledge myself as an object which can be addressed, witnessed, and reflected upon, and thereby to be inaugurated as a self-reflexive subject by the address despite my resistance. What the self trades for its defiance of the address or of the terms in which it is made, is a measure of intelligibility. We become, in the instance of our refusal to publish ourselves, not so much mysterious as aberrant – a subject, yes, but one which cannot be made sense of in terms of the relations by which I, the other who addresses you, make sense of myself. Defiance thus instantiates a difference that, I would argue, necessarily destabilises the identity of others by expressing the limits of the language in which they narrate themselves, and thus the limits of their own recognisability and identity. How, then, to make sense of this obligation? We might express it as the expectation of the other who addresses us, aroused and conditioned by a system of norms, which we must fulfil on pain of misrecognition. Obligation is, in this sense, a conditional expectation, an expression of the constrained negotiability of the relations which constitute me and which emerge as a result of my interaction with others, of the sociality of my subjectivity.

In a similar fashion, we might say that we are obliged to account for our choices because, and only insofar as, we are subject to specific expectations, aroused by the system of norms which governs the social circumstances of myself and the expecting other, which must be fulfilled in order to secure a certain desired, positive relation to the other, or to avoid being forced into an undesired, negative relation. Here the other might be exterior – another person or group thereof – or it might be an interior other, the product of a certain regulatory self-reflexive relation to myself, enabled and conditioned by the impress of others upon my being. Put simply, I am obliged to act in a certain manner when I am expected, by myself or others, to act thus, with my failure to do so carrying the risk or reality of an undesired change in my relations. In failing to meet an obligation to myself, for instance, I might suffer a depreciated view of myself, or, in failing to meet my obligations to my community, I might be viewed as unreliable, at best, and immoral or malicious, at worst.

We are therefore obliged to account for our choices, such as the choice to read or write about literary representations of rape, just insofar as we wish to meet the specific expectations others have of us, and that we have of ourselves (in accordance with a certain social order and historical context). The significance of our choice to attempt to meet the expectations of others or not lies in the fact that our continued, happy membership within our particular communities depends upon our ability to fulfil the expectations of others, where these expectations may take the form of prescriptions, norms, informal agreements and collective understandings.

In the case that we fail to fulfil an obligation to another, or to our community as a whole, the provision of an account of our actions gives us a chance at mitigation and amelioration. Insofar as our account helps to show our failure to meet certain moral expectations to be the result of a mistake or misunderstanding, or otherwise contrary to our intentions, it can lessen the apparent severity of our failure, and help us maintain positive relations to the person in question or to the community as a whole. Insofar as it shows our failure to be accidental or unintentional it may also ameliorate part of the harm caused by it. For example, if we hurt another member of our community mistakenly, or as result of a choice which had unforeseen consequences, our account of our actions may not only alleviate our

blameworthiness in the eyes of others, it may actually go some way toward redressing the harm caused by reassuring the victim that he or she is not being persecuted or targeted maliciously, and that his or her community has not turned against him or her.

Importantly, self-narration, the provision of an account of ourselves, may fulfil these functions *in spite* of the limits and problems with the said account indicated by Butler. What Butler provides are compelling reasons to rethink the moral demand for the provision of a complete, truthful account of oneself and one's actions, but short of these reasons affecting widespread social change, we nonetheless find ourselves in moral communities which continue to value such accounts. That is to say that in describing the theoretical problems with the demand that we give an account of ourselves, Butler tends to overlook the practical, social function of such demands. This function, which is not necessarily dependent on the theoretical coherence of the particular terms by which it is served, persists in spite of the fallible logic of its expression, and may stand in a contrasting relation to some of the discourse which it draws upon. So it is that our talk of responsibility would seem to voice a demand or requirement for the impossible (an exhaustive, true account of oneself) and yet this impossibility does nothing to prevent us from 'taking responsibility for our actions' by providing an explanatory story of ourselves and our relation to the events in question, or of expecting and accepting such accounts from others. Talk of responsibility, moral obligation and even judgement therefore ought to be evaluated in relation to the specific function such talk fulfils. One can happily agree with Butler that we should be wary of judgement insofar as it is used to exclude, alienate, punish or dehumanise whilst in the same breath defending the usefulness of judgements insofar as they are used to include, reform, renew, or to sustain communal bonds or identify harmful behaviour. Similar things can be said of moral obligation and responsibility.

I propose that it is useful for the purposes of harm avoidance to understand oneself as under certain obligations to certain persons and to one's community, as having certain responsibilities, as being responsible for one's actions (albeit in a far more limited manner than generally supposed) and to both labour to fulfil one's responsibilities and to attempt to account for one's actions when one fails to do so. Butler's most prescient point, in my view,

is that this kind of discourse, and the view of the subject that typically comes attached, all too often serves punitive or retributive desires, functioning as communally sanctioned means of justifying and carrying out violence against certain persons. We may retain such terms as long as we take on board the kind of reformed understanding of human agency Butler provides and scrutinise the particular ends served by the deployment of such language.

The question of how we might account for our choice to read may in one sense be asking too much; as Butler shows us, we are simply not the kinds of beings which are able to provide a 'true' and exhaustive account of our behaviour. But as I have just said, I believe it nonetheless pays to think of ourselves as responsible for this choice, and as having certain responsibilities as a result of making this choice. The benefit of thinking of ourselves as being responsible for our actions and having certain responsibilities is twofold. On the one hand, it assists us in our efforts to avoid and prevent harm by focusing our attention on the potential impact of our personal decisions. On the other hand, it provides us with ways of ameliorating or mitigating any harm we may inadvertently cause. Understanding ourselves as having certain responsibilities as readers of and writers about rape and literary representations thereof provides us with a framework of behaviour that places certain limits on our conduct and encourages self-reflective attentiveness to the harm-risking activity by reminding us of what is at stake. This assists us in maintaining our commitment, or fulfilling our desire, to avoid hurting others. As I mentioned earlier, the benefit of providing, or being able to provide, a necessarily partial, fragmented and transitory account of our actions is that it enables us to ameliorate some of the harm our actions may inadvertently cause. Insofar as we did not set out to hurt anyone, an explanatory account of our actions, however flawed its presuppositions may be, can work to re-affirm the communal bonds damaged or weakened by the outcome of our actions insofar as it is deemed 'acceptable' by its audience. It can also work against any further distress that might be suffered by those who might fear that the suffering we have unwittingly inflicted upon them reflects something about how their community regards them, specifically as survivors or women at risk of rape. Such an account also offers us the opportunity to acknowledge the trauma of those we have harmed. Finally,

by giving an account of our actions, we might break with the patriarchal discourse we may have unwittingly affirmed.

The question, however, remains: how do we justify our choice to read or write about literary representations of rape if we despise cruelty yet know that our decision might inadvertently facilitate or contribute to the suffering of others? How might we account for our decision if confronted by another, or by the self-as-other? Given what I have argued thus far, I think the answer must be that we have good reasons to engage with rape in literature, reasons that have to do with the prevention and avoidance of harm. For, although they have the potential to cause harm, literary and critical approaches to rape also provide us with useful means of positively reforming our understanding of rape and our social treatment of those affected by the violation or threat thereof. As I discussed in Chapter One, the enactment and effect of rape necessarily depends on how the act is conceptualised by society at large, and so, in order to prevent rape and rape-related suffering, we must engage with its social meaning, with the various scripts, tropes and assumptions that make up our collective social conception of the act. Fiction and literary criticism allow us to do exactly that, and without appropriating the actual experiences and trauma of actual survivors for these purposes. By reading and discussing literary treatments of rape, we gain the chance to contest patriarchal discourse, which obscures the harmfulness of the act, portrays survivors' testimony as unreliable, and implicitly justifies the actions of rapists. Importantly, literature and literary criticism's potential to affect our collective social conception of rape endures regardless of whether or not we choose to realise this potential for positive ends. Thus, to abandon the reading or writing of and about rape in order to avoid the risks that come with such activities is effectively to cede its discursive power to the patriarchy. Without any attempts to contest the status quo, it will invariably perpetuate itself through our fiction and criticism, which will tend to reflect the entrenched beliefs and attitudes of our society regardless of whether some principled minority abstains from reading or writing about rape in fiction. Our abstention from engaging with or creating literary representations of rape would do nothing to prevent others from doing so in ways that are cruel or otherwise harmful. Ultimately, the literary representation of rape, as well as the critical discussion of such representations, may just be

additional ways by which the logic of patriarchy and rape culture perpetuates itself, or they may be a crucial means of contesting and resisting this logic and culture.

We have, then, good reasons that have to do with the prevention and avoidance of harm to engage with rape in the literary and critical arena despite the risks. And these reasons, and our ability to recount them if necessary, go some way to fulfilling the obligations I think we should understand ourselves as having towards those we risk hurting by choosing to read or write about fictional depictions of rape. But we do not generally think of responsibility as merely a matter of finding sufficient justification for our actions; responsibility is also a matter of doing our best to avoid or mitigate the risk of harm. The better part of responsibility, for the reader and critic of literary representations of rape, has to do with the actions one undertakes to limit the chances of others being hurt. Thus we ought to ask, 'what preventative measures, what behaviours or habits, might we adopt in order to mitigate the risk of reading and writing about literary representations of rape resulting in suffering?'

There are several practices we might adopt as readers in order to fulfil our responsibility to others, particularly those affected by or at risk of rape. Some of these are particular to reading, and some are more general epistemic prescriptions. The first of these is attentiveness. While it goes without saying that a good reader should read attentively, the stakes of reading rape are such that heightened attention to the particular details and context of a scene of rape is a basic requirement of responsible reading. Attentiveness helps offset the risk of non-recognition or misrecognition of rape, which, as I discussed in the first half of this chapter, leads to the further mystification of rape (to the extent that our reading is available to others). To read rape attentively is to treat the interpretation and analysis of the depiction as an end in itself, rather than as only a means to an end. Insofar as our reading of rape is merely subservient to our broader interpretive thesis or analytical aims, our attention will be diverted away from the details of the scene and their significance with regards to the worldly suffering to which said scene necessarily has some non-trivial relation. This is not to say that where one encounters textual representations of rape one must suspend entirely one's critical project or one's other interpretive aims in favour of a detailed analysis of said

representation – although it could certainly be argued that doing so might best serve one’s desire to avoid causing harm. Rather, it is just to say that within the bounds of one’s overall interpretation and critical project, the literary depiction of rape should be treated as significant in and of itself, regardless of what else we think or have to say about the text as a whole.

We may also guard against harmful interpretations by exercising readerly self-awareness. That is, engaging in a sustained, intentional consideration of what one brings to the text – of how one’s beliefs, values and assumptions inform the act of reading and thus work to produce the resultant interpretation. Such awareness is necessary if one wants to avoid having one’s interpretation overdetermined by the dominant conventions of the patriarchal social order. As I discussed in Chapter One, reading rape in terms of such conventions allows for the proliferation of those patriarchal meanings which serve as rape’s conditions of possibility, provide support for the rationale behind rape and related harms, and shift discourse such that rape and related harms become even more likely, less preventable and harder to ameliorate. Thus if one wants to prevent or avoid contributing to rape-related harm, one needs to be in a position where one is able to select, to some extent, which conventions, which beliefs and assumptions, one employs in the act of reading. One needs, that is, to be as self-aware a reader as possible.

The notion that good reading should be attentive and self-aware is not new – it chimes with existing practices and norms in the literary establishment. The third practice I wish to propose, strategic conventionalism, is however a departure from conventional wisdom. As I discussed in the first half of this chapter, contemporary literary theory tends to focus on the openness of the text, and calls for the reader to acknowledge this openness, and to strive to read in a manner that respects and reflects the openness of the text as an object of interpretation. Doing so undoubtedly has normative utility; by leaving the text open – by marking out the fact that the text could and can be interpreted differently and to different ends helps readers avoid the kind of determinate readings that strip literature of its radical potential by reproducing the hegemonic logic brought to bear on the text. But as I earlier argued, this openness is inappropriate to the reading of scenes of rape because of the way in



which it plays into the mystification of rape. Thus we need to exercise what I named strategic conventionalism – the selective, conscious determination of scenes of rape, or scenes which we have good reason to believe are of rape, in accordance, at the very least, with our legal definitions, and at best with our most progressive and just social conceptions of the act. Such determination is the only way to avoid portraying rape in literature and elsewhere as something vague or hard to identify, and thereby contributing to the process by which patriarchy mystifies rape and obscures the harm it causes. One need, and indeed, should, not allow this selective determination to become general; contemporary theory has the right of it when it talks of textual openness and warns against the dangers of determinate reading. The text is open, and interpretations which respect the general openness of the work in question do help prevent the text from being reduced to a vehicle for the prevailing beliefs of one's society. My claim is merely that a focus on the openness of the text is harmful where rape is concerned, and that, therefore, we should endeavour to read and speak of rape in more selectively determinate, essentialist terms than we otherwise would for the sake of those who might otherwise suffer from the introduction of yet more ambiguity about their violation.

These three practices – attentiveness, self-awareness and strategic conventionalism – are specifically concerned with how we read rape. But there are some additional practices which we might adopt that have a more general, epistemic scope. Outside of our specific manner of reading, we might strive to avoid harm by listening to survivors and exercising general self-awareness. Listening to survivors is obviously important, not least because it is they who our actions as readers, writers and critics of rape risk harming. By paying attention to the testimony, arguments and needs of survivors of rape, we can ensure that our thinking about the act, our assumptions and general conception are useful to survivors, and in line with their experiences rather than patriarchal myths. It should be obvious that any conception of rape being deployed in a particular reading that does not align with the experiences of actual survivors is dubious at best and dangerous at worst. Thus reading rape responsibly requires that one familiarises oneself with the theory and testimony of survivors and the work of those who study and catalogue the experiences and thoughts of survivors. One can never

really 'know enough' in this department, and so this practice in reality functions as a regulative ideal. Ideally, we should be experts on rape as it is experienced and understood by survivors, but short of that, we should do our best to become acquainted with their experiences and understanding, so that our theory, criticism and interpretation is responsive to the needs of survivors and predicated on their experiences rather than on stereotypes, tropes and fictional accounts of the act and its effect.

I have already spoken of 'readerly' self-awareness, but I now wish to speak of a more expansive sense of the concept, having to do with our identity and conception of ourselves, and our understanding of how and why we make certain judgements, in general. For so much of the potential harm of reading rape has to do with the way in which the norms of our society, the norms in terms of which we become subjects and define ourselves as persons, enable rape and facilitate rape culture. How we read, and what judgements we make on the back of our interpretations, and what we have to say about our interpretations all depend not merely upon which conventions we follow as readers, but on our conception of the world as a whole. Our understanding of rape, for instance, is intimately connected with our understanding of gender and sex, which are in turn intertwined with our understanding of who we are. These prior understandings set the scene for our interpretation of rape, and to a large extent predetermine our assumptions and conclusions about, and judgements of, a particular representation of rape. If we are truly concerned with avoiding harm as readers and writers about rape, we ought to continually scrutinise our self-conception and the understandings that make up our sense of the world, and specifically of rape, gender, sex and power. As with the recommendation that we listen to survivors, this recommendation, that we exercise as much epistemic self-awareness as possible, is open-ended. It is not that we should only read about rape on the condition that we have perfect self-awareness (which is, in any case, an impossibility); rather, in choosing to read rape, we ought to pay explicit attention to our responses and judgements and do our best trace them to their source in our prior beliefs about the world. Moreover, we should commit to being open to the possibility that there may be something wrong (because cruel) about our understanding of rape, or ourselves, or the

world, and accept that we may need to challenge ourselves and eventually reform our understanding of such matters if we want to avoid causing harm to others.

### **3.5 Conclusion**

I said, at the beginning of this chapter, that the critical feminist strategy of employing deliberately normative reading strategies which resist the logic of patriarchy is more or less the best means we have of preventing rape-related harm through our engagement with works of fiction. But as I hope to have shown, this approach is not without its limits. Reading rape is a fraught but necessary process, and even the best of methods must contend with a host of challenges. The simple act of recognition becomes, where rape is concerned, an involved, complex activity which must be engaged with self-consciously in a way that favours recognition over non-recognition in order to have the best chance at avoiding harmful outcomes. If they wish to reduce the chances of their reading causing suffering, readers must contend with the characteristic ambiguity and indeterminacy of literature whilst striving to interpret in a manner that is selectively and strategically determinate, even essentialist, where rape is concerned. To do so is to break with the best of contemporary theory, and to, in a sense, knowingly turn a blind eye to the indeterminate, open nature of text and the infinitude of other interpretive possibilities in the hope that in so doing one might secure the term rape against further mystification and ambiguity, and thereby do one's part to work against injustice that such ambiguity facilitates. If one accepts the implications of the linguistic turn, one must do all this whilst struggling for justification outside of the conventional bounds of the Western philosophical tradition, lest one's descriptive claims seem unjustified or otherwise simply sink back into a foundationalist metaphysics (which is at odds with contemporary literary and continental theory and, in many ways, the broader project and assumptions of contemporary feminist criticism as a whole).

If one wishes the normative content of one's criticism to be persuasive, one must further consider and selectively appeal to the values and moral beliefs of one's audience. But one has to do so carefully, and with a great deal of consideration, lest one be read as affirming

the dominant social order and, thereby, the patriarchal conventions of which it in part consists. One should also expect to have to fend off questions of moral authority and justification. But as I have said, one should not take these questions too seriously, for one need not claim any special authority or justification outside of that which can be obtained via appeals to the values and beliefs of one's audience; to think otherwise is to be trapped within the foundationalist bounds of a neo-Kantian view of ethics that cannot account for the relationality of its terms or contemporary notions of the self. That said, the critic must remain sensitive to the limits of moral rhetoric, and ought therefore to utilise a dynamic, and adaptive style of writing which is responsive to changes in the values and practices of his or her community and audience.

The negotiation of these challenges amounts to an attempt to take responsibility for one's reading, to fulfil certain obligations we have to others by virtue of our acceptance of the social expectations and norms of our community, as well as our personal desires with respect to the happiness and flourishing of others and our role in preventing or accommodating this flourishing. As I hope to have made clear, the project of reading responsibly is a difficult, but worthy one. There is, I believe, no sense in which fiction featuring rape can be considered just one among many texts; the specific demands of reading rape oblige compassionate critics to consider whether they are up to the task of responsible reading, whether they are able and willing to meet the aforementioned challenges and to allow their discussion of rape to be an end in itself, rather than merely an instrumental part of their critical thesis or reading. Should one choose to do criticism of literature featuring fictional depictions of rape, normative criticism is the best available tool for the prevention of harm. Moreover, there are a variety of critical habits and practices that might be adopted to further increase the chance of positive outcomes. Readerly attentiveness and self-awareness and the strategic use of conventionalism where rape is concerned are all means of securing one's reading against harmful outcomes. As I argued in the last section of this chapter, although normative criticism must negotiate many challenges, and although reading rape responsibly is invariably a fraught and difficult process, it is nonetheless an essential means of confronting and resisting patriarchal conventions and discourse.

## Conclusion

In this thesis I have done my best to give substance to the idea that our literary and critical treatments of rape can contribute to rape and related harms and that, as such, they require subject-specific adaptations to our interpretive habits, careful consideration, and thorough scrutiny. I have specifically argued in favour of the critical feminist idea that harm prevention where the literary representation of rape is concerned is best served by the deliberate use of normative critical interventions. I have also noted, however, that the employment of such a strategy is not a simple or straightforward thing, as the making and justifying of the kinds of judgments upon which such a strategy depends, as well as the 'simple' act of recognising rape in literature, and of making and defending claims of identification, face a variety of practical and theoretical difficulties. I have maintained, however, that these concerns and difficulties do not ultimately prevent the effective use of normative critical strategies of harm prevention, even if they do constrain their utility.

In order to support my claim that literary representations of rape can cause harm, I outlined the way in which such representations affect public discourse and thereby necessarily have either a positive (supportive) or negative (resistant) relation to the symbolic order – that order which encompasses both discourse and the pre-discursive symbolism upon which discourse is founded, and through which meaning is organised and the social order prescribed. Through an analysis of works by du Toit, Ebert and Marcus, I concluded that one of the ways in which rape representations can cause harm is by contributing to the enabling (symbolic and discursive) conditions of rape and related harms. I then turned to the work of Fricker in order to demonstrate another mechanism through which representations can cause harm: the provision, distribution and maintenance of social heuristics, such as stereotypes, scripts and common-sense assumptions about rape. I observed how, according to Fricker, these social heuristics, as well as the shared imaginative conception of rape they inform, make possible an epistemic species of harms which harm individuals specifically in their capacity as knowers, either by undermining their credibility and the believability of their testimony or by

contributing to the impoverishment of the pool of hermeneutic resources available to them for the purposes of making sense of and explaining their experiences to others. I concluded my discussion of the harm of literary representations by outlining how representations of rape can impede the recovery of rape survivors by contributing to harmful social, symbolic and discursive conditions, or otherwise producing, spreading and affirming the kinds of harmful stereotypes, scripts and common-sense assumptions that contribute to testimonial and hermeneutic injustice.

My subsequent discussion of *Disgrace* and its public and critical reception in Chapter Two served to demonstrate how the potential harm of rape representations is not at all self-evident. In my discussion of the controversy that faced the publication of *Disgrace*, I noted how many critics and commentators found the text's representation of rape significant by virtue of what it was assumed to imply about race relations, with its significance with regard to rape and gender relations being overlooked almost entirely. My discussion also illustrated how even a keen awareness of the relevance of novelistic representations of rape to our discussions about rape and gender-based violence, along with the best of intentions, does not ensure positive outcomes. Attwell, Samuelson and Boehmer, I observed, in otherwise perceptive papers directly concerned with the novel's treatment of gender and sexual violence, all equivocate about whether Melanie's rape counts as such. Such equivocation, I theorised, is indicative of the particular challenges facing the recognition and critique of representations of rape, the discussion of which I took up in the following chapter.

In Chapter Three, I discussed the epistemic and ethical problems facing the use of normative criticism as a strategy of harm prevention and offered up a pragmatic negotiation of the notion of readerly responsibility. I specifically discussed how the emphasis in contemporary critical theory and practice on the openness of interpretation and the indeterminacy of the text leads critics like Attwell, Samuelson and Boehmer to be wary of making strong interpretive claims where there seems to be the possibility for a variety of divergent interpretations. This kind of critical caution, I suggested, is in part the cause for their equivocation about Melanie's rape, and has a worrying effect where the reading of rape is concerned. I further discussed how the recognition of rape in literary texts is complicated by

the aforementioned critical conventions, as well as the subjective differences between individual interpretations, and the ambiguity and indeterminacy of literary texts. These complications, I went on to argue, are a product of the general problem of descriptive justification that has arisen as a direct consequence of the antifoundationalism of poststructuralist thought, which dispelled the notion of universal conditions of justification and left us with an understanding of justification as the appeal to community-specific epistemic conventions. I argued that although the aforementioned problems do complicate the business of doing normative criticism, they do not ultimately obstruct it from being used to prevent harm.

In my subsequent discussion of the ethical limits of normative criticism I addressed concerns about the authority of normative criticism's moral claims and I explicitly rejected the Kantian view that moral authority depends upon the relationship of one's claims to transcultural objective criteria of right and wrong. Instead, I argued, in antifoundationalist fashion, that moral authority depends upon the speaker's position within the social order and the relationship between their moral claims and the beliefs and values of their audience. The moral authority of normative criticism, I wrote, is thus necessarily contextual and particular.

I concluded the chapter with a discussion of responsibility, in which I drew upon the work of Butler to argue that responsibility, from an antifoundationalist perspective, amounts to the attempt to fulfil the expectations that other members of our moral community have of us, and that we have of ourselves. Although Butler gives us good reasons to rethink conventional notions of personal responsibility, I argued that it is nonetheless useful for the purposes of harm prevention to think of ourselves as personally responsible for our choice to read and write about literary representations of rape. Lastly, I offered some practical recommendations towards the responsible reading of rape in fiction.

My research suggests the need for vigilance on the part of readers and critics of rape in literary fiction. As I said towards the end of the last chapter, given the relationship between representation and the harms of rape, if we want to avoid contributing to harm in our reading and criticism of rape representations, we cannot read scenes of rape as we would read other parts of a text. Instead, we have to pay specific attention to the terms in which a scene is

relayed, doing our best to evaluate its relationship to popular symbolism and discourse, and, more specifically, to prevalent stereotypes, scripts, tropes and common-sense assumptions having to do with rape. We also need to be mindful of what we bring to the text, of how we use our imagination and prior understanding to realise the scene, since, in doing so, we invariably draw upon shared social conceptions of rape which, due to their circulation within patriarchal society, typically consist of damaging myths or depend upon flawed social heuristics.

The need for vigilance is especially urgent where criticism is concerned, for the potential harm of a reading of rape depends upon its circulation, and whereas personal readings are generally circulated, if at all, by word of mouth, and typically within a small community of friends and peers, the careful documentation and distribution of one's interpretations is the very goal of criticism, the success of which can generally be judged by the extent of its reach. Criticism is also generally regarded as more authoritative than the average layperson's interpretation, and so is more likely to affect change in its audience's mindsets. As such, if we critics are concerned with preventing rape-related harm, it pays to think of ourselves as having obligations or responsibilities over and above those we might ascribe to the regular leisure reader.

As I discussed in the previous chapter, meeting these responsibilities requires specific adaptations to our critical praxis. Despite the fact that much of our contemporary theory points to the openness and indeterminacy of texts, we must, where rape is concerned, be willing to make determinations and to write in a more declarative manner. We must do so not because the representation of rape in literature is somehow less open to interpretation than other subject matter, but because reading rape in a manner that is open, that resists making determinations, invites patriarchal interpretations which reduce openness to uncertainty in order to imply the vagueness and ambiguity of the concept of rape itself, thereby mystifying the violation and obscuring the harm it causes. Thus I have urged that we critics employ what I have termed strategic conventionalism: a rhetorical style that occasionally sets to one side the idea of textual openness in order to selectively appeal to certain authoritative epistemic conventions and popular concepts for the purpose of making strong declarations about rape.



In a similar fashion, I have recommended that critics concerned with preventing rape-related harm selectively appeal to the norms, values and practices of their audience and community in order to ensure that the moral content of their critical interventions is both persuasive and authoritative. These appeals should be selective because one of the primary means by which normative critical interventions can prevent rape-related harm is through the critique or rejection of patriarchal norms and moral beliefs. Thus, in order to be persuasive and effective as a harm prevention strategy, normative criticism needs to effectively play the best and most progressive of our values and norms against the worst and most harmful. We need, for example, to appeal to the notion of equality and the belief that cruelty is wrong in order to contest norms of male dominance and sexual entitlement. Furthermore, critics need to be sensitive to the moral differences between themselves and their audiences, and consciously adapt their argumentation such that it appeals insofar as is possible to the values of their audience. That is to say, critics concerned with preventing rape-related harm need to adopt an adaptive style of argumentation that is responsive to the particular moral beliefs and norms of their audience lest their criticism runs aground on the shoals of moral difference.

My research has also led me to believe that there is a real need for more responsible representations of rape, both in our literature and in popular media. I have argued that representations of rape can contribute to harm by exerting a negative influence on our shared conception of rape and rape survivors. But as I have also tried to show, particularly in my discussion of *Disgrace*, the affective character of literary representations means that they can also work to positively influence our discourse and thereby reform and progress our understanding of the violation and related harms. The work of combatting the patriarchal misrepresentation and mystification of rape would thus benefit from the production and distribution of representations of rape which adequately depict the harm of rape whilst avoiding or subverting the kinds of stereotypes, tropes, symbols and discourse that contribute to rape-related harms. In order to reform South Africa's collective understanding of rape, we need new and better stories about rape. We need more stories which provoke sympathy for survivors and help audiences better understand their needs, as well as stories which emphasise the damaging effect rape has on survivors, communities and even rapists

themselves. We need more stories which, like *Disgrace*, expose in detail the sordid and self-destructive nature of the kinds of desires, motivations and justifications which lead men to rape. These stories need to be told in novels as well as in more accessible media such as comic books, TV shows, magazines and movies, for they need to have reach in order to be effective.

This last point enables me to talk about the need for future research. If there was one thought which haunted me during this thesis, it was the thought that literary novels and the like have a somewhat limited audience. Their popularity amongst South Africans pales in comparison to, for instance, the kinds of multilingual soap operas that are broadcast on national television. There thus seems to me to be a need for research which closely examines the representation of rape, sex and gender in long-running prime-time shows like *Rhythm City*, *Muvhango*, *Generations* and *Isidingo*, for example. Moreover, there is room for work which extends the kind of analysis I have offered in this thesis to televised representations of rape in order to discuss the role television plays in either facilitating or combatting rape and related harms in our country.

Staying with the theme of alternative mediums of representation, it may also be useful to direct critical attention to non-fictional representations. For our conception of rape comes as much from the stories we tell about it as it does from the more functional ways we talk and write about it. News and tabloid stories, educational pamphlets, legal documents and survivor testimony are all examples of non-fictional writings which shape how we think about rape. Studies which analyse the representative economy of such writings, and which pay specific attention to the tropes, scripts, stereotypes and assumptions which they draw upon, affirm or otherwise subvert or resist, would do much to expand our understanding of the relationship between discourse, culture and rape in South Africa. In particular, the way in which rape is represented in perpetrators' accounts of their actions might be looked at, as such accounts provide a window into the way in which rape is conceived of by those who carry it out. For, in order to prevent rape, we need to understand how it is understood by those who rape, and how this understanding ties in with their self-justifications and motivations, so that we might thereby come to know what needs to change in the national

and communal discourse within South Africa in order to discourage and prevent men from raping women.

Ultimately, I have tried, in this study to motivate for the direction of critical attention to the ways in which we write, read and do criticism of literary representations of rape. I have specifically argued for the employment of careful and considered normative critical interventions which explicitly engage with the relationship between representations and our collective social conceptions of rape. Such work is challenging. It requires the development of a certain critical sensitivity and adaptability on the part of critics, who must carefully select which epistemic and normative conventions to appeal to in order for their claims to be persuasive and thus their interventions effective. Furthermore, it has certain limitations. Critical interventions must be carried out on the basis of a particular interpretation, which, however conventional, will nonetheless be particular to a certain community of readers, all of whose own interpretations will differ in idiosyncratic ways from that of the critic. These interventions depend upon contextual and particular judgements which will seem appropriate to one community and inappropriate to another. Nonetheless, such work is necessary. For it is our best means of preventing our critical interpretations and literary representations of rape from causing yet further harm to rape survivors and the millions of women in South Africa who live with the fear of rape.

## Notes

### Chapter 1

<sup>1</sup> The contention, in my view, forwarded by critical anti-moralists – that is, those who oppose the insistence of people like me on the relevance of morality to criticism – is not that literature does not have any morally relevant aspects or effects, but that moralistic language and argumentation is in some or other way bad or misguided. I address these concerns directly in later chapters, but my view, more or less, is that, whatever concerns we have about critical moralism, our criticism nonetheless always has a substantive moral component, especially where it concerns representations of morally exigent phenomena.

<sup>2</sup> This, in part, is what I meant in the previous endnote by saying that criticism ‘always has a substantive moral component.’ Representations, whether literary or of literature, as in the case of criticism, are never neutral in relation to their ideological context. To put it in a way that might appeal to those who still cling to some form of critical anti-moralism: we are ‘doomed’ to moralise. Either we can attempt to obfuscate and conceal our moral interests, or we can give our readers the benefit of being explicit and straightforward about the interests that drive our criticism, so that they might be cognisant of how these relations mesh or conflict with their own. I think the fear of those who would prefer we did not talk so explicitly about morality has to do with the polemical and censorious responses that moral explicitness often attracts and the threat one imagines these responses could pose to one’s career or the literary establishment.

<sup>3</sup> In the context of Du Toit’s work, the trauma of rape is one of the reasons it is such a horrendously effective means of suppressing and containing female subjectivity. As if the distress of being raped were somehow not enough, the effects, including the violent erasure of any sense of sexual autonomy, of personal freedom and identity independent from the sexual whims of men, are ‘revisited’ upon the victim continuously following the initial act of subjugation via the involuntary re-experiencing of the traumatic event.

<sup>4</sup> According to Herman, “[g]uilt may be understood as an attempt to draw some useful lesson from disaster and to regain some sense of power and control. To imagine one could have done better may be more tolerable than to face the reality of utter helplessness” (Herman 53).

<sup>5</sup> In part, this is a general consequence of the nature of signification, as discussed in the first section of this chapter. To briefly revisit that discussion: the interrelatedness of signs – the manner in which their meaning is dependent on their place in the total network of signs which is their context – means that no change in our terminology or conceptual vocabulary will ever be merely ‘local.’ Insofar as we are a community which shares a wider vocabulary and depends on the same system of meaning, how we think about the rape will determine how we treat victims of rape and how we respond to their trauma.

<sup>6</sup> 'Ecological' here denotes a community psychology perspective which, in Harvey's words, suggests that psychological attributes of human beings are best understood in the ecological context of human community, and that reactions to events are best understood in light of the values, behaviours, skills and understandings that human communities cultivate in their members" (4).

<sup>7</sup> While some theorists have treated this as a problem specific to the narration of trauma, Michelle Balaev rightly points out that this is a general problem facing the expression of self in language.

<sup>8</sup> Although I do not discuss it, I am indebted to Lindsay Kelland's paper "A Call to Arms; Reviving Feminist Consciousness-raising Speak Out" for both introducing me to the work of Fricker, Mckenzie-Mohr and Lafrance, and for first revealing to me how their work helps explain the strife of victims in the aftermath of rape.

<sup>9</sup> As discussed earlier, no perfect set and order of words exists or could be invented that would allow the victim to perfectly convey the meaning of his or her experience: the nature of language precludes this possibility. Making 'adequate' sense of trauma, for the purposes of understanding, communicating, and integrating one's experience of it does not, as Culbertson, Herman and others point out, require perfect expression, however. All that is required is that the victim produces a narrative that, despite its incomplete nature, helps him or her make sense of, integrate, and communicate the significant aspects of his or her experience 'well enough.'

## Chapter 2

<sup>1</sup> It is interesting, and perhaps telling, that the submission makes no mention of the coloured characters, Soraya and Melanie, both of whom suffer directly as a result of a white man's abuse of privilege-afforded power. Although a discussion of the gender politics of the ANC is outside of the ambit of this chapter, it is nonetheless worth noting the conspicuous absence of gender from criticism which focuses on a scene of rape.

<sup>2</sup> As Graham points out, "the central incident in each narrative setting is an act of rape. Most commentators, however, have refused to engage with this fact" (13).

<sup>3</sup> By postmodern techniques I have in mind the novel's deliberate use of ellipsis and irony, as well as its focalization of the narrative through the perspective of a character who is prone to deceit and self-deceit – a perspective which is repeatedly undermined within the course of the narrative it relays.

<sup>4</sup> By 'typical reading habits' I simply mean those elements of our relation to, and interpretation of, a text which are prefigured not by the uniqueness of the text, but rather by our disposition and general expectations as readers (of literature generally, but more specifically of fiction, and of particular genres and modes thereof).

<sup>5</sup> Although I think his comments can be understood as a more general observation of the novel's formal elaboration of its thematic concern with reading and interpretation, it should be noted that Marais states that this performative elaboration is specifically of "reading as *ek-stasis*" (183). That is, a process of overcoming the self (and the forces of history) in order to truly and fully sympathise with the Other. This aspect of Marais's reading is discussed later in the chapter.

<sup>6</sup> Resistant in the sense that arguments to this effect are hard to justify. For whatever reason, the text does seem to attract such ill-considered arguments.

<sup>7</sup> When Bev Shaw asks Lurie if he regrets his affair with Melanie, he responds simply by saying “I don’t know. What happened in Cape Town brought me here. I’m not unhappy here” (148). When she asks him more pointedly whether he regretted his actions “at the time,” he replies: “Of course not. In the heat of the act there are no doubts” (Coetzee 148).

<sup>8</sup> When Lucy eventually rescues Lurie from the bathroom, “[s]he is wearing a bathrobe” and “her feet are bare, her hair wet” (97).

<sup>9</sup> In the language implied by this particular image, both acts are similarly ‘filthy’ (that is, immoral) actions which leave their victims feeling ‘dirtied’ (that is, violated).

<sup>10</sup> When Melanie turns up on his doorstep at midnight, in tears, after an unmentioned altercation, presumably with her boyfriend, Lurie “makes up a bed for her in his daughter’s old room, kisses her good night, leaves her to herself” (26). The following morning, when she is again overcome with misery, Lurie speaks to her as one would a child, nearly referring to himself as her father: “‘There, there,’ he whispers, trying to comfort her. ‘Tell me what is wrong.’ Almost, he says, ‘Tell *Daddy* what is wrong’” (26). On the following page, he “strokes her hair, kisses her forehead” and wonders “[m]istress? Daughter? What, in her heart, is she trying to be? What is she offering him?” (27).

### Chapter 3

<sup>1</sup> I fall back on this conventional binary opposition (descriptive-normative) merely for the sake of convenience; my organisation is by no means meant to reflect my commitment to this opposition or those ways of talking which take it for granted.

<sup>2</sup> See for instance Simon Critchley’s *The Ethics of Deconstruction* or the work of the various writers who contributed to the anthology *Mapping the Ethical Turn*.

<sup>3</sup> If it is tempting to scoff at the apparent simplicity of the problem, so phrased, this is only because we take so completely for granted the conventional heuristics by which we ‘recognise’ and ‘identify’ (which is to say, carve out of our collective experience) discrete ‘things’ that it seems impossible for these heuristics to fail us, or otherwise to come into question, and therefore absurd to suggest this is the case.

<sup>4</sup> One 2017 study found that of 3952 rapes reported to the police in 2012, only 340 or 8.6% of these resulted in criminal convictions; 81% of these cases never made it to trial (Machisa et al, 29). An earlier study, which analysed 1886 rape dockets opened in 2003, found that whilst 41.6% of cases made it to trial, only 6.6% of all cases resulted in convictions (Jewkes et al, 17).

<sup>5</sup> Butler speaks of this scheme in universal terms, as if it underlies sociality everywhere, but from the antifoundationalist perspective I am writing from this scheme which she describes is only one culturally specific manner of conceptualising, regulating and sustaining subjectivity, and even subjectivity is itself not a necessary term — it is merely conventional within certain communities. Nonetheless, I take the scheme which she describes to be ubiquitous enough to justify speaking of it *as if* it were universal.

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