

History and the Other: Writing Pain and Marginality in J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*

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Abstract

This paper explores how J. M. Coetzee devises an alternative mode of engagement with history in his novel *Disgrace* (1999). It offers a meditation on the reality status of history and the ways in which fiction might be able to critique its narrative logic. While conventional history concerns itself with the temporality of the event, with the pastness of the past, I argue that Coetzee imagines the spatiality of history and explores the cracks there in order to bring to light its constructedness. These cracks and blind spots are imagined as channels through which pain operates, and journeys from event to being. They constitute the structural violence that underwrites the formation of history. This brings up the inevitable question: how to represent these channels of pain as counterpoints to a convenient and "mythic" history? Coetzee's usual technique is to stage ethical encounters with an absolute Other that cannot be reduced to the familiar structures of history. In the particular context of *Disgrace*, I argue that Coetzee's brand of ethical writing sets out to uncover and represent the subterranean channels of pain, which adds up to the vision of a white marginality that counters the myth of a new South Africa based on reconciliation and forgiveness.

Keywords: History, Myth, Pain, the Other, Marginality

Throughout the first half of his career J. M. Coetzee has had to face much criticism for the mode of his engagement with a violent history of South Africa during the apartheid era. Nadine Gordimer was extremely skeptical of his modernist attempt to "transform the world by style" and the subsequent "disestablishment from the temporal".¹ In a review of Coetzee's novel *Life and Times of Michael K.*, entitled "The Idea of Gardening", she takes Coetzee to task for his supposed lack of political engagement and responsibility at a time when the crisis of apartheid was at its worst, and accuses him of mere formalist game playing, of "stately fastidiousness", and a "revulsion against all political and revolutionary solutions."² Coetzee responds to this charge in a talk, entitled "The Novel Today", delivered at the Weekly Mail Book Fair in Cape Town where he distinguishes between a mode of writing which "supplements" history by "depending on the model of history" for "its principal structuration," and another that "rivals" history by "occupying an autonomous place."³ He defends this latter position of "rivalry with history as opposed to supplementarity" and envisions "the power of the novel that evolves its own paradigms and myths, in the process... perhaps going so far as to show up the mythic status of history."⁴

¹ Gordimer, Nadine. 1988. "Living in the Interregnum." In *The Essential Gesture: Writing, Politics and Places*. Edited by Stephen Clingman (Johannesburg: Taurus, 1988), 219-50.

² Gordimer, Nadine. "The Idea of Gardening." *The New York Review*, February 2, 1984, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/1984/02/02/the-idea-of-gardening/>

³ Coetzee, J. M. "The Novel Today." *Upstream* 6. no 1 (1988), 2-5.

⁴ Coetzee.

This article attempts to explore the mechanism of the rival position of literature that Coetzee talks about by looking at the context and structure of his most famous novel *Disgrace*.⁵ In an influential article on Coetzee, entitled "'Little enough, less than little: nothing': Ethics, Engagement, and Change in the Fiction of J. M. Coetzee", Mike Marais argues how Coetzee seeks to transcend the a priori structure of history through an ethical eruption, through the figuration of the Other that is outside history, and therefore, is yet to arrive.⁶ This is achieved through a logic of non-representation, a "passive attentionality" to the radical alterity of the Other. However, what remains unclear in Marais is how the encounter with the Other leads to an engagement with history, and how and why the ethical and the historical overlap. I'd argue in this paper that what Coetzee does is to shift the focus and the location of the narrative from the overwhelming temporality of popular history to its spatiality. The concept of history-as-space allows him to work at the cracks of historical narratives and thereby expose their mythicity. From the perspective of space one can define history as the path that the Sign traces in its journey from the event to the fact. The impulse to intentional factification is the key element in history that Coetzee resists by placing the Other in the path of the Sign, that keeps the structure open and the narrative event-centric. This brings up the unanswered question: what relation does Coetzee imagine between the Other and the Sign before it is frozen into history? The answer lies in the complex network of pain and privileges which informs the structure of history. Whereas the Self is a matter of power and privilege, the Other is characterized by powerlessness and pain. The terms "cracks" or "blind spots" are metaphorical but what renders them literal is the very reality of pain. The dominant sign suppresses and cements over the Other in order to build the concrete roadway of history. The process entails a structural violence that is characteristic of institutional history. What Coetzee does is to infuse the Other with renewed energy which makes it and its pain visible to the society. In *Disgrace* the Other is imagined in the figure of Lucy, and her pain provides the counterpoint to history. This brings us to the next key issue: the relationship of pain and pen. What exactly constitutes pain? How does Coetzee imagine and represent a phenomenon like pain which is on the one hand abstract, and at the same time is an expression of an immediate reality? These are the questions that will be addressed in the rest of the paper in the context of *Disgrace* and the spatiality of history.

This paper reads *Disgrace* as a negotiation between history and the Other, between structures, and their subversion and/or transcendence. In order to problematize the phenomenon I'll be addressing Coetzee's vision of a white marginality in the post-apartheid South Africa, which he uses as a makeshift telos to ground his historicist narrative. From the perspective of history the colonial/postcolonial case of South Africa has been unique because of its ethnic diversity. Throughout the long apartheid era in the twentieth century it's the white minority that has enjoyed power and privilege over the vast majority of black and colored people of the land. Even after the independence from the British colonial powers in 1931, segregation along racial lines was strengthened further. However, the 90's were marked by the end of the apartheid regime and the emergence of a new South Africa through a massive socio-political transformation that witnessed the enfranchisement of the black and the colored people. In such a scenario, quite against the tide of history, Coetzee sets out to represent the pain of the white South African in

⁵ Coetzee, J. M. *Disgrace* (New York: Viking, 1999).

⁶ Marais, Mike. "'Little enough, less than little: nothing': Ethics, Engagement, and Change in the Fiction of J. M. Coetzee." *Modern Fiction Studies* 46, no. 1 (2000), 159-182.

Disgrace. He envisions that the empowerment of the blacks necessarily entails a disempowerment of the whites, thereby pushing them down from the level of powerful white minority to powerless white marginality that constituted the “voiceless” section of the new society.

The whole story in *Disgrace* is told from the white male perspective of David Lurie, and any other point of view - that of the blacks or even the white woman - is severely restricted. Lurie, an aging man of fifty two, a womanizer, is forced to resign from his post as a professor of communications and literature in the Cape Technical University because of his sexual fling with a colored student, named Melanie Isaacs. His subsequent refusal to publicly apologize, brings upon him the disgrace mentioned in the title. He retires to his daughter Lucy who runs a farm in the Eastern Cape. But one day three black Africans come to the farm, torture and burn him, and gang-rape Lucy. After the event Lucy becomes agoraphobic and shuts herself in the farm, nun-like; she refuses to lodge a complaint with the police or even to disclose the details of her rape. David undergoes a mental transformation – despite his lingering desires – through his work in the animal clinic where he helps Bev Shaw in running her animal shelter and in disposing off unwanted, deformed dogs. Through a heart-felt connection with the souls of animals, he is able to recognize his love for them, and thus achieves some sort of grace and meaning in life.

Coetzee has been aware of the dangers of such a vision, and the depiction of the rape of a white woman by three black men does indeed bring against him charges of racism. However, the vision of the white marginality must also be seen as a counter-myth that Coetzee talks about in “The Novel Today” as opposed to the popular myth of the new South Africa. Coetzee is definitely not against the abolition of apartheid; what he critiques is the representation of it in history and politics. In dominant systems of political representation the transition is put forth as “miraculously” seamless and peaceful as opposed to many forebodings of a violent civil war. For instance, F. W. DeKlerk, the South African President before Nelson Mandela, who started the repealing of the apartheid laws and received the Nobel Peace prize jointly with Mandela in 1993 for the abolition of apartheid, describes the transition in his very Nobel lecture in the following terms:

What is taking place in South Africa is such a deed - a deed resounding over the earth - a deed of peace. It brings hope to all South Africans. It opens new horizons for Sub-Saharan Africa. It has the capacity to unlock the tremendous potential of our country and our region. The new era which is dawning in our country, beneath the great southern stars, will lift us out of the silent grief of our past and into a future in which there will be opportunity and space for joy and beauty - for real and lasting peace.⁷

Disgrace critiques precisely this rhetorically constructed illusion of peace, beauty and joy by uncovering violence that flows underneath the surface which representative history covers over, and chooses to ignore. The narrative that was most needed and constructed by dominant political history is that of forgiveness and reconciliation. Indeed, a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was set up by the government to smoothen the process of transition by helping South Africans to come to terms with the horrors of the past. The Commission sought to excavate the truths of human rights violations during the apartheid from its victims and

⁷ de Klerk, F.W. Nobel Lecture (speech, Oslo City Hall, Norway, December 10, 1993), South Africa: Overcoming Apartheid, Building Democracy. Accessed 28 Dec. 2016. <http://overcomingapartheid.msu.edu/unit.php?id=65-24E-6>

perpetrators; it was also endowed with the power to grant amnesty in specific cases and thus transform guilt for wrongdoing into “positive commitment to building a better society - the healthiest and most productive form of atonement” (Mrs. Mary Burton, the TRC commissioner, quoted in the “Register of Reconciliation”).⁸ The first statement in the “Register of Reconciliation” in the website of TRC reads thus: “This register gave members of the public a chance to express their regret at failing to prevent human rights violations and to demonstrate their commitment to reconciliation.”⁹

Coetzee has been skeptical of this whole political appropriation of an essentially ethical process, with its insistence on a public demonstration of regret. His lack of faith in the TRC is obliquely expressed in the scene in which Lurie has to attend the hearing before the university disciplinary committee for his harassment of Melanie. Lurie’s colleagues in the committee, especially the chairman Manas Mathabane, assure him of an amnesty only if he agrees to issue a public statement of regret, sincere or not. Lurie refuses to acquiesce, showing a particular irritation at the mention of the term “regret”, and subsequently loses his job. Thus in parallel circumstances both Lurie and Coetzee express their aversion to the processes of forgiveness and reconciliation through the public “show” of regret. For them the whole politically motivated reproduction of ethical consciousness is an absurdity. Neither the university disciplinary committee nor the TRC can have the authority to pass moral judgment. The impurity of these mass productions of forgiveness is wonderfully articulated by Derrida in the following lines:

each time forgiveness is at the service of a finality, be it noble and spiritual (atonement or redemption, reconciliation, salvation), each time that it aims to re-establish a normality (social, national, political, psychological) by a work of mourning, by some therapy or ecology of memory, then the ‘forgiveness’ is not pure - nor is its concept. Forgiveness is not, it *should not be*, normal, normative, normalizing. It *should* remain exceptional and extraordinary, in the face of the impossible: as if it interrupted the ordinary course of historical temporality.¹⁰

Derrida goes on to argue about the necessity of the ethical mediation of the political and not the other way around. An ethical moment like regret or forgiveness can only be intensely personal, contingent and non-reproducible in its uniqueness. That impossible moment occurs in the text towards the end when Lurie goes to the house of Melanie, begs pardon of her father and kneels down before her mother, asking for forgiveness.

Coetzee counters the myth of reconciliation with the myth of pain and/of marginality which originates as a result of the backlash of history. The event of Lurie’s burning and Lucy’s rape is a playing out of the revenge narrative, which occurs with the shift of power relations, contrary to the popular representation of the transition as a “peaceful” one. The sexed body of the female subject has been a happy hunting ground where the forces of history have played out and marginality been written in. In a parallel world in India, as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak notes in “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, the body of the *sati* has been hijacked by the pre-colonial Hindu

⁸ Burton, Mary. “Register of Reconciliation”. Truth and Reconciliation Commission. <http://www.justice.gov.za/Trc/ror/index.htm>. [Accessed 28 Dec. 2016]

⁹ “Register of Reconciliation”. Truth and Reconciliation Commission. <http://www.justice.gov.za/Trc/ror/index.htm>. [Accessed 28 Dec. 2016]

¹⁰ Derrida, Jacques. 2001. *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*. Translated by Mark Dooley and Michael Hughes (New York: Routledge, 2001), 31-32.

discourses as well as by British imperialism to construct the sacredness of patriarchy, which later was interwoven with the barbarity of Hindu practices.¹¹ The narratives are appropriated into politics and in both cases the voice of the woman is systematically excluded, thereby bringing about her marginality.

However, with Lucy the violence is born of postcolonial structures rather than colonial ones. The Empire does write back and its writing is not just an innocent discursive practice. Writing back also involves a striking back that entails violence, pain, and violation. Indeed, in broader terms, striking is a powerful form of writing. To have a glimpse of this mechanism of writing/striking back we do not even need to look at history outside the literary text. Coetzee explores this possibility of writing back within the small scope of the text itself. The initial sexual harassment of Melanie by Lurie can be seen as the abuse of power and exploitation that was rampant during the apartheid era. But, under changing circumstances, the retribution does not stop at the mere dismissal of Lurie from his job; it returns to haunt them in the farm, disrupts their lives, and forces Lucy to pay for it in a fatal way.

Lucy's silence, following her rape, is the key event in the plot that explains much of Coetzee's treatment of her pain and marginality. We see Lucy suffering continuously for days on end and yet refusing to say anything about it. This silence can be explained as the persistence of her pain and suffering, as the preceding event assumes the shape of a trauma. The pain is not so much in the event of rape itself as it is in its continued effect upon the mental health of Lucy, in its very inexpressibility. This is a very useful way to define the experience of trauma. In the simplest of terms, a traumatic experience is what resists a linguistic expression. Lucy's inability to find an adequate language for the expression of her pain ensures its persistence without attaining any sort of closure. On the other hand, Lurie's repeated attempts to get Lucy to speak, which is always met with failure, gives her pain some sort of visibility. Coetzee thus successfully achieves here the paradoxical feat of representing Lucy's pain through a logic of non-representation.

Similarly, Lucy's rape is not the singular event that writes her marginality; it is written by what follows: her refusal to lodge a complaint with the police or even to disclose the details of the event to anyone. Before we read marginality into Lucy's silence, it is important to clarify what we understand by the term marginality. Who is classified as marginal and what constitutes a marginal community? In the Indian context Mahasweta Devi defines the tribal marginal people that populate her stories as "the voiceless section of Indian society."¹² The question of why and how are the marginal people voiceless, is explored at great length by Spivak in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Incorporating the criteria of voicelessness into the South African context of Coetzee's *Disgrace*, we are faced with this fundamental question that is at the heart of the text: why doesn't Lucy speak?

On the surface the text seems to imply that Lucy chooses not to speak. However, in the hegemonic universe we cannot read choice as a marker of agency. In Spivak's terms "'the subaltern cannot speak' means that even when the subaltern makes an effort to the death to speak, she is not able to be heard."¹³ Lucy too can be seen as an expression of the "subaltern

¹¹ Spivak, G. C. "Can the Subaltern Speak?". In *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Edited by Cary Nelson and Larry Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271-313.

¹² Devi, Mahesweta. *Srestha Galpa* (Kolkata: Dey's Publishing, 2004), 9-10.

¹³ Spivak, G. C. "Setting to Work." In *Critical sense: Interviews with Intellectuals*. Edited by Peter Osborne (London:

subject-effect" that Spivak talks about. Lurie believes that by passively suffering Lucy might be acting out "some form of personal salvation" in order to "expiate the crimes of the past".¹⁴ Lucy dismisses the possibility saying, "Guilt and salvation are abstractions. I don't act in terms of abstractions".¹⁵ Lucy's pain is more rooted in the now-ness of South Africa than in the past. Her silence is the inevitable result of the structural and historical condition of the post-apartheid social sign system. At a time when history comes down crashing upon her with the raging narratives of assimilation and reconciliation from the outside world, Lucy is at a loss even to find a vocabulary that would criminalize the actions of the three black men which make her suffer passively. She doesn't have a vocabulary, not even that of the violation of basic human rights, in which to translate her suffering because the language itself is hijacked by history. This is what she means when she accounts for her silence to Lurie saying "what happened to me is a purely private matter. In another time, in another place it might be held to be a public matter. But in this place, at this time, it is not."¹⁶ In another conversation Lucy clarifies that the event of rape means not slavery but "Subjection. Subjugation" (159). Not slavery, but subjection and subjugation are, as we know it, the primary conditions of marginalization. Coetzee's vision of a white marginality therefore ticks all the important criteria of marginality: violence, pain, subjection and voicelessness.

In his other famous novel *Foe* (1986), Coetzee's rewriting of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), there is a scene in which the narrator Susan Barton tries to teach the mute Friday a sort of sign language in order to recover the lost history of how Friday lost his tongue.¹⁷ The attempt fails and Susan tries to teach him writing instead, which too fails. Regarding this failure to recover the history of colonial violence which has made Friday a passive object, Spivak notes, "[T]he unrepeatability of the unique event can only be repeated imperfectly".¹⁸ In the same way the rape of Lucy by three black men in *Disgrace* is irrecoverable in terms of language without imperfections. Her rape is a unique event at a particular moment in history, held together in a complex network of historical, racial and sexual logic. However, whereas Friday's loss of tongue is informed by a colonial logic, Lucy's rape is an act of postcolonial violence. Thus seen intertextually, *Foe* and *Disgrace* together illuminate the full dimension of Coetzee's vision in which the postcolonial, post-apartheid social structure ends up reproducing the old colonial structures of violence and marginalization.

Both Friday and Lucy can be read as "agents of withholding" in the text who refuse to speak and thus resist appropriation by the other.¹⁹ Lucy is not just a racial other to the black majority of the new South Africa; she is also the gendered other to Lurie who keeps on "misreading" her. Neither Lurie nor Coetzee can read the traumatic event of her rape which is unique and unrepeatable. By refusing to speak, Lucy maintains the logic of unreadability that is at the heart of her suffering. Giving any voice to her whatsoever, and speaking about the event, would only

Routledge, 1996), 292.

¹⁴ Coetzee, J.M. *Disgrace* (New York: Viking, 1999), 112.

¹⁵ Coetzee.

¹⁶ Coetzee.

¹⁷ Coetzee, J. M. *Foe* (New York: Viking, 1986).

¹⁸ Spivak, G.C. "Theory in the Margin: Coetzee's *Foe* Reading Defoe's *Crusoe/Roxana*". *English in Africa* 17, no 2 (1990), 13.

¹⁹ Spivak, G.C., 16.

be a (mis)appropriation of the woman's trauma by the male author. That would paradoxically be the silencing of the white woman in South Africa. Her voice would only make her silent; whereas the quietness that the novel maintains is not so much silence, but a possibility, a preparation of the ground for the white woman's authentic voice to emerge and subsequently make possible positive political action.

Through her silence Lucy is also able to avoid the cult of the victim that would otherwise rob her of all agency as an individual, and reduce her to an outcome of collective history. Her silence thus paradoxically affirms her agency. It is both a compulsion and a choice. She is pushed into the margin; she doesn't have a language to articulate her pain, but nonetheless retains her agency in her very refusal to be represented.

Lucy inhabits the ambiguous space between event and fact, and thus holds the potential to subvert and transcend all the historicist readings that might be put forward. She represents the unrepresentable Other of history that cannot be appropriated in terms of language. This is realized in Lurie's journey from a desire to possess her by forcing her to speak, to a reflective attentionality in the penultimate scene, where he observes her from a distance but doesn't say a word. She offers him tea in a gesture of a non-reductive approach to the Other. Lurie reflects on the new beginning of their relationship: "Visitorship, visitation: a new footing, a new start".²⁰ The calm movement of the scene and the idea of visitation, signal the ethicality of the new encounter based on mutual respect and responsibility for the Other.

Coetzee's greatest achievement in all his texts, and particularly in *Disgrace*, lies in his placing of the radical alterity of the Other in between event and history, and expose the inner life of history as fractured with a network of pain. This allows the flow of pain to seep into the text itself, which oscillates between the two poles and steers clear of the familiar patterns such as revenge, assimilation, reconciliation, victimhood etcetera. Coetzee thus constructs representations of events, and allows them to float free in the air and not freeze into the popular rhetoric of history, and thereby, as promised, he exposes the "mythic status" of those historical narratives.

²⁰ Coetzee, 218.