

# Reading Against Race: J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*, Justin Cartwright's *White Lightning* and Ivan Vladislavić's *The Restless Supermarket*<sup>1</sup>

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## Summary

In this essay, I argue that the treatment of race that one finds in J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999), Justin Cartwright's *White Lightning* (2002) and Ivan Vladislavić's *The Restless Supermarket* (2001), is premised on a recognition of the discursive inscription of the category of race in culture. These novels ponder the implications of the cultural basis of this trope by asking, for instance, whether nonracialism is a possibility that is open to the individual in a social context in which discourses of race prevail and, if not, how the individual may counter them. My essay examines not only the ways in which the novels under consideration articulate these questions, but also how they respond to them through a foregrounding of the culturally determined nature of reading.

## Opsomming

In hierdie artikel voer ek aan dat die behandeling van ras wat aangetref word in J.M. Coetzee se *Disgrace* (1999), Justin Cartwright se *White Lightning* (2002) en Vladislavić se *The Restless Supermarket* (2001) van die vooronderstelling van 'n erkenning van die diskursiewe inskripsie van die kategorie ras in kultuur uitgaan. Hierdie romans oorweeg die implikasies van die kulturele basis van hierdie troep deur byvoorbeeld te vra of nie-rassehaat 'n moontlikheid is wat oop is vir die individu in 'n sosiale konteks waarin diskoers oor ras algemeen is, en indien nie, hoe die individu dit kan teenwerk. My artikel ondersoek nie slegs die wyses waarop tersaaklike romans hierdie vrae artikuleer nie, maar ook hoe hulle reageer op hierdie vrae deur die kultureel bepaalde aard van interpretasie op die voorgrond te bring.

In 1987, J.M. Coetzee described South African literature as a literature written in “bondage”:

South African literature is a literature in bondage, as it reveals in even its highest moments, shot through as they are with feelings of homelessness and yearnings

for a nameless liberation. It is a less than fully human literature, unnaturally preoccupied with power and the torsions of power, unable to move from elementary relations of contestation, domination, and subjugation to the vast and complex human world that lies beyond them. It is exactly the kind of literature you would expect people to write from a prison.

(Coetzee 1992: 98)

Almost a decade after the first democratic elections in South Africa, it is perhaps cogent to ask whether or not the situation which Coetzee described in his Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech has changed. Have South African writers begun to explore the deeper human concerns of which Coetzee speaks, or are they still obsessed with “power and the torsions of power”?

In some ways, the opposition that this question sets up is simplistic. I am not simply referring to the rather ingenuous antinomies between human and inhuman, natural and unnatural, contained in Coetzee’s description of apartheid literature – a description which projects a time and a literature after apartheid – but more specifically to the assumption implicit in my question, that “deeper human concerns” may somehow be divorced from issues of power or that discourses of power will somehow summarily be suspended upon the end of an era. In my view, the old preoccupation with power and its torsions, as it manifests itself in race politics, is still very much in evidence in post-apartheid writing and, more to the point, it could not be otherwise. After all, although some of the material realities of apartheid have been, and are being, addressed in the postapartheid period, it would simply be naive to assume that the discursive a priori of these realities has altogether disappeared. Not surprisingly, then, in a recent article on the ideal of non-racialism in South African fiction, Shaun Viljoen arrives at the following conclusion:

While the legacy of non-racialism as propounded by [Richard] Rive has infiltrated the contemporary in policy formulations, in the minds of a new generation of South Africans it exists by and large in uneven, dissipated fragments. The desired world of non-racialism, while having been sighted and given the nod, still remains a fiction.

(Viljoen 2001: 52)

Perhaps it would be more useful to ask whether there have been any changes in the last decade, in the ways in which South African writers express their “unnatural” preoccupation with power. In this regard, it seems to me that there is now a more widespread and thoroughgoing recognition that the notion of race is discursively inscribed in culture, than was previously evident in South African literature. My point is not that writers under apartheid did not realise that “race” is what Henry Louis Gates terms a “biological misnomer” (Gates 1985/1986: 4) or, in Anthony Appiah’s description, a “metonym for culture”

which biologises “what *is* culture, or ideology” (Appiah 1985/1986: 36), but rather that some contemporary South African writing has begun to examine the manifold *implications* of the cultural and discursive basis of the trope of race. That is to say, that the writing in question considers the corollaries of the recognition that, in Jacques Derrida’s words, “there’s no racism without a language” (Derrida 1985/1986: 331) for the individual who is located in language and culture – namely, that she/he can never entirely transcend the discourses of culture, and that these will inevitably, to a greater or lesser extent, locate his or her attitudes on matters such as race. By extension, the writing to which I am referring tackles questions such as the following: is non-racialism, in fact, a possibility that is open to the individual in a culture in which discourses of race prevail? If it is not – that is, if the individual is unable to transcend these discourses – how then may she/he counter them? For instance, is it possible for the individual to respond not to that which the generalising movement and iterative ability of discursively constructed generic categories predispose him or her to see, but to the *singularity* of the other person?

This paper traces the remarkably similar ways in which these questions are articulated and addressed in three recent South African novels, namely J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace* (1999), Justin Cartwright’s *White Lightning* (2002) and Ivan Vladislavić’s *The Restless Supermarket* (2001). I demonstrate that, while Coetzee’s and Cartwright’s novels use the pastoral mode to articulate a desire to transcend the generic discursive categories in history, both these texts ultimately question the possibility of such transcendence and suggest that it is only through an acknowledgement of his or her location in culture, and an ateleological questioning of the local nature of the forms of knowledge available within that culture, that the individual may *begin* to treat other beings respectfully. Much of my discussion focuses on the ways in which *Disgrace* and *White Lightning* make this point by foregrounding, and so politicising, the act of reading. Finally, I demonstrate that, through a similar exposure of the culturally determined nature of reading, Ivan Vladislavić’s *The Restless Supermarket* articulates the possibility of an ethic of tolerance that is grounded not in metaphysics, but in an acknowledgement of the localised nature of the epistemological structures through which the subject seeks to know other beings.

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It is not incidental that Coetzee’s novel is largely set on a farm or smallholding. Indeed, Coetzee has written extensively on the way in which the early South African *plaasroman*, or farm novel, evinces an anxiety about the rights of white ownership in the colonial context – an anxiety which is evident in the

excision of the “curse” of black labour from the pastoral idyll that is conventionally invoked by texts in this genre. This “silence about the place of black labour”, Coetzee suggests, “represents a failure of imagination before the problem of how to integrate the dispossessed black man into the idyll” (Coetzee 1988: 71). As a rule, those of Coetzee’s novels that call to mind the *plaasroman* – *In the Heart of the Country* (1978) and *Life & Times of Michael K.* (1983), for example – reinscribe the place of black labour in the portrayal of relations on the farm.

*Disgrace* is no exception to this rule. In its depiction of labour and race relations in the contemporary rural context, this novel is selfconsciously georgic in nature – that is, instead of withdrawing from history by eliding the relations which have fashioned South African history, this novel’s use of the pastoral foregrounds these relations. For instance, following his arrival on the farm, Lurie is introduced to the character Petrus, who, after Lurie asks him whether it is he who looks after the dogs, describes himself as a servant: “I look after the dogs and I work in the garden .... I am the gardener and the dog-man” (Coetzee 1999: 64). Crucially, though, even as it acknowledges these formative relations in history, Coetzee’s novel *also* inscribes a pastoral desire to transcend them: Lucy describes her relationship with Petrus in terms that are nominally divested of power, that is, as her “assistant” and “co-proprietor” (p. 62). Later, she says that she is unable to “order Petrus about” because “[h]e is his own master” (p. 114).

In its reinscription of black labour, *Disgrace* consequently creates a tension between the unequal economic and race relations which have determined the course of events that constitute South Africa’s colonial history, and a desire to transcend, or withdraw from, this history. To borrow the description of the Karoo farm in *Life & Times of Michael K.*, Lucy wishes to make of the smallholding a “pocket outside time” (Coetzee 1983: 82). Her efforts to divest her relationship with Petrus of the race-based, economic inequalities which apartheid history inscribes in relations in South Africa are also strongly reminiscent of those of the character Magda in *In the Heart of the Country*. In this earlier novel, Coetzee does not simply characterise the relationship between Magda, her father and their servants as one of dominance and subservience. If anything, the emphasis in his portrayal of this relationship is ultimately on Magda’s desire for equality. Thus, she expresses her longing for “words of true exchange, wisselbare woorde” (1978: 101) and wishes to be “[t]he medium, the median .... Neither master nor slave, neither parent nor child, but the bridge between, so that in me the contraries should be reconciled!” (p. 133).

One significant area in which the articulation of this desire in *Disgrace* differs from its expression in *In the Heart of the Country*, however, is in its very careful historical contextualisation. Far from being a locus removed from

the struggle for power that generates the history of the society beyond its precincts, the smallholding in *Disgrace* is clearly and firmly located in a history of conflict. In itself, Coetzee's choice of geographical locale, that is, the Salem area of the Eastern Province, invokes a history of frontier wars waged on the issue of land between the British settlers and the Xhosa people in the nineteenth century. Moreover, this history is directly referred to by David Lurie's comment on "old Kaffraria" (Coetzee 1999:122) and his references to his daughter as a "sturdy young settler" (p. 61) and "[a] frontier farmer of the new breed" (p. 62).

Lucy Lurie's description of her relationship with Petrus as one that is ostensibly divested of racial and economic considerations of power is therefore placed in the context of a history that has been defined by that imperial permutation of the master-servant bond: the relationship between (European) coloniser and (African) colonised. And, as the novel proceeds, it becomes increasingly apparent that this history of violent conflict is still in progress and that it is played out, in miniature, on the smallholding. So, in fact, there is ultimately little evidence of a transfiguration of power relations in Lucy's association with Petrus. Even though Lucy does not *see* herself as a term in a power relation, she *is* one. Ultimately, she finds herself in a remarkably similar position to Magda who, in *In the Heart of the Country*, is finally unable to renegotiate her relationship to Hendrik and Klein-Anna and is, instead, ineluctably reduced to a term in a relationship of dominance and subservience. Furthermore, in *Disgrace*, as in the earlier novel, Lucy's failure to transfigure relations on the smallholding is marked by an assertion of power in the form of rape. Significantly, there are numerous suggestions that Petrus may be implicated in the rape of Lucy and, at the end of the novel, she is on the point of handing over her title deeds to him in exchange for his protection. This hardly constitutes a realisation of her earlier affirmation of "co-proprietorship", but rather a mere inversion of the binaries she was hoping to transcend.

Finally, then, Coetzee's novel juxtaposes Lucy Lurie's desire for a relational mode which is not yet in history with the actual generic power relations of lived history. Nevertheless, the resultant tension, here, is short-lived: history's conditioning force is exposed when Lucy is reduced, despite her intentions, to a term in a power relationship, an act which foregrounds the fragility and tenuousness of the desire for transcendence.

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A similar tension between the individual's implication in relations that have been discursively inscribed in history, and a pastoral desire for transcendence, may be observed in Cartwright's *White Lightning*. In this novel, James Kronk, who has been raised in South Africa but thereafter relocated to England,

returns to the country of his birth to attend to his dying mother and, on receiving an unexpected but substantial financial inheritance, buys a farm in the Helderberg district of the Western Cape. From the first, Cartwright's use of the pastoral mode is evident in direct references (Cartwright 2002: 4), in allusions and references to Virgil's *Georgics* (pp. 23-24, 142, 150), and in ironic descriptions of the use of this mode in the tourist and advertising industries (pp. 9-12). It is in this self-consciously literary context that the protagonist's purchase of "a farm in Africa" is placed and, I would argue, ultimately rendered ironic.

In *White Lightning*, Cartwright's use of the pastoral mode articulates the protagonist's desire to transcend the world. Hence James Kronk (as he is identified to the reader, his surname only being divulged in the final chapter) reflects as follows on his reasons for buying the farm:

But I know that the original idea of paradise, as an area enclosed against the world, is a persistent one.

And now I'm returning to my own slice of paradise, roofless for the moment, and my beehives and fruit trees and contented inoffensive hens.

(Cartwright 2002: 189)

And, a little later, he comments that "[h]ere in my private paradise, I am trying to eliminate worldly anxieties" (Cartwright 2002: 190). This desire to transcend the world may be read as a desire to transcend the world's culturally imposed differences between people, animals other than humans, and the landscape. For instance, Kronk befriends a family of Xhosa people who live in an informal or "squatter" settlement, and eventually accommodates them on the farm; argues for a near-mystical affinity with the Southern African landscape; and attempts to develop a friendship, across the species, with a baboon. It would seem that his pastoral ambition is informed by a desire to transcend his discursive separation from other entities, and thereby to coincide with them.

Significantly, though, the very possibility of such a transcendence of the world is constantly questioned by the text's insistence that the self is constituted in and by culture and its discourses. Kronk, despite his desire to belong in Africa and to commune with Africans, suspects that he cannot be an "African", that his response to "blacks" and "coloureds" is socially conditioned:

These brown people who stop or loiter or wander along eating are not attractive people. They have faces that have been knocked about by life. Of course, I know that this is a cultural judgement, but I am not here to weigh and consider or to make allowances for history and deprivation and injustice.

(Cartwright 2002: 57)

Accordingly, he suspects that the “dark people” are ultimately “probably unknowable” (Cartwright 2002: 91; see also 95). Similarly, he acknowledges that “how we see landscape is the product of conditioning” (p. 223) and, by implication, that, despite his desire to achieve “a communion with the [South African] landscape” it, too, is in the end unknowable. Finally, he comes to question whether he is able to know his mother – or even himself (pp. 95, 215).

In the novel, these doubts enact the *localised* nature of knowledge, that is, they indicate that knowledge is located within the particular cultural formation in which the knowing “I” is situated. By extension, the protagonist’s doubts and suspicions expose the self’s inscription in culture, its inseparability from the subject position that it occupies in language, the bearer of culture. It follows that the text, even as it articulates James Kronk’s desire to transcend the world and commune or coincide with other entities, undermines and renders ironic this desire by suggesting that it is unrealisable. Not unexpectedly, then, the narrator eventually arrives at the conclusion that “the world is too much with us”: “But also I see that you are never going to be free of the world, not before death” (Cartwright 2002: 223).

This asymmetrical tension between the protagonist’s desire to coincide with other entities and the text’s exposure of the impossibility of realising this desire is evident from the outset in the first-person narrative point of view utilised in the novel, a point of view which, in its highly introspective nature, installs a stark contrast between inner self and that self’s encounter with the outer world. The significance of this contrast, for the reader, is that it dramatises the self-distinguishing nature of a consciousness that is premised on linguistic conceptuality. Since Cartwright’s use of this point of view makes the reader privy to Kronk’s thoughts, reflections and perceptions, the reader *witnesses* the latter’s inability to commune with and gain access to other entities. Cartwright’s management of point of view in the novel thus *stages* the partial and localised nature of his protagonist’s knowledge. From his or her location in Kronk’s consciousness, the reader is constantly confronted with the linguistic and discursive limits of the narrator-focaliser’s world. Throughout the novel, she/he is ironically aware of that which Kronk eventually comes to realise when he is forced to kill Piet, the baboon – namely that the limits of his language are the limits of his world (Cartwright 2002: 243), that his access to other beings and entities is linguistically and discursively mediated.

The implication here, then, is that the failure of James Kronk’s pastoral ambition is implicit from the first in the text: in fact, since it was never a possibility in the first place, it cannot really be deemed a failure. Furthermore, the climactic revelation of this character’s racism, when he responds as follows to being grabbed by the arm by a black man: “I feel the blood stir; he has gone too far: he is a black man” (Cartwright 2002: 236), also comes as no surprise: despite his clear and conscious desire to be non-racial in his dealings with the

residents of the squatter camp, Kronk is nevertheless situated in a culture which is, partly at least, premised on discourses of race. He is a part of the world and the world is a part of him. Accordingly, in order to transcend the world and coincide with other entities, he will have to transcend himself. And, as he eventually realises in the earlier-cited reflection, the only way of achieving this is through death.

The tension between implication and transcendence in *White Lightning* is thus resolved by the novel's assertion of the ineluctable nature of the former, and therefore of the impossibility of the self's desire to bracket its cultural presuppositions in its commerce with the cultural other. Does this mean that Cartwright advocates a renunciation of the desire to coincide with the cultural other? Might it not be that the novel suggests that, since the self is constituted in culture and cannot step outside the latter's values and assumptions, a non-colonial tolerance of cultural difference can only be attained through the self's renunciation of the claim to "know" the cultural other and, accordingly, to "let it be"? If this is indeed the novel's argument, it opens itself to criticism on the grounds that the position which maintains that the cultural other should be "left alone" is ultimately no different from the imperialist impulse to obliterate the racial other. What these two positions have in common, Christopher Miller maintains, is precisely "the inability to describe something outside the self" (Miller 1985/1986: 285). A further criticism, here, would be that a form of "tolerance" that is premised on incommunicability among cultures, is uncomfortably close to racial segregation. In this regard, Tzvetan Todorov argues that "[a]ffirming the existence of incommunicability among cultures ... presupposes adherence to a racist, apartheid-like set of beliefs, postulating as it does insurmountable discontinuity within the human species" (Todorov 1985/1986: 374). He goes on to assert that "[w]e are not only separated by cultural differences; we are also united by a common human identity, and it is this which renders possible communication, dialogue, and, in the final analysis, the comprehension of Otherness" (p. 374). "Culture", he avers, "is learned, and it can therefore be unlearned; sometimes a new culture can then be relearned" (p. 375).

In view of these responses to notions of the incomprehensibility of cultural otherness, it is perhaps tempting to conclude that Cartwright's *White Lightning* tends inevitably towards a deterministic form of neoracism in which the category "race" is simply replaced with that of "culture". Such a conclusion, though, would disregard the numerous references and allusions, in the novel, to the natural philosophy of Eugène Marais and, through him, to that of Charles Darwin – both of which assert the interconnectedness and transience of *all* species,<sup>2</sup> and thereby question the notion of an independent, "common human identity" and imply that any such notion of "the human" is itself a cultural construct. Culture, quite simply, is not treated as an ancillary to an



innate humanness in *White Lightning*. It is not something which may be donned and doffed, learned and unlearned at will by the individual. Thus, for instance, though Cartwright's protagonist briefly entertains this possibility when he resolves to learn Xhosa or Zulu, on the assumption that "it is through language that you can enter the mind of another people" (Cartwright 2002: 115), nothing comes of this resolution and he continues to assert the unknowability of the "dark folk". One must assume that he comes to the same conclusion as does Christopher Miller, namely that "[n]o matter how many languages I learn or ethnologies I study, I cannot make myself into an African" (Miller 1985/1986: 282).

It would seem, then, that Cartwright's novel does not accept the epistemological and ontological assumptions that inform the questions, and possible answers to them, which I posed above. On the most basic level, to suggest that this text advocates a noncolonial form of tolerance which may derive from the self's renunciation of the desire to know the cultural other, concomitant on the recognition that it cannot describe anything beyond itself, is to assume that, while the cultural *other* may be more or less unknowable, the *self*, at least, *is* knowable. It is precisely this latter assumption that is questioned by *White Lightning*'s radical position on unknowability as a phenomenon that arises not only in the attempt to communicate or coincide *across* cultures but also *within* individual cultures. After all, as I have pointed out, Kronk not only finds Africa and "black" Africans, but also his mother, "white" English-speaking South Africans, fellow Britons and, crucially, himself unknowable.

What, then, does this novel's emphasis on the inability of the self to transcend the cultural contexts in which it is situated say about the problem of racism? Are we to assume that the self is merely a passive conduit for discourses of race, and that nonracialism can only ever be an unattainable ideal? The answer to this question is implicit in the text's placement of the reader at the limits of its protagonist's knowledge. As I have argued, the novel constantly confronts the reader with the *limits* of the protagonist's world. The important corollary, here, is that, in delimiting this world, *White Lightning* places the reader not only in relation to the world that has been delimited, but also in relation to that which falls *outside* this world, that is, the limitlessness which these limits inevitably imply. So, for example, in indicating that entities, including the self-consciously "knowing" self designated by the first-person singular pronoun, are finally unknowable from within the cognitive paradigms through which that self seeks to know and contain them, the text suggests that these entities exceed these paradigms and, by obvious extension, that such schemata are arbitrary and conventional – and consequently provisional. By further extension, the kind of "truth" that emanates from these schemata can only ever be partial, relative and contingent.

In relentlessly foregrounding the partial nature of Kronk's perceptions,

Cartwright's strategy of excession requires the reader continually to *read against*, rather than passively accept, this character's opinions and judgements. (In fact, such a reading process is actively encouraged in the novel by Kronk's own epistemological scepticism and constant questioning of the assumptions which inform his views and values.) By reading in this manner, the reader, even while Kronk attempts to transcend his cultural implication, apprehends the impossibility of this endeavour and *therefore* the ethical *necessity* of acknowledging one's implication in culture and its discourses, not as a prelude to a passive acquiescence in cultural determinism, but as the precondition for developing the ability ceaselessly to question the schemata through which one comprehends existents and the kind of knowledge and "truths" which they enable. In placing the reader at the limits of culture, Cartwright's novel accordingly attempts to show that, through a constant and self-reflexive interrogation of our ways of seeing others and ourselves, we may develop a form of tolerance which, being grounded in a recognition of the localised nature of knowledge, precludes the possibility of absolute judgement.

Ultimately, then, the emphasis in *White Lightning* on the self's location in culture and its resultant inability to know itself and other existents, points to the mode of ethical agency that is available to the subject who is *in-the-world*. It suggests, that is, the possibility of an active form of tolerance which derives from the breakdown of essence and the impossibility of subjective certitude, and which is premised on the relation of the *individual* within culture not only to entities in other cultures, but to *all* other entities.

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Although it postulates the impossibility of transcending the world and thereby the generic power relations of history, Coetzee's *Disgrace* does not settle for a mechanistic form of cultural determinism. In fact, its depiction of the character Lucy's response to her gang rape develops the argument in Cartwright's novel for a form of ethical agency that is grounded in the individual's self-reflexive questioning of his or her interpretive paradigms. Coetzee's portrayal of Lucy suggests that, through such an ateleological questioning process, the individual may gain a sense of the *singularity* of other existents – a sense, that is, of that which exceeds the iterative and generalising movement of generic discourse. In this regard, the passivity of Lucy's response to her rape is pivotal: it is *meant* to be perplexing and to invest her with a degree of alterity that renders her resistant to interpretation. (In a novel which contains numerous references and allusions to the Romantic poets, the obvious should here be borne in mind: namely that this character's name associates her with Wordsworth's enigmatic Lucy.) Indeed, the reader only ever observes Lucy Lurie's response from the uncomprehending perspective of her father, David

Lurie, the focaliser in the novel. It is he who constantly draws the reader's attention to what his daughter fails to do, namely fortify her home against future attacks, lay a charge with the police against her violators and hunt them down. The reader is *never* privy to Lucy's thoughts on these matters. She/he is simply provided with Lurie's interpretations of Lucy's actions, and the novel very deliberately foregrounds the unreliability of the former's perceptions throughout.

So, for instance, in a pivotal passage, David Lurie struggles to understand his daughter's passivity and eventually challenges her as follows:

I don't agree with what you are doing. Do you think that by meekly accepting what happened to you, you can set yourself apart from farmers like Ettinger? Do you think what happened here was an exam – if you come through, you get a diploma and safe conduct into the future? Or some sign you can now paint on the door-lintel to make the plague pass you by?

(Coetzee 1999: 112)

Lucy responds to her father's challenge by telling him that he has misunderstood her: "Stop it, David! ... I am not just trying to save my skin. If that is what you think, you miss the point entirely" (Coetzee 1999: 112). And, when he continues his interrogation with the questions: "Is it some form of private salvation you are trying to work out? Do you hope you can expiate the crimes of the past by suffering in the present?" (p. 112), she again, very pointedly, tells him that he has misinterpreted her: "No. You keep misreading me. Guilt and salvation are abstractions. Until you make an effort to see that, I can't help you" (p. 112).

The use of the term "misreading", here, lays bare the *hermeneutic* aspect of David Lurie's relationship with his daughter. In the process, it not only relativises *all* his interpretations or hermeneutic procedures, but also points to the political nature of the activity of "reading" itself. After all, in revealing a disjunction between his interpretation and the object thereof, the word "misreading" questions the origin of Lurie's "reading". If the latter does not bear an a priori relation to the object which it purports to comprehend, where *does* it come from? The answer is fairly self-evident. Apart from its lack of foundation in material reality, the racial overtones of Lurie's interpretation (or interpretive construct) indicate that, far from proceeding *ex nihilo*, it is grounded in the discourse of race which has shaped the events that constitute the history of South African society. In averring that Lucy wishes to "humble" herself "before history" (Coetzee 1999: 160) – that her passivity is prompted by a desire, born of guilt, to atone for the history of white oppression in South Africa – Lurie offers a historical reading of Lucy's passivity, a reading which is itself determined by the discourse that has shaped the history in question.

The dissonance which *Disgrace* exposes between Lurie's interpretive activity and the object thereof thus points to the former's location in South African culture, and indicates that the generic oppositions of race politics within this culture locate his hermeneutic endeavours. In other words, it exposes the origin of his interpretation in a generalising discourse which violently elides the specificity of the individual. In the process, *Disgrace* shows that, while the generic concept of race may have no biological foundation, it is precisely its linguistic and discursive status as a trope, a construct, a mere fiction which, far from rendering it innocuous, confers on it the ability to be general and repeatable and thus routinely to qualify singularity.

Now, in laying bare her father's hermeneutic activity, Lucy's use of the word "misreading" also aligns the reader *of* the novel with David Lurie, the reader *in* the novel. Lurie's attempts to make sense of his daughter's violation, and of her reaction to this violation, prefigure those of the reader *of* the novel. In the process, they point to the actual reader's situatedness in history, and to the way in which this situatedness will inevitably affect his or her interpretations. Many readers in South Africa have responded to Coetzee's depiction of the rape and ensuing events in terms that are predictable in a literary establishment which seems, as a matter of course, to reduce heterogeneous political, social and literary positions to the simplistic oppositions of race politics. On the one hand, Coetzee has been criticised for the supposed conservatism or racism implicit in his portrayal of the rape of a "white" woman by "black" men. Although this criticism is most evident in the African National Congress's submission to the Human Rights Commission's inquiry into racism in the media, it can also be seen in Michiel Heyns's dismissive reference to *Disgrace* as a "Liberal Funk" novel (Heyns 2000), that is, as representative of a subgenre of the South African novel that records liberal fear at the marginalisation of "whites" in the postapartheid period. On the other hand, Coetzee's portrayal of Lucy Lurie's passivity following her rape has been read as exemplifying "whites" acceptance of their perceived marginality in the "new" South Africa. This interpretation was first proffered by Athol Fugard, and has since become something of an orthodox response to the novel ... which is somewhat ironic, given that Fugard, by his own admission at the time of his comments, had not yet read 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.

(Fugard 2000)

In their reduction of the rape incident to the generalising, generic politics of race, such interpretations mime and rehearse David Lurie's reading of his daughter's violation, a reading which, as I have indicated, the novel itself terms a "misreading". As such, they overlook the simple, yet crucial, fact that the novel offers no *definitive* interpretation of the rape and of Lucy's response to it and, in fact, relativises or discounts those interpretations which it *does* offer. *Because* Lucy and her behaviour are presented as an enigma in the text, they resist *any* interpretation and, inevitably, inscribe an irresolvable tension in the novel between that which can only ever remain unexplained and the reader's *will* to explain. This tension foregrounds the discursive constraints imposed on interpretation, and the way in which the generalising movement of discourse ineluctably reduces that which is singular and complex. So, while the device of the enigma which Coetzee enlists in this novel in his depiction of Lucy and her actions means that the reader inevitably *performs* such a reduction in his or her reading of the text, it also provides him/her with the sense that Lucy *exceeds* his or her interpretations. In the process, a sense of that which her attackers and, for the most part, her father fail to recognise – that is, her singularity – is imparted. It is only through failing to comprehend Lucy that the reader may come to intuit and respect her singularity, and so refrain from repeating her violation on the level of reading.

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If Coetzee's ethical project in *Disgrace* may be described as an attempt, through heightening the reader's sense of the hermeneutic process in which she/he is engaged, to instil in him or her a sense of that which exceeds the generic paradigms of discourse, and so enable him or her to develop a respect for otherness, the same may be said of Vladislavić's *The Restless Supermarket*. Like David Lurie in *Disgrace*, Aubrey Tearle, the protagonist of *The Restless Supermarket*, is a reader-figure. This is, of course, evident in the fact that Tearle is a proofreader, albeit a retired one, whose principal aim in life is "to determine species of error, and to assist in eliminating them" (Vladislavić 2001: 64). Throughout the novel, Vladislavić collapses the distinction between his protagonist's *linguistic* proofreading and his *social* proofreading, that is, the obsessive manner in which Tearle detects "errors" in the world around him as he goes about his daily business. In terms of the latter, Tearle exemplifies the hermeneutic syndrome outlined in the epigraph to Part One of the novel,

drawn from William Hazlitt: “He reads the world ... like an edition of some old work which he is preparing for the press, only to make emendations in it, and correct the errors that have inadvertently slipped in”.

In the narrative itself, this form of social reading is evident in Tearle’s interactions with his companions at the Café Europa, whom he routinely “proofreads” (Vladislavić 2001: 41). In the following passage, which describes his “reading” of Nomsa, it emerges that the skin colour and physiognomy of “black” or “coloured” people are the principal “species of error” which he detects in the changing clientele of the establishment, once it begins to reflect the social and political changes occurring in the country at large:

Her skin had a purple sheen I’d never observed on a colour chart. The sweat stood out like wampum along her hairline. Plastic pearls at the throat. Mouth improbably larger, lips like segments of some sea-fruit, a creature that looked like a plant, but was really an animal, something that would snap if you touched it.

(Vladislavić 2001: 264)

Clearly, when Tearle encounters “black” people, he does not perceive the singularity of the individuals involved. What he *does* see are culturally inscribed differences among people.<sup>3</sup> In other words, that which he sees is mediated and produced by a network of differential relations in which the signifier “white”, and its numerous attendant terms – such as “Europe”, “civilised”, “order”, “knowledge” and “reason” – occupy a privileged position in relation to the signifier “black”, and its attendant terms – such as “Africa”, “barbarous”, “disorder”, “ignorance” and “emotion”.

What the novel suggests in stressing the hermeneutic aspect of Tearle’s interaction with others, then, is that his inability to respect their otherness is a function of his embeddedness in discourse. This character routinely instantiates a colonialist discourse of race in his dealings with others. His obsessive attempts at imposing order on his society are not the actions of an autonomous subject, but the expression of this discursive formation’s territorial desire for closure, its impulse to construct itself as a finite, bounded totality. By means of his ordering gestures, Tearle initiates the movement of closure through which this discourse ceaselessly seeks to reduce all otherness to the sameness of its order.

Is Vladislavić’s purpose in *The Restless Supermarket* simply to expose the discursive nature of the supposedly absolute standards to which Tearle adheres and which, in determining his perceptions, render him incapable of respecting others? Such a reading would seem to be supported by Vladislavić’s use of irony, which, in establishing a disjunction between Tearle’s views and those of both the implied author and the implied reader, apparently enables the

postapartheid reader complacently to distance himself or herself from Tearle and deride his apartheid-era aberrations. In resisting Tearle's appeal to a communality that stems from his assumption that the reader shares his values, standards and beliefs, the reader oppositionally positions himself or herself together with the implied author, thereby forming a "community" that is premised on a different set of assumptions and beliefs.

I would argue, however, that Vladislavić's purpose in *The Restless Supermarket* is not only to question Tearle's standards, but also those of the reader. In this regard, irony in the novel works not only as a distancing mechanism, but also as a means of *identifying* the reader with Tearle. For instance, Vladislavić deliberately places the reader in the position of proof-reader of his novel by planting what Tearle would term "corrigenda" (Vladislavić 2001: 61) in the text. Hence, the reader encounters teasing but false etymologies – such as Tearle's account of the etymological derivation of *fartlek* (p. 59) – and numerous solecisms, such as those in the following sentence: "The streets were littered with crutchers, rhinoceros products, muslin fundamentalists, celeried employees and their pardners, bonsai baobabs, dawgs" (p. 227). Moreover, the fact that the version of Tearle's "The Proofreader's Derby" with which the reader is presented is not the one "riddled with corrigenda", but the "corrected version", as referred to in the novel's conclusion (p. 303), in no way distances the reader from Tearle, the proof-reader. If anything, it strengthens the alignment, since the reader now reads "The Proofreader's Derby" as a palimpsest, that is, with a view to locating evidence of the "corrigenda" which have been corrected. When she/he encounters phrases like "pita-bread with hummus" and "wonton dumplings" (p. 223), she/he deduces that the "corrigenda" which have here been corrected are "humus" and "wanton". Such strategies, in addition to the obviously ludic verbal conundra of certain names (Alibia, Europa, the Restless Supermarket, Tearle, Spilkin, Graaff, Fluxman), ensure that the act of reading establishes the reader's commonality with Tearle.

The trope of irony in the novel consequently doubles back on itself and is in turn rendered ironic since, in aligning the reader with Tearle, it indicates that the former's hermeneutic activity is itself culturally determined. By extension, this meta-ironic turn questions the stability and certitude of the contract that the reader establishes with the author in the course of the textual encounter – a contract which is largely an *effect* of the reader's hermeneutic enterprise, and thus a result not only of the *inference* of meaning, but also of the *attribution* of values and beliefs to the author.

A significant implication, here, is that the reader's reading of the novel is informed by the same desire for order and closure that informs Tearle's reading practices – both linguistic and social. Just as Tearle routinely attempts to fix the order which he creates by invoking an absolute standard, so too the

reader's desire to ascribe meaning to "Vladislavić", is an appeal to an absolute standard, that is, to the author as transcendental signified and guarantor of meaning. In the novel, the move of irony ironises this desire and frustrates the closure toward which it tends, that is, the closure of the interpretive community which enables the reader to believe that she/he is perfectly self-contained – divorced from irony, change, and the context in which she/he is situated. Instead of allowing the reader complacently and self-indulgently to distance him-/herself from Tearle, the move of irony in the novel historicises the reader's values and beliefs by exposing the congruity that in fact exists between him/her and Tearle.

The importance of Vladislavić's use of irony in *The Restless Supermarket* is that, in aligning the reader with Tearle, it demonstrates that, far from being aberrant, Tearle's ordering gesture is a consequence of the human subject's being-in-the-world, of that subject's location in a cultural context which in turn and inevitably locates it. Indeed, through contriving that the act of reading *perform* the embedded subject's desire for unitary closure, the novel makes it clear that the reader, too, is in-the-world, and that the need for closure which she/he enacts in his or her reading of the text extends to his or her "reading" of the world. The issue of closure which this text raises in its depiction of Tearle does not therefore merely pertain to a bygone and conveniently repudiated era. We are all potential Tearles and apartheid is not simply a problem of the past: it is a possible present or future.

However, as this novel's meta-ironic twist indicates, this possibility may be avoided through our recognition of that which we share with Tearle. In recognising this common ground, we acknowledge the provisionality and contingency of the values and standards by which we order the world. In turn, this deeply self-reflexive acknowledgement *enables* us to interrupt our ordering gestures, even as we *inevitably* make them, and thereby respond with a degree of respect to the singularity of other beings.

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My argument has been that some postapartheid writing is engaged in a profound re-evaluation of the notion of race. Since their point of departure is that this notion is discursive, rather than biological, the three novels dealt with in this essay confront the attendant problem of the subject's location in discourse. If individuals are situated in culture, they will inevitably, albeit in varying degrees, instantiate the discourses within that culture in their commerce with other existents. How then, the texts ask, may the individual counter the generalising movement of such discourses, and thereby respond to the singularity of other beings? What each of the novels emphasises in addressing this question is the necessity of acknowledging one's implication



in culture and consequently the localised nature of one's knowledge. This preoccupation is not simply thematised on the presentational surface of the texts concerned. I have shown that the texts foreground reading in an attempt to make the culturally determined act in which the reader is engaged *enact* his or her situatedness in culture. Through this staging of cultural implication, these texts confront the reader with the arbitrary and conventional nature of the standards and values through which she/he makes sense of the world. They suggest, by extension, that a *sense* of the singularity of the other being can only derive from knowledge of the culturally delimited limits of knowledge – a self-reflexive epistemology which is the condition of possibility for a respectful response to the otherness of other existents. Such an epistemology would enable an ethic that is grounded not in essence but the breakdown thereof, that is, a recognition of being-in-the-world.

Despite the inevitable irony attendant on such a move, I conclude this discussion with Vladislavić's description of the deeply secular form of tolerance that is at stake here in the following extract from an interview which I held with him shortly after the publication of *The Restless Supermarket*:

Vladislavić: Tolerance has been devalued in a sense. It is a much derided idea, but ... for me it isn't a kind of limp value. Although it's regarded as some kind of neutrality, I think of tolerance as a strong, active value. An active attitude, rather than an attitude of passive acceptance. It requires work.

Marais: It's also intensely self-reflexive.

Vladislavić: Yes.

Marais: I mean, if one is to be tolerant, a constant questioning of one's values and one's paradigms is required.

Vladislavić: Exactly.

(Vladislavić quoted by Marais & Backström 2002: 140)

## Notes

1. This is an altered version of an essay, entitled "Race, Reading and Tolerance in Three Post-Apartheid Novels", being edited by Isidore Diala, that is due to appear in a Festschrift on the Nigerian scholar, Professor Obomselu.
2. Consider Darwin's following observation in *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* ([s.a]: 462): "When I view all beings not as special creations but as the lineal descendants of some few beings which lived before the first bed of the Cambrian system was deposited, they seem to me to become ennobled".

The ateleological nature of the evolutionary process calls for a response that acknowledges the individual life of any creature as an instant in a larger and fluid sequence of existence. Such an acknowledgement requires a departure from conventional notions of a self-contained human identity (cf Clarkson 2002).

3. The notion of radical difference, or singularity, that is here at stake, should of course, not be confused with culturally inscribed difference – the latter is the discursive and therefore generic means through which the subject routinely forecloses on the otherness of the other, its radical difference and therefore singularity.

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