

Miscegenation, Desire and Rape: The Shifting Ground of *Disgrace*

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Summary

I discuss three novels that draw on different forms of sexual contact across the colour line, namely *Turbott Wolfe* by William Plomer ([1926]1976), Alan Paton's (1953) *Too Late the Phalarope* and *Disgrace* by J.M. Coetzee (1999). These novels respectively explore miscegenation, interracial sex, and interracial rape. What unites these narratives is their anatomisation of the response in white society to such sexual encounter, crucially indicting sexual contact as a social trope that defines relationships of power. Despite its recurrence, the trope is nonetheless responsive to societal change. An obvious and yet significant difference is that in the post apartheid society represented in *Disgrace*, interracial sex is not forbidden. I argue that the convention of interracial sexual contact within white South African writing is structured around the signifier "transgression", and that J.M. Coetzee retains this signifier as a point of reference within the trope, by shifting its overt content from interracial desire to interracial rape. I further consider the formal duplicity of *Disgrace*, whereby racialised discourse embedded in the realist facet of the narrative is not erased or subsumed by its metafictional properties.

Opsomming

Ek bespreek drie romans wat gegrond is op verskillende vorme van seksuele kontak oor die kleurgrens heen, naamlik *Turbott Wolfe* deur William Plomer ([1926]1976), *Too Late the Phalarope* deur Alan Paton (1953) en *Disgrace* deur J.M. Coetzee (1999). Hierdie romans verken respektiewelik rassevermenging, seks tussen mense uit verskillende rasse en verkragting oor die kleurgrens heen. Die drie verhale se samebindende krag is hul ontleding van die respons uit die wit samelewing op sodanige seksuele kontak en hul aanklag hierteen as 'n maatskaplike wending wat magsverhoudinge definieer. Nieteenstaande die feit dat dit by herhaling voorkom, is hierdie wending tog vatbaar vir maatskaplike verandering. 'n Voor die hand liggende en tog beduidende verskil is dat in die postapartheid samelewing wat in *Disgrace* verteenwoordig word, interras-seks nie verbode is nie. Ek betoog dat die konvensie van seksuele kontak tussen rasse binne wit Suid-Afrikaanse literêre werke om die "oortreding"-aanduier gestruktureer is en dat J.M. Coetzee hierdie aanduur as 'n verwysingspunt binne die wending behou deur die klaarblyklike inhoud vanaf wellus tussen rasse na interras-verkragting verskuif. Ek kyk ook vervolgens na die formele duplisiteit van *Disgrace* waarvolgens rassediskoers wat in die realisfaset van die verhaal veranker is, nie uitgewis of deur sy metafiktiewe eienskappe gesubsumeer word nie.

I discuss three novels that draw on different forms of sexual contact across the colour line, namely *Turbott Wolfe* by William Plomer ([1926]1977),¹ Alan Paton's (1953) *Too Late the Phalarope*, and *Disgrace*, by J.M. Coetzee (1999). These novels respectively explore miscegenation, interracial sex, and interracial rape. The common thread running through these narratives is their anatomisation of the social response of outrage to such sexual encounter. The narratives under discussion, crucially, explore sexual contact as a social trope that defines various relationships of power.

In *Turbott Wolfe*, miscegenation is presented as the logical social future of African colonial society. However, the novel demonstrates an ambivalence towards its own solution that is evident not only in the reactions of the white protagonists and surrounding characters, but also embedded in the voice of the narrator. In *Too Late the Phalarope*, social condemnation is as absolute as the punishment exacted on the transgressor. In his representation of an outraged white society, Paton tropically links the notion of racial purity to the sustainability of white power.

In both narratives, a more structural level of ambivalence can be read in the asymmetry of representation between white and black characters. Narrative attention is far more extensively focused on the white protagonists than on the black, and white characters are fleshed out in greater detail and with more complexity. For the writer, and therefore the reader, the black partner in racial/sexual transgression remains unknown and undisclosed as a personality. Thus, while the novels perform a critique of the taboo against racial intimacy, and of the racial politics underwriting this taboo, such asymmetrical narrative attention affirms at a structural level of narrative the subaltern status assigned to the black protagonist within the social hierarchy that is criticised within the content of the novel.

There is a crucial, albeit obvious, difference between the social conditions represented in *Disgrace* on the one hand, and in *Turbott Wolfe* and *Too Late the Phalarope* on the other. In the earlier novels, sex across the colour line is not forbidden, and thus offers a reduced possibility of transgression as a narrative premise. However, I argue that the genre of interracial sexual contact within white South African writing is structured around the signifier "transgression". Further, I argue that J.M. Coetzee retains this signifier as a stable point within the genre by shifting its manifest content from interracial desire to interracial rape. Given the degree to which rape has metastasised in recent years within South African social life, and the amplified transgressive force that obtains, I argue that the linkage between transracial sex and relationships of social power shown in the two earlier novels under discussion is thus translocated, and thereby reproduced. In this sense, the trope

1. While *Turbott Wolfe*, strictly speaking, predates apartheid, many of the legal and statutory systems of apartheid were already in place, as were the conditions of a racist culture underpinning white hegemony.

under discussion demonstrates both continuity and change through the boundary between anti-apartheid and post-apartheid writing.

1

Both *Turbott Wolfe* by William Plomer ([1926]1977) and Alan Paton's (1953) *Too Late the Phalarope* imbricate their crises of interracial sexual encounter within complex strata of social reaction. These reactions are not confined to the protagonists: in both texts, witnesses anticipate the forbidden encounter, fear it, express a range of reactions to it, and in different ways, share the consequences. These diverse reactions not only externalise the complexities of the central character's response; they also represent the social milieu against, and despite which, the protagonists act. It is worth noting that while Plomer was writing *Turbott Wolfe*, the Immorality Act² of 1927 was being drafted, while the Immorality Act of 1950 was promulgated as Paton was writing *Too Late the Phalarope*. The eponymous narrator in *Turbott Wolfe*, for example, is principal witness to the events surrounding the central act of miscegenation. While the novel is sprinkled with minor characters who express unambiguous racist attitudes, Turbott Wolfe's reactions suggest as much distaste as enthusiasm for miscegenation. In narratively presenting the case for miscegenation, he embraces two positions. One is that in a country like South Africa, racial hybridisation is inevitable; the other is that while black Africans are charming, they are in fact inferior, and their human status is self-evidently diluted by animal qualities.

Sympathy for miscegenation is shown in Wolfe's attraction to a young Zulu woman, Nhliziyombi. It climaxes in his confession of love to her in a forest grove, to which she responds by tenderly holding his head for more than an hour (Plomer [1926]1977: 39). This is where his direct participation ends. An explicit case for miscegenation is further articulated in the founding of a society called Young Africa, established to promote the following principles:

1. That Africa is not the white man's country.
2. That miscegenation is the only way for Africa to be secured to the Africans.
3. That it is inevitable, right and proper.
4. That if it can be shown to be so, we shall have laid the true foundations for the future Coloured World.

(Plomer [1926]1977: 70)

2. The Immorality Act, Act 5 of 1927, and the Immorality Amendment Act, Act 21 of 1950, forbade sexual relations between races.

However, a newspaper article on the founding of Young Africa (p. 70), written by an African member, is condescendingly simplified. Indeed the narrator makes this explicit, observing that the article “turned out to be rather amusing” (p. 70).

The most spirited advocacy of such principled miscegenation is left to Friston, an enthusiastic and sometimes deranged clergyman. A conversation between Wolfe and Friston (p. 100) presents Friston’s views as garbled. As he is the chief spokesman for miscegenation in the text, his confused and satirically presented advocacy cannot be taken at face value, and does indeed embed in the narrative an ambivalence towards the topic.

Surfacing throughout the narrative are many other reflections of the narrator’s unreflecting racism. Africans are described as “simian” (p. 14), compared directly with monkeys (p. 19), and their animal charm (p. 30) is endorsed. There are also invocations of an exoticising and yet demeaning aesthetic, typified in descriptions like “that old wonderful unknown primitive African life – outside history, outside time, outside life” (p. 31), or “the monstrous intangible darkness of the native point of view” (p. 77). Slighting references to “dagos” (“coloureds” in this context) and “Jews” are embedded in the narrative (as distinct from the dialogue) with sufficient carelessness and frequency to suggest either that Plomer did not regard such discourse as offensive, or that he consciously undermined his narrator’s position.

If Plomer intended his novel to shock, he succeeded, ironically because the ambivalence of its advocacy was ignored. Roy Campbell’s defence of the novel in *Voorslag* (1926), and Laurence van der Post’s introduction to the 1965 edition of *Turbott Wolfe*, confirm that he created a furore. However, there is some evidence that he also intended to placate his readership to some degree by shocking his own narrator – not with the *idea* of miscegenation, but with the *fact* of it as realised in the union of Zachary Msoni and Mabel van der Horst. This ambivalence is laid bare in Wolfe’s declaration to van der Horst, surprising for a founder member of Young Africa: “I’m going to take the liberty of asking what you’re playing at with that nigger” (p. 98).

In Alan Paton’s *Too Late the Phalarope* (1953), the chorus of social outrage is given absolute force, and the narrative is subject to little ambivalence. The novel focuses on interracial sex rather than miscegenation as such. Where Plomer presents a view of miscegenation (however ambivalently) as “the true foundations for the future Coloured World” (1953: 70), the society represented in Paton’s novel fears and abhors more the implicit *political* issue of sexual encounter between races. The taint attendant on such a transgression – the disgrace – would “destroy a man and his house and his kindred” (Paton 1950: 230), the synecdochic implication of which is that white power itself stands to be dismantled.

In *Too Late the Phalarope*, the core transgression of interracial sex is subject to hegemonic force, and sanctioned with absolute disgrace. Indeed, this disgrace is underwritten by the Immorality Act, described in the novel as “the greatest and holiest” (Paton 1953: 118; my italics) of all the apartheid laws designed to concretise and perpetuate white purity, and thereby white power. The novel inscribes this discourse of purity into a theocratic/legalistic language forbidding racial dilution, presented in the register of the sublime. The principal witness to Pieter van Vlaanderen’s temptation and fall is the narrator, his spinster aunt Sophie. Part of her knowledge of van Vlaanderen’s crisis is retrospective, feeding information that will be gained only in the future back into the narrative as hindsight. Part of her knowledge is a mixture of intuition and suspicion, a loving dread that reads something terribly amiss in van Vlaanderen’s life without knowing what it is. Her reactions are embedded in a fourfold cultural formation, of which the elements combine into a dense and comprehensive definition of taboo. Its components are the legal-political system of apartheid, particularly where it is expressed as the Immorality Act that forbade sexual relations across the colour bar; a bedrock racism that is presented as an essence of Afrikaner rural life, coming to particular expression in the theme of repulsion and outrage at interracial sexual transgression; a Puritan theology which renders moral value absolute and immutable; and a seamless and comprehensive patriarchy, in which the word of senior white males is as binding as God’s own. Paton’s psalmodic rhythms animate this matrix with a particularly vivid, albeit suffocating, energy.

There are many invocations to the sublimity of Afrikaner patrimony, and the legal structures underwriting it. Van Vlaanderen “was like a god” to the black community (Paton 1953: 24). “The white man’s law” is not merely puissant, it is ringed about with “certitude and majesty” (p. 42). Of these laws, the Immorality Act is “the greatest and holiest of all the laws” (p. 118). Where the law is transgressed, however, it is not merely a matter of breaking the law; it reflects universalised conflict of good and evil, darkness and light (pp. 70-71). Pieter van Vlaanderen expresses a revulsion at dirt (p. 119), which is soon expressed as a horror of physical contact with black humanity (p. 120). After a sexual encounter with the black woman Stephanie, he rises from the ground “stinking” of khakibos, “which stinking was a symbol of his corruption” (p. 148). Pieter van Vlaanderen falls thus out of a condition of grace with which power is imbricated. He falls into a condition of sin and its absolute consequence: demoralisation, incarceration and finally expulsion from the body politic (which one might further associate as strongly with expulsion from the body of the elect in the Calvinist sense). In sum, the text nests a political metaphor within the moral trajectory of its protagonist, whereby “his house and kindred” (p. 230) truly are destroyed.

In both Plomer’s and Paton’s novels, a further and more structural layer of narrative is embedded in what the writer does not say about the other central

character, the dark co-transgressor of the racial sexual code. These omissions (of characterisation, dialogue, complexity of motive, and reaction) demonstrate what is invisible to the white writer: the dark partner has either no interior space, or little to speak of. Such absence of personality confers on the dark partner a subaltern role, in a structural narrative sense distinct from the role allocated this figure in the social hierarchy reflected as content. In other words, the black sexual partner/Other is relegated an even deeper subaltern status in terms of the limited scale on which he or she is represented.

The narrative layers I have described combine in their effect. Firstly, the social chorus of outrage fleshes out what the writer knows of his or her represented society. Secondly, the writer stands to some degree outside that society and its sexual mores, yet demonstrates a measure of ambivalence towards what he criticises. It is therefore not surprising that the embedded, complex white social response is drawn with such animation and density. On the other hand, this asymmetry of representation shows exactly what the writer does not know, namely who it is that the white protagonist encounters sexually. This asymmetry not only places the dark co-transgressor in subaltern orbit around the white transgressor within the social hierarchy depicted in the content of the novel; it also inscribes this hegemonic-subaltern binary into the structure of the narrative. In short, despite the critique of racial taboo that constitutes the subject matter of the text, it is nevertheless a white voice that speaks a white world into which the black figure intrudes disruptively.

2

The social trope I have posited still obtains in that most significant post-apartheid novel of interracial sexual encounter, namely *Disgrace* by J.M. Coetzee (1999). However, there are key differences in which continuities of representation can nevertheless be read. In *Disgrace*, the relationship between transgression and sanction is more complex. A key difference lies in an obvious social change: sex across the colour line is neither forbidden nor sanctioned. What remains forbidden and sanctionable is rape.

In writing a post-apartheid novel of sexual encounter across the colour line, Coetzee cannot draw on the code of transgression implicit in the sexual colour bar; there is none in post-apartheid society, at least in a legal sense. There is no Immorality Act, and whatever social inhibitions may remain residual, there can be no legal sanction. Yet transgression lies at the core of this trope, and it has long been the laboratory in which the wrongness of hegemony may be proven. It therefore makes sense for Coetzee to transform desire as the mechanism of transgression into rape. Further, because rape in *Disgrace* falls across the colour line, a transgression of violence/violation is

inevitably racialised (though one might question the validity of this perception, as I will discuss below). The trope, thus transformed, strikes a dual resonance. Firstly, and most obviously, the incidence of rape in South Africa has reached and exceeded catastrophic proportions. Secondly, rape of white women by black men has long been a spectre haunting the colonial imagination, fuelling “black peril” hysteria (see Graham 2003: 435). This use of rape as the mechanism of transgression is therefore an interesting narrative strategy, partly because it could be depended on to trigger the kind of outraged³ public response that the novel in fact did. It is also interesting because, more arcanelly, it succeeds in relating an anti-apartheid trope to post-apartheid conditions.

Despite Coetzee’s problematisation of the trope I have discussed, and although reading Coetzee is inevitably a layered activity, it is not clear that he diverges entirely from the racial ambivalence inscribed in *Turbott Wolfe*. It is true, as David Attwell has observed (2002: 335), that Lucy’s rapists are depicted “without reference to race” (p. 336). He also notes that the fact that “race is bleached out of the [rape] episode almost entirely” is typical of Coetzee’s praxis. In Attwell’s view, the rape itself is likewise without racial or social Darwinian implications. It is, by contrast, subsumed within a view of colonial and postcolonial history that is not racialised, but is rather a cyclic struggle of power and appropriation, and one that finds particular expression in the assertive and appropriative role of male sexuality (pp. 337-338).

My difficulty with Attwell’s argument is that it blurs the distinction between substance and manner. I concede that Coetzee does not foreground race in his presentation of character. Further, the differences between Lucy and David Lurie, on the one hand, and the three rapists on the other, can validly be read in economic and historic terms without reference to race, as Attwell has done. However, there is no uncertainty that the rapists are black; nor is there any uncertainty about the malignancy that is represented. For example, the youngest of the three, Pollux, is portrayed as aggressive, dangerous and retarded (pp. 132, 206), as well as being sexually incontinent, a rapist and peeping Tom. He is given a repulsive appearance, with “a flat expressionless face and piggish eyes” (p. 92). Petrus’s ruthlessness – the viciousness of his sexual strategy as a ploy to acquire land – is also relevant. It is vested in his bid to marry Lucy, and the offer of protection that goes with it (“Then it will be over, all this badness”) (p. 202) in return for the remainder of the farm. Lucy supports this view of rape as an economic instrument: “I contribute the land, in return for which I am allowed to creep

3. See for example Athol Fugard’s reaction to *Disgrace* (2000: n.p.), and the protest made by the African National Congress to the Human Rights Commission Hearings on Racism in the Media (2000).

in under his wing. Otherwise, he wants to remind me, I am without protection, *I am fair game*" (Coetzee 1999: 2003; my italics).

Petrus is thus characterised as a Machiavellian peasant, intent on acquiring land through ownership of its female owner. As is the case with the rapists, there is no necessity to link these properties to race. However, within this convergence of historic and economic forces, of appropriation and restitution, agent and victim are divided by race. At a different level, that of reception, the novel concerns itself with – and is published within the context of – a racialised history. For Attwell, a racialised reading of the power transactions of *Disgrace* is at once depressingly inevitable, and in itself lamentable (2002: 340). Yet I argue below that Coetzee could not have been oblivious of the possibility that a text so configured would be likely to trigger exactly the response that Attwell disparages.

3

In *Turbott Wolfe*, racial ambivalence is written into the chorus of social outrage that surrounds the forbidden encounter. *Too Late the Phalarope* and *Turbott Wolfe* both present the chorus of social outrage as offensive to the moral centre of the text. *Disgrace* differs in this regard, as the racial element is placed in the background, while the disgrace of rape can never be exempted from criticism or outrage. However, the novel really complicates the aspect of social outrage in two respects. Firstly, the text allows the possibility of a linkage between race and rape simply by virtue of the transracial nature of the act, but it does not explicitly articulate any such linkage. Secondly, the victim of the most brutal form of rape in the novel suppresses protestation. This in itself becomes outrageous, not only for David Lurie, but also for many readers.⁴

It is significant that David Lurie characterises rape in the following terms: "Rape, god of *mixture*, violator of *exclusions*" (Coetzee 1994: 104; my italics). What exactly is *mixed* by rape, and what *exclusion* is breached? In the context of the gang-rape of Lucy, the coupling of "mixture" and "exclusions" links the transgression of rape to the discourse of race.⁵ This is elaborated in the aftermath. When Lucy declares that "[w]hat happened to me is a purely private matter" (pp. 112), precisely because it occurs in South

4. As I will discuss below, Marais (2001: 33) observes that Lurie enacts a *mise-en-abyme* of the outraged reader, a position that explains away, but does not remove, such outrage, or its expectation.

5. Meg Samuelson argues to the contrary: in her view, *Disgrace* does not project a racialised discourse of sexual violence by virtue of its reflection on this discourse. It thereby interrogates perspectives on real rape, thus "disfiguring rape" (2007: 141).

Africa, her father's outrage at the rape transforms, taking on a political content: the transgression now is not only that she has been raped within the context of a historic antagonism. It is also her bewildering acceptance of the situation. To abstract race from this context – to exclude it as a consideration – appears to me to be a matter of selective focus rather than an interpretative necessity. I argue further that a reading which admits race as a narrative factor opens up the following implications. Lucy's silence, and the political/economic choice it contains – that she must necessarily be silent in order to survive in this place – anticipates a central political dynamic of *Disgrace* that is embedded in Petrus's offer of marriage, and in the vicious negotiation it embeds. In particular, Petrus's strategic use of Lucy as a bargaining chip crosses the moral border between the commodification of women and their human rights. It is not without relevance that the transgressor of this border is a black man, and his victim is a white woman, despite the representational tact of the author.

Stéphanie Robolin (2006: 307-308) argues that in racially stratified societies, because women are gatekeepers – through reproduction – to caste membership, reproductive purity in racial terms is carefully guarded. The transgression of black man/white woman miscegenation is accordingly seen as more severe than its opposite. What is not as obvious, partly because it is more muted in effect, is Lurie's parallel commodification of women in Soraya, his abuse of Melanie and use of Beverly. However, this qualification is offset (and exceeded) by the fact that Petrus's offer crosses a further and more compound border, violating distinctions between gender, race, ownership, and ultimately power. The rape of Lucy thus becomes a profoundly political matter in terms of racial stratification: not only because it is the rape of a white woman by a black man, but also because it involves issues of landownership as well as social hierarchy in a postcolonial context. The outcome of this overdetermined political transaction is that ownership and power are overthrown by a revolution that exceeds the political and economic dimensions and transgresses the boundaries of the body.

This fractured set of borders nests within it a harder economic and political border. It is expressed literally in the contest for ownership of a piece of "old Kaffraria" (Coetzee 1999: 122), the historic Eastern Cape border centred on Salem and Grahamstown. This has been characterised by Grant Farred (2002: 17) as "the most enduring site of antagonism between black and white"; a site "where race, racism and race relations are most deeply embedded, most resistant to being reconstructed" (p. 17). In this contest, and this site of contest, rape as a metaphor for encounter with the Other transforms into an allegory of struggle for the economic kingdom, to echo Kwame Nkrumah's phrase. Yet rape as a figure of alterity, and as an image of economic struggle, are interlinked.

To consider the outcome of this struggle, it is clear that David Lurie is marginalised partly by his self-imposed state of disgrace, and partly by

Lucy's refusal to invoke the sanction of law. He is also out of his depth in a state where law itself and the concept of property rights are decayed to the point of impotence. In painting a world that falls ultimately by violence/violation under control of the formerly subjugated Other, Coetzee takes the trope of encounter in Plomer and Paton to its logical conclusion. What begins as subliminal anxiety at taint and contamination ends in a de facto loss of political and economic control. *Turbott Wolfe* both presents and lampoons miscegenation as the political solution for Africa; *Too Late the Phalarope* depicts a society which abhors the possibility because of its implications for white power; *Disgrace* presents it as a mechanism that signifies the ending of the colonial project.

Reading the political and economic space allowed to Lucy, however, is more problematic, not least because this is where race and gender borderlines merge. What price does Lucy pay for the right to stay on what used to be her property? The case has been made that her condition is an attempt to redefine a novel history, to borrow Michael Green's (1997) phrase, free of the binary condition "dominance/subservience". In my view, this is not a convincing argument.

Marais (2001: 32), for example, rejects the view of *Disgrace* as "a novel that records liberal fear at the marginalisation of whites in the post-apartheid period", or as a text "exemplifying whites' acceptance of their peripherality in the 'new' South Africa". He argues that readings of this kind are actually anticipated by Coetzee and staged as a *mise-en-abyme* by Lurie's persistent misreading of Lucy's choices (p. 33). The problem for Marais's argument, which he acknowledges (p. 33), is that Lucy, equally persistently, refuses to provide any corrective to Lurie's misreading. Marais's solution is to articulate Lucy's position⁶ as an attempt to stand outside the struggle of dominance/subservience that generates history. It is obvious, however, that history will have none of it, as shown in the differences between Petrus and Lucy in their respective definitions of their relationship. Lucy consistently refuses to define her relationship with Petrus in terms that suggest dominance or subservience; he, on the other hand, introduces himself as a humble subordinate (p. 35), and then is shown to work through the novel to invert that status. Lucy Lurie's passivity, for Marais, "is precisely an action that resists the terms of this history and thereby refuses to supplement it. Through her passivity, she refuses to perpetuate the cycle of domination and counter-domination out of which colonial history erects itself" (Marais 2001: 37).

In my view, Marais's argument fails at this point: while he asserts that "history fails to negate" (p. 38) what he says Lucy attempts to do, Marais fails to demonstrate that this is indeed the case. In sum, I do not see that

6. Marais draws on Hegelian terms that are beyond the scope of this paper. However, see Marais (2001: 34) for discussion of these terms.

Lucy *does not end* in a subjugated position. Marais concludes that it is sufficient achievement for Coetzee to *imply* the possibility of refusing the stale binaries of history, particularly South African history; and that to read *Disgrace* as a fable of inverted dominance/subjugation is “a failure of historic imagination” (p. 38). However, revisiting the topic two years later, Marais (2003: 275) concedes that “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”.

Attwell makes a related case for Lucy, reading in her condition the assertion of a “pared-down” ontological grace that Lucy shares with animals: “a consciousness of what it means to be alive, sharing the precariousness of creation’s biological energy” (Attwell 2002: 340). It is “an ability to survive miraculously with nothing, rather like Michael K imagining that he could survive on the abandoned farm by drawing water out of the blown-up well with a teaspoon on the end of a string” (p. 340). My difficulty with this nuanced and percipient reading is that it underplays the social conditions that require Lucy to “survive miraculously”. It begs the following question: what future does the novel envision for people who are unwilling to be reduced to the ontological condition of animals, and who might be unable to survive miraculously? It can be argued that Lucy, by virtue of her qualities, is not a victim. However, it is less easily arguable that she has not been victimised.

4

In conclusion, I relate the considerations above to the form of *Disgrace*. Coetzee has staged a transaction in the public space of a novel in which rape and extortion can be seen (and have in fact been seen by readers and critics) as a form of retribution for the collective racial crimes of apartheid, exacted on a female body. The accuracy of this reading is not material to my argument at this stage. In representing this provocative content, *Disgrace* appears to take on the form of a classic realist novel, with its accurate description, its unsqueamish gaze on sordid details of a life, the masterful orchestration of detail around the central climactic points, the siting of its persons in a particular historic milieu, and its powerful address to crucial public questions of that history. The novel presents, to appropriate Coetzee’s own description of engaged realist fiction, a “vicarious first-hand experience of living in a certain historical time, embodying contending forces in contending characters and filling our experience with a certain density of observation” (Coetzee 1988[1987]: 3). It is singularly easy to site this narrative of rape and race within the aspect of realist form.

As David Attwell (1990: 100-101) warns, however, the “politics of the referent” is always matched in Coetzee’s writing by the “politics of signification”. Attwell has also criticised “over-heated discussion about what is the least complex – and, arguably, least interesting – areas of the novel’s performance: its socially mimetic function” (2002: 332). I contend that the mimetic function becomes one of its most interesting qualities if read together with, rather than against, its textuality.

It is obvious that to define *Disgrace* as only a realist novel is insufficient; it conducts in fact a postmodern, metafictional exploration of signification as intensely as it examines a certain political history. More particularly, it carefully positions itself in the history not only of the South African pastoral, but in the context of Coetzee’s earlier counter-pastoral works, such as *In the Heart of the Country* (1977), and the *Life and Times of Michael K* (1983).

In my view, the ethical ambivalence Coetzee demonstrates in the person of Lurie, and in the position of Lucy, is also vested in form. While it is probable that a majority of critics regard the realist aspect of the novel as deceptive, I believe that both realist and postmodern readings are legitimate, neither one entirely subsuming or erasing the other. It is typically argued that *Disgrace* is not realist because a certain postmodern factor is present that negates its realism. A common alternative is that *Disgrace* is realist, but that this realism is subverted by a certain postmodern factor. If anything confirms the stability of the realist construct, however, it is the bewildering range of realism-displacing/negating/subverting postmodern factors that has been proffered.⁷ Gareth Cornwell (2002: 314) is not exceptional in his view that a “symbolic or allegorical tendency” subverts the realist pretensions of the novel, observing that

although events portrayed in *Disgrace* may appear to be realistic, the verisimilitude of their representation – *l’effet de réel* that they contrive – is not the purpose of their portrayal, or not the whole purpose for the portrayal of all of them. Moreover, at certain critical junctures an underlying symbolic or allegorical tendency in the novel emerges to subvert, or at least to stretch the credibility of the book’s mimetic pretensions.

(Cornwall 2002: 313-314)

The “verisimilitude of ... representation” that Cornwell (2002: 313-314) identifies might not be “the whole purpose” behind the portrayal of events in the novel, but “an effect of the real” is present as a field of signification, and is no doubt meant to be experienced as an important (and most immediately troubling) part of the reading experience. One might characterise this

7. See for example Marais (2001), Wicomb (2002), Cornwell (2002), Attwell (2003), Barnard (2003), Kauer (2003), Gaylard (2005:), Attridge (2005) and Samuelson (2007).

as the first impact of reading; it will also be the only field of signification visible to a great many readers who are not scholars. The deep intertextuality and subtle metafictional properties of *Disgrace*, the *mise-en-abyme* of the outraged reader staged by Lurie's persistent misreading of Lucy's choices (as Marais 2001: 33 suggests), do not erase the realist effects, nor the political arguments about relationships of power staged within this first stratum, this first encounter, of reading. In short, there is an ethical disjuncture between the two modes of statement. One cannot open a literary space (particularly one of such conviction and power) which enables racial inscription, and simultaneously close it by metatextual interrogation: it remains visible and present. In this particular sense, *Disgrace* is a novel that utters divergent contents at different levels of form.

Given this formal duplicity, a unitary reading of the full text is problematic. A novel is a form of mass communication, particularly one written by a world literary figure. As such, the novel inserts itself into a historicised discourse of race that lies in the local and global public domains. It would be risible to suggest that J.M. Coetzee, writing the socially mimetic mask of *Disgrace*, could be unaware of either this possibility, or of mass participation in the generation and reception of discourse of any kind, and of racialised discourse in this particular context. I will therefore assume that in writing a text that is skilfully disguised as a politically focused, post-apartheid realist novel in which the race-defined protocols of apartheid appear to be symmetrically reversed on racial lines, and in which patriarchy emerges in an even more overt and ruthless form, Coetzee intended to be misunderstood at the public level.

The content of this skilfully crafted misunderstanding is its prognosis of failure for the new polity as a society released from the imprisoning binaries of race. It is a content that is most visible in the realist platform of the novel. I have rejected the view that the hidden metafictional positionings erase this formal ambivalence, and the negative prognosis it projects, in any manner. Both remain accessible, and both have been widely read into *Disgrace*. If politics is a matrix of perceptions as much as it is a matrix of power relations, the novel has reproduced – and yet placed in question – a traditional political, racialised anxiety within the South African literary canon.

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