

The Poverty of Desire: Spivak, Coetzee, Lacan and Postcolonial *Eros*

Eugene de Klerk

Summary

This article's point of departure is Gayatri Spivak's insistence that, if greater global and social equity are to be obtained, "an uncoercive rearrangement of desire" needs to take place. I examine what might be learnt about desire from selected works by J.M. Coetzee, finding within these texts a postcolonial interrogation of the nature of *eros* and a concern with its ethical underside. Such a concern parallels that of Jacques Lacan and, more specifically, relates to his reworking of the concept of sublimation. I also endeavour, through a consideration of Plato, to undo the double bind between classical notions of *eros* and postcolonial social realities (a double bind ostensibly supported by Coetzee's novels). Ultimately, it is the contention of this article that Spivak, Coetzee, Lacan and Plato all locate ethical potential in desire and that, perhaps, any "re-arrangement" might first require reacquainting ourselves with what it is that desire conveys about the human condition.

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel se vertrekpunt is Gayatri Spivak se aandrang dat 'n "dwingende herrangskikking van begeerte" moet plaasvind as groter globale en sosiale gelykheid bereik wil word. Ek ondersoek wat dalk oor begeerte geleer kan word uit gekeurde werke van J.M. Coetzee en het in hierdie tekste 'n postkoloniale ondersoek na die aard van *eros* en 'n besorgdheid met sy etiese ondersy gevind. So 'n bemoeienis loop sy aan sy met dié van Jacques Lacan en is meer spesifiek verwant aan sy verwerking van die konsep sublimasie. Deur 'n oorweging van Plato streef ek ook daarna om die dubbele band – tussen die klassieke begrip *eros* en postkoloniale, sosiale werklikhede ('n dubbele band wat oënskynlik ondersteun word deur Coetzee se romans) – ongedaan te maak. Uiteindelik is die standpunt in hierdie artikel dat Spivak, Coetzee, Lacan en Plato almal etiese potensiaal in begeerte vind en dat enige "herrangskikking" dalk eers 'n hervertroudraak van ons vereis met wat begeerte aangaande die menslike toestand oordra.

Gayatri Spivak, in an address given at the University of Glasgow in Spring 2007, spoke about issues concerning the funding of the humanities. She staged a speech she had recently given to her university's sponsors and then

offered a translation and critique of the corporate discourse she had been forced to adopt owing to that audience and occasion. Such discourse, which claims to be able to promote development, forcibly precludes any discussion of the way in which subjects (especially those subjects to whom such “development” will be administered) perceive themselves or, indeed, how their desire is informed.

Relating an anecdote concerning her return to India to undertake development work, Spivak spoke of witnessing an enactment of what, she supposed, was broadly regarded as “development”: a young Indian woman, clad in an eighties-style power-suit was screaming into her cellphone about stock prices. Spivak claimed that she had wanted to take this woman aside in order to indicate to her that the capitalist promise of equality (and satisfaction) predicated on individual financial success is, in fact, illusory and ultimately damaging to self and community. However, Spivak painfully felt her own complicity as a professional who had chosen to work in the United States. She also did not feel that she had any right to tell the woman that she ought to want different things or want differently (or that, in fact, at some stage she may *have* wanted differently).

Yet the question remains as to how greater social justice might be achieved if alternative objects and modes of desire are not embraced (or recovered). Spivak concluded her speech with the assertion that the only way to effectively address inequality and poverty is to bring about an “uncoercive rearrangement of desire”; the aspirations into which the oppressed are interpellated (with which they are colonised) are also directly responsible for their marginalisation as well as the effacement of otherness.

As Spivak puts it in *Other Asias* (2007b), not only does the capitalist-inspired duty to better the self (inevitably at the expense of the other) reinforce “worldwide class apartheid” (pp. 20, 26), but social responsibility envisioned solely as the “duty of the fitter [developed] self” negates agency on the part of the marginalised; the prevailing culture of Human Rights constructs those in need of aid as passive (as just so-many gaping mouths and minds) to whom rights, food, and education must be delivered regardless of epistemic/ecological violence. Spivak hopes that the humanities, by contrast, will prove capable of providing the sort of education which will foster a “desire to redistribute” and reawaken communitarian impulses contained in the silenced and neglected cultural habits of the disenfranchised. She posits that these habits appear largely obsolete (or even embarrassing or backward) under capitalism because they conceive of human subjectivity as a matter of being “called by the other, before will” (p. 29). These cultural modes conceptualise desire as always-already mediated by radical alterity with the result that ethical conduct is premised on maintaining a commitment to such alterity beyond/before self; the much-prized “self” and “self-will” of neoliberal entrepreneurship has no place here.

It is Spivak's suggestion of a "rearrangement of desire" that I would like to use as the starting point of this article in order to begin exploring the ways in which the postcolonial literature of J.M. Coetzee might constitute an attempt to re-educate or re-elucidate desire. This may also be true of postcolonial literature more generally.

There might be the objection that one should leave desire to its own devices, that the beauty of desire is precisely that it is free of political or ethical considerations. Conversely, however, there appears to be very little possibility of offering a comprehensive ethical philosophy without taking desire into account. In seeking to outline the principles or criteria concerning why, how and when one should act, how can one put aside that which always seems to have the potential to interrupt, redirect or overtake both thought and deed? Even unsophisticated ethical systems which seek to isolate desire must first endeavour to identify it, its characteristics and its potential impact.

Desire often presents itself first and foremost as a problem, a potential obstacle to the rationality, piety, modesty or humility thought to be appropriate to an intellectual, social, political or historical context. Indeed a characteristic of desire would seem to be its delight in impropriety. Brute attempts to eradicate it entirely only seem to prompt it to adapt, attaching its characteristic excess of feeling to new objects. These may appear to be strange objects in terms of stereotypical associations with pleasure and certainly not desirable in any commonplace or simplistic evolutionary sense; examples of such "objects" might include self-denial, guilt or humiliation. Desire, it would seem, always finds a way; but, interestingly, it presents itself as capable of adopting unconventional objects (often biologically inessential). Freud famously employed the metaphor of water in order to describe the dynamics of desire owing to the fact that water, finding itself restricted, erodes resistance and establishes new channels; often using the very materials obstructing it in order to do so.

It would be a mistake to suggest that desire is only a problem for conservative or repressive belief systems. As Spivak's story shows, it is a problematic variable for those who seek to redress inequality or who attempt to rid themselves, others or the world of prejudice and exploitative practice. Desire, in light of this and its openness to reinvention, presents itself as the potential locus of a fundamental form of ethics. It may also be possible to educate desire if it is no longer simply a matter of choosing between resistance (punishment) or surrender (indulgence).

J.M. Coetzee is one self-consciously postcolonial author who tackles desire as that which will just not disappear gracefully in the face of ethical realisations or the physical senescence that seems to accompany them. From the magistrate's inscrutable desire and bathetic sexual appetite in *Waiting for the Barbarians* to equally questionable attractions in *Disgrace*, *Slow Man* and *Diary of a Bad Year*, there appears to be the suggestion of an

ignobility about persistent longing (especially if it is also sexual) and an interrogation of, specifically human, want.

Possibly one of the most striking depictions in Coetzee concerning the predicament of desire is that of the chastened dog in *Disgrace*; the conversation is between David Lurie, the protagonist, and his daughter, Lucy, and it bears quoting at length:

“When you were small, when we were still living in Kenilworth, the people next door had a dog, a golden retriever. I don’t know whether you remember.”

“Dimly”

“It was a male. Whenever there was a bitch in the vicinity it would get excited and unmanageable, and with Pavlovian regularity the owners would beat it. This went on until the poor dog didn’t know what to do. At the smell of a bitch it would chase around the garden with its ears flat and its tail between the legs, whining, trying to hide.”

He pauses. “I don’t see the point,” says Lucy. And indeed, what is the point?

“There was something so ignoble in the spectacle that I despaired. One can punish a dog, it seems to me, for an offence like chewing a slipper. A dog will accept the justice of that: a beating for a chewing. But desire is another story. No animal will accept the justice of being punished for following its instincts.”

“So males must be allowed to follow their instincts unchecked? Is that the moral?”

“No, that is not the moral. What is ignoble was that the poor dog had begun to hate its own nature. It no longer needed to be beaten. It was ready to punish itself. At that point it would have been better to shoot it.”

“Or to have it fixed.”

“Perhaps. But at the deepest level I think it might have preferred that to the options it was offered: on the one hand, to deny its nature, on the other, to spend the rest of its days padding about the living-room, sighing and sniffing the cat and getting portly.”

“Have you always felt this way, David?”

“No, not always. Sometimes I have felt just the opposite. That desire is a burden we could well do without”.

(Coetzee 1999: 90)

Here human desire is not only equated with animal instinct but also with suffering; yet it is unclear as to whether it is the curbing or conditioning of desire that results in suffering or if desire itself is the source of such pain. Desire is often represented by animals in Coetzee or presented in terms of animal being: for example, in *Diary of a Bad Year* a magpie patriarch instils a sense of relative impotence in the narrator while in *Waiting for the Barbarians* the magistrate reflects: “Sometimes my sex seemed to me to be another being entirely, a stupid animal living parasitically upon me, swelling and dwindling according to autonomous appetites, anchored to my

flesh with claws I could not detach” (1982: 45). Of course such an understanding of desire is in no way unique to Coetzee and indeed he seems almost to have modelled his considerations on classical engagements with the topic. His crippled but still-amorous protagonist in *Slow Man* alludes to the paradigmatic example sketched in Plato’s *Phaedrus*:

A memory comes back to him of the cover of a book he used to own, a popular edition of Plato. It showed a chariot drawn by two steeds, a black steed with flashing eyes and distended nostrils representing the base appetites, and a white steed of calmer mien representing the less identifiable nobler passions. Standing in the chariot, gripping the reins, was a young man with a half-bared torso and a Grecian nose and a fillet around his brow, representing presumably the self, that which calls itself *I*.

(Coetzee 2006: 53)

Plato’s Socrates uses this image to allegorise the human condition concerning the tussle between ethics and desire. Each of the horses, one stereotypically white and the other black, represents an aspect of the psyche: judgement and desire, respectively. Eros, the black steed, is prone to unruly behaviour and often unbalances the charioteer. The treatment this contrary beast receives at the hand of his master is reminiscent of that meted out to Coetzee’s golden retriever: “[W]ith still more violent wrench [the charioteer] drags the bit out of the teeth of the wild steed and covers his abusive tongue and jaws with blood and forces his legs and haunches to the ground and punishes him sorely” (1986: 135).

Once again the taming of *eros* is situated in an image of animal suffering. Implicit within both representations seems to be the notion that we as humans are part animal, part divinity and that this is the cause of the conflict of which David Lurie speaks. “Divinity” may also usefully be translated as subjecthood, self-consciousness or self-mastery, narrative or, more simply, meaning.

It should be kept in mind, however, that Plato situates *eros* not as pure animality but as an aspect of the soul, albeit a brutal and independent one. And indeed the interrelation of being and meaning specific to human existence appears to necessitate that a distinction be made between desire and animal instinct, between longing and compulsion.

Following Lacan I would like to suggest that desire be understood as articulated need; instead of being the untameable, inexorable animal impulse within, it might be characterised as a result of the encounter between organic need and meaning. Desire in this model is the result of alienation from the immediacy of need: as animals we could simply require, as humans, owing to the intrusion of meaning, “need” becomes a socio-symbolically mediated puzzle. Desire in this account is akin to a fundamental form of thought and is how we represent (signify) need. Within desire thus conceived lie the seeds of invention (imagination and fantasy) but also of unanswerable longing. Suffering here is not owing to the

enforced repression of instinct but to the incommensurability of need and desire, organic being and meaning. That which can never be covered is the distance between need and desire; the latter can also, as a result, never offer the satisfaction that simply answering the first may once have provided.¹ In Lacanian terms, we are catapulted beyond the *jouissance* (joy or fulfilment) of pure being.

David Lurie's seemingly simplistic dualism concerning desire in his parable of the retriever is interrogated by the complex ending of *Disgrace* where it is debatable whether he has eluded desire or learnt to desire differently.² Is it the case, as Louis Tremain (2003) for example maintains, that Lurie has escaped disgrace, desire and suffering by reobtaining the immediacy of an animal existence beyond signification, prejudice, appropriation or expectation? In making him "like a dog" (Coetzee 1999: 205) does his experience assert the simple purity of natural fatalism over the inevitably unfulfilling artifice of human desire and thereby allow him to make peace with insignificance and death? This, according to Tremain's argument, is the *meaning* of Lurie's final *gesture* of giving up the dog. This act cannot, however, be read as a meaningful gesture if it supposedly occurs outwith the realm of significance; unless, possibly, critics and readers are doomed to betray the purity of Lurie's act by presiding or puzzling over its meaning.

It is my contention by contrast that the final act of the novel is purposively presented as a significant gesture without betraying any particular significance. It is "in-significant": within the parameters of significance which human animals – who are also subjects – can never fully escape, but empty of meaning. As I hope to show, through my discussion of Lacan's suggestions concerning desire below, Lurie does not escape or abandon human desire in this moment but instead unlocks the ethical potential implicit in its very form. He is brought to a place in the narrative where

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1. In terms of the substitution of objects, desire extends well beyond whether or not such substitutions will satisfy the requirements of survival; when it comes to desire it is rather a question of a compelling symbolic rearticulation. A useful literary example of the difference between need and desire can be found in Kafka's "The Hunger Artist" where the artist requires food to survive, but this need is superseded by a desire for recognition. It is interesting to note that the hunger artist's cage is, after his death, occupied by a panther: "It was a palpable relief even to the most stolid to see this savage animal thrashing about in the cage that had been lifeless for so long. He lacked nothing. The food he liked was brought to him by his keepers without a second thought" (1981: 252).
 2. Lurie becomes a "dog-man" in the novel in that he assists with the euthanising and disposal of unwanted dogs. *Disgrace* closes with Lurie "giving up" to death a three-legged dog he has adopted through this work and has grown to love (1999: 220).

desire becomes separated from love (affirmation/ownership/colonisation) and is unmasked as the inevitable human (en)circling of organic being as alterity; in fact, in some respects, desire is nothing but a constant reminder of alterity and interminable longing. Lurie's acceptance of his own desire as both profound search and humbling impossibility is mirrored by the enigmatic ending of the novel. It is my impression that Coetzee as author is eager to explore the ethical potential of desire.

In his work Coetzee often places sex and charity in close proximity to one another. In the case of *Disgrace* this is most evident in the affair between David and Bev Shaw. The motivation for this liaison is difficult to fathom according to stereotypical models of desire and Lurie advances that it is an act of succour on Bev's part, an impotent salve for his metaphoric castration.³ If this is indeed the rationale behind Bev's actions; it recalls those undertaken by the eponymous Elizabeth Costello who poses for and later attempts to fellate a dying artist friend. Elizabeth wants to assert this display as an instance of the redemptive power of *eros* (in reply to her nun-sister's claim that Classical ideals make no room for the suffering body and therefore preclude compassion). She cannot, however, escape the awareness that her act does not accord with the aesthetic values it aims to defend:

As for her, Elizabeth, crouched over the old bag of bones with her breasts dangling, working away on his nearly extinct organ of generation, what name would the Greeks give to such a spectacle? Not *eros*, certainly – too grotesque for that. *Agape*? Again, perhaps not. Does that mean the Greeks would have no word for it? Would one have to wait for the Christians to come along with the right word: *caritas*?

(Coetzee 2004: 154)

If one revisits the Greeks, however, one gets a sense that *eros* is not what Romantic neoclassical notions have made of it and that perhaps within it persists the possibility of compassion, of charity and that indeed these may be at the heart of some classical conceptions.⁴ Let me take a brief step back

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3. Although fraught when it comes to suggestions concerning desire, it is worth considering if Lucy's acceptance of her rape – as a form of historical compensation – might also be thought of as an act of charity. Might it be an appropriate response to the "desire" of the rapists insofar as what their "desire" represents is, in fact, poverty and disenfranchisement?
 4. Even Blanche (Elizabeth's sister) allows for an alternative Greek tradition (neglected by ego-driven Western ideological appropriations of Hellenism): "You backed a loser, my dear. If you had picked a different Greek you might have stood a chance. Orpheus instead of Apollo. The ecstatic instead of the rational". See Cornwell (2003) for a discussion of (religious) ecstasy and Coetzee. A case could certainly be made for a link between Lacanian sublimation and Erasmus's account of ecstasy – on which, as Cornwell demonstrates, Coetzee draws.

to the *Phaedrus* and note how the black steed is described: “crooked, a great big jumble of parts put together any old how Shaggy round the ears, deaf” (1986: 134). To understand this characterisation of supposedly fearsome *eros*, it is useful to consider the account given of the god’s birth by Diotima in the *Symposium*. In this account *Eros* is born of *Penia*, his mother [Poverty], and *Poros*, his father [Resource], on the occasion of a banquet in honour of *Aphrodite*.

As the son of *Poros* and *Penia*, *Eros* has the following destiny: First he is always poor, and far from being soft and beautiful, as most people suppose, he is hard and rugged. Barefoot and homeless, he always lies unsheltered on the ground and sleeps on doorsteps and roadways in the open air. Taking after his mother’s side, he is always in need. But then he also takes after his father since he conspires after good and beautiful things. He is bold, impetuous, and high-strung.

(Plato 1979: 36)

Eros in this depiction has two aspects and indeed his primary experience seems to be that of impoverished suffering.⁵ It is this representation of *eros*

5. It is neither possible nor responsible to ignore the gendering of this myth, i.e., that it is the maternal that is identified with lack and the paternal with goodness and beauty. However, I would ask one to recall that, at this moment in the *Symposium*, it is Socrates who is in the position of ignorance (contextual lack) and Diotima who seems to possess knowledge (contextual presence). Of course one would also need to consider that Diotima is Plato’s mouthpiece. It is beyond the scope of this article to consider these dynamics in any greater depth other than to say that it is intriguing that Coetzee also employs a female persona to promulgate intellectual theories, namely Elizabeth Costello. One possible reason might be that both Plato and Coetzee presume that there is a profound subjective wisdom to be had from being *identified with* lack (consider, in this regard, that Diotima is also a slave, someone who seems least qualified to speak on matters of desire). The form of wisdom which I am suggesting here is non-essentialist and has to do with being identified, or actively identifying, with lack rather than unavoidably embodying it owing to cultural prejudice. Ideally, such identification should be constituted through an ethical choice rather than generated owing to an enforced socio-political reality.

Of course there have been many critiques of the psychoanalytic account of desire as bound up with lack, including those of Harraway (1991) and Robinson (1991). Perhaps the most famous work to indict psychoanalysis on this count is Deleuze and Guattari’s *The Anti-Oedipus* (1984). There they accuse Lacan, in particular, for supporting a model of desire that perpetuates a false nostalgic consciousness and the suffering that results from such a mindset. It may be fertile to consider, by way of a response to those who see psychoanalysis as mendaciously inculcating a narrative of loss, a passage taken from *Elizabeth Costello*. Elizabeth, again in conversation with Blanche, asks why one of her sister’s wards insists on repeatedly carving the

that Lacan uses to elaborate his own conceptualisation of the dynamic of desire (indeed his entire eighth seminar is devoted to an analysis of Plato's symposium). As we have seen, in accordance with Platonic notions, Lacanian *eros* primarily concerns lack and suffering (the human organism is alienated by culture and need is overcome by the need-to-mean). Desire according to Lacan's model can be said to be, ultimately, the human organism's inability to end its alienation, its split, through locating an unequivocal signifier for the fact of its beingness, one that would restore the certainty and immortality of undifferentiated being.⁶ Such an order of being

same image of suffering (Christ on the cross). Blanche responds: "This is reality: the reality of Zululand, the reality of Africa. It is the reality now and the reality of the future as far as we can see it" (2004: 141). Is it incredible to suppose that psychoanalysis also seeks to acknowledge the reality of the psychic suffering of those who seek some sort of redemption from such suffering? As Althusser reflects, "[P]sycho-analysis is concerned with ... struggle, the war humanity pretends it has never declared, the war it always thinks it has won in advance, simply because humanity is nothing but surviving this war, living and bearing children as culture in human culture" (1971: 190). It would be as naïve to suppose that psychoanalysis invented longing or suffering as it would be to suggest that Christianity is the source of all human anguish rather than a response to it.

6. It is remarkable that Freud devotes six pages of his "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" (1991) to the debate concerning whether or not unicellular organisms are immortal (pp. 318-323). Although unicellular organisms display a degree of differentiation in forming outer membranes when they divide, they are not made to confront the death of their individual essence. Unicellular organisms unlike humans generate exact replicas (potentially indefinitely) when they reproduce. In human beings of course only a portion of genetic material is duplicated owing to sexed reproduction. These reflections by Freud are what lead Lacan to insist on the concomitant nature of the awareness of sex and death in human experience. Lacan, furthermore, describes the reality of the unconscious as sexual (1998a: 150) because, for him, the unconscious unfolds between the promise of lost immortality (undifferentiated being) and the (symbolic) means through which we attempt to recover such immortality.

Lacan's controversial statement that there is no such thing as a sexual relationship (1998a: 6), refers to his notion that sex is, unconsciously at least, always a vain attempt to recover immortality and never about the other person (the other stands in for what is lost). Sex then becomes an attempt, as in Aristophanes' myth in the *Symposium*, to join with a greater continuum of being. Paradoxically, sex is both a reminder of the mortal nature of individual existence as well as a lure which hints at the extension of that existence.

Elizabeth Costello's mediation on sexual intercourse between gods and mortals (specifically, initially, that between *Eros* and *Psyche*) is interesting to consider in this context. She proposes that the gods envy mortal sexual

borders closely on that which Elizabeth Costello so envies in the frogs she remembers from her youth; indeed it is probably not incidental that these frogs are drawn from the relatively simple subjectivity and unsophisticated symbolic menagerie of youth:

She steps forward. "What I believe," she reads in a firm voice like a child doing a recitation "I believe in those little frogs It is because of the indifference of those little frogs to my belief (all they want from life is a chance to gobble down mosquitoes and sing; and the males among them, the ones who do most of the singing, sing not to fill the night air with melody but as a form of courtship, for which they hope to be rewarded with orgasm, the frog variety of orgasm, again and again and again) – it is because of their indifference to me that I believe in them."

(Coetzee 2004: 216-217)

Here need is not alienated by desire, and sexual behaviour has immediate aims and ends.

Desire can thus be viewed as a result of the noncoincidence of language/culture/meaning and the fact of being. Representation becomes, as with Plato, a cave from which escape is momentary, if at all. Caught up in desire is the hope that it is not in vain that we scribble on the walls of the cave trying to find the symbolic formula which will evoke the unmediated certainty of pure being (or make up for it). Coetzee, in *Diary of a Bad Year*,

congress precisely because it is mortality which animates desire: "In marking us down for death, the gods gave us an edge over them. Of the two, gods and mortals, it is we who live the more urgently, feel the more intensely. In the sexual ecstasies of mortals, the frisson of death, its contortions, its relaxings: they talk about it endlessly when they have had too much to drink" (Coetzee 2004: 189). Freud, following Weismann, sees this mythical dynamic between mortality and immortality playing itself out within human existence. Weismann posited that higher organisms experience a tension between the soma ("the body apart from the substance concerned with sex and inheritance") and the germ plasm ("concerned with the survival of the species"), the former being mortal and the latter immortal (1991: 318). For both Freud and Lacan, this intra-biological tension is the blueprint for the experience of subjectivity; immortality, at the level of subjectivity and not biology, is represented by an unequivocal meaning for being (which only gods can know). In this sense all sexual intercourse is, in the hope that it expresses for certainty and immortality, "congress across a gap in being" (Coetzee 2004: 184). Consider, also, that one of Lucy's rapists in *Disgrace* is named Pollux (in mythology, the immortal offspring of Zeus' rape of Leda, and, in the context of the novel, the immortally suffering child of the rape of Africa by Empire who commits yet another rape). *Eros* is, significantly, not only the stretching across this gap in being but also the gap itself (both hope and suffering; hope because of suffering).

points to the promise of mathematics in this regard, especially that promise contained in the suggestion that mathematics can be “discovered” in nature: “The mathematics we have invented (in some accounts) or discovered (in others), which we believe or hope to be a key to the structure of the universe, may equally well be a private language – private to human beings with human brains – in which we doodle on the walls of our cave” (Coetzee 2007: 96).

Lacan also speaks of the peculiar alchemy through which meaning (the human conception of time in this case) locates itself in the real, subjugating humankind, as a result, to a seemingly independent, authoritative will:

From the moment man thinks that the great clock of nature turns all by itself, and continues to mark the hour even when he isn't there, the order of science is born. The order of science hangs on the following: that in officiating over nature, man has become its officious servant. He will not rule over it, except by obeying it. And like the slave, he tries to make the master dependent on him by serving him well.

(Lacan 1988: 298)

These instances, mathematics and science, despite exploiting the dynamic of desire, are ultimately disavowals of the poverty of meaning underlying human experience. They are a denial of the precariousness of narrative and, consequently, alongside Romantic notions of beauty, operate as oppressive presumptions concerning the possibility or probability of perfection and ultimate resolution. As Coetzee reminds us, the difference between meaning and the real (being) “remains everything” (1988).

Despite being a Romantic scholar, David Lurie seems by the end of *Disgrace* to be broken and impoverished, divested of the presumption of desire (no longer, it would seem, a “servant of Eros” (1999: 52)): he even surrenders to death the dog he claims to love. There appears to be no place for *eros* or love in post-apartheid South Africa. And yet *Disgrace* might be read, not as a parable of the negation of desire, but of desire freed to re-encounter its noncoincidence with the real; to experience that non-coincidence as a kind of (traumatic) freedom; and to bring to realisation its inevitable relationship with irrecoverable loss, absence or difference.⁷

Such “freed” desire is not anti- or a-ideological but is, nevertheless, at the very basis of ideology. Althusser famously refers to ideology as the way in

7. It is little wonder, in light of the possibly fundamental relationship between desire and knowledge (desire returns us always to ignorance), that *Disgrace* is also an academic *anti-bildungsroman*. Here, as in a Socratic dialogue, it is the teacher who is taught and the lover who is brought to reflect on the nature of his or her desire rather than the object of such desire; recall how Socrates responds to the adoration of Alcibiades: “I think you'd better have a better look, otherwise you might make the mistake of thinking I have something to offer” (1994: 65).

which individuals represent their imaginary relationship to their real conditions of existence: in other words, like desire, it is a mediation between the real and culture. Spivak argues that desire can never be separated from its expression as ideological interest but that it is possible to envision ideology schematically so that it is also-always open to interruption by that which is excluded by the dominant order (1999: 253, 430). In this sense ideology can also be considered “in-significant”: something which retains a formal outline, yet is also open and can be “filled in” differently. Possibly desire can be thought of as ideology contemplated schematically. For Spivak, Lurie’s situation at the close of the novel would constitute a sort of ideological *tabula rasa* which, even so, remains within the field of ideology.

Lurie suggests that what he and Bev do with the dogs is an act of “‘sublimation’: as alcohol is sublimed from water, leaving no residue, no after-taste” (p. 142). Intriguingly he appears to mistranslate “sublimation” (most often *Sublimierung* in German) as *Lösung* (“solution”). The most obvious implication of this is a parallel between Lurie’s work with the dogs and the Holocaust (the “Final Solution” or *Endlösung*). The choice of translation, however, also potentially sets up a relationship between sublimation and the Holocaust. Such a relationship, interestingly, is already suggested in Lacan’s work.

For Lacan sublimation is, in part, the realisation that desire is objectless, that it is unanswerable and the result of the incommensurability of meaning with being; an awareness that it corresponds to the gap constituted by meaning’s inability to fully incorporate being (or the gap being remains in meaning).⁸ In Lacan’s account, this gap, if simply unmasked, prompts us to sacrifice anything and everything in the hopes of eliciting an immortal and transcendent response which will fill it (a “final solution” of sorts). He calls this “the drama of Nazism” (1998a: 275): the fruitless and ever-more-violent effort to locate a symbolic stopper for the mortal abyss that being repeatedly constitutes for meaning.

In place of entirely occluding this gap once again (repression in Lacan), or becoming morbidly entranced by it (de Sade, for example), Lacanian sublimation would have it encircled through some special case of signification.⁹

8. As Elizabeth Costello indicates, awareness of this gap is exacerbated by postmodernism: the word mirror has shattered and the dictionary no longer occupies a place of honour on the bookshelf equal to the Bible (2004: 19).

9. Indeed, for Lacan, the gap brought about by meeting (in fact, nonmeeting) of the symbolic with the real insists on articulation. This means he accords with Spivak insofar as it is not his contention that desire be “unpolluted” of ideology but rather that it is necessarily also ideological (an occasion for articulation). Lacanian psychoanalysis, however, prompts a subject to engage with any articulation as inherently unstable (so that he or she may act ethically); subjective fantasy must be opened to “sustained interruption from

The sublimatory object for Lacan is one which brings us back from the precipice of potential nonmeaning without denying the existence of the abyss; an act of sublimation speaks to its own insufficiency in stopping up the gap in meaning but stops it up nonetheless. Catherine Belsey's example (2005) is the Victorian crypt which recalls death, thereby acknowledging that something has fallen out of the world of meaning, and yet, through its elaborate suggestion of immortality, attempts to answer for that absence (the crypt is also a literal "encircling" of the nonmeaning of death). Lacan's own instructive examples (which rely on the isomorphic encircling of absence) include clay pots and macaroni (1992).

I suggest that Lurie's gesture at the end of *Disgrace* is closer to Lacan-ian sublimation than any sort of final solution. His sacrifice is quite evidently a significant gesture, furthermore, it is encircled by Coetzee's text which remains within and dependent on language and culture, and yet its significance is undecideable. It is, in a very specific sense, an empty gesture, which accords with Lucy's assertion that David and she must begin again, "[n]ot with nothing but" (1999: 205); it is the "but" and the double negative preceding it which indicate that one has obtained the borders of meaning but not crossed over into animal existence: "*like dogs*" (p. 205; my italics).¹⁰

The question remains as to how such a notion of the functioning of desire might be useful in reconceiving of desire such that one might promote greater social justice. In answering this I should like to speak about a serendipitous (in the context of this article) historical curiosity. It concerns the statue of *Eros* in Picadilly Circus (1893). Of course, the statue was not in fact intended to be of *Eros*, nor, of the Christian Angel of Charity (despite being renamed such at one point in order to quell the objections of the "moral" majority). The statue was commissioned to commemorate the life of the 7th Earl of Shaftesbury, a Victorian philanthropist, and sculpted by Alfred Gilbert, whose subject was, in fact, the comparatively obscure Greek god *Anteros* (Potts 2004).¹¹

a source relating "otherwise" (Spivak 1999: 430). Lacan's model of sublimation suits Spivak's notion of a mode of deconstruction that is also-always never a-ideological. It is a matter of having one's cake but not eating it.

10. For a detailed analysis of Coetzee's use of language in *Disgrace*, see Sanders (2002).
11. The statue as metaphor for the rearticulation of desire becomes even more intriguing when one considers that the 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury, a direct ancestor of Lord Antony-Ashley Cooper (and his namesake), was a philosopher of ethics who maintained that desire harboured the potential of generating a moral aesthetic which would guide humankind in the direction of benevolence (cf. Eagleton 1990). In his conception this aesthetic would, in fact, reveal that desire is, at base, a wish to be moral.

Anteros, much like Eve for Adam in Christian mythology, was created as a playmate to alleviate the solitude of *Eros*. He was seen as the god of reflected and requited love. This may, at first, seem to overturn the thesis of desire as ultimately representing poverty or inadequacy as in the figure of *Anteros* it is given its answer; a seemingly perfect response. However, I should like us to consider the following depiction of the two gods:

In the *gymnasium* of Elis in the Peloponnese, *Eros* and *Anteros* had an altar where they were to be seen struggling for the palm of victory. They [the ancients] wanted the young men to remember not to spurn those who loved them but to return their love, to love others as they knew themselves to be loved. There were pictures or statues of two children, one of them Cupid, holding a palm in his hands; the other *Anteros*, struggling to take it from him, but despite all his endeavours, not succeeding. Thus he who responds to love ought to show with all his might that he loves no less than he who first displayed his feelings.

(de Tervarent 1965: 205)

This conception of the relationship between *Eros* and his counterpart is also found in the *Phaedrus*: “When the lover is there, then like the lover he [the beloved] finds release from his pain. When he is not there, then, again like the lover, he misses him and is missed. His return of love is a reflection of love [*Anteros*]” (Plato 1986: 137).

Is it really reciprocated love or sufficiency which is embodied by *Anteros*; or is it, precisely, mirrored lack? Is the requirement of the beloved, insofar as this depiction might be thought representative, not rather that he or she should reflect the lover’s suffering, the experience of being not-whole; a reminder of the lover’s own alterity to himself? As the narrator of *Waiting for the Barbarians* reflects, “Desire seem[s] to bring with it a pathos of distance and separation which it [is] futile to deny” (1982: 45).

If this is so, such a conceptualisation of desire as universal shared suffering may suggest an alternative dynamic for relationships as well as a different basis for community. In his Twentieth Seminar Lacan asserts that we only recognise each other as others (and not as props or objects in various fantasies) when we acknowledge our shared subjugation to the loss about which desire reminds us (1998b: 85).

I contend that Coetzee’s depiction of desire in his novels is directly linked with his ethical preoccupations; that in much of his work desire is shown to be a subjective window onto inassimilable alterity, loss, weakness and repressed or suffering aspects of being. This, further, mirrors Spivak’s evocation of the call of otherness and makes such a call a fundamental aspect of all human culture and experience. Might reawakening this “knowledge” (as psychoanalysis seeks to do) not also bring about a rearrangement of desire and ideological reshuffle; even in the most hardened capitalist or egocentrist? What is ostensibly the very basis of a supposedly inevitable

culture of consumption might be harnessed and deployed against that culture.¹²

Coetzee seems compelled by classical thought, almost as much as he appears to reject it (possibly owing to his own education). He, however, hollows out Hellenism, rather than simply dismissing it, demonstrating its uncertainties and exploring its less acknowledged components; those which speak to doubt and human fallibility. One may well be tempted to suggest that he deconstructs it or makes of it a purely sublimatory mechanism. In terms of the assumptions concerning the ancient Greek world (“free minds in free bodies” (2004: 132)) which underpin the dominant neoliberal aesthetic, as well as its epistemology and humanism, it would constitute an intervention to indicate, as desire does itself, ultimately, that alienation (otherness) is pervasive, inherent and inescapable. Indeed this strategy of pointing out the otherness at the origin of the “Western Self” may be more meaningful than promoting any sort of West/East, North/South binarism.

In many of his novels Coetzee seems to be toying with a central impossibility, namely that of obtaining unequivocal certainty (even anticolonial ethical conviction). Desire always seems to present repeated interruption:

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12. In his analysis of the aesthetics of superfluity in reference to the city of Johannesburg, Achille Mbembe demonstrates how the form taken by consumerism in post-apartheid South Africa can be made to reveal a “traumatic amnesia” concerning history (specifically in terms of Johannesburg, the active forgetting of its past as a “racial city”). It may similarly be the case that Londoners’ misidentification of the figure of *Anteros* is an attempt to repress London’s history as slum (and in some respects its current reality as slum; as containing a disenfranchised emigrant workforce).

Mbembe also demonstrates, in keeping with Lacan (albeit it via Deleuze and Guattari) that fantasies are derived from the foreclosure of a “void in the symbolic structure” (2004: 383). In other words, the repressive denial of the constitutive incapacity that relates directly to desire (and which is common to all subjects as such) can give rise to violent fantasies and exploitation (in the case of Johannesburg and South Africa these are specifically racial in character). Sublimation demands instead that the articulation of this void not altogether obscure or wholly (over)compensate for it.

Mbembe’s work relating to the aesthetics of the postcolony (in which he writes back to Bakhtin) is also intriguing. He suggests that the grotesque aesthetic deployed in the humour of many oppressed peoples might be thought of as not only a challenge to the pomp and posturing of dictatorial regimes but a reminder to those regimes of their human fallibility. In fact, such humour demonstrates that the fantasies underlying the spectacles of power are attempts to repress anxiety regarding inevitable shared fallibility (relating specifically to the bowels and potency): “the fetish, seen for the sham it is, is made to lose its might, and becomes merely an idol” (1992: 8). Insofar as these fantasies are shared culturally by the oppressed (in their own way), such obscene or grotesque humour may also constitute a form of psychological reflexivity.

for example, just before apologising for his treatment of Melanie, Lurie cannot but feel a twinge of desire for Desiree: “There are crumbs on her upper lip. He has an urge to reach out, brush them off; at the same instant the memory of her sister comes over him in a hot wave” (1999: 164). In the midst of Coetzee’s aesthetic there is an absence of resolution, yet he never abandons writing or aesthetics entirely and in this he may be mirroring an inevitable aspect of the human condition, that of “in-significance”.

It seems clear that if secular humanism is to rehabilitate itself it must seek a way of matching the compassionate aesthetic offered by religious symbolism (which is, significantly, not the absence of an aesthetic – despite Sister Bridget’s assertion that Christianity is simply the reflection of Africa’s reality): “Which is why African people come to church to kneel before Jesus on the cross, African women above all, who have to bear the brunt of reality. Because they suffer and he suffers with them” (2004: 141). Could it be that the African worshippers Blanche refers to come in search of an aesthetic that encompasses but does not deny suffering; offers meaning while acknowledging the simple brutality of pain and hunger?

Spivak’s deconstruction, Coetzee’s fiction and Lacanian sublimation all partake of a secular humanist aesthetic able to comprehend and appreciate weakness (a dialogue between the Costello sisters). Such an aesthetic seems to begin by hollowing out colonial and Hellenistic fictions concerning perfectibility (which also underpin contemporary neoliberal agendas) and employing the very desire which seeks to take inauthentic refuge in these images to dismantle them. It may be that desire as a form of fidelity to alterity and weakness persists within even these forms (as it does in the notion of *eros*). Perhaps, then, it is not a “re-arrangement” of desire that is required, at least initially, but a “re-discovery” or a “re-awakening”.



Anteros (popularly misperceived as *Eros*), Alfred Gilbert 1893, Piccadilly Circus, London (wikimedia.org: 2008)

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Eugene de Klerk
Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University
Eugene.deKlerk@nmmu.ac.za