

## J.M. Coetzee's Ambiguous Confessional/Autobiographical Writings: Truth-Telling and Truth-Seeking in *Disgrace*

*Evelyn Prado*

More and more I see the essay on Tolstoy, Rousseau and Dostoevsky emerging as pivotal. [...] What was going on in the essay? In the present retrospect I see in it a submerged dialogue between two persons. One is a person I desired to be and was feeling my way toward. The other is more shadowy: let us call him the person I then was, though he may be the person I still am. The field of their debate is truth in autobiography. [...] In the terms brought into prominence in the essay, the debate is between cynicism and grace. Cynicism: the denial of any ultimate basis for values. Grace: a condition in which the truth can be told clearly, without blindness. (J. M. Coetzee, *Doubling the Point* 392)

In the interview from which the quotation above was extracted, J.M. Coetzee identifies a significant turning point in his literary career, marked by a “pivotal” event: the conception, in 1985, of his essay “Confession and Double Thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoevsky”. In the essay, Coetzee analyzes a number of both fictional and autobiographical writings that seek to tell an *essential* truth about the self: Tolstoy’s *The Kreutzer Sonata*, Rousseau’s *Confessions*, and Dostoevsky’s *Notes from Underground*, *The Idiot*, and *The Possessed*. Interestingly, in the novels written after the publication of “Confession and Double Thoughts”, Coetzee has explored what he referred to in the essay as “a condition in which the truth can be told clearly, without blindness”. With great consistency, he has investigated in those novels the ambiguities of truth-telling and truth-seeking against a confessional, biographical, or autobiographical background. *Age of Iron* (1990) consists of one long fictional letter of confession. In *The Master of Petersburg* (1994), Coetzee weaves the narrative around distorted biographical facts of the historical Dostoevsky’s life. *Boyhood* (1997) is the first of his memoirs, to be followed by *Youth* in 2002. Being autobiographical, they evince an evident resemblance with the confessional mode of writing, despite Coetzee’s choice of third-person present narration. In *Disgrace* (1999), at least

one episode can be directly linked to Coetzee's interest in truth-telling, namely the hearing conducted by a university tribunal against a professor charged of sexual harassment. There is broad consensus among scholars that, in that particular episode, Coetzee has levelled stark criticism against the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa. In *The Lives of Animals* (1999), *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), *Slow Man* (2005), and *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007), Coetzee plays with his own image as a writer who is renowned worldwide by means of the "proxies" Elizabeth Costello and Señor C. Elizabeth Costello makes her first appearance in *The Lives of Animals*. Originally, *The Lives of Animals* comprises the two Tanner Lectures that Coetzee delivered at Princeton University in 1997-98, followed by responses of scholars of different fields. The form in which Coetzee has chosen to deliver the lectures is what distinguishes them: instead of keeping to the traditionally philosophical format of the Tanner Lectures, Coetzee opts for the literary device of creating the character Elizabeth Costello, a distinguished novelist who is invited to deliver two lectures on a topic of her own choice, thus creating a mirror of the situation in which he found himself. The biographical aspect in this context is manifest in the affinities between the novelist Elizabeth Costello and the novelist J. M. Coetzee; in the Tanner Lectures, Costello functions as a "spokesperson" for Coetzee. In the novel *Elizabeth Costello*, Coetzee thickens this association: six of the eight chapters of the novel had been published earlier as essays which Coetzee himself had written. *Slow Man* is the last novel in which Costello makes her appearance, "intruding" upon the story of the protagonist. Her presence brings to the fore questions related to the authorial control over the literary work and to the literary work as an environment by which even the author himself is encompassed. In the context of autobiographical writing, those questions translate into how the writer of an autobiography has privileged access to information and can *construct* himself in the narrative. In *Diary of a Bad Year*, another "proxy" takes the function that was Costello's: C is a South African writer who has won the Nobel Prize and is presently living in Australia. Among his novels is one called *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the same name as of one of Coetzee's most famous novels; also as Coetzee, C has essays on censorship among his critical writings. The biographical details in *Diary of a Bad Year* at the same time coincide with and diverge from Coetzee's own life. Coetzee's most recently published novel, *Summertime* (2009), closes the memoir trilogy begun about ten years earlier.

In this article, I will focus on Coetzee's best-known novel, *Disgrace*. *Disgrace* is the only novel among those I have mentioned which does *not* seem to have the confessional/autobiographical atmosphere hovering over it, apart from the episode which relates to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa. My claim is, however, that *Disgrace* is just as much a product of

Coetzee's interest in "a condition in which the truth can be told clearly, without blindness" (*Doubling the Point* 392), as his memoirs, his confessional novel *Age of Iron*, his Dostoevskyan novel *The Master of Petersburg*, and the novels in which he creates his alternative writer-selves.

*Disgrace* is often taken to have inaugurated the phase in Coetzee's oeuvre in which he pursues ethical questions that include the relations between human beings and animals, a topic further explored in *The Lives of Animals* and *Elizabeth Costello*. *Disgrace* occupies a central position among Coetzee's fictional writings also for being the novel which turned him, known for his aversion to public exposure, into an internationally renowned public figure, under the constant gaze of the media and of literary critics. Not surprisingly, it was in the years following the novel's great repercussion, which culminated in his being awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2003, that Coetzee created the two intriguing alternative writer-selves, Elizabeth Costello and Señor C.

Coetzee's engagement with the ambiguities of truth-telling in autobiographical writing followed the publication of his essay "Confession and Double Thoughts". According to Coetzee, the narratives by Rousseau, Tolstoy and Dostoevsky which he examines in the essay engage with the complications of truth and self-knowledge that "demarcate a mode of autobiographical writing that we can call the *confession*". (252, emphasis in the original) A confession, as Coetzee understands it, is primarily not the narrative of a transgressive act, but an effort to be liberated from the *guilt* of having committed such an act by searching what motivated it in the first place. Coetzee finds the parameters of this mode of confessional self-examination in Augustine's *Confessions*. He identifies a sequence of transgression, confession, penitence, and absolution in Augustine's search for the truth. In Book II of his *Confessions*, Augustine relates a childhood episode in which he and some friends stole pears from a neighbor's garden. They did it not because they were hungry, but for the pleasure and excitement of committing a forbidden act. What troubles Augustine as an adult man, when he tells the story, is the knowledge that what in fact motivated the deed was a desire for shame. Being aware of his desire to experience shame brings Augustine even more shame, and yet feeds and satisfies this same desire; this goes on endlessly, so that he can never reach what lies behind his desire for shame. In Augustine's story, what motivates him to confess is hence not the transgression, that is, not the wish to make known the theft of the pears, but the wish to apprehend something that he still does not know about himself, an *original truth* that lies beyond the reach of his rational self-scrutiny. Augustine's self-examination is obstructed by the very source which gives it birth: his self-consciousness unfolds indefinitely, always finding behind an explanation another one, always deceiving itself, thus not

allowing him to reach the truth that would release him from guilt and grant him forgiveness.

To learn the truth about the self is thus the main point of inquiry for Coetzee as he proceeds to discuss the confessional texts by Rousseau, Tolstoy and Dostoevsky mentioned above. His discussion of the *Confessions* aims at proving that Rousseau's text is in fact open to endless scrutiny, despite the author's assertion of his overriding commitment to complete transparency. With the problem spotted, as it were, in a seminal confessional narrative, one can address Coetzee's argument about Tolstoy's *Sonata*. Here he addresses the question of the author's avowal of the truth articulated in a text. In the specific case of the *Sonata*, Coetzee focuses on Tolstoy's lack of interest in the complications of truth-telling, a lack of interest that is surprising in light of his engagement with the problem in previous texts. Finally, in the Dostoevskyan novels, Coetzee identifies the solution of the confessional problem he has been dealing with, a solution that is both conceptual, in that it undoes the negative endlessness of confessional (self)-examination, and structural, in that Dostoevsky apparently succeeded in representing it also at the narrative level.

The conception of confession which Coetzee borrows from Augustine is premised upon an understanding of the confession as both an epistemological and an ontological search with ethical implications. In that understanding what lies behind an act of transgression is a challenge to reason, confession is an epistemological challenge, and an insurmountable one. However genuine the self's willingness is in the confessional effort, whether the truth will *in fact* be attained cannot be warranted. In that the self seeks to apprehend something *essential* about its own nature, the confession turns also into an enterprise of ontological relevance. Most importantly, perhaps, given the unattainability of the truth, or what one would call an *absolute* truth beyond contestation, by means of self-scrutiny, one can reflect on the validity of truth-seeking not only as an effort towards (self)-knowledge, but also as a form of ethical self-assessment. If the self is truly, genuinely committed to an effort of self-evaluation, does the apparent inevitability of self-deception annul the *search for the truth* as such, or as a form of coming to terms with feelings of shame and guilt? It is perhaps the case that the truth about the self is an epistemologically unconquerable challenge, but can soul-searching be a means of ethical self-assessment, a way to counter "the denial of any ultimate basis for values"?

Coetzee does not position himself *explicitly* in his essay as far as such questions are concerned, but one cannot avoid noticing the dialogue between his arguments in the essay and the "playing with possibilities", as he himself calls it, (*Doubling the Point* 246), in the novels that followed it. In the tight critical argumentation of "Confession and Double Thoughts", Coetzee describes the search for the truth in confession as a cul-de-sac; as a mode of autobiographical

writing, the confession is bound to revolve around its epistemological boundaries. In his novels, however, Coetzee seems to have found a new arena to explore truth-seeking with more freedom. My point of departure in the following discussion of *Disgrace* is that one can argue for the validity of the self's commitment to searching for something that can be called the truth as an ethical action, despite epistemological dead-ends. Truth can be found *in the search itself*; it is an intuition, rather than a phenomenon whose existence can be proved or concretely seen. But before I expand on this, I will turn to Coetzee's essay and explore the arguments I find most relevant in that context.

The central argument of Coetzee's essay, the endless withdrawal of truth, is clearly a deconstructionist one; it problematizes the essential concept of origin and of a transcendental signifier such as God that exists ultimately "above" everything else and from which meaning stems. Besides, in the seemingly eternal deferral of truth there are indubitable echoes of *différance*, which undermines the concept of presence of truth by suggesting that it is always just out of reach. This is a crucial element in Dostoevsky's concept of the unattainability of truth by means of reason, implicit in Coetzee's analysis. If, in a secular confession, the truth does not lie in God, for the obvious reason that divine intervention is excluded in such a context, the concept of truth is attuned to *différance* and its endless deferral of origin and hence of meaning. In the deconstructionist core of Coetzee's analysis, I find two crucial aspects for my discussion of *Disgrace*. The first one refers to *what lies behind* Dostoevsky's confessional quandary, that is, behind the endless consciousness of consciousness. The second aspect regards the *solution* of the quandary, namely the intervention of grace. I believe Coetzee himself answers the first question as to the underlying mechanism that triggers the unfolding of layers of conscience, but he does so indirectly.

According to Coetzee, Dostoevsky undermines the validity of *reason* in the confessional context by claiming that reason only brings about more reason; the subject is trapped by and in his own rational scrutiny. In an interview in *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee reflects about an aspect of autobiographical writing which illuminates the confessional paradox he identifies in Dostoevsky:

Writing, then, involves an interplay between the push into the future that takes you to the blank page in the first place, and a resistance. Part of that resistance is psychic, but part is also an automatism built into language: *the tendency of words to call up other words, to fall into patterns that keep propagating themselves*. Out of that interplay there emerges, if you are lucky, what you recognize or hope to recognize as the true. (18, my emphasis)

The tendency of language to propagate itself, as Coetzee describes it, is a variation of the doubling back of consciousness that he identifies in Dostoevsky. It is a sort of doubling forth of words, for they feed on themselves interminably and, at length, distance themselves more and more from what the self originally wanted to convey. As Malcolm Jones claims in “Dostoevsky and Religion”,<sup>1</sup> “Dostoevsky’s view [is] that human language is incompetent to express the deepest truths”. (171) He alludes to a much cited letter in which Dostoevsky wrote that “a thought spoken is a lie”.<sup>2</sup> In *Dostoevsky and the Dynamics of Religious Experience*, Jones devotes a chapter to further this claim with a detailed analysis of what he calls “the undecidability of Dostoevsky’s text”, characterized by “a slippage between the view that there is a higher truth beyond human knowledge and the contrary view that beyond the infinitely receding layers of knowability there is nothing at all”. (93) This slippage is enacted in “the web of words” that “Dostoevsky uses to trap the reader” and “whose relationship to ‘reality’ always remains ambiguous”. (94) Certainly, it is language that lies behind the infinite unfolding of reason in the Dostoevskyan confession.

The second aspect I wish to address is the intervention of grace as the solution to the linguistic impasse in a confessional context. In the interview preceding “Confession and Double Thoughts”, Coetzee emphasizes the ethical and political weight of Dostoevsky’s religious beliefs and his determination to bring the endless questioning of the self to an end. According to Coetzee, the labyrinth in which reason/language traps the self is no excuse for not accounting for one’s actions and this, as an ethical premise, is a powerful political statement:

The self-interrogation of Montaigne, of Rousseau, of the earlier Tolstoy, carries on by other means a religious tradition of self-examination and confession: soul-searching turned into psychologizing. [...] Against the endlessness of scepticism Dostoevsky poses the closure not of confession but of absolution and therefore of the intervention of grace in the world. In that sense Dostoevsky is not a psychological novelist at all: he is finally not interested in the psyche, which he sees as an arena of game-playing, of the *middle* of the novel. To the extent that I am taken as a political novelist, it may be because I take it as given that people must be treated as fully responsible beings: psychology is no excuse. (*Doubling* 249, emphasis in the original)

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<sup>1</sup> See *The Cambridge Companion to Dostoevskii*.

<sup>2</sup> See Dostoevskij, Fedor Michajlovic, *Complete Letters Vol. 4 1872-1877*, ed. and trans. David A. Lowe (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1991), 305.

More significant, though, is the parallel Coetzee draws between the ethical/political commitment expressed in *his* own writing and Dostoevsky's: "Politics, in its wise stupidity, is at one with religion here: one man, one soul: no half-measures. *What saves me* from a merely stupid stupidity, I would hope, is a measure of *charity, which is, I suppose, the way in which grace allegorizes itself in the world*". (249, my emphasis)

Coetzee's remark on the possibility of an allegorized form of grace in his fiction is an enticing point of reference for an analysis of *Disgrace*, since the title of the novel suggestively alludes to a fall from grace. As I have claimed, truth-telling is recurrent in Coetzee's oeuvre, whether in an explicitly confessional context or in the analogous form of autobiographical writing. In *Disgrace* in particular, I believe Coetzee's concern with the limitations of the confessional form as a means to reach the truth is present first and foremost in specific confessional moments; but together with the impasses of truth-telling, or despite them, a commitment to the *possibility* of truth is likewise a major element of the novel.

Grace, as Coetzee seems to understand it, is also a particularly meaningful concept from an ethical perspective in that it suggests a mode of engagement with otherness (charity) as the solution to an existential paradox the self is confronted with. David Attwell has probably something like that in mind when he interrogates Coetzee, in an interview in *Doubling the Point*, about an apparent Dostoevskyan principle of grace in Coetzee's confessional novel *Age of Iron*. Here he refers to the impression that the protagonist Mrs. Curren, as the novel follows its course and she is close to death, is approaching a final moment of absolution. The question is a problematic one and Coetzee, in a characteristic evasive move, replies that, at the time the interview was carried out, he was still "too near" the writing of the novel; he would be "stepping onto precarious grounds" by attempting to comment on the novel as a whole. "As for grace", he concludes, "no, regrettably no: I am not a Christian, or *not yet*". (*Doubling* 250, my emphasis)

In what follows, I single out three confessional moments in *Disgrace* and discuss how the impossibility of ever ascertaining the truth in a secular confession sheds light upon them. My intention is to examine how Coetzee applies the arguments from the essay to a fictional situation. I take his argument on the goal of confession as the premise for this analysis: the end of confession is not to acknowledge the transgression, but to search for an original truth about the self. In that search, the confessant's wish to tell the truth, his awareness of self-scrutiny or self-deceit, and the role of the confessor

as the one who scrutinizes or sanctions the version of truth produced, all play a fundamental role in the confessional effort.

I would like, however, to begin by considering the effect of third person present narration in that context. Derek Attridge calls attention to this particular type of narration in Coetzee's memoir *Boyhood*, pointing out first that "the use of the third person implicitly dissociates the narrative voice from the narrated consciousness", and, most importantly, that "the present tense denies the text any *retrospection*, any place from which the writer can reflect on and express regret about (or approval of) the acts and attitudes described". (*Ethics of Reading* 143, my emphasis) Coetzee's narrative strategy in *Disgrace*, by being the same he chooses to make use of in his autobiographical novel *Youth*, simultaneously stimulates and rejects an interpretation of the novel as a confessional narrative of sorts, hence suggesting that *there indeed seems to be* a major concern with truth-telling pervading it. This will be explicit in the three confessional episodes I intend to discuss below. It is also interesting to notice how Coetzee's choice of narrative voice in *Disgrace* and in the memoirs seems to reflect his arguments as to the use of language in Rousseau's *Confessions*. In his analysis, Coetzee emphasizes Rousseau's premise of the self's complete transparency to itself over time, a principle that is sustained by the idea of a language whose source is always in the *present*. Such language prevents the self from being at "a reflective distance from [it]self". (*Doubling* 268) Reflective distance is what triggers the unfolding of layers of conscience that undermines any effort to attain the truth in confession. In principle, a language whose source is always here and now, as Coetzee argues in "Confession and Double Thoughts", could manifest *its own truth*. A confession made in the present tense, one could conclude, would *seem* to be exempt from self-deceit.<sup>3</sup>

In the first confessional episode in *Disgrace*, David Lurie has to defend himself before a university tribunal after his student Melanie Isaacs has lodged a complaint for sexual harassment against him. In the actual trial/inquiry, David is expected to confess "to the abuse of a young woman". (53) He is requested to speak "from his heart" and "express contrition". (54) The members of the tribunal, David's "confessors", are the ones who sanction the truth that he is requested to produce, a truth that, in the tribunal's terms, will come forth if David acknowledges his fault "in a *public* manner". (58, my emphasis) This, one must remember, contradicts the most important principle of confession according to Coetzee, "to tell the truth to and for oneself". (*Doubling* 291) And besides, every effort to articulate the truth in confession, if one accepts Coetzee's arguments in his essay, is bound to end in deception.

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<sup>3</sup> In the context of autobiographical writing, one of the various questions that the third person present narration introduces is instead how it endows the narrative with a *fictional* "touch", since it denies the reader the feeling that the story being told by the subject of the narrative is a project of *self*-revaluation.

But David will not even attempt to articulate what is on his heart. He presents himself before the members of the tribunal “in the wrong spirit” (47) and explicitly warns them that he will “make no confession”. (51) David openly discredits the tribunal’s capacity to assess sincere contrition: “You trust yourself to divine that, from the words I use – to divine whether it comes from my heart?” (54) Repentance, for him, inhabits “another universe of discourse”. (58) Upon David’s refusal to produce, out of his own effort, his own words, a kind of truth that is deemed satisfactory, the tribunal offers him the alternative to subscribe to a statement in mitigation. This statement must be issued “in a spirit of repentance” (58) to be accepted by the tribunal. Needless to say, David does not accept their offer. The impasse between the tribunal and David attests to the necessary arbitrariness once some sort of reconciling “truth” must be established to bring confession to an end. Accordingly, to settle the dispute, David accepts the charges against him and pleads guilty, a “secular plea”. (58) The tribunal, however, does not accept his plea, which hence precipitates his dismissal.

The second confession is prompted by Melanie’s father, the religious Mr. Isaacs. Isaacs has previously been described in a slightly humorous tone (37–8) and, in the episode in question, is again depicted with derision. (165) Isaacs’ inappropriateness as a confessor is insinuated in the subtle tone of mockery of these descriptions. David goes to the Isaacs’ first without knowing why: “*God save me*, he thinks – *what am I doing here?*” (164). Besides, he is clearly not in the spirit to deliver a truthful confession of having seduced Melanie; upon meeting Desiree, Melanie’s younger sister, he cannot refrain from imagining himself with the two sisters “in the same bed”, “an experience fit for a king”. (164) Before Isaacs himself, David reaffirms his wish to tell what is on his heart for he has been “at a loose end”. (165) “That much is true, he does want to speak his heart”, the narrator tells us. “The question is, what is on his heart?” (165) David then presents his side of the story in “self-defense”. (166) David’s “impulse” to confess, to probe into his heart ceases here, for one knows that, in framing his story as self-defense, whatever he is about to say is no longer going to be a true confession. Self-defense obviously implies the awareness of being examined; in David’s case, by someone whose credibility as a confessor has already been hinted at as dubious. David begins by telling Isaacs that his affair with Melanie amounted to “a sudden little adventure that men of a certain kind have”. (166) In itself, his way to put it to Isaacs, a man who he imagines is “something in the church, a deacon or a server” (166), might arguably be due not to frankness, but to a desire to scrutinize Isaacs’ reaction to such a provocative statement. David’s scrutiny of Isaacs is in fact evident; he even wonders whether Isaacs has had adventures.

The rest of David's confession is clearly a result of his being "trapped" by "the tendency of words to call up other words, to fall into patterns that keep propagating themselves", as Coetzee put it when he considered autobiographical writing in *Doubling the Point*. (18) Indeed, as David speaks, one notices how Isaacs toys mechanically with a pen in his hands, and how the pen's movement creates an intriguing moment of identification between David's "speaking [of] his heart" and writing: "The pen continues its dance". The pattern of words that call up other words is evident: his passion for Melanie was an attempt at not letting "the fire" within him go out; it was "a flame [...] not hot enough to burn [him] up, but real". When he stops speaking, the echo of the words he has just uttered lingers in his mind: "Burned – burnt – burnt up". Interestingly, as soon as David stops speaking, "the pen [has] stopped moving". (166)

Isaacs presses on, obviously waiting for David to apologize but, seeing he evades it, he invites David to "break bread" (167) with the family, hence setting the third stage for a confession. At the end of the dinner, the moment has come when David "can prevaricate no longer". He feels compelled to confess, but again the words trap him: he has to "hunt" for them and, when they do come out, they do not come out "right":

One word more, then I am finished. It could have turned out differently, I believe, between the two of us, despite our ages. But there was something I failed to supply, something – *he hunts for the word* – lyrical. I lack the lyrical. I manage love too well. Even when I burn I don't sing, if you understand me. For which I am sorry. I am sorry for what I took your daughter through. You have a wonderful family. I apologize for the grief I have caused you and Mrs. Isaacs. I ask for your pardon.

*Wonderful is not right. Better would be exemplary.* (171, my emphasis on *he hunts for the word*)

Once more the doubts of conscience and the elusiveness of language betray David's confession; the apology does come, but how can its sincerity be ascertained in light of his uncertainty as to having used the "best" words? Isaacs takes David's apology as an opportunity to lecture him on learning a lesson, on finding out what he believes God wants from him, "besides being *very sorry*" (172, my emphasis). In the sequence transgression – confession – penitence – absolution that Coetzee identifies in the self's search for the truth (*Doubling* 251), it is evident that Isaacs places David in the "penitence" stage, in repentance, just as the university tribunal did. David does not believe in

repentance as the university tribunal and Isaacs conceive of it; he translates the idea of repentance into “his own terms”: “I am sunk into a state of disgrace from which it will not be easy to lift myself. It is not a punishment I have refused. I do not murmur against it. On the contrary, I am living it out from day to day, trying to accept disgrace as my state of being”. (172)<sup>4</sup>

As in David’s first attempt to confess to Isaacs, the suspiciousness about the truth he utters is evident, first in Isaacs’ outright scrutiny, then in David’s own doubts about his confession. Isaacs repeatedly asks David if he “has any ideas” about “what God wants” from him, if he knows “why” he is there or who he “really” came to speak to, all of which David considers as “tricks”, as a distracting “back-and-forth”. (172–3) What David does next reaffirms the impossibility of confessing verbally to Isaacs or, for that matter, to himself: leaving the dining-room, he goes towards the room where Mrs. Isaacs and Desiree are and, “with careful ceremony, he gets to his knees and touches his forehead to the floor” (173) before them. David’s dramatic gesture illustrates his effort to escape being entrapped by words, as he has been thus far with Isaacs, when trying to confess what he has on his heart. But this attempt is likewise undermined by his immediate self-scrutiny; even before getting back to his feet, he thinks: “Is that enough? Will that do? If not, what more?” (173) And as he meets the eyes of the aptly named Desiree, “again the current leaps, the current of desire”. (173) The questioning of his motives in this passage does not end with his self-doubt, though; back in his hotel room, David receives a phone call from Isaacs in which he asks if David is “hoping for [them] to intervene with the university”. (173)

Following his dismissal from the university after his affair with Melanie is made public, David moves to his daughter Lucy’s smallholding in the Eastern Cape. There they will be the victims of a brutal attack in which Lucy is raped by three men and David is set alight. The utter consternation David experiences after the attack forces him to undergo a traumatic readjustment to life. The first blow to his self-possession is Lucy’s persistent reticence about the gang rape. Indeed, it is Lucy’s refusal to make use of language to portray her personal drama as the victim of rape, in other words, her *silence* about it, that plunges David into the helplessness and despair he feels. Without the intelligible grounds an account of the rape would provide him with, and on which he believes he could relate to Lucy, David fails to understand why she refuses to report the rape to the police, why she did not have her doctor take care of all “eventualities” (105) including an abortion and, chiefly, why she insists on staying on the farm. Fundamentally, what her silence blatantly lays bare to him, but that he, in his consternation, fails to grasp, is the fact that, the rape being a

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<sup>4</sup> I will return to these passages and to David’s use of the “lyrical” further on in my discussion.

“purely private matter” (112) for her, there is absolutely no possibility of relating to her in terms of being a victim of rape. That is what the words of his new friend, Bev Shaw, throw into his face, and what makes him so outraged: “But *you weren't there*, David”. (140, my emphasis) He is outside the framework Lucy's rape constitutes; both are the victims of a brutal attack, but only *she* is the victim of a rape. David, as a matter of fact, has been the perpetrator of one, though he apparently (conveniently?) fails to understand this as well.

Lucy's silence is a reflection of her traumatic experience at the hands of the rapists, an experience that brought her close to death, as she hints at in the following passage:

When it comes to men and sex, David, nothing surprises me anymore. Maybe, for men, hating the woman makes sex more exciting. You are a man, you ought to know. When you have sex with someone strange – when you trap her, hold her down, get her under you, put all your weight on her – isn't it a bit like killing? Pushing the knife in; exiting afterwards, leaving the body behind covered in blood – doesn't it feel like murder, like getting away with murder? (*Disgrace* 158)

It is obvious for the reader that Lucy's words, her allusion to feeling dead in the act, bear a resemblance with the depiction of Melanie's rape by David: “Not rape, not quite that, but undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core. As though she had decided to go slack, die within herself for the duration [...] so that everything done to her might be done, as it were, faraway”. (25) The fact that Lucy addresses David in these terms (“You are a man, you ought to know”) indicates the parallel between the two rapes. In both episodes, desire (regardless of how violent it is) is connected with death.

At this point in the narrative, David is engaged in a close relation with Bev Shaw, who runs the Animal Welfare Clinic where he volunteers. As he gradually gets more involved with the work in the clinic, it seems that an interest in him grows in her, and despite *his* lack of reciprocity, his lack of erotic engagement, they start an affair. This time, however, it is David whom we identify as the one who has escaped desire:

Of their congress he can at least say that he does his duty. Without passion but without distaste either. So that in the end Bev Shaw can feel pleased with herself. All she intended has been accomplished. [...] [H]e has let her do everything she has felt a need to do. (150)

Interestingly, David also associates being the object of desire with death, as intimated in connection with Melanie (who, one remembers, “died within herself for the duration”, 25) and Lucy; he thinks of a line from Virgil, “Sunt lacrimae rerum, et mentem mortalia tangunt” (“Tears in the nature of things, hearts touched by *human transience*”, 162, my emphasis) after one of his encounters with Bev.<sup>5</sup> One would probably be going too far by claiming that the parallel between Melanie’s and Lucy’s rapes and David’s experience of being an object of desire in his relation with Bev represents a reevaluation of his problematic ethical stance towards women. It is true that, on an abstract level, he can apparently “envision” what the other experiences in a sexual relation in which desire is not reciprocal, but his experience of death still seems too feeble, too detached from reality, in comparison to Melanie’s and, above all, Lucy’s. It is undeniable, though, that David is undergoing a change in his relations with women, however unwillingly it might be taking place. In the description of his lovemaking with Bev as “without passion but without distaste either”, one is reminded of Melanie’s “undesired” participation. The following passage adds another element in David’s experience of desire: “Let me not forget this day, he tells himself[.] [...] After the sweet young flesh of Melanie Isaacs, this is what I have come to. This is what I will have to get used to, this and even less than this”. (150) The idea of *punitive retribution* is implicit in the parallel between David and Melanie, and in the bitter (and, again, objectifying) comparison he makes between Melanie’s “sweet young flesh” and Bev’s “sturdy, almost waistless” body, “like a squat little tub”. (149) Seen from that perspective, David’s account of his state of disgrace to Isaacs (that I have discussed previously) gains yet another dimension: “I am sunk into a state of disgrace from which it will not be easy to lift myself. It is not a *punishment* I have refused. I do not murmur against it. On the contrary, I am living it out from day to day, trying to accept disgrace as my state of being”. (172, my emphasis)

The state of disgrace which David refers to as punishment amounts to a purging of sorts, which he describes as a feeling of being *emptied*:

He has a sense that, inside him, a vital organ has been bruised. [...] It may take weeks, it may take months before *he is bled dry, but he is bleeding*. When that is finished, he will be like a fly-casing in a spiderweb, brittle to the touch, lighter than rice-chaff, ready to float away. (107, my emphasis)

It seems evident that there is a relation between David’s experience of desire as something that ultimately brings death and his allusion to being punished. Most

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<sup>5</sup> See K. W. Gransden’s *Virgil: The Aeneid* (West Nyack, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

importantly, one notices a remarkable resemblance between the descriptions of David feeling emptied and *language* itself also being emptied, losing its inner power, its driving force, as it were: David imagines language as being “eaten from the inside as if by termites”, becoming “tired, friable”. (129) A clear indication of how his previous eloquence has become ineffective for him is his failure to communicate with Lucy; he questions her incessantly about the rape even though she refuses to talk. He tries repeatedly to interpret her silence, to translate it by describing her relentless reserve as he describes what is happening to himself: her silence results from a sense of disgrace (109); he believes she did not lay charges against the rapists because she is too ashamed to tell what happened. (110, 115)

Gradually David starts helping Bev Shaw with the work at the Animal Welfare clinic with more regularity. The dogs’ helplessness in the moment they are sacrificed, the crude inevitability of their fate, besides leaving a deeply unsettling imprint on David’s imagination, precipitates in him an unexpected dedication to these animals, on the verge of irrationality. The dogs’ lack of power becomes evident in the following passage:

When people bring a dog in they do not say straight out, ‘I have brought you this dog to kill,’ but that is what is expected: that they will dispose of it, make it disappear, dispatch it to oblivion. What is being asked for is, in fact, *Lösung* (German always to hand with an appropriately blank abstraction): sublimation, as alcohol is sublimated from water, leaving no residue, no aftertaste. (*Disgrace* 142, emphasis in the original)

For David, the animals’ struggle at the moment they are about to be killed amounts in fact to outright murder:

[The dogs] flatten their ears [and] droop their tails, [...] locking their legs, [having] to be pulled or pushed or carried over the threshold. On the table some snap wildly left and right, some whine plaintively; none will look straight at the needle in Bev’s hand. [...]

Worst are those that sniff him and try to lick his hand. He has never liked being licked, and his first impulse is to pull away. Why pretend to be a chum when in fact one is a murderer? (143)

But the death of the dogs is imbued with a transformative power as well. After the dogs are sacrificed, they are put in plastic bags that David, at first, drives to a hospital and leaves to be incinerated the following day. One

morning, he realizes that, since the dogs' corpses had grown stiff over night, the incinerator crew had to beat them with the back of their shovels to break the rigid limbs before incineration. Since that day, David "took over the job himself", but

[w]hy has he taken on this job? To lighten the burden on Bev Shaw? For that it would be enough to drop off the bags at the dump and drive away. For the sake of the dogs? But the dogs are dead; and what do dogs know of honour and dishonour anyway?

*For himself, then. For his idea of the world, a world in which men do not use shovels to beat corpses into a more convenient shape for processing.* (145-6, my emphasis)

An aura of *repentance*, of atonement informs David's exaggerated and fruitless care for the dogs' corpses. Repentance is a crucial notion in David's new idea of the world; his individual and private ethic reflects at this point in the novel an unprecedented concern with the body of the other on his part. He, previously so egotistical a man who would not hesitate to violate a female body, realizes that to violate *any* body, even an *animal* body, is to bring dishonor, *disgrace*, not to the victim but to the perpetrator. David's treatment of the dogs' corpses is endowed with ethical worth because it is an *irrational* act, an act beyond understanding and, above all, beyond self-interest.

This transformation in David's character is above all closely connected to his misconceived idea about what *love* is. His work in the clinic has a decisive bearing on his writing of a chamber opera about Byron and his lover Teresa, a project he had been cherishing long before he left Cape Town to live with Lucy in the Eastern Cape. At first, David takes on the occupation in the clinic as a sort of pastime. As long as he does menial tasks in the clinic, the project does not move; "the first notes remain as elusive as wisps of smoke". (141) But gradually, as he becomes more involved in the task of helping Bev in the killing of the dogs, and also more involved with Bev, the opera starts gaining a more definite shape. David had initially conceived of the opera as a hobby, "just something to dabble at". (214) After the attack, however, he realizes that, conceived as such, "the project has failed to engage the core of him"; there is something in it "that does not come from the heart". (181) He cannot find words for the passionate Teresa he wants to portray, "young, greedy, willful, petulant". (181) Instead, it is a different Teresa that gradually engages his heart and sings his music: a woman in middle age, "a dumpy little widow [...] with a heavy bust, [a] stocky trunk [and] abbreviated legs" (181) living in a small dull provincial town. David's failure in depicting a young and lustful Teresa is

connected with his own loss of desire, which he also associates with death, as I have argued previously. The Teresa he imagines bears a very suggestive resemblance with Bev, as one can infer from the way he describes her. Bev “is a dumpy, bustling little woman” (72); her body is “sturdy, almost waistless, like a squat little tub”. (149) It is this older Teresa that leads him (186) into hearing her, finding words for her. Significantly, as David “opens” himself more and more to Teresa’s voice, the voices of other women, women with whom he has had amorous liaisons, come to him too. Most importantly, he thinks of Melanie, of how *she* too might have suffered at the end of their affair. (191)

In a sudden and soundless eruption, as if he has fallen into a waking dream, a stream of images pours down, images of women he has known on two continents, some from so far away in time that he barely recognizes them. He holds his breath, willing the vision to continue. [...] What has happened to them, all those women, all those lives? ... *Enriched*: that was the word the newspapers picked on to jeer at. A stupid word to let slip, under the circumstances, yet now, at this moment, he would stand by it. By Melanie, by the girl in Touws River; by Rosalind, Bev Shaw, Soraya: by each of them he was enriched. (192, emphasis in the original)

Love, as he had previously experienced with these women, was in fact a manifestation of desire. When he at first gives Teresa the voice of desire, of longing for the immortal love of Byron, the words Byron sings back to her “wavering and disembodied” warn her: “*secca, dry. It has dried up, the source of everything.*” (183, italics in the original) David’s thoughts immediately echo Byron’s words; he thinks of his women lovers:

[C]omplex proteins swirling in the blood, distending the sexual organs, making the palms sweat and the voice thicken as the soul hurls its longing to the skies. That is what Soraya and the others were for: to suck the complex proteins out of his blood like snake-venom, leaving him clear-headed and *dry*. (185, my emphasis)

But Teresa’s lesson to him is that these women had much more to give him than mere sexual relief; they were not emptying him, on the contrary: they truly *enriched* him, as he recognizes.

One recalls, when David apologized to Melanie’s father, how he attributed the bitter end of his relationship with Melanie to his lack of “the lyrical”. (171) The “lyrical”, for someone like David, a man with artistic inclinations and ambitions, with his taste for Romantic poetry, is his (mis)conception of

unselfish love. But he, whom one could describe as egotistical and self-interested, gradually gives himself wholeheartedly to the fruitless task of killing stray dogs in a spirit of compassion, giving the animals in their last moments something that he also describes as *love*. How can David's "elevated" idea of "lyrical" love, of a love which longs to be immortal, which aims at bringing back the dead loved one, be reconciled with his everyday work at the Animal Clinic, in direct contact with the crude reality of dying and the materiality of corpses?

*Disgrace* is a novel about unlearning as a condition for learning, about a movement away from knowledge towards something that could perhaps be called illumination. It is in this context that one sees with more clarity how David's gradual learning to love is connected with the idea of truth or, more specifically, *truth-directedness*, the commitment to the pursuit of truth, as Coetzee argued in his analysis of Tolstoy's *The Kreutzer Sonata* in "Confession and Double Thoughts". For David, understanding what love for the other truly is entails leaving behind the idea that is it something *grand*; he has to let go of a lifelong, intellectualized idea of romantic love as an abstraction, and accept instead that love manifests itself in the concreteness of practical, everyday concern for the other in need, however *little* the gesture is or however minor the consolation it brings. It is according to this realization that he commits himself to putting down a lame dog which is so fond of him. When its time has come, David will

caress him and brush back the fur so that the needle can find the vein, [...] support him in the moment when, bewilderingly, his legs buckle; and then, when the soul is out, fold him up and pack him away in his bag, and the next day wheel the bag into the flames and see that it is burnt, burnt up. He will do all that for him when his time comes. *It will be little enough, less than little: nothing.* (219, 20, my emphasis)

*Repentance* is a word that seems to pervade David's transformation throughout the novel. His disgrace, more than public dishonor, signals a profound ethical crisis in his subjectivity in terms of a thorough reevaluation of what loving the other means. The character one meets at the end of the narrative is not a reformed man, but a man who is apparently truly committed to transforming himself, to reevaluating his previously selfish and objectifying stance towards the other. In this respect, one sees in David's development the "state of truthfulness in the self" that Coetzee referred to in his discussion of Tolstoy's concern with truth. Tolstoy's *Confession*, Coetzee argues, depicts "a crisis (a confrontation with [his own] death) that brings about an illumination in the life

of the central character that makes it absurd for him to continue in a self-deceived mode of existence". (262) Death is a recurrent element in David's story in *Disgrace*; as I have claimed, it figures as a stark image in Lucy's description of her trauma after the rape and in David's active participation in the killing of the dogs at the Animal Clinic. Lucy's reaction after the rape enables David to rethink his own very dubious conduct in the affair with his student Melanie. Gradually, somehow unconsciously, it dawns on him that there is in fact a very thin line between forcing himself upon Melanie's body on the basis of having become "a servant of Eros", as he bookishly defines the act of loving someone, and the brutal rape committed upon his daughter's body. It is around the parallel between both episodes that David's feeling of being punished arises.

Despite this extraordinary transformation, one can certainly not claim that David has become a wholly "better" man; he does not progress from a state of disgrace to one of "grace" in that sense. Again borrowing Coetzee's words about Tolstoy, it is clear that in David's case "there is no simple dualism of false and true selves. Rather, the self is a site where the will goes through its processes in ways only obscurely accessible to introspection" (*Doubling* 261). If one can describe David's transformation in terms of illumination, or *grace*, it is in the sense of unlearning, of leaving behind a selfish and self-deceived conception of what loving someone means in the name of a sincere, *truthful* commitment to learning what loving the other, in reality, is. In Coetzee's *Disgrace*, *grace* amounts to the charity, the *caritas*, of giving love to the one in need in its ultimate moment. As in Dostoevsky, it is "the closing of the chapter" (290) in a tone against skepticism.

I would like to close this discussion by returning to the interplay between Coetzee's arguments in his essay and the "voice" one can hear in his fiction. If one does not allow the fictional to overshadow the autobiographical in Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year*, one finds in the novel a rather explicit acknowledgement of the Russians' influence on Coetzee's writing in terms of their ethical convictions. The writer whose diaries we read in *Diary of a Bad Year*, and who we assume is, at least in the passage in question, *truly*, Coetzee, expresses his profound admiration for both Tolstoy and Dostoevsky for

setting before us with such indisputable certainty the standards toward which any serious novelist must toil, even without the faintest chance of getting there. [...] By their [Tolstoy and Dostoevsky's] example one becomes a better artist; and by better I do not mean more skilful but ethically better. They annihilate one's impurer pretensions; they clear one's eyesight; they fortify one's arm. (227)

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