

Reconsidering the Copula, ‘and’, in ‘Literature *and* Politics’, and Some Thoughts on ‘Progressive Formalism’

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Introduction

During the course of his 1984 Sol Plaatje Memorial Lecture at the then University of Bophuthatswana, entitled ‘Actors and Interpreters: Popular Culture and Progressive Formalism’, the text of which was later published in his collection of essays¹, Njabulo Ndebele (1991:85) made the following observation about his sense of the relation of South African literature to ‘contemporary African culture in South Africa’:

Literature appears *not to have found a place* in the development of contemporary African culture in South Africa. Instead, in groping for this place, literature has located itself in the field of politics. And it has done so without discovering and defining the basis of its integrity as an art form. Its form therefore, has not developed, since to be fictional or poetic was to be political [e.a.].

Ndebele’s observation is not without its basis in similar, though not necessarily the same, criteria for judging literature’s relation to politics or to what is in a general sense ‘outside’ of literature itself, assuming, of course, that by ‘itself’ I mean literature’s difference—its strategic recalcitrance or

¹ *Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Essays on South African Literature and Culture* (1991).

'formalism'. J.M. Coetzee (1988:4), speaking about the novel's relation to history, in 'The Novel Today', makes the following observation:

I reiterate the elementary and rather obvious point I am making: that history is not reality; that history is a kind of discourse; that the novel is a kind of discourse too, but a different kind of discourse; that, inevitably, in our culture, history will, with varying degrees of forcefulness, try to claim primacy, claim to be a master-form of discourse, just as, inevitably, people like myself will defend themselves by saying that history is nothing but a certain kind of story that people agree to tell each other.

In both of the above statements, literature in general and the novel in particular are distinguished from politics and history, respectively, on the grounds that the basis of literature's 'integrity' is its being 'an art form' (Ndebele) and that the novel is 'a different kind of discourse' to the discourse of history (Coetzee). Of course, both statements cannot be presumed to imply that literature is apolitical or that the novel is a-historical; indeed, further reading of Ndebele and Coetzee's commentaries on literature will show that such a presumption is hasty and/ or somewhat opportunistic. Even though in the opening quotation it seems that Ndebele views politics as inhabiting a (non-discursive) 'field' on its own, there is no doubt that when it comes to literature, he insists on careful, rather than apolitical, discriminations; Coetzee, for his part, is quite explicit about the discursive nature of history: 'history is not reality ... history is a kind of discourse [the] authority [of which] lies simply in the consensus it commands'. Part of the impetus for these kinds of statements is that literature (or the novel) has been called upon to further the ends of politics (or history) as handmaiden without its own ends, which it has. However, literature has also suffered from a generally conservative view, often identified with Matthew Arnold, namely that it is either a mark of cultivation or lack thereof. Together, the impetus for Ndebele and Coetzee's statements and the conservative view of literature deny literature its specificity, in the sense in which Theodor Adorno argues that 'if art smashes through the formal contours which demarcate and estrange it from ordinary life [it will] simply succeed in spilling and defusing

its critical contents' (Eagleton 1992:371). Thus, says Coetzee (1992:364) of the South African novelist and the apartheid state:

For the writer the deeper problem is not to allow himself to be impaled on the dilemma proposed by the state, namely, either to ignore its obscenities or else to produce representations of them. The true challenge is: how not to play the game by the rules of the state, how to establish one's own authority, how to imagine torture and death on one's own terms.

But also, post this (apartheid) state:

Revolution will put an end neither to cruelty and suffering, nor perhaps even to torture humanity [as Rosa Burger hopes in Nadine Gordimer's *Burger's Daughter*] will be restored across the face of society, and therefore all human acts, including the flogging of an animal, will be returned to the ambit of moral judgment. In such a society it will once again be *meaningful* for the gaze of the author, the gaze of authority and authoritative judgment, to be turned upon scenes of torture. When the choice is no longer limited to *either* looking on in horrified fascination as the blows fall *or* turning one's eyes away, then the novel can once again take as its province the whole of life, and even the torture chamber can be accorded a place in the design [e.i.o] (Coetzee 1992:368).

Coetzee's 'post-apartheid' novel, *Disgrace* (2000), appears to herald this restoration of humanity, in which 'all human acts, including the flogging of an animal, [are] returned to the ambit of moral (and/or ethical) judgment'. Prior to *Disgrace*, Coetzee indeed appears steadfastly to refuse in his fiction to be 'impaled on the dilemma proposed by the state, namely to ignore its obscenities or else to produce representations of them'; or, as he remarks about Sipho Sepamla's description of the torture of Bongzi, in Sepamla's novel, *A Ride on the Whirlwind*, to 'succumb to erotic fascination' or to making 'his torturers both all too satanic ... and all too easily human' (Coetzee 1992:365). Rather, since *Dusklands*, Coetzee's fiction has addressed itself to cultivating a different language that would rival the

language of conquest—the language of Jacobus Coetzee—and its multiple implications. Needless to say, how Coetzee has gone about cultivating this language is what has been the source of serious debate, both within and outside the academy. Recently, *Disgrace* came under scrutiny of the most sustained kind for a single novel in South Africa in a long time. Some of the views on *Disgrace* have reminded us that the views about literature that Ndebele and Coetzee hold, different in certain important respects as they indeed are, are not always immune to the very problems that they identify; put differently, these views on *Disgrace* have shown that it is one thing to ‘defend’ literature against the authority of political and/ or historical determinism but, quite another to ‘defend’ it against the consequences of its own authority. Thus, for instance, asks Louise Bethlehem (2002:20) of the third person narrative voice in Coetzee’s *Disgrace*:

To whom does this language belong? The declarative form of the sentence: ‘A ready learner, compliant, pliant’, effects a kind of grammatical refusal to betray the person who speaks it: there is no parenthetical or explanatory ‘thinks Lurie’, for example, to resolve the matter for us. The sentiment expressed is suspended, in a form of free indirect speech ... and remains a declaration strung out between the experiencing or focalizing consciousness, Lurie’s, and that of the narrator anterior to him, possessed of all the traditional narrative authority of the third person.

Or, earlier, Michael Vaughan (1990:189), of Ndebele’s *Fools and Other Stories*:

There is an implicit agenda for the intellectual in these stories. This is the agenda of leadership. The destiny of the intellectual as Ndebele imagines it, is to provide an intellectual guidance and leadership for the wider, largely non-intellectual society of the township.

About the stories’ composition:

Ndebele seems to me to be a skilful composer of stories in a *Western, realist tradition* of fiction-writing. I cannot see any

significant element in the composition of the stories that is extraneous to this tradition; only the subject matter is distinctively South African. Characteristic of this Western, realist tradition is its close-up focus on the inner life of the protagonist, a focus which provides the narrative with a significant principle of organization (Vaughan 1990:191).

Further, particularly on the part of materialist critique, there is concern that some of the objections to *Real politik* (Ndebele) and/or the determinations of culture/literature in/by history (Coetzee), may unduly hand over too important considerations—not outside the province of literature—to formalism and/or to the 'negative knowledge of reality' (Eagleton 1992:369) of the Frankfurt school kind. Indeed, much of what has been the ground of contention *vis-à-vis* the fiction of Coetzee is what Benita Parry (1998:163) has argued are the 'apparent referents of Coetzee's fictions [which] have encouraged their literal interpretation as protests against colonial conquest, political torture, and social exploitation' against both his fiction's refusal explicitly to acknowledge this dimension and the apparent mysticism of some of his readers. Furthermore, according to Parry, textualist/ culturalist critique sits ill with the work of (sometimes the same textualist/ culturalist) 'critics [who] have argued that by subverting colonialism's oppressive discourses, his (Coetzee's) work performs "a *politics* of writing"' [e.a.] (Parry 1998:164).

The Ideology of Aesthetics/ the Aesthetics of Ideology

It is not this essay's brief to offer a re-appraisal of Coetzee's *oeuvre*, nor that of Ndebele. Suffice to say that, perhaps more than any other South African writer, Coetzee's writing has continued to throw into sharp relief the affiliations of critique of South African writing, and of the critics, arguably (though at times misleadingly) on either side of the politics/poetics divide (see Njabulo Ndebele 1989:23-35; see also Kelwyn Sole 1997:116-151). What I do want to ponder, however, is the essay that Coetzee first published in the *New York Times Book Review* in 1986, 'Into the Dark Chamber: The Writer and the South African State', parts of which I quoted above². In

² Later published in David Atwell's *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews* (1992).

particular, I want to bring the second quotation to bear on *Disgrace*, via a re-appraisal of the first. The first quotation sets a specific, if tricky, agenda for the writer in a politically repressive state, and the second ponders, from the point of view of the lives of animals, the future of a certain kind of humanism in South African writing post apartheid. What this means, then, is that my essay will rejoin the discussion of literature and politics from the point of view of the copula, 'and', which conjoins the two thoroughly complex terms, the meaning of each of which is still very much in serious dispute. Indeed, rather than conjoin these terms in a peaceful and unilateral manner, 'and' is the arena of great critical activity.

'Into The Dark Chamber: The Writer and the South African State' deals, primarily, with the nature of power and authority, rolled into one of their most spectacular manifestations in the prison torture chamber. However, this is the kind of spectacle to which only the torturer and the tortured are privy: 'the torture room thus becomes like the bedchamber of the pornographer's fantasy ... insulated from moral and physical restraint ...' (Coetzee 1992:363) yet, precisely because of this, the site of extreme fascination for the novelist. Citing John T. Irwin, Coetzee (1992:363) elaborates on this last point:

It is precisely because [he] stands outside the dark door, wanting to enter the dark room but unable to, that he *is* a novelist, that he must imagine what takes place beyond the door. Indeed, it is just that tension toward the dark room that he cannot enter that makes that room the source of all his imaginings—the womb of art.

Thus, 'the novelist is a person who, camped before a closed door, facing an insufferable ban, creates, in place of the scene he is forbidden to see, a representation of that scene, and a story of the actors in it and how they come to be there' (Coetzee 1992:364). It would seem that, in *Disgrace*, David Lurie, in part, finds himself in such a situation, during and after the rape of his daughter, Lucy; during the rape, he is locked inside the toilet whilst his daughter's rapists take turns on her and, after the rape, his daughter tells him to stick to the story of his experience and leave her to tell hers. The basis of the terms of David Lurie's ban, as Lucy frames it, is that:

'This has nothing to do with you, David. You want to know why I

have not laid a particular charge with the police. I will tell you, as long as you agree not to raise the subject again. The reason is that, as far as I am concerned, what happened to me is a purely private matter. In another time, in another place it might be held to be a public matter. But in this place, at this time, it is not. It is my business, mine alone'.

'This place being what?'

'This place being South Africa' (Coetzee 1992:112).

When David Lurie surmises that, by her saying 'In another time, in another place it might be a public matter', she means that her not reporting the rape serves to 'expiate the crimes of the past by suffering in the present', Lucy replies: 'No. You keep misreading me. Guilt and salvation are abstractions. I don't act in terms of abstractions. Until you make an effort to see that, I can't help you' (Coetzee 1992:112). In short, she puts him in his place, that is, even further outside the scene by rejecting his interpretation. But what does she mean, if it is not what Lurie thinks she means? Let me return to Coetzee's comment on the broad implications of Rosa Burger's reaction on witnessing the merciless flogging of a donkey by 'the man in a drunken fury' as she drives around, 'half lost', on the outskirts of the townships of Johannesburg:

Forever and ever, in Rosa's memory, the blows will rain down and the beast shudder in pain. The spectacle comes from the inner reaches of Dante's hell, beyond the scope of morality. For morality is human, whereas the two figures locked to the cart belong to a damned, dehumanized world. They put Rosa Burger in her place: they define her as within the sphere of humanity. What she flees from, in fleeing South Africa, is the negative illumination they bring: that there exists another world parallel to hers, no further away than a half hour's drive, a world of blind force and mute suffering, debased, beneath good and evil (Coetzee 1992:367).

Needless to say, Lucy will not flee the country, as her father implores her to. Instead, she will seek protection under her former farm hand, but lately co-owner, Petrus's 'wing', as one of his wives.

Even though the township does not feature in *Disgrace*, I nonetheless want to note its problematic construction in 'Into The Dark Chamber' as 'a world of blind force and mute suffering, debased, beneath good and evil', and of blackness as altogether embroiled in this, a view which seals the township, and blackness, inside the single issue of apartheid, protest style. It is to the theoretical basis of the proposition of the first quotation that I now want to turn, and the implications thereof for the South African writer both then and now. What does it mean to 'establish one's own authority ... to imagine torture and death on one's own terms', when, in fact, the instruments of torture and death reside in the state? How, indeed, does the writer avoid being impaled on the dilemma proposed by the state, when, in fact, as Coetzee himself observes, it is precisely because he 'stands outside the dark door, wanting to enter the dark room but unable to, that he is a novelist'? I have considered, in this connection, one instance of what it could mean to refuse the torturer the last word, by allegorising Lucy's exchange with her father after the rape.

Related to the essay's examination of the nature of power and authority, 'Into The Dark Chamber' speaks of the implications, for the writer, of the status quo, in all its manifestations; it speaks of the endless potential of the status quo to ensnare writing, to compel it to reproduce its images and to re-circulate them at the very moment that writing thinks it is undoing them. In South Africa, apartheid sought to create laws for every aspect of life, thus setting the agenda for assent and/or dissent. Coetzee's fiction has resolutely inhabited a parallel position to the status quo, often, because of its distance from it, appearing irrelevant to it, but very much the dark side of its enlightenment. *Disgrace* is probably the only novel in Coetzee's *oeuvre* that appears to coincide with anything that can be called realism. In other words, in *Disgrace*, Coetzee appears to have finally left the physical and epistemological frontier. Yet the novel's closeness to the current issues is also its distance, precisely because, whereas it appears to have left the physical frontier—or, at least, forced it into dialogue with modernity/the 'new' South Africa—it is still very much on the epistemological frontier. Despite its generally misleading tabloid straightforwardness or realism that makes up its frame—the novel is framed between potentially sensational and generalisable stories, namely the discovery of David Lurie's 'inappropriate' sexual conduct with his student,

Melanie Isaacs, and his daughter Lucy's rape in her Eastern Cape house by two black men—the significant thrust of *Disgrace* is *not* to be found inside this frame. Readers get the first indication of this when Lurie refuses to appear before his university's disciplinary committee, accepts guilt and turns down the committee's offer to negotiate his rehabilitation on condition that he shows contrition and/or accepts its interpretation of his guilt and appropriate justice. The second indication, to which I have already alluded, is Lucy's refusal to accept the terms of David Lurie's interpretation (or appropriation) of her experience and his idea of appropriate justice.

However, let me consider at length and more broadly the theoretical basis and justification of Coetzee's fictional agenda, which 'Into The Dark Chamber' proposes when it says,

For the writer the deeper problem is not to allow himself to be impaled on the dilemma proposed by the state, namely, either to ignore its obscenities or else to produce representations of them.

I also want to consider some of the objections that have been raised in this connection, in particular by those who have felt that this position is at best indecisive and untenable—or turns critical paralysis into a virtue—and, at worst, advocates an 'aristocracy of art'. Put differently, I want to consider the objections of those for whom the copula, 'and', in 'politics and literature' marks the place of literature's transcendence of its own agenda as a kind of intervention and coincides with a cause. The basis of the theoretical proposition of 'Into The Dark Chamber' is, as I have put it above, the awareness of the endless potential of the status quo to ensnare writing, to compel it to reproduce its images and to re-circulate them at the very moment that writing thinks it is undoing them. However, it is absolutely crucial to proceed from making fine distinctions between the idea of literature that 'Into the Dark Chamber' implicates and that which is generally identified with the *avant garde*. Let me, thus, (1) revisit one of the veins in which the discussion of the politics-poetics dyad has been postulated and, then, (2) propose that Coetzee's postulation of this dyad is, for lack of a better description, a kind of double gesture. Rather than make a choice between the literary-cultural and the political, Coetzee ponders both from the point of view of what I have termed the copula, 'and', which forces them to

confront each other's presumptions. I shall, then, (3) consider *Disgrace* as an elaboration of Coetzee's double gesture.

The ground of contest that I am trying to reconstruct in the first connection above is, as I understand it, the nature of the relationship between literature (and culture) and politics. Its impetus can be seen to be the progressive/unidirectional break-up into specialised enclaves of the 'three great areas of historical life—knowledge, politics, desire—each becom[ing] ... autonomous, sealed off into its own space'. Or, the 'cultural system detach[ing] itself from the economic and the political systems, and thus [coming] to figure as an end in itself' (Eagleton 1990:366f). In the introduction of his review of some of the moments 'post' the organicism of the discourse on literature and culture in South Africa, Kelwyn Sole (1997:117) makes the following point:

When local 'colonial discourse'/'post-colonial' applications first surfaced, they seemed to herald a breath of fresh air: promising new ways in which to examine and theorise literary and cultural studies in this country. In terms of scholarship, they appeared to open up untouched areas of enquiry.

However, Sole (1997:119) continues:

there are increasing signs that the theories/descriptions of 'post-coloniality' are becoming a new academic orthodoxy of their own. It is noticeable that the sense of 'newness' it both helped form and responded to often demonstrates a superficial understanding at best of what the local versions (in literary criticism) of the 'master narratives' it has sought to supplant were.

Terry Eagleton (1992:373) considers postmodernism in the same light, but adds that this state of affairs is inevitable (though no less problematic than Sole, rightly in my view, considers it to be):

Much postmodernist culture is both radical and conservative, iconoclastic and incorporated, in the same breath. This is so because of a contradiction between the economic and the cultural forms of

late capitalist society, or, more simply between capitalist economy and bourgeois culture.

Needless to say, it is the same contradiction that Sole highlights. Organicism, for a long time the dominant literary-cultural framework in South Africa, came under renewed, if at the time unexpected, critical pressure with the publication of Albie Sachs' African National Congress (ANC) in-house discussion paper on culture, entitled 'Preparing ourselves for freedom'. Its influence—it was published with responses in *Spring Is Rebellious* (1990)—says, Njabulo Ndebele in a follow-up publication, *Exchanges* (1991), was not so much that it had said what it said but, rather, that it came from a position of political influence. Nevertheless, what Sachs' paper heralded was the subtle split between the militant United Democratic Front (UDF) and the exiled ANC leadership that was preparing to return to the country and to start negotiations with the National Party (NP) for the transfer of power to the former. However, contrary to what some have argued, it was not to something of a 'post' organicism—a post-apartheid cultural eclecticism of sorts—that Sachs' paper turned to, but, rather, to an organicism of another kind: African nationalism. The accord with his own work that Ndebele remarked about Sachs' paper, in *Exchanges*, adds another dimension to the kind of formalism that Ndebele—and I would say Sachs—identifies with his work, even if, unlike Ndebele, Sachs' intervention does not declare—nor identify with—any specific academic literary credentials. What underscores the formalism that Ndebele advocates, Tony Morphet observes in his review of *Rediscovery of the Ordinary*³, is the same African nationalism that underscores Sachs' pseudo-playful proposition that the militant UDF slogan, 'culture is a weapon of struggle', be 'banned for at least five years' and be replaced by an affirmative/positive/progressive culture. If Ndebele's formalism appears radical, in the sense in which it offers itself up as a corrective to a protest tradition impoverished by the dependence of black writers on liberal humanism, it is radical insofar as it simply swells the ranks of the otherwise narrow urbanicity of the protest literature collective, by substituting it with the 'ordinary'.

What seems to me to be at stake in the formalisms that have been

³ In *Theoria* 80, October 1992.

canvassed by Sachs, Ndebele and, in the seventies and eighties, Ezekiel Mphahlele and Lewis Nkosi, amongst others, is their grounding variously in 'ourselves', 'our', 'the ordinary', 'race', 'Africanity', or 'people', without these collectives themselves being understood as mediated in form. To this extent—and here Coetzee appears particularly pertinent—there is no engagement with humanism—call it a new African/black humanism—as another straight-jacket. In many ways, *Disgrace* places this question on the agenda of its narrative. However, it would be folly to presuppose that the alternative to humanism, whether of the liberal kind or of the localised—some would say, Africanised—kinds that have been canvassed (ubuntu, ujaama, etc.) is post-humanism. In this connection, *Disgrace* proposes not a post-humanism, in which the lives of animals—dogs, sheep, geese—take centre stage because humanity has proved to be tainted, but, rather, seeks to keep humanism honest, or, to extend the metaphor of the straight-jacket, to make us wear our humanism loosely. It is my view, then, that *Disgrace* inhabits the location between literature and politics, which in the title of this essay I have called 'and'. It is from this position that *Disgrace* becomes particularly tricky.

Let me consider some of the crucial points in the last connection above, proceeding from the concern that Louise Bethlehem raises pertaining to the narrative voice that is 'possessed of all the traditional narrative authority of the third person'. One of the consequences of this narrative stance, argues Bethlehem, is that it asserts the compliancy and pliancy of 'Soraya' without the ironic awareness of the import of its authority. Here Bethlehem works from the presupposition that this narrative stance—which, at one point in her essay, she argues reaches 'heightened mimeticism'—works directly on 'Soraya' as a woman in a novel that does not reflect on its obsession with 'fathers', and, thus, asserts its masculinity without irony. But Soraya, as the same narrator informs, is 'a popular *nom de commerce*' (Bethlehem 2002:8); indeed, after the first 'Soraya' exits the narrative, another 'Soraya' takes her place. Perhaps the problem is that it is Bethlehem's essay that proceeds from mimeticism. 'Soraya' is a 'function' (Bethlehem 2002:2) of the escort agency and not the *woman* who is traded by that name, who leaves the narrative unknown and, indeed, who shuts the door to that possibility by disclaiming 'Soraya' and Lurie: "I don't know who you are", she says. "You are harassing me in my own house. I demand

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you will never phone me here again, never” (Coetzee 2002:9f). Likewise, Melanie does not become ‘Meláni: the dark one’ of Lurie’s fantasy; she will not ‘shift [with] the accent’ if Lurie thinks ‘Melani—melody: a meretricious rhyme [is] Not a good name for her’ (Coetzee 2002:18). Petrus will not be a character in Lurie’s detective plot:

‘Do you know, Petrus’, he says, ‘I find it hard to believe the men who came here were strangers. I find it hard to believe they arrived out of nowhere, and did what they did, and disappeared afterwards like ghosts. And I find it hard to believe that the reason they picked on us was simply that we were the first white folk they met that day. What do you think? Am I wrong?’

Petrus smokes a pipe, an old-fashioned pipe with a hooked stem and a little silver cap over the bowl. Now he straightens up, takes the pipe from the pocket of his overalls, opens the cap, tamps down the tobacco in the bowl, sucks at the pipe unlit. He stares reflectively over the dam wall, over the hills, over open country. His expression is perfectly tranquil (Coetzee 2002:118f).

Petrus ignores some of his comments, ‘chooses not to take [Lurie’s rhetorical question] as a question’ that he ought to answer and, worse, offers a rude reminder that it is no longer ‘the old days [when] one could have had it out with Petrus. In the old days one could have had it out to the extent of losing one’s temper and sending him packing and hiring someone in his place’ (Coetzee 2002:116). I have already referred to Lucy’s refusal to have her experience appropriated for ends that will not raise the issue of rape as the faultline in a country where the generalities of political transformations have not addressed themselves to the vulnerability of the human subject—politics without grace and felt contact. Lucy, thus, rejects the political narrative that her father offers her, also because the men who raped her ‘do rape’, and Lurie ‘ought to know’:

When it comes to men and sex, David, nothing surprises me any more 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? (Coetzee 2002:158)

This, for Lucy, is the bottom line and Lurie 'ought to know'. Melanie may not be 'someone strange' in the sense of Lucy's rapists but, Lurie's attention is 'Strange love!' (Coetzee 2002:25) nonetheless. Lurie may not quite rape her but, sex with him is 'undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core. As though she had decided to go slack, die within herself for the duration, like a rabbit when the jaws of the fox close on its neck' (Coetzee 2002:25). If, as Lurie wants Lucy to believe, there is any racial or political score that is settled by her rapists, it is, as Lucy puts it, an abstraction; it is, as it were, a distortion/mystification of rape.

But, as a narrative stance, Lurie is another place of provocation in the novel—as it were, another 'and'—a place from which *Disgrace* tests certain presumptions. Among other faultlines, his scandal and departure from the university opens up the possibility of reconsidering social theory and literature's place in it. Lurie's appearance before a committee which will hear the cases that Melanie and the chair of his department, Elaine Winter, have brought against him is chaired by Religious Studies professor, Manas Mathabane. The discourse of the committee, or, rather, its basis, is summarised in the statement that Mathabane reads to him as the committee's final offer to 'save you from yourself':

I acknowledge without reservation serious abuses of the human rights of the complainant, as well as abuse of the authority delegated to me by the University. I sincerely apologize to both parties and accept whatever appropriate penalty may be imposed (Coetzee 2002:57).

Mathabane tells Lurie that if he accepts the statement in the 'spirit of repentance', it 'will have the status of a plea in mitigation' (Coetzee 2002:58). Lurie turns it down on the basis that they

went through the repentance business yesterday. I told you what I thought. I won't do it. I appeared before an officially constituted

tribunal, before a branch of the law. Before that secular tribunal I pleaded guilty, a secular plea. That plea should suffice. Repentance is neither here nor there. Repentance belongs to another world, to another universe of discourse (Coetzee 2002:58).

Needless to say, it is this other 'universe of discourse' that the committee had rejected earlier, when Lurie had said about his sexual conduct that 'I was not myself. I was no longer a fifty-year-old divorcé at a loose end. I became a servant of Eros' (Coetzee 2002:52). Indeed, one of the committee members, the woman from the business school, ignores the Eros part and, instead, asks: "“You were not the same as what?”" (Coetzee 2002:52). I shall not go into the details of the significance of Eros in the spirit Mathabane claims for the discourse that he offers Lurie. It should suffice to say that Lurie has a point in saying that the spirit in which he is expected to accept the draft plea sits ill with the committee's secular ends and is, as such, offered in bad faith, which is to say in contradiction of his earlier attempt at stating his case.

However, not to go into the details of the significance of Eros in the above connection, does not mean that the tension which thus arises must be overlooked. Indeed, the tension between social discourse—the new language of human rights and representativity, the religious discourse of confession and repentance and the legal discourse which must enforce it by extracting admission of guilt—and literature—even if he admits to 'not being a poet', (Coetzee 2002:52) it is poetry that Lurie thinks would speak his case more efficaciously—is unmistakable in *Disgrace*. One of the consequences of this tension is that, after Lurie quits his job, his preoccupation with the Byron opera that he has been putting off begins to intensify. Another, which has been the subject of quite a few research articles, is the issue of ethics which begins to preoccupy the novel and which has retrospective and prospective consequences for (1) a reconsideration of the Melanie debacle and Darwin and (2) for the reconsideration of literature in a 'secular age', respectively. It is significant to consider the novel's place in and outside Lurie's preoccupation with writing an opera on Byron's romantic exploits and the Darwinian universe which it revisits (and the discussion of which, as I intimated earlier by quoting from 'Into The Dark Chamber', the novel enjoins us not to postpone anymore). In this connection, I want to consider

two essays in particular, Colleen M. Sheils' 'Opera, Byron, and a South African Psyche in J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*' and Carrol Clarkson's "'Done because we are too menny": Ethics and Identity in J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*', both of which appeared in *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa*, 15, 1&2 2003 respectively. In her essay, Sheils argues that Lurie's 'attempts to compose an opera on Lord Byron and Teresa Guiccioli' can be read from the perspective of Jacqueline Rose's work on 'the link between fantasy and political identity'. From this perspective, the role of Lurie's opera is to communicate 'reflections on identity, exile, and political meaning within the mind of a newly disenfranchised member of South Africa's nation' (Sheils 2003:38). Clarkson's view is that, with *Disgrace*, 'Coetzee extends ethical questions raised in Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*—questions which have to do with the subject's relatedness to other sentient beings within the context of a natural world indifferent to the individual's plight or to contingent ethico-cultural values' (Clarkson 2003:77).

From the summaries of the two essays, one can draw two pointers in the present essay's relation: Sheils' essay views Lurie's Byron opera as the mark of his 'alienation' or 'exile' from the present, which is to say post-apartheid, body politic, and Clarkson, on the issue of Lurie's and the novel's immersion in the ethical question, argues that 'As much as he comes to recognise their ephemerality and contingency, Lurie upholds Western values: the fact that his ethical paradigm is supervenient upon a cultural and historical moment does not in itself necessitate the view that his paradigm is without worth' (Sheils 2003:77). However, it is when the two essays are juxtaposed that some interesting issues arise. Whereas for Sheils there is no worth either in Lurie's preoccupation with Byron or in his involvement with dying dogs—indeed, for Sheils these simply intensify Lurie's alienation from the 'new national identity of a new South Africa' (Sheils 2003:49) that she never quite explains, let alone engages—for Clarkson, there is worth in both, albeit ambivalent. For Sheils, 'the question is what happens in the psyche of those (like Lurie) who gained from and endorsed the apartheid State, those who never shared in the desire for the unconscious nation of democracy' (Sheils 2003:39). Sheils (2003:39) continues, in this vein, to ask:

what about those who saw their historical desires actualized in the

apartheid regime? And what happens when this fantasy (because apartheid too was once fantasy, later actualized, albeit unethical and inhumane) is crushed by the triumph of the stronger desire, the other unconscious fantasy, of the people? In the aftermath of apartheid, will the consciously racist nation simply shift to exist in the unconscious, on the level of fantasy and nostalgia, for those who do not desire to embrace the new nation? Or will the former supporters of apartheid find themselves in need of a psychic purging, to cleanse the unconscious feelings of guilt?

For Clarkson (2003:85):

It is precisely the contingency of his cultural values that Lurie has to confront—and question. At the outset of the novel he is presented as a veritable repository of European Romanticism. He teaches Romantic poetry at the Cape Technical University; he interprets his relationship with Soraya as a Baudelairian experience of '*luxure et volupté*' (Coetzee 1999a:1) and he is composing an opera, *Byron in Italy*. But what is the place of his Western Aestheticism in the isolated region of the Eastern Cape? With self-directed irony, locked in the lavatory while his daughter is being gang-raped, Lurie reflects [speaking languages that] 'will not save him here in darkest Africa' Nevertheless, Lurie's recognition of the contingency and ephemerality of his values—the fact that his ethical paradigm is supervenient upon a cultural and historical moment—does not in itself necessitate the view that this paradigm is without worth, or that it should be relinquished. On the contrary, the realisation that one's cultural values are under threat calls one to justify and defend them, precisely *because* they are relative.

She concludes in this vein:

In his last visit to Lucy, Lurie contemplates his future role as grandparent. He acknowledges that he is inescapably part of a transtemporal 'line of existences', irrespective of his cultural engagements. It is a line in which his share, his gift, will become

gradually less and less 'till it may as well be forgotten' (Clarkson 2003:217).

Sheils' reading of Lurie, I would like to think, is too one-dimensional—too superficial even—and without nuance. She sets up a weak paradigm: because Lurie is one of those 'who gained from and endorsed the apartheid state, those who never shared in the desire for the unconscious nation of democracy', he can never be read any other way but as an incorrigible product of the past who would not respond to the 'national identity of a new South Africa [which] calls out to [him]'. At best, 'His answer ... is too indistinct'. Clarkson's reading, by contrast, acknowledges that whereas Lurie's cultural values are at the 'outset of the novel ... presented as a veritable repository of European Romanticism', his 'recognition of the contingency and ephemerality of his values—the fact that his ethical paradigm is supervenient upon a cultural and historical moment—does not in itself necessitate the view that this paradigm is without worth, or that it should be relinquished'. To use Coetzee's words, Sheils makes Lurie 'all too satanic' and her premise is tied too uncritically to the liberal discourse of guilt and penance, which the novel considers inadequate. One waits in vain to find out what 'the stronger desire, the other unconscious fantasy, of the people' means in the broad scheme of the novel, besides that it is 'stronger'.

Conclusion

What I have tried to elaborate in this essay is the continued relevance of Coetzee's 'Into The Dark Chamber: The Writer and the South African State'. Coetzee's essay, at bottom, identifies with the threshold on which literature must stand the better to gesture both towards itself and towards that which may be considered extrinsic to it, but which is its *raison d'être*. This threshold is the copula, 'and'.

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