

To criticise the critic: *Disgrace*

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Review Article

Disgrace

by J.M. Coetzee,

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Sometimes a critic may choose an author to criticise, a role to assume, as far as possible the antithesis to himself, a personality which has actualised all that has been suppressed in himself; we can sometimes arrive at a very satisfactory intimacy with our anti-masks (Eliot 1933:112).

I propose to approach *Disgrace* through discussion of the type of investment made in Coetzee by literary critics committed to shoring up his canonical status. Approaching this topic through a consideration of Eliot's views on the relation between criticism, literature and politics has the advantage of clarifying some of the general issues at stake in judging literature. Coetzee's reading of Eliot foregrounds the limitations of one lingering form of traditional literary criticism. I argue that *Disgrace* presents a serious challenge to the current installation of the Coetzee critical medium.

I

In the essay 'To Criticize the Critic', casting a judicious eye over his literary criticism of the last forty-odd years, T.S. Eliot declares that the question of the use, or uses, of literary criticism is a question worth asking, even if we find no answer satisfactory. Echoing Arnold's (1864:12) vision of criticism 'creating a current of

true and fresh ideas', Eliot hopes to draw some plausible generalisations of wider validity, and—what is still more worth while—stimulate other minds to do so. In this sense criticism is self-criticism, as when he concedes 'the dogmatism of youth' and the partisanship of the early essays; 'I was implicitly defending the sort of poetry that I and my friends wrote', and 'I was in reaction, not only against Georgian poetry, but against Georgian criticism' (Eliot:1961:16). The emphasis on 'tradition'—and the coining of such portmanteau phrases as 'dissociation of sensibility'—came about 'as a result of my reaction' (19), 'from my feeling of kinship with one poet or with one kind of poetry rather than another' (20); as a bridge over more immediate predecessors to the writers of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Still,

There are errors of judgement, and, what I regret more, there are errors of tone: the occasional note of arrogance, of vehemence, of cocksureness or rudeness, the braggadocio of the mild-mannered man safely entrenched behind his typewriter (Eliot 1961:14).

If, in discussing the subject of literary criticism, 'we cannot escape personal bias' it is also opportune to bear in mind that there are other standards besides that of literary merit; 'it is impossible to fence off *literary* criticism from criticism on other grounds, and that moral, religious and social judgements cannot be wholly excluded' (25). In other words, literary criticism cannot in all sincerity pretend to be disinterested in the Arnoldian sense¹. The 'Critic with Gusto', according to Eliot (1961:12), is not called to the seat of judgement but is rather the advocate of the author whose work she expounds². While this object of endeavour may be a

¹ 'And how is it to be disinterested? By keeping aloof from practice; by resolutely following the law of its own nature, which is to be a free play of the mind on all subjects which it touches; by steadily refusing to lend itself to any of those ulterior, political, practical considerations about ideas, which plenty of people will be sure to attach to them ...' (Arnold 1864:12). *The Sacred Wood* adjudges that, in practice, Arnold, in his destruction, 'went for game outside of the literary preserve altogether, much of it political game untouched and inviolable by ideas' (Eliot 1920:xiii).

² This partisan sleight of hand, however, is part of the life-blood of the critical game, with its own rules and limits which are there, in a certain way, to be transgressed: 'Every writer is accustomed to seeing his words quoted out of context, in such a way as to put an unintended construction upon them, by not over-scrupulous controversialists' (Eliot 1961:14). Rather this, as Eliot says, than the claustrophobic atrophy of criticism in the labour of obnubilation.

marginalised author it can also be an established, canonical author thought to be in need of defending; in which case *Gusto* can be combined with the defensiveness of the 'Critic as Moraliser' (Leavis being the model of the type). While it may aspire to transcend factionalism and avoid the erection of personal preference into the edicts of judgement, criticism, simply put, involves taking a position on issues of the day; a position that, since inconsistency does not mean incoherence, can be modified. Both writer and reader share, up to a point, a horizon of interpretation, and communication may well take place, but will explain nothing.

Now it might seem strange to begin a consideration of Coetzee with a disquisition on Eliot, and it may appear that most of what I have said, while it may have some bearing on the appreciation and understanding of literature, has very little to do with creative writing. But this is part of the larger question of the relation between criticism and literature. In 'The Function of Criticism', Eliot (1923:23) states, with the pontifical solemnity of the early essays, that, like tradition, 'the function of criticism seems to be essentially a problem of order too'. Criticising Arnold for artificially cleaving criticism and creativity, he stresses the capital importance of criticism in the work of creation itself. But the fusion of criticism with creation does not entail the fusion of creation with criticism, for a work of art is 'autotelic' while the elucidation of works of art and the correction of taste that is criticism, by definition, is about something other than itself. Ten years later Eliot (1933:388) makes explicit what had always guided his criticism: 'Literary criticism should be completed by criticism from a definite ethical and theological standpoint'. In this case, a Christian standpoint: 'The artistic sensibility is impoverished by its divorce from the religious sensibility, the religious by its separation from the artistic' (Eliot 1968:99). Ultimately the concept of 'dissociation of sensibility' moves from the realm of literary phenomenon and sensibility to be located in the socio-political realm as the consequence of a state secularised, a community turned into a mob, and a clergy disintegrated³. Tradition (fidelity to form) is translated into orthodoxy (fidelity to doctrine), and Eliot has moved from literary criticism to general and cultural criticism. The fetishizing of form, always indissoluble from order and tradition, is refined as Christian orthodoxy and the substitution of literary sensibility

³ Even thoughtful attempts like Geertsema's (1996) to recuperate Eliot from this type of critical reading invariably side step the implications of Stephen Spender's observation that Eliot was, in the strictest sense of the term, reactionary. Leavis (1955:314) raises the pertinent issue in his defence of Lawrence from Eliot's sustained attacks: 'Snobbery, in fact, seems to be the natural trait of the consciously privileged whose social advantage gives them their assurance'. E.M. Forster described Eliot as a 'spider'.

for religious belief is a bridge to the reinstitution of (Christian) community. Where does this leave the political aspect of criticism?

The Introduction to *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* may open with the assurance that '[t]he present lectures will have no concern with politics' (1933a:13), but it goes on to claim that literary taste cannot be isolated from one's other passions; 'it affects them, and must be limited as one's self is limited' (36)—politics, like poetry, undoubtedly being a passion. Indeed the felicitous stress on historical context ensures that Trotsky's literary theory is superior to Richards's valorisation of art as saviour: 'Trotsky, whose *Literature and Revolution* is the most sensible statement of a Communist attitude that I have seen, is pretty clear on the relation of the poet to his environment' (135). Addressing the topic 'The Literature of Politics', Eliot (1955:136) comments dryly on the observation by a columnist that he had not previously addressed politics: 'Well, I intend to be just as political, and not a jot more so, than I have been in some of my prose writings which perhaps the writer ... has overlooked'. However, 'all political thinking must in the end be judged' in terms of the 'pre-political', the 'domain of ethics—in the end, the domain of theology' (144). We need not untangle the knot of Eliot's attempt to free literature and its criticism from subjection to politics to sense the force of the ambiguities at work. I shall argue that a comparable if simplified phenomenon is to be found in the defensive appreciation of Coetzee.

II

Coetzee's (1993:11) 'What is a Classic?', referring to ways of reading Eliot, draws attention to 'the transcendental-poetic and the sociocultural' approaches to interpretation, and makes a case for an historically sensitive version of the former. Like Eliot, Coetzee is interested in 'the idea of form' (13), and historicity⁴. Eliot's fetishizing of form is echoed in Coetzee's identification of form with affectivity and communication, an interpellative 'being spoken to across the ages' (18). Form, then, as the transcendental-poetic, has to do with sensibility, more specifically aesthetic sensibility. Community of sensibility is linked to the possibility of a moral community, a duty or 'imperative, a transcendental imperative' (Coetzee 1992:340) to which the writer responds; not, in Kantian terms, in order to represent freedom as such, but rather to give intimations. This kind of subtlety has provoked the charge of ideological dilettantism, elision of the socio-political realities of the apartheid state, and effectively passing off privilege as methodological exigency. The response to the tokenisation of Coetzee as the condensation of a particular form of scrupulous

* Which does not prevent Coetzee's omission of the fact that Eliot did in fact visit South Africa (cf. Moran 1994).

liberalism retreating under the banner of ethics before the messy business of commitment to the imperfect political means of approximating the ethical has been to marshal the counter-charge of political supervision.

Certainly Coetzee has been attacked with vehemence but there is also an evangelical fervour mobilised in his defence that appears commensurately disproportionate to the task, and signals the dynamics of a battle for legitimacy and the exclusion of heterodoxy. Is it possible to disentangle the net of ambiguous symbolic resistances and transference that attend a living author; particularly when the author, like his critics, is an academic? The attempted vindication of Coetzee can be traced in two strands of criticism concerned with alterity and community characterised, respectively, by a concern with the exegetical and the testamentary. The two writers chosen below employ widely different critical registers yet, I argue, they share a common tropological destination.

For Derek Attridge '[i]n a sense, the "literary" is the ethical' (77), and Coetzee's fiction is implicated in a post-structuralist reading of the post-colonial other:

otherness is always *perspectival* [and] is always *produced*. First, there is no transcendent other (except in certain kinds of religious discourse); there is only an other that presents itself to a specific subject in a particular place and time; otherness is always otherness to someone (who inevitably, and by virtue of the existence of the other, is put in the position of the self and the same). And, second, the other does not come from elsewhere, but is a product of the identical constituting act that has produced the self-same (Attridge 1994:65).

In the name of prioritising ethics over politics Attridge appeals for the recognition of 'trust in the other' beyond 'a vague liberal humanist truism, urging individuals to behave justly towards others', in the context of South Africa as the exemplar of 'the acute ethico-political trauma of the postcolonial world' (65, 66,76)⁵. However, the ethics of literature can smoothly reconstitute its traditionalist form even in the most theoretically self-conscious approach.

⁵ See also Attridge's (1992:248) claim that 'literature can act powerfully to hold the political and the ethical up for scrutiny by means of its power of suspension, momentarily dissociating them from their usual pressing context, performing the ethical decision and the political gesture'. Cf. also Attridge's (1992a) discussion of the cultural exclusions of canonicity. David Attwell (1993:10) sees in Coetzee's fictional oeuvre 'ethical questions fasten tenaciously to forms of reflexive play'.

'Levinas, Blanchot, and Derrida' (69) are cited as authorities for the ethics of the other. Although Heidegger's *Gelassenheit* is briefly evoked (70), the politically compromised philosopher of temporality is absent from these authorities—as is Hegel, the thinker *par excellence* of identity and difference, and inspiration for Marx. This is curious because Attridge stresses the modality of temporality as distinctive of otherness and endorses Levinas's cryptic claim that 'The other is the future' (80 note 17). Moreover the triumvirate of thinkers of alterity noted by Attridge refer critically and constantly to Heidegger, and in Derrida's criticisms of Levinas Heidegger is the specific resource for a critique of the ethics of the other⁶. Despite Levinas's strictures against *identifying* the Other (the very source of violence: there is no concept of the other), Attridge conceives of an 'other' with 'black voices' (76)⁷. Derrida (1978:101) comments on Levinas's formula 'Absolutely present, in his face, the Other—without any metaphor—faces me': the face of the Other as substance amounts to 'The face is presence, *ousia*'. This is a criticism of conceiving of the Other as self-present subject, as consciousness (exemplified in the privileging of the self-presence of speech), which only makes sense within a critical relation to Heidegger's *destruktive* analysis of the determination of Being as presence. In deconstructive terms, re-installing the anthropological other in place of the transcendental other is hardly an advance. These problems apart, the tendency of criticism to slide into mystagogy via the ethical can yield more predictable results.

In her essay on 'Coetzee, Eliot and the Private Mode' Myrtle Hooper (1999:31) elaborates the relation between Eliot and Coetzee by arguing that 'the theory of a "dissociation of sensibility" has uses for the study of Coetzee in South Africa at the turn of the century'; because it 'directs us to seek explanations of characteristic features of the writer within the mind of the writer', and to seek 'explanations for such features in the readership to whom the writing is directed (or at least by whom it is influenced)'. We are here in the realm of what Eliot identified as 'psychological criticism' (the interest in the mind of the writer) and 'sociological

Attridge draws heavily on Simon Critchley's *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas* (1992) which largely consists of a defence of Levinas against Derrida's critique. This naturally presents tensions within Attridge's strategy of combining Levinas with Derrida. Also doesn't the attempt to utilise Levinasian insights in a colonial post-colonial context need to address Levinas's strong support for the State of Israel?

Cf. Attwell (1993:121): 'The Other in *Age of Iron* is no longer the historical Other of colonialism, with black speech fully "represented", the interlocutor changes as well, becoming the taciturn derelict Vercueil, Elizabeth's consort and Angel of Death'. Attwell (1998) repeats this argument.

criticism' (interest in the field of context and reception). The extrapolation from Eliot's revisionist polemic services a recuperative reading intended to rebut the hackneyed accusation of political quietism⁸. The seductive process that 'allows us to recognise ourselves as a "vicarious audience" to whom Coetzee's text is "in some sense related"' (Hooper 1999:42) reaches a climactic crescendo of inclusive pronouns that 'allows us to address questions of readership', to 'remind us' that 'we might find ourselves as readers of Coetzee's text interpellated not across a national boundary, but across a margin of personal experience at the point of its translation into the public domain of death' (Hooper 1999:42-3). The inflation of the recuperative capacity of reading evidences an obsessional intrasubjectivity that reproduces the mirage of the pre-political literary community: 'Without our reading such translation cannot take place' (43). Reaffirmation of the covenant between reader-author-reader grounds the fantasy destination of an alternative locus of shared values and consensus. Our witnessing presence, which enables works of fiction to come into being, is complimented by a final anagogic ingredient: 'Yet the metaphor given to God is that of "author", who employs several "translators" of life into death' (42). The terminus of the sodality of recognition in this and other readings of Coetzee is the very pseudo-religious approach to literature that Eliot criticised in Arnold and Richards as blinding the critic to the intervention of textuality.

Such assumptions seem to be part of the missological texture of literary criticism; the wish-fulfilment fantasy of literary culture exemplified in Leavis's 'disinterested clerisy' is part of the legacy of English literary studies⁹. What is more interesting is not so much the rejection of politics for its crudity, complicity with bias, prejudice, generalisation, authority, opportunism, etc., but the unstated assumption that lingering in the precincts of pseudo-religious election somehow escapes the stigma of dogmatism. Is it too much to hope with Eliot that literary critics at least care to make different mistakes from those of their predecessors—this time including the ethical as the pre-political, and critically addressing the slide from

⁸ The spurious claim that Coetzee's 'return to South Africa in the early 1970s predates but is by no means completely distinct from that of exiles returning home in the 1990s' (Hooper 1999:37) surely raises more questions than it answers. This is the latest version of Attwell's (1993:125) strained iconography: 'In hindsight we can see that Coetzee's return to South Africa at the start of the 1970s had the effect of ensuring that his fiction would escape the consequences of the "posthistorical" age'.

⁹ As Said (1983:290-92) notes, religious criticism is part of the social imaginary that circulates in literary culture. See Graham Peckey's (2000) discussion of *The Master of Petersburg* for a refined type of this literary-critical devotional asceticism.

the ethical to the theological?¹⁰ As the protagonist of *Disgrace* puts it with characteristic lack of originality: 'The more things change the more things stay the same' (Coetzee 2000:62).

III

Professor David Lurie, aged 52, author of three scholarly books, is sick of literary criticism: 'The truth is, he is tired of criticism, tired of prose measured by the yard' (Coetzee 2000:4). Languishing in a 'transformed and, to his mind, emasculated institution of learning' (4), he thinks more about 'Emma Bovary, coming home sated, glazed-eyed, from an afternoon of reckless fucking' (5):

He earns his living at the Cape Technical University, formerly Cape Town University College. Once a professor of modern languages, he has been, since Classics and Modern Languages were closed down as part of the great rationalization, adjunct professor of communications. Like all rationalized personnel, he is allowed to offer one special-field course a year, irrespective of enrolment, because that is good for moral. This year he is offering the Romantic poets. For the rest he teaches Communications 101, 'Communication Skills', and Communication 201, 'Advanced Communication Skills' (3).

Existing in a flurry of promiscuity and entitlement, concerned to reconcile the imagination and the onslaughts of reality, he fucks a student—'Not rape, not quite that, but undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core' (25); 'Unequal: how can he deny that?' (53). In his own estimation 'Not a bad man but not good either' (195), he doctors her marks and attendance, is reported for sexual harassment, and refuses to recant ('It reminds me too much of Mao's China These are puritanical times' (66)). As his ex-wife comments: 'The whole thing is disgraceful from beginning to end. Disgraceful and vulgar too. And I'm not sorry for saying so' (45). Some readers have agreed, extending the excoriation to the novel as a whole and censuring Coetzee himself for writing it. The novel, like its reactionary and elitist central protagonist, not only invites censure but seems to crave it.

Retreating to his daughter's farm outside Grahamstown, Lurie overcomes his impatience with animal-welfare—'Everyone is so cheerful and well-intentioned

¹⁰ To return to what Eliot (1933a:36) termed 'a large and difficult question: whether the attempt to teach students to appreciate English literature should be made at all; and with what restrictions the teaching of English literature can rightly be included in any academic curriculum, if at all'.

that after a while you itch to go off and do some raping and pillaging. Or to kick a cat' (73)—to the point of ambivalent identification with the maligned dogs he helps to exterminate: 'They do us the honour of treating us like gods, and we respond by treating them like things' (78). Moreover, arguing for 'the rights of desire' (89), he feels another affinity: 'No animal will accept the justice of being punished for following its instincts' (90)—a dictum brutally realised in the rape of his daughter by two black men and an adolescent, 'Like dogs in a pack' (159):

It happens every day, every hour, every minute, he tells himself, in every part of the country At risk to own anything: a car, a pair of shoes, a packet of cigarettes. Not enough to go around, not enough cars, shoes cigarettes. Too many people, too few things. What there is must go into circulation, so that everyone can have a chance to be happy for a day. That is the theory; hold to the theory and to the comforts of theory. Not human evil, just a vast circulatory system, to whose workings pity and terror are irrelevant. That is how one must see life in this country: in its schematic aspect. Otherwise one could go mad. Cars, shoes; women too. There must be some niche in the system for women and what happens to them (98).

Surprisingly Lurie is able to indulge in didactic reverie during the attack and to reach the conclusion: 'missionary work: what has it left behind, that huge enterprise of upliftment? Nothing that he can see' (95). A second disgrace: 'Locked in the lavatory while his daughter was used Lucy's secret; his disgrace' (109). And Lucy will keep her secret—'what happened to me is a purely private matter'—because of '[t]his place being South Africa' (112), 'I am prepared to do anything, make any sacrifice, for the sake of peace' (208). She does not want to invite retribution—'I think I am in their territory. They have marked me. They will come back for me' (158)—and will be willing to marry into the family harbouring one of her assailants (and also with designs on her property) for the sake of her own safety and that of her child. To Lurie the rape that was 'meant to soil her, to mark her, like a dog's urine' (199), to leave her with nothing, 'Like a dog' (205), is a part of 'war reparations; another incident in the great campaign of redistribution' (176). 'It was history speaking through them'. (156)

In *Disgrace* black characters are insistently compared to dogs, but then so are other characters; canine animality marking the limits of the human where humanism is stripped of its obfuscation and confronted with the crudity of reality. Lurie becomes what 'Petrus once called himself', a 'dog-man' (146). Petrus, recipient of a Land Affairs grant and not 'an old-style kaffir' (140), combines race

with the theme of land hunger. Is Lurie a racist? Working at the animal clinic leads him to the conclusion that the dogs he sees suffer 'most of all from their own fertility. There are simply too many of them' (142). A few pages later we read: 'The dogs are brought to the clinic because they are unwanted: *because we are too menny*' (146). Is this snide mimicry aimed at second-language English speakers in 'a country where dogs are bred to snarl at the mere smell of a black man' (110)?

Some readers will respond to the testimony of white *angst* and victimisation by uncritically identifying with Lurie. Others will dismiss that character and its author as reactionary and racist. Both recognitions take Lurie, the unreliable narrative focaliser, at face value and turn the novel into a *Roman à clef*. The tissue of praise and execration represses the fact that he is a cipher for a type of embittered white marginalisation; 'A figure from the margins of history' (167) speaking a language tired, friable, eaten from the inside: 'More and more he is convinced that English is an unfit medium for the truth of South Africa. Stretches of English code whole sentences long have thickened, lost their articulations, their articulateness, their articulatedness' (117). Any identification has to swallow Lurie's callous misogyny—'Raping a lesbian worse than raping a virgin: more of a blow' (105)—as well as a subliminal racism that prevents the acknowledgement of the violation of black women, white on white violence, and white on black.

The defensive exoneration of Coetzee from any complicity with the sensibility of Laurie is equally unconvincing since, as I have noted, the identification of Coetzee with his unreconstructed white liberal protagonist is positively invited. So we have a possible interpellated schizoid community of readers split between uncritical identification with Lurie's limited point of view and its rejection, along with that of the novel as a whole, on the grounds of its distortion of reality, contributing to South Africa's negative image, etc. Is Lurie's despairing viewpoint Coetzee's? The affinities are seductive:

The demons do not pass him by. He has nightmares of his own in which he wallows in a bed of blood, or, panting, shouting soundlessly, runs from the man with a face like a hawk, like a Benin mask, like Thoth He has, if the truth be told, been putting it off for months: the moment when he must face the blank page, strike the first note, see what he is worth (121).

But there are points at which the implied author can be distinguished. Lurie, a classicist, does not register the significance of the name of the youngest rapist—'He was there to learn' (159): 'Pollux', 'P-O-L-L-U-X' (200). Pollux or Polydeuces, one of the Dioscuri (sons of Zeus), is brother to Castor, Helen and Clytaemnestra. Zeus seduced his mother Leda, wife of Tyndareus king of Sparta, in the form of a

swan. When as a child Helen is abducted by Theseus Castor and Pollux rescue her with the help of Academus. As for the learned Professor Lurie: 'He gives the boy a good, solid kick, so that he sprawls sideways. Pollux! What a name!' (207).

Lucy reads Dickens's last novel, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*: not what he would have expected' (76), and after the rape: 'Of *Edwin Drood* there is no more sign' (114). The significance of a half-finished book regarded by Dickens's friend Wilkie Collins as the melancholy work of a worn-out brain is multiple. *Drood* concerns guilt, pathological obsession, and the mystery of an unresolved crime, themes that resonate in *Disgrace*. The main suspect is Jaspers, an opium addict with violent and erotic dreams, who has been interpreted as the embodiment of the submerged part of Dickens himself, his own animal nature. Dickens's heavy irony about those who misguidedly respected black people in the novel is a symptom of his hardening racism¹¹. The *Drood* mystery hardly deflects the charge of racism that Coetzee masochistically appears to encourage. But how to prove one is not a racist? After all, 'the town of Salem on the Grahamstown-Kenton road' (59), established by the 1820 settlers, has a meaning other than 'peace'. None of this 'intellectualism', of course, means that Coetzee is in control here, and the meta-textual games are weak enough to avoid obstructing a more forensic interpretation.

Finally, is the representation of South Africa in *Disgrace* realistic? The indictment of the brutality and inhumanity that is the legacy of colonialism, the lethal symbolism attached to attritional violence, particularly against women, the whirl of myriad persecution complexes on all sides, wounded forgiveness fuelling revanchist ardour—all form part of a jeremiad that has a characteristic weakness. Coetzee, in his destruction, gives a fiercely one-dimensional indictment of the inhumanity of post-apartheid South Africa that inevitably feeds into the trough of gleeful pessimism that nourishes opponents of black governance. Hence the charge of irresponsibility leveled at Coetzee. That is to say, this very writing may be a specimen of the kind of paranoid discourse it seeks to describe. Ulterior, political, practical considerations, certainly, but constitutive of a charge that, once one has assumed the mantle of the transcendental imperative, does find purchase. Nothing positive issues from the wreckage of Lurie's anaemic liberalism (and his type is legion)—except, perhaps, the fact that it will no longer serve. More importantly, since there is little hope of salvaging a responsible or ethical implied author in the wake of this text it is surely time to relinquish yet another consoling fetish of criticism.

¹¹ Angus Wilson (1993:24) suggests 'that Dickens had, perhaps partly consciously, become very mistrustful of fiction, of the art he practised, of the fancy and the imagination as weapons on behalf of the good in life'.

conclusion

The avoidance of politics in *Disgrace* has not saved it from political recrimination. (Curiously Zakes Mda's attack on the new political elite has failed, so far, to hit the same raw nerve.) For the blinkered Lurie the inequities of 'a vast circulatory system' fail to explain the ferocity of evil and the powerlessness of the good. Politics recedes behind the limitations and intensities of the personal. While this might promise to put the question of individual autonomy before the programmatic generalisations of political rhetoric, it has the contrary effect of securing a fatalism that reduces freedom to the negativity of desiccated subjectivity. I would suggest that although this short-sightedness limits the realism of the book and pushes it toward naturalism—confirming Lukács's thesis that the subjectivism of (post)modernism tends toward nihilistic naturalism—it also renders it timely. *Disgrace* affords the reader opportunity for a precise and relentless confrontation with the ideological capillaries embalming the possibility of community. 'What if ... what if *that* is the price one has to pay for staying on?' (158).

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