Coetzee, Debt, Rights

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My talk today is about J.M. Coetzee's novel *Disgrace* and the ways in which we might read that book as an analysis of human rights. Or to put it more precisely, what I'll try to do is show how Coetzee's book makes it difficult for us to maintain a particular type of classical rights talk based on an analogy between ethical obligation and economic debt. It does this, I think, through a kind of *reductio* of its own reading; that is, it makes implausible the idea that rights violations are akin to unpaid debts by showing the reader the unsatisfactory consequences of exactly that supposition.

One might have thought that this was an obvious point, at least as a reading of Coetzee's novel. Those of you who know the book will recall its unmistakable concern with guilt, obligation, and the socio-economic realities of South Africa after apartheid. It's clear enough, in short, that there's *something* going on in the text about repaying debts. But *Disgrace* remains one of the most widely misunderstood novels in recent memory, and there's little critical consensus concerning either the importance of debt or any specific interpretation of what the "something" in question might be. [Incidentally, I mean "widely misunderstood" in a quasi-empirical sense; there are enough contradictory treatments of the book that most of them simply *must* be wrong.]

To understand why the novel has proven so elusive (and so divisive), we need to recall a little about both its plot and its reception. Thee plot is straightforward, although its interpretation is not: The protagonist is a man, David Lurie, 52 years old, who teaches literature at the Cape Technical University. He has an affair with a student, Melanie Isaacs; he describes one of their encounters (the narrative is focalized exclusively through him) as "not rape, not quite that, but undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core" (25). She files a complaint some weeks later, which results in a commission of inquiry that is an obvious analogue to the Truth

and Reconciliation Commission (whose work was ongoing at the time the novel was written); he loses his post after he refuses to mount anything resembling an adequate defense. Disgraced and unemployed, he leaves Cape Town for his daughter Lucy's smallholding in the Eastern Cape, which she has recently divided with Petrus, a former laborer on the property who know owns half of it. The idea, to the extent that there is one, is that Lurie will enjoy a spell of anonymity and occupy himself by writing a chamber opera on Byron. While there, the farm is attacked by three men; Lucy is raped and he is beaten and burned. Lucy reports the attack to the police, but withholds any mention of her rape. Uncomprehending of either Lucy's motivations or his place on the farm, he returns briefly to Cape Town, stopping en route to apologize to Melanie's family. But he quickly settles back in the Eastern Cape to await the birth of Lucy's child (which she refuses to abort); he passes his days working on the increasingly hopeless opera and helping Lucy's friend Bev Shaw run a small veterinary clinic whose principal function is to euthanize unwanted dogs. The novel closes with his decision to put down a dog to which he has become particularly attached.

So … this is not a happy book, though in truth it's no worse on that score than many of Coetzee's others, written before the fall of apartheid. It debuted, in 1999, to much international praise (it won the Booker that year, and Coetzee was awarded the Nobel four years later), but to strongly divided reviews in South Africa. The ANC leadership criticized its lack of fully-drawn black characters and the racial dynamics of its provincial violence. These points—the latter in particular, which was often called "fear-mongering" and connected to the work of other, more politically dubious white South African writers—were widely, but certainly not uniformly, echoed in the local press. Coetzee emigrated to Australia three years later, and has since renounced his South African citizenship. Interestingly, though, *academic* criticism of the novel in the decade since its appearance has had relatively little to say on either score. [If you'll permit me a moment of speculation, I'd guess this has much to do with the fact that, although *Disgrace* is an African novel, it has found an

academic audience comprising mostly non-Africanists. This, predictably, has resulted in a readership that is comparatively ignorant of the cultural and political conditions in South Africa, which makes it difficult for many of its readers to understand either the scope or the political role of violent crime at the time, and nearly impossible for them to imagine a writer of Coetzee's impeccable anti-apartheid credentials as any part of a larger trend of racialist reaction.[1] I don't mean to suggest that we outsiders are wrong, exactly, only that there's probably a reason why *Disgrace* went over better abroad than at home, and it's not just that South African critics missed its obvious strengths.]

What *has* interested academic critics, generally speaking, has been the nature of Lurie's wrongdoing, his attempts at atonement, and the novel's alleged failure to condemn his actions in unambiguous terms. If we wanted to construct a plausible ethical criticism of Coetzee's novel along these lines—and there's a reason for doing so, though my point will eventually be to show that this doesn't work—it might read as follows:[2] Lurie and his fate are plainly the central concerns of the novel; other characters are important, especially Lucy but also Melanie, Petrus, and Bev, but it is Lurie to whom we inevitably must devote our most significant attention. Lurie is a bad man, though perhaps not in any simple way. He is accustomed, unthinkingly, to using others, and especially women, for his own satisfaction, as is the case with Soraya (the prostitute with whom he has a standing arrangement at the novel's outset), with Melanie, with the series of women with whom he has had affairs over the years, with his two ex-wives, with the (male) friends whose help he spurns during the inquiry, and so forth. This wouldn't be a problem by itself, exactly—we don't demand moral perfection in our fictional characters,—were it not for the specific ways in which he suffers for his sins, and for the extent to which the reader is invited to view those sufferings as unjust.

[1]Some reference material: For violent crime, see Farred, "The Mundanacity of Violence." Also, South Africa's current murder rate is 0.5 per 1000 residents per year, second only to Columbia (US = 0.04 = 10x lower). Assaults: 12/1000/yr, #1 in the world and 60% higher than the US. Rapes: 1.2/1000/yr, world #1 by far and 4x the US rate. All numbers from United Nations. A white writer accused (by Coetzee himself, no less) of stirring up white anxiety is Breyten Breytenbach.

[2]A composite sketch. But see especially Beverly Roos.

There is the first moment, bad enough in isolation, of the inquiry. Here, Lurie's almost-rape of Melanie (it helps this reading to take Lurie's own description without significant doubt or irony)—an act driven not by hate nor by an intent to harm but only by a natural and purportedly irresistible urge (he describes himself as having been a "servant of Eros") and mitigated if not excused by "the rights of desire"—results in the absurd demand (so this reading goes) that he not only admit his transgression (which he does openly) but that he disavow his nature. [Let me make clear what I'm doing here, because I know it's a bit murky: I'm constructing an imagined critical reading of the novel, with which I disagree. This imaginary critical reading itself constructs an objectionable reading of the novel, with which I also disagree. So there are two readings, neither of which is my own and both of which I find implausible. If you want to object to my own reading of the novel, you'll have plenty of chances in a bit.] So, back to the inquiry: That Lurie loses his job for something "that must go on all the time" is in a way immaterial; it may be a disproportionate punishment, but he has done something wrong and can only expect to suffer the consequences. What's objectionable, on the reading to which my imaginary critic objects, is that he is asked to go beyond the legitimate realm of secular justice. He is asked, in short, not just to repay his debt to Melanie and to society by forfeiting something of value, but to punish himself for the existence in him of a sinful desire over which he has no control. We are invited to feel sympathy for Lurie on this score, to see him, from relatively early in the novel, as a man more sinned against than sinning, and to forget or to minimize his crime. To see him, in other words, as the novel's true victim.

But things get much, much worse. [Continuing with the double construction here.] It can't possibly escape the reader that the novel's two rapes are in some way analogous. But the second—of Lucy, under threat of death, during a home invasion by three strangers—is presented as real and undeniably traumatic in a way that Lurie's own crime is not. And this is objectionable on at least three levels: (1) It suggests that there are degrees of rape, and that some rapes are *relatively*

unobjectionable. (2) It presents Lucy's rape as a part of Lurie's experience, that is, as part of the payment extracted from *him* in compensation for Melanie's rape, rather than as Lucy's own trauma. This reading is reinforced by both the narrative opacity of Lucy's consciousness and by the plain analogy between Lurie and George Isaacs, Melanie's father, whose position Lurie occupies *vis-a-vis* Lucy. This parallelism suggests that both rapes are primarily transactions between men, that the victimhood of women is significant primarily as an instrument of their (David's and George's) suffering. (3) It extends the sense of outraged victimhood suffered by Lurie. Surely *this*—his daughter's rape, his own assault, the loss of his car, the loss of his looks, which in turn deprives him of the ability to satisfy his natural desires—*this* is too much, a payment out of all proportion to the debt incurred by his earlier transgression.

And then there's the matter of the novel's obvious political allegory, which, given the context, is unavoidably a racial allegory as well. Lurie's rape of Melanie isn't just a man's crime committed against a woman; it's a figure for the white minority's exploitation of the black and colored majority during decades and centuries of colonial and racist rule. But this is well and truly awful, since the reader's identification with Lurie cannot *but* produce the horrifyingly objectionable conclusion that, if his abuse of Melanie was a clear but explicable and rectifiable offense, so too must be the sins of apartheid. This reading is bolstered by Lurie's own explanation of Lucy's attack, which holds that it (the attack) was an instance of "history speaking through" the assailants, a "history of wrong." It makes little difference that Lurie himself apparently sees the justice of this claim; the point is that the reader has long since been lead to perceive the second attack as one related to but entirely out of proportion with the earlier crime. How can the reader then escape the conclusion that where blacks once suffered unduly, now whites have been substituted unfairly in their place? And if so, how can we possibly overlook Coetzee's deeply objectionable if lightly disguised reactionary politics?

OK … close the double imaginary reading. As I suggested at the outset, I think

this is an unconvincing account of what the novel is up to. In keeping with the purpose of our seminar, on law, and with my title, on debt and rights, I want to focus on a single, erroneous assumption that I think grounds and enables the misreadings I've just presented. If you'll forgive me for once more introducing a proposition only to disagree with it, this assumption is that there is a meaningful and necessary equivalence between economic and moral debts. By this I mean not only that moral obligations are "like" economic obligations, that in both cases one is obliged to pay for the things one takes from another person, but also that moral obligations are calculable and finite in the same way monetary debts are. This is not a new idea. It's the basis of the Old Testament's "eye for an eye" injunction (a progressive notion at the time, when the alternative was retribution without proportional limitation); it's Nietzsche's conclusion in the *Genealogy of Morals*; and it's the basis of not only most contemporary approaches to human rights, but also of the Truth and Reconciliation proceedings alluded to in the novel.

But here's the problem: The equivalence of ethics and economics renders soluble, in a straightforward way that conflicts deeply with our lived and historical experience, any moral conflict or ethical breech. Debts can be repaid, at least in principle; their cost might be too high in any specific case—in other words, *I* may not, as a practical matter, be able to pay off whatever debts I've incurred—but there is no class of economic debt that cannot even theoretically be made good. And so the task of the economic moralist, or of a court, or of the TRC, if it comes to that, is to estimate the appropriate exchange value of noneconomic wrongs and of their potential payments. Sometimes this will be easy, sometimes it will be difficult and people of good will and honest intention will disagree on the proper assessment, but a resolution will always be possible, if only by judicial or legislative fiat. In fact there's an important sense in which the TRC, in spite of the more or less spiritual rhetoric surrounding its purposes, worked on exactly this model: Given that there was almost no realistic prospect of direct repayment (whether economic or punitive) for the abuses of apartheid, the testimony it was designed to elicit offered

a lesser but significant and more easily obtained compensation to the victims, who would otherwise have received even less.

As a practical matter, this may be the best we can do, and I would hesitate to say we're wrong to have organized our understanding of ethics along these lines. But it's this kind of economic understanding of rights on which the misreading of Coetzee's novel depends. If we think that the appropriate question to ask concerning David Lurie is "has he yet paid enough to surrender the advantage he took from Melanie," then and only then are we prepared to answer that at some point too much has been taken from him, that he has suffered out of proportion to his crime. Likewise if the task of ethical action after apartheid is to compensate its victims up to the point at which their accounts balance those of the perpetrators, then we are again in a position to say at some point that such a balance has been achieved. In neither case will we necessarily draw the same conclusion as our misguided imagined reader, who saw that point reached sometime during the inquiry and before Lurie lost his post, but we will have made such a reading possible.

The novel suggests we should do otherwise, and therefore that the problem of finding a point at which Lurie's debts have been paid is moot. When he uses Melanie, he doesn't incur a debt to her, though this is admittedly how he thinks of it when he describes himself as having been "enriched" by the experience. (Lurie, in any case, is hardly the man from whom we should take our moral cues.) Instead, we would better understand his transgression as something that simply *is*, that's tied to him, that's *his* sin and *her* suffering, and that cannot be undone or compensated. One can, of course, compensate the victim, thought Lurie never does any such thing, except to the feeble extent that his apology eases the lives of Melanie's parents (which is feeble indeed, and they are in any case victims of a different type of wrong). At the same time, what happens to him and to Lucy is likewise wrong on its own, without respect either to his treatment of Melanie or to the historical circumstances surrounding it. If there is anything Lurie has learned by the end of the novel, it's that while he can and should work to provide pleasure to—or remove the suffering of—

others, even dogs, there is no sacrifice he can make that will settle his account with Melanie, or with history. *That's* why his daughter's resolution, for herself and for him as well, to "start over with nothing. Not with nothing *but*. With nothing. Like a dog" is unsatisfactory, as is any thought of redemption through art that might have been raised by the failed chamber opera. There is no escape, the novel suggests, no moment when one's guilt is perfected or expunged. It merely continues.

If this seems bleak, well, I said at the outset that this is not a happy novel. As for what it has to do with rights and the law, I think the suggestion is that whatever the advantages—or the simple necessities—of ordering our social institutions as if sufferings behaved like debts, that is, as if they were measurable and mutually offsetting, this is at best a fiction necessary to the smooth functioning of public order, and at worst a method for sanctioning any wrong. If we are concerned instead with morality—a private affair, whatever its public origins—the novel suggests that we can only live out our guilt and our sufferings, work not to incur them in the first place, and hope to lessen those of others, as Lurie—possibly reformed, but certainly not redeemed—does in the novel's last and bleakest line. This isn't much to go on, and we may object that Coetzee has given us nothing of joy. But then that's never been his project, and at least we'll no longer be inclined to mistake his meaning in a way that makes a mockery of it.