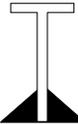


Pliant/compliant; grace/*Disgrace*; plaint/complaint

.....

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We are reminded of a complaint widely associated with the work of Coetzee in his more allegorical phase, a kind of de-referential slipperiness which, said Coetzee's detractors (and they were many), amounted to a 'studied refusal to accept historical responsibility'

he first time that Soraya received David Lurie, says John Coetzee, she wore vermilion lipstick and heavy eyeshadow. "Not liking the stickiness of the makeup," the text reads, the protagonist, Lurie, asks her to wipe it off. The prostitute, Soraya, the hired woman, duly desists. "She obeyed and has never worn it since." [Pause – *The speaker takes out and positions a small flower-shaped mirror on the podium.*] "A ready learner," the paragraph ends, "compliant, pliant" (D:5). [*The speaker deliberately wipes off the red lipstick she is wearing, and looks into the mirror as she does so. She ignores the smear of colour still left on her cheek. She slowly glances around the room, challenging the audience with her eyes to react to her gesture.*]

In narratological terms, the last

sentence I have just read fascinates me [*but perhaps not so much as my gestural subversion fascinates you*]. 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 or, better still, "combined discourse", to use Menakhem Perry's term (Perry 1979), 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. We cannot say, with any degree of reliability, who says these words, pliantly, compliantly ...

John Coetzee, whose professional training in linguistics once produced an entire article devoted to "The first sentence of Yvonne Burgess' *The strike*" (Coetzee 1976), would not be unduly alarmed by my delayed parsing of this sentence.¹ And the string of syllables "JM Coetzee" does, in a certain sense, in a certain legal sense even, answer the question "to whom does the language belong". But it is

precisely the invocation of John Coetzee, canonical South African author – the radicalism of whose allegorical textual practice, it has been argued, subversively rewrites not only what Benita Parry calls South Africa's "liberal novel of stricken conscience" (1998:149), but also the discursive and ideological codes which make a liberal subject position tenable in the first place (see Teresa Dovey 1988; David Attwell 1990, 1993; Benita Parry 1998; Louise Bethlehem 2001) – that makes the adjudication of the overarching "realism" of this post-apartheid novel so complicated. Our inability to pinpoint the place of the utterance is reminiscent of a complaint widely associated with the work of Coetzee in his more allegorical phase, a kind of de-referential slipperiness which, said Coetzee's detractors (and they were many), amounted to a "studied refusal to accept historical responsibility" (Abdul JanMohamed 1985:73). Coetzee was accused, with increasing vehemence over the course of the early 1980s, of what South African literary criticism construed as a "dehistoricization" of the "real". Deprived of what influential literary scholar Michael Chapman, following Arthur Koestler, calls the "responsibility of action" (1988:336), Coetzee was said to be lost to history. The literary-

theoretical debates surrounding Coetzee's *Foe*, for instance, were held by Chapman to be a specially pertinent evasion of responsibility for a South Africa where "history may certainly be regarded, poststructurally, as discourse while to millions of the dispossessed it is more likely to manifest itself, concretely, as low wages or the police cell" (Chapman 1988:327).

Chapman's comments (which I have critiqued elsewhere at length, see Bethlehem 2001) mask two, far more fundamental questions. The first question, of particular interest to the literary historian, relates to the form of literary representation appropriate to a context of political saturation; adequate, that is, to the representation of a society saturated by violence, as pre- and post-apartheid South Africa was, or is; as Israel was, and remains. The second question, not unrelated, of interest to us all, pertains to the role of the "responsible" or "accountable" intellectual (to use the terms of the South African struggle) in such contexts. Significantly, given the (non-)accountability of the intellectual, Coetzee characteristically refused so much as even to grant the terms in which this debate was framed; refused, that is, to comply with the dictum, or better still, the dictate, that novelistic discourse in South Africa be subordinated to the exigencies of the political – variously encoded as "history" or "the real". There is a game, Coetzee is on record as saying, "going on between the covers of the book, but it is not always the game you think it is. No matter what it may appear to be doing, the story may not really be playing any of the games in the games handbook. While it may certainly be possible to read the book as playing one of those games, in reading it in that way you may have missed everything" (1987:4–5).

It is not without a certain large measure of irony, therefore, that I acknowledge now, in conducting my own reckoning with *Disgrace*, just how difficult it is to lay these ghosts of responsible reference. Indeed the paper which, quite literally, catalysed this text of mine, Hannan Hever's reading of Coetzee (Hever 2002), addresses precisely the role of the intellectual in times of social turbulence, violence, revolt, liberation struggle, uprising, *intifada*, *El Aqsa intifada*. For

Hever, Coetzee's text is valuable precisely for its rejection of the messianic hopes encoded in the formal ratification of political transformations such as contained in a peace treaty, in the weighty documentation of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, or in her new constitution, for that matter. Hever stresses that historical process is always the stuff of excess, never reducible to the letter of the law, however newly constituted – hence Lurie's heroic defiance in refusing to append a *mea culpa*, writ in his own hand, to the charges of sexual harassment brought against him by a young woman, a student, with whom he has had intercourse. The role of the responsible intellectual, according to Hever, is comparably unstable: not only are we faced with the painful task of seemingly acting against the particularist interests of our own community in the name of a more encompassing universalism, we are also denied – indeed, as responsible intellectuals we must also deny, says Hever – the redemptive or messianic teleology of a "happy end" to the struggle. It is for this reason, and I quote, "that Coetzee brings his characters to the point of incomprehensible extremity, where the end of the conflict does not result in a kind of pseudo-democratic equality of mutual love, but where its culmination is the product of almost complete intermingling so that it is rape which ushers in the 'New World', a world where it is not so much the type of regime which is different as the colour of the babies born into it" (2001:2, my translation).

It is precisely here, where the word "rape" striates the surface of my text, that my argument with Coetzee (and, to a much lesser extent, given all that I have learnt from him, with Hannan Hever) begins. The rape of Lucy, Lurie's lesbian daughter, is part of a larger narrative sequence whose hard core both does, and does not, lie in the following passage:

There were three men, [Lucy] recites, or two men and a boy. They tricked their way into the house, took (she lists the items) money, clothes, a television set, a CD player, a rifle with ammunition. When her father resisted, they assaulted him, poured spirits over him, tried to set him on fire. Then they shot the dogs and drove off in his car. She describes the men and what they were wearing; she describes the car. (D:108)

In contradistinction to the indeterminacy of the first piece of text which I have lifted from this novel, the surrounding context of *this* tellingly depersonalized third-person narrative makes it clear that Lurie hears this report and that he recognizes the dissonance between it and both the subjective or experiential reality of being set alight – what the novel refers to as “his story” (Coetzee 1999:98) – on the one hand, and the subjective or experiential experience of rape – Lucy’s story – on the other hand.

Structurally, this is a moment of heightened mimeticism in the novel to the extent that its temporal and spatial coordinates are rendered with considerable particularity, and to the extent that the discourse proclaims its loyalty both to its seeming point of origin in Lucy’s speech which it “simply” transcribes, as well as to Lurie’s bystander status – foregrounded in the parenthetical “(she lists the items)”. Note too, how the terms of this description form part of a ready-made repertoire, easily replicated in the journalism of the *Cape Argus*, the *Sunday Times*, the *International Herald Tribune*, or in the word-of-mouth reports circulated by the victims of violence, or, I add – remembering the murder of noted South African economist, Ronnie Bethlehem, and my own retelling of it – by those who outlive violence.

Perhaps this is the appropriate point to stress, if I have not already done so, that Coetzee’s post-apartheid novel is also arguably the most realistic of all Coetzee’s works of fiction – so committed, indeed, to the prescriptive perspective of character

(Lurie’s character) – that it can be thought of as allegorical only to the extent that it deliberately encodes a narrative gap or aporia which is, strictly speaking, irresolvable in terms of its realist scaffolding. Lucy’s refusal to reenact the rape through verbal recapitulation (re-capitulation) is increasingly thematized in the concluding sections of the novel, leading to a conflictual narrative economy in terms of which the internal consistency of Lurie’s character is preserved, and a scopic will to knowledge generated and simultaneously frustrated by Lurie as the reader’s delegate, at the cost of the ever-increasing opacity of Lucy’s actions – particularly her decision not to abort her hybrid child, sired by violence.

“David, when people ask, would you mind keeping to your own story, to what happened to you?”

He does not understand.

“You tell what happened to you, I tell what happened to me,” she repeats.

“You’re making a mistake,” he says in a voice that is fast descending to a croak.

“No I’m not,” she says.

“My child, my child!” he says, holding out his arms to her. When she does not come, he puts aside his blanket, stands up, and takes her in his arms. In his embrace she is stiff as a pole, yielding nothing. (D:99).

Stiff, unyielding, Lucy appears in her refusal of her father’s blanketed embrace to be the antithesis of the pliant and compliant Soraya (the latter, significantly, another daughter: “Soraya is tall and slim ... Technically he is old enough to be her father”). But the preoccupation with paternity which surfaces in the novel here and elsewhere ... *My child, my child ... old enough to be her father ...* reveals a reversion to patriarchy which some-

times wears the cloak of fatherly concern. Consider the following interchange between Lurie and his daughter about her lover, Helen:

“Helen has been back in Johannesburg since April. I’ve been alone, aside from the help.”

“*You didn’t tell me that*. Aren’t you nervous by yourself?”

Lucy shrugs. “There are the dogs. Dogs still mean something. The more dogs, the more deterrence. Anyhow, if there were to be a break-in, I don’t see that two people would be better than one” (D:60, *emphasis added*).

What begins to emerge here for me is a kind of truth screened by a new and seemingly zealous commitment (Lurie’s, but by extension also, Coetzee’s own) to post-apartheid modes of representation in their pre-apartheid guise: ones which retain, for all Coetzee’s deference to interrogative postmodernism/post-structuralism, the tell-tale pre-eminence of declarative truth-telling. *You didn’t tell me that*. Lucy refuses to tell the truth about her experiences – but Coetzee’s particular accountability for the selection of the details that flesh out (if that is the phrase) the necessarily partial nature of the fictional representation undermines the potentially subversive gesture of refusing to re-circulate rape, even in its most diffused textual guises. Instead, Lucy’s refusal to disclose her suffering becomes part of her strangeness, her alterity, another characterological tic, *like her homosexuality perhaps?* If the rape of Lucy takes place offstage, beyond the purview of David Lurie’s restricting and restricted consciousness, then so too does the enactment of her sexual pleasure. Which is, given the importance of the exchange of

women's *reproductive* capacity for patriarchy (Gayle Rubin 1975, 1993), not particularly surprising. The independent, and let us not be afraid to say clitoral, desires of the actively sexual women characters, silenced one after another by this novel, are routinely subordinated to the Law of the Father(s), for whom social stability – even in the bizarrely messianic mixing of blood in the gene pool of Lucy's bastard child – depends on the appropriation both of the womb and of its fruit. It is surely no coincidence that Lurie's sexual relations with Soraya end under the phantasmic accusation of the other man, the real father, once Lurie encounters Soraya and this man's sons by chance on the street:

[N]either he nor she can put aside what has happened. The two little boys become presences between them, playing quiet as shadows in a corner of the room where their mother and the strange man couple. In Soraya's arms he becomes, fleetingly, their father: foster-father, step-father shadow-father ... His thoughts turn, despite himself to the other father, the real one (*D*:7).

We end therefore, where we began: with the spectacle of the hired woman – Soraya, reified in her stereotypical iconicity as representative of Muslim black or brown Southern African women (“He strokes her honey-brown body, unmarked by the sun; he stretches her out, kisses her breasts ... Soraya is tall and slim, with long black hair and dark, liquid eyes” [*D*:1]) – and this not solely in the pages of the *Discreet Escorts*' books under the category “Exotic” (7).

David Attwell, one of the most respected South African commentators on Coetzee, has recently attempted to defend Coetzee's novel *Age of iron* against post-colonial critic Benita Parry's lament that it fails to articulate “a transfigured social order” (Attwell 1998; Parry 1998:162). For Attwell, such failures are proper refusals: evidence, in other words, of Coetzee's deliberate choice to encode a “social vision” solely “*in terms of* its commitment to aesthetic self reflection” (Attwell 1998:167, emphasis in original). Attwell calls for the recognition that “a novel like *Age of iron* will not stage certain interclass and intercultural encounters purely as object-lessons in

social conduct; it will be about alterity itself, in both the thematic and performative senses – in other words, the work thematizes, performs, and thus reflects on, various modes of alterity” (1998:167). While it would certainly be tempting to console ourselves with the speculation that Coetzee is somehow not implicated in, not compliant with, the eradication of alterity (whether otherness of class, culture, race and not least of all, gender) that we encounter in *Disgrace*, I conclude that there is little in the novel to support this. Coetzee's structuring of the novel to exclude Lucy's testimony is, quite literally, a *cosmetic* issue: “*cosmetic*, from the Greek *kosmetikos*, skilled in arranging, *kosmein* to arrange, adorn, *kosmos*, order (etymology taken from art historian and performance artist, Joanna Frueh, 1996:161).

Since the language I have spoken in citing Coetzee's novel freezes into a position of pliant compliance the woman/women supposedly positioned to learn from David Lurie's meditations/mediations; and since I have already, flamboyantly, identified myself with this woman, these women of colour, I arrogate to myself the right to end this article by means of a foregrounding of modalities of the body which might resist Coetzee's forcible reinscription of the female body under patriarchy. In defiance of the pointed putting on display of David Lurie's tortured male body in *Disgrace*, in *disgrace*, I would emphasize by way of tentative conclusion, *for this time, and in this place, Jerusalem, May 20, 2001*,² that there can be no transhistorical narrative of, say, the suffering body, the body-as-victim. We must resist the body-narrative of being-victim (*how much more so, of being Jewish victim, even in times such as these*), as providing a stable, unified or consistent meaning which might “legitimately” be mobilized in the national cause. Whichever national cause. “Bodies are volatile,” says Gillian Whitlock writing about the conflictual cross-currents of women's autobiographies (2000:3); they can reveal the profound truth of experience suppressed between the lines of the retelling of the truth (22–6). When thinking about “colonialism's culture in particular,” she says (3), it is precisely the contingency and history of bodies which must be taken into

account. Bodies are vulnerable, I add, as I knowingly focus now on my bodily presence in the delivery of my text; as I cast my mind back to the truth of an experience suppressed between the lips which retell, retail, someone else's truth; as I think now, about the stickiness of lipstick and its reapplication. [*She touches her lips with the lipstick.*] And in this, I am not alone: Joanna Frueh cites Margaret Simons recounting her first sight of Simone de Beauvoir: "I was shocked when she opened the door. In spite of looking old and wrinkled, she had the audacity to wear red lipstick and bright red nail polish" (in Frueh 1996:84–5). There is no time for "lip service" (159) to patriarchy, and "True Red", says Frueh (183), is not a simple colour.

Notes

- 1 See also Coetzee's (1985:43) statement: "Much of my academic training was in linguistics. And in many ways I am more interested in the linguistic than in the literary side of my academic profession. I think there is evidence of an interest in problems of language throughout my novels. I don't see any disruption between my professional interest in language and my activities as a writer."
- 2 Seminar at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem under the auspices of the Harry S Truman Research Institute for the Advancement of Peace, Africa Unit, with the title "Is reconciliation possible: post-apartheid South Africa and beyond".

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