

Book Review

Literature and the humanities are fast getting marginalized in schools, colleges and universities all over the world. Yet there is no discipline that holistically explores the meaning/meaninglessness of the human condition, presenting man/woman within the context of his/her relationships, better than literature. Because it unravels and presents meaning or its absence, not by analyzing concepts, but as journey through levels of experience, the study of literature adds a qualitatively different dimension to human understanding. The book reviews in this issue are exploratory discussions of two recently published novels. —Ed.

THE DISGRACE OF BEING

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J.M. Coetzee, *Disgrace*, Secker and Warburg, London, 1999; Awarded the Booker Prize in 1999 and the Commonwealth Writers Prize in 2000.

J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* is a disturbing novel. It lends itself to multiple interpretations which do not interlace in a neat symmetry. Meanings build up in a slow almost imperceptible vortex which leaves at the end a debris of destroyed earlier meanings – meanings held prior to reading the novel or tending to coagulate at different points during the reading. At the surface level, in swift reading, chronologically sequenced events provoke interest in what-next. The pressure of events pushes out the need to analyse too much. Stylistically, it makes for a remarkable economy of statement packed with complex implications. Thematically, it creates an unsettling sense of will-lessness in characters. Swept by a force beyond their control, which could be their own desires, or those of others, their actions/decisions are not expressive of them but of wider configurations of circumstances, possibly signifying some-

thing deeper, larger in the human condition which is both historical and existential. The main events defined by a seduction and a rape are by themselves 'conventional' situations. The characters' responses to them are unpredictable and unusual. This unusualness of response is strategic. It does not tell us more about the characters. In fact, it diffuses the sense of established identities. The effort to grapple with the unusual responses actually provokes multiple interpretations and splits the surface meaning into many layers. An apparently straight forward narrative makes powerful subtle reversals towards a final denouement of disturbing insights. The dramatic ironies in the novel express the tensions that constitute the experience of self. The disgrace that surrounds the two episodes of the novel—David's affair and Lucy's rape—investigates the idea of the self in a complex way. Layers of meaning peel off to suggest increasingly uncomfortable possibilities and dissolving certainties thereby destabilizing assumed positions.

At one level, the narrative relates to a particular kind of historical experience. The experience of history as conflict, the demolition of one culture by another and the consequent protest, both marked by violence. The history of racial tension, the colonization of Blacks by Whites and the retaliation. There is almost an allegorical simplicity in the explanation offered by David; 'It was history speaking through them. A history of wrong. . . . It came down from their ancestors.' Vengeance and retribution. And an obvious irony in the Whites' assumptions that the Blacks they employ are dependent on them. . . . Clearly they are not and clearly they call the shots. There may also be a suggestion that in this process of historical retribution the Whites have to come down to rock bottom and then try to start life again for them to realise what they have inflicted on the Blacks.

But this is not just about historical retribution. There is a counter colonization by the colonized. The oppressed becomes the oppressor. It becomes a brutal negation of the possibility of freedom as a historical experience. Historically, communities remain divided and relate only through various forms of domination. There are only obvious or concealed pulses of domination and their relationship is purely contingent. A historical inequality is levelled by a similar inequality at another point in history, a strange equality constituted of inequalities.

In an even more complex manner, the oppressed, passive at one level, are, at another, active in the construction of their situation, of their oppression. Lucy looks upon the assault on herself as 'the price one has to pay for staying on': 'They see me as owing something. They

see themselves as debt-collectors, as tax collectors.' Interesting that Lucy refers to the rapists as tax collectors. There is almost a legitimization of oppression by the victim herself. There is no idealization of suffering. There is in fact no suffering. This is the startling realization. The anguish is in the strange, dry inability to suffer. The victims come quickly to terms with their suffering. Suffering gets distanced from the subject. The victim adjusts to her experience of suffering and seeks to convert it into an advantage. This is a curious mixture of exploitation and dependence. This is true at the historical and existential levels. The nature of suffering is a commentary at the historical level on the complicity between the colonizer and the colonized that blurs the distinction between them.

It is evident that the theme of colonization goes beyond its narrative context of racial antagonism. It underlines the way human being, relate to each other particularly as men and women and in the final analysis as they relate to themselves. In each case there is an acceptance of the terms of domination by denying or refusing to acknowledge the suffering that it implies. Thus, rape is at one level a violent indictment of White domination. At another level it is also a comment on the unequal nature of sexual relationship. Sex is always an act of domination, a colonization of the woman by the man by subjugating her body, and from a woman's point of view the nature of all sexual encounters between a man and a woman is like rape. "When it comes to men and sex, David, nothing surprises me any more. Maybe for men, hating the woman makes sex more exciting. You are a man, you ought to know. When you have sex with someone strange—when you trap her, hold her down, get her under you, put all your weight on her—isn't it a bit like killing? Pushing the knife, afterwards leaving the body behind covered in blood—doesn't it feel like murder, like getting away with it?" When Lucy says this, David wonders: Are she and he on the same side? They are not. They can never be. Lucy and David stand eternally divided, despite their bonds of race, culture and family. Because she is a woman and he is a man. He ought to know what doing rape is like. But he can never understand what she feels. As he realizes, 'If he loses himself, be there, be the men, inhabit them, fill them with the ghost of himself. The question is does he have it in him to be the woman?'

To that extent, David's sense of disgrace cannot be the same as Lucy's. It is not the disgrace of subjugation. It is the disgrace of being caught as Rosalind says, with his pants down; a judgement that ironically

subverts his sense of an unfinished melody. Lucy as a woman experiences the humiliation of 'subjection. Subjugation'. This is different from 'slavery'. David sees the implication of rape only as racist violence. For Lucy it is a threat to her identity as a person. She stays on because to leave is defeat. From a feminist standpoint, by accepting the consequences of her rape and making peace with her circumstances, Lucy actually attempts to subvert the male logic of rape. To overcome the effect of the male murder weapon (purring between their legs) accepting her sexual humiliation and agreeing to marry Perrus is her way of shedding herself of all her sexual vulnerability. Refusing to behave like a conventional rape victim, she denies the power of subjugation/annihilation that rape carries. A man dominates a woman by assuming her to be defined completely by her sexual identity as he sees it, which for him also constitutes her weakness vis-à-vis him and, so, her source of shame. If a woman refuses to feel the shame of sexual violation, in a way she negates the man's sense of power rooted in his sexual consciousness. There is of course tremendous ambivalence in a situation that suggests that women can counter the disgrace of rape by simply refusing to feel disgraced. Or that obliterating one's sexual identity, undebasing oneself to a 'ground' level, is a better way of dealing with male aggression than asserting one's subjectivity, of which sexual sensitivities are an important integral part.

Colonization here is both expulsion and possession, displacement and fixation. The expulsion of someone from one's world through hostility is one obvious kind of colonization. The inverse of this is possession or assimilation. Fix the other within one's world by statising it through a dependent identity. There is rejection and reduction in both forms of colonization. The former may, perhaps, still leave space for protest and counter statement. The latter, even more painfully, completely annihilates through assimilation and this is what *Disgrace* deals with. This is the disgrace that the novel invokes, deepening from a sense of social/cultural ostracism, nauseatingly, to the final disgrace of not feeling one's disgrace—a state of complete extinction of subjectivity.

In examining the theme of colonization what is disturbing is the realization that the novel does, at one level, connive at the myth of the superior White race. This comes out surprisingly but surely. There is an unequal representation of the Whites and the Blacks. The Whites carry sympathy, the Blacks provoke condemnation. There is a clear contrast between the behaviour of the Whites and the Blacks in every

respect. David, a White, seduces a black woman. A gang of Black men rape a White woman, his daughter. At one level, the White Black action equals out. At another, it remains unequal and points to the superiority of the Whites. David's action has a measure of human concern and honesty in it. He ascribes a sense of value to his brief affair with Melanie. He is aware of the difficult position he has put her in and wants to help in the way he thinks he can. His refusal to apologize for it and his willingness to accept his expulsion express a strong sense of integrity and principles based on a conviction of individual autonomy as inviolate and not susceptible to public haranguing. David's willingness to accept responsibility for his act, the fact that he does not betray Melanie's own willing complicity, his acceptance of his humiliating indictment as price for not giving up his own convictions, all invest his actions with a dignity and courage that inverses the relationship between the apparent righteousness of the public indictment and the reprehensibility of his action. It is evident that his refusal to apologize expresses not his reprobate obstinacy but his adherence to his own convictions about his action. When the news reporter misunderstands his remark about his feeling enriched by his affair, there is a clear contrast between his honesty and his sense of 'something generous that was doing its best to flower' and the external perception of it. A certain sympathy stirs for him in his apology to Melanie's family. In the entire incident of the apology, the Black response evinced through Melanie's father appears pompously self-righteous, more as a sense of slight to the ego than a deep moral outrage. The White conduct, on the other hand, expressed through David, carries tremendous dignity that makes the wrong doer look right. There is an abdication of ego in an apology that carries the knowledge that there is no understanding, no exoneration, but is willing to accept condescension and complacent self-righteousness as inevitable to its condition. All this, while a curious, almost romantic attraction continues to beset him that gives a kind of poignancy to his way of relating to Melanie. Melanie, the Black victim, on the contrary becomes the villain. Melanie's willingness makes her complaint against David appear dishonest. Her dishonesty contrasts sharply with David's honesty and alienates sympathy. David's actions have a peculiar indifference to a calculated sense of self-interest. He rejects apology at the cost of his job and honour but apologizes on his own emotional impulse. A man who begins as a drifter, a nonchalant immigrant through states of temporary sensations, becomes an emotionally

complex person who compels respect. The White seducer ends up a hero. Consider also the contrast between Melanie's and Lucy's reactions to their seduction/rape. Melanie actually prospers. Lucy is virtually dead. Melanie thrives after demolishing her White 'antagonist' through an accusation that suppresses her own complicity. Lucy is dishonest in suppressing what happened to her but this dishonesty is forced upon her by her circumstances and in a way destroys her. In a general impression, the Blacks get presented in a manner half farcical, half menacing. Consider any Black figure—Pollux or Perrus, for example—devious, under-developed, deficient in basic human sensitivities. Perhaps, by making the Whites the victims of humiliation by the Blacks, Coetzee attempts to recreate for them the harsh experiences of colonization. But since the novel does not capture the Blacks' experience of conflict or exploitation at all at any point, it misses out on the possibility of reconstructing a historical experience by a reversal of subjectivity.

Yet, the novel survives its racist undertones. It moves beyond a White-Black antagonism to a deeper, more fundamental level of human experience. That is its disturbing power. The remarkable point is that while this kind of identification, this generalization of emotion is central to literary endeavour, this novel deliberately thwarts a process of easy identification between the reader and the characters, in fact it deliberately makes a reader reject each character. The identification, like Peer Gynt's onion, emerges as each layer of judgement peels off.

At the surface level, the novel provokes a distancing from the characters. All characters produce a strong sense of disgust at one point or the other. One reacts to them through a strong consciousness of not being like them, of even of disapproval, if not actually condemning their behaviour. One comes to terms with their behaviour as not being like ours—civilized, normal. Even as one grapples with their somewhat strange, unpredictable conduct, one becomes slowly aware that what is holding our interest in them is not their difference from us but our identification with them. Watching them is like slowly, inevitably, surreptitiously, watching ourselves—watching voyeuristically our own emotions play out their true character unrestrained, unimposed by a superior, civilized self. What we indict in others is what we secretly indulge in ourselves—not one but all conflicting contradictory emotions. This compelling, compulsive voyeurism turns into a kind of a horror film, as we slowly recognize our own faces in the most repellent of acts. We come to terms, reluctantly, ruthlessly

with what we condemn in others, because we see our own emotions and our own lives in their suffering, their humiliation, their exploitation, their desire for freedom and their resignation. Our identification with them is not through events. These, in fact, distance. The identification is through a low churning of emotions, resolving themselves in a complete reduction of our sense of our life and of our self into a sense of disgrace. Neither profoundly felt, nor intensely experienced, just a flat neutral disgrace.

Can there be a flat neutral disgrace?

This leads one on to examine the idea of disgrace in terms of the relationship between the private, individual self and the public world governed by a conventional tacit framework of consensus. David's disgrace is of one who violates this framework by inflicting his sexual will on a person who (at a point) protests at it. Lucy's disgrace is that of the victim, of one who suffers the infliction of such a will. The one who commits a socially prohibited act and the one who suffers it are both in disgrace. Public disgrace is defined by what others feel about you and what they feel you should feel about yourself. Their judgement on you is expected to constitute your shame. David's colleagues, the press, Rosalind, constitute the public voice of disgrace. The public sense of disgrace is what David rejects. He has a private disgrace, which is completely different from the public. This is his sense of having hurt Melanie and her family, particularly Melanie, in not having been able to communicate what he feels. The disgrace is at his own inadequacy, not at a publicly judged aberrant behaviour. This is developed further and more disturbingly in the case of Lucy. Interestingly enough, it is the world she lives in that humiliates her. She goes through that humiliation. Her way of accepting it is by slowly denying it, by rationalizing her experience in impersonal terms, accepting herself in minimalist non-human terms. Like a dog, David is shocked at such an acceptance and self-abasement. For Lucy, David constitutes the public voice, not the public world that inflicts the disgrace on her. She denies that disgrace and resents David who reminds her of it. David becomes for Lucy what Rosalind and others have been for him. Just as David needed to get away from the world that sought to impose upon him a sense of disgrace that he disagreed with, so Lucy needs to be away from David who constantly reminds her of her public disgrace. This is what David does not understand—that

in his act of protection he is actually the indicting world for Lucy which she needs to shut out to reconstitute herself. In both cases, real disgrace is the internally felt loss of self with which one comes to terms only through an excruciating sense of loneliness. This is because the loss of self is not a falling away of a publicly defined self. It is an alienation from what has been internally sought for as self. It is the realization that the self as imagined does not exist. To this extent, both Lucy and David go through a similar experience of self-abnegation. But there is something more. Lucy can accept her non-self existence and present a picture of health at the end. Like the weed that David alludes to Pollux as being. That is her complete disgrace—her denial of her internal experience of disgrace. That is her complete loss of subjectivity. David remains on a threshold. A certain ambivalence remains in David lending irony to the reference to Bonnard. An ambivalence he is aware of and strives to overcome by preparing to wait for Lucy's child as if everything were normal: a visitation, a new beginning. His consciousness of the ambivalence in his relationship with Lucy holds him on the edge of the disgrace of dying. 'If I am still conscious I am all right'. Disgrace is about slowly numbing that consciousness. That is the only condition of living. 'Disgrace as my state of being.'

The theme of disgrace, at one level, tracks the movement from not feeling to feeling the not-feeling to an attempt to not feel the not-feeling. The novel begins and ends with not feeling. But the two states of not-feeling at the beginning and the end are different. David's initial not-feeling is one of incapacity to feel even while he is aware of some possibly more meaningful experience. He is also aware therefore of his incapacity to feel. He moves through his suffering to learn to feel but just when he does so he must realize that his feelings are irrelevant, his suffering meaningless, and he must tutor himself not to feel and to not feel his not feeling. Lucy's initial world of well ordered activities reveals its own emotional deficiencies, after the rape, in the way she fails to connect with her world, her father, herself. Like David she tutors herself to not-feeling.

This could be described as spiritual solitude. But the novel scrupulously steers off any clear definition. The characters appear to deliberately avoid any form of deep self analysis that may yield greater clarity to them of their own desires or states of mind or their relationship with the world. The closest the novel comes to suggesting a sense of spiritual solitude is in David's sense of the loss of the lyrical. This distinguishes David from the other characters and merits attention

since he is the central character. It is expressed in many ways. The way David sees his attraction towards Melanie, the way he sees his daughter change, the way he tries to reconstruct the story of Byron and Theresa. There is a clear ironic contrast between the old professor's nostalgia for a great passion, so great that it needs shielding from reality and his own inner failings and those of his surrounding conditions. It is interesting that David's hero is Byron poised between passion and irony. 'Not a bad man but not good either. Not cold but not hot, even at his hottest...Lacking in fire. Will that be the verdict on him...?'

His apology in the end is, at one level, the result of his sense of his failure to create the lyrical in his relationship with Melanie. What he is apologizing for is not his affair with her. That is the way her family perceives it and he goes through that formal apology because of his sensitivity (a recently developed sensitivity) to other's sentiments. He is apologising for his failure to bring in the lyrical in his love. That according to him was where he really hurt Melanie. That rendered his act with her indistinguishable from any other similar act. He keeps exploring the lyrical in his imaginative construction of the Byron-Theresa theme, looking to Theresa to create the passion he has imagined. But this is a doomed venture. Bathetically, the Banjo goes plink plonk to the lament of a clumsily aging Theresa with an old and dying dog as audience. He teaches Romantic poetry, but becomes a disgraced pupil of the nature poet Wordsworth and instead of the sublime can only engage in 'ecstasies of the unlovely'. The failings are within him and in the world he inhabits. Symbolically, his place as a teacher of Romantic poetry is taken by someone who teaches applied language.

The nostalgic sense of the loss of the lyrical obliquely creates a sense of some sought after value. Fleetinglly. Countered by images of pettiness, hypocrisy, selfishness, tedium, and appetite. All that is anti-lyrical. What gets highlighted is the wedge between dream and reality. This itself is a conventional Romantic theme. Coetzee deliberately deflates it through irony and bathos. This has the effect of puncturing nostalgia, making the lyrical look comical. The woman's point of view in this context is very pertinent, being very anti-lyrical. Melanie is successful and happy and unremorseful after her affair, while David mourns the loss of the lyrical. The affair meant nothing do her. Ironically, she who appears beautiful and lyrical to David evinces no such emotion in her behaviour. There is 'no sign' that she has to give to David. For Lucy, sex comes to imply an antagonistic subjugation

and the relationship between a man and woman, a careful tough negotiation of turf, metaphorically and literally, of 'space', in contrast to David's own sense of being enriched by all the women he has encountered. To this Lucy has a curt rejoinder : do the women feel that too?

David is caught between his desire for the lyrical and a sense of its illusory nature. The 'right of desire' that 'makes even the small birds quiver' instead of expressing itself in lyrical forms yearned for in imagination can in life emerge in very ugly shapes like molestation or in just casual fleeting gestures of fornication ending slowly but inevitably in abandoning the rights of desire. 'Right of desire' is a very interesting and complex phrase. It captures contradictions together as necessarily and inescapably constitutive of all experience. The reality of the experience sought is in the desire, not in the experience. But that also makes for its illusoriness. There is an inherent irony in the nature of desire. It is real only in itself but is dependent for its very being and fulfilment upon an object outside itself. Desire is only so long as it turns upon itself. Once imposed upon its object, it gets mediated and deflected from the way it was experienced as desire. Desire derives its reality from its belief in itself and in its rights. But the expression of its rights makes it dependent on the very object it seeks to claim. It loses its autonomy and its rights. Desire is what connects but between desire and its object remains an unbridgeable wedge, casting a shadow on the reality of both, experienced as loneliness. David begins with experiencing this wedge and ends by trying to close it by letting go of his desires. Lucy feels she inhabits a more practical, real world where there is no wedge between what is and what appears and that it is this that gives her strength. The rape reveals the fragility of her belief harshly, ironically, by challenging her convictions about her security from which she had built up her solid world, showing that what she believes can give way unpredictably, menacingly, to layers of existence more stark, more alien from what ever one identified oneself with. Lucy's firm, non-ideal real world is as vulnerably split as David's world, hung between what he experiences and what he believes in or aspires to. Both, in the end, come together in an effort to deny the wedge in their existence. The denial of the wedge is the death of desire, and is the final irredeemable spiritual solitude.

What remains is a sense of the impossibility of the lyrical even as an idea. This settles in as a cold discomfoting feeling, the feeling of being lonelier than before, alienated from one's own dreams, the very

negation of dreams and the sense of life as being the less for that turning into a sense of life being just that. Disgrace is both the recognition of the failure of being able to achieve the lyrical in life through the inadequacy of self to express and defend what gives meaning, inwardly, and the acceptance of a feeling that perhaps there is nothing that is lyrical; the feeling that relationships are not constituted of any inherently meaningful emotions, but of transitory circumstances that bring with them their own compulsions.

Disgrace is both the failure to be able to experience life as nuanced by value and significant emotion and the acceptance of that failure to the extent of a denial of that failure. Its obliteration in memory and consciousness.

Through the idea of disgrace, the novel also deals with the issues of freedom and determinism. The main events represent the encirclement of life by circumstances that are created by the effects of the actions and motives of other people. The pursuit of different impulses (social or personal, and these are always enmeshed) by different people, will come into conflict, even when not intended. People have to pay prices, suffer, choose in the changing unsteady spaces created by an uncontrollable configuration of circumstances in which their own agency is marginalized or distorted. People choose. But the choice is strangely poised between affirmation of will and negation of options. People get driven towards their own victimization, and their freedom lies in choosing their victimization as the only option they have and, perhaps, the best. That converts their victimization into volitional conditions creating an asphyxiating sense of freedom. And yet there is nothing tragic in this. That is the most unconventional and unsettling part of the novel. People accept their destinies with neither protest nor optimism nor illusions. This acceptance is also their way of choosing. To be able to accept without false illusions, without railing, should really be the expression of stoic courage. But instead of being so it creates a sense of disgrace. Why should this happen? This is because of the nature of the motives guiding the choices made. There is, eventually a willingness to accept any kind of humiliation just to be able to somehow live on a deliberate pretence of normalcy. The ability to compromise to any extent just to be allowed to be—that is the nature of the choice made. Such a compromise does not entail a sense of loss. The sense of meaning diminishes and what remains is all that there is. There are no norms, no values, no referents outside one's own perceptions. Lucy and David both accept their disgrace,

driven not by any set of values or sense of good outside them but by their own, individual experience of what makes them feel adjusted to their lives, compelled to do so by their own sense of what they owe themselves, not what they owe others. This complete absence of referent values makes even disgrace an impossible experience. The survival of life without a distinction between grace and disgrace makes this a difficult novel to come to terms with. Its power is its capacity to evoke a disturbing feeling of disgrace in making us recognize that absence within ourselves. The disgrace is the disgrace of dying—not being able to feel anymore. That is also the point where a distinction between freedom and compulsion ceases. David's sense of freedom 'with duties to no one but himself' is an 'unsettling' feeling. It is almost like being outcaste and homeless. He returns to Lucy compromising his own sense of what is good for her, to accept her decisions because a compromised life that allows one to hold onto what creates a sense of belonging, is preferable to freedom that cuts from it. Precisely Lucy's reason for compromising. In the ultimate analysis all compromises made in the novel, whether David's or Lucy's, suggest that this is a commentary on the nature of life itself. That freedom is possible only when one reaches the rock bottom. 'To start at ground level. With nothing, Not with nothing but, With nothing. No cards, no weapons, no property, no rights no dignity.' Freedom gets defined as nothingness. One can experience it negatively as an unsettling feeling, drifting, not knowing what to do. Or one can experience it positively, by perceiving that nothingness as a condition of living and then learning to accept it. That, however, is not what the novel encourages us to feel, leaving one with an annihilating sense of being trapped, unsure as to where or what the trap is—inside ourselves or outside.

All key themes—colonization, loss of subjectivity, freedom and the underlying emotional undercurrent of disgrace—are built up in parallel through the theme of animals and their relationship with humans. Those who kill dogs—Bev and David—do so with affection, just the right kind of emotion without sentimentalization. "Why should a creature with the shadow of death upon it feel him flinch away as if its touch were abhorrent? So he lets them lick him just as Bev Shaw strokes them and kisses them if they will let her". The conventionally imagined relationship between an oppressor and a victim is displaced. It does not have to be one of antagonism. Something has to be done and someone has to do it. Mercy killing of animals gets to be juxtaposed with colonization (racist or sexual) in a grotesque way. Historically, the novel suggests, colonialism is inevitable. It is best to realize this and

submit to it, accepting an existence qualified by dominant conditions. 'Happiness' lies in that. David is afraid that the rape would have the effect of traumatizing Lucy and killing her confidence. It does that. But more than that it makes her accept her victimization as the only way to salvation. That is more disturbing. David is relieved that she is alive, but ironically the Lucy he knew prior to rape is dead. She lives on precisely because she is so dead. Her living is like the dogs' 'disgrace of dying.' Like the dead dogs she no longer knows the difference between honour and dishonour. David remains an outsider to Lucy's post-rape world, as he is to the dogs' when they have to be killed, because 'he gives the wrong smell... the smell of shame'. He changes. He learns to feel for others as he enters his daughter's world, and then he teaches himself again not to feel. This non-feeling is different from his earlier not feeling. It moves from a selfish self-absorbed existence to experiencing and understanding suffering and teaching himself to accept it. From emitting a wrong smell, David learns to accept what gets harder each time. He learns 'to concentrate all his attention on the animal they are killing, giving it what he no longer has difficulty in calling by its proper name: love.' This should actually make this kind of acceptance an expression of courage. It does not, however, become that. The acceptance is finally not of suffering, but is really a denial of suffering. Suffering is denied because significance attributed to different ways of experiencing life is obliterated. As Lucy remarks: 'This is the only life there is. Which we share with the animals.'

Ironically 'some of our human privileges' to be shared with the beasts, caring and killing them for their good or for one's own appetite, is exactly what human beings do to each other. There is an obvious analogy between Petrus fattening the sheep on his land to kill them for his feast and working on Lucy's land to finally usurp her along with the land; between the rape that renders Lucy 'dead' but initiates her into a new life, a mercy killing that transforms her from her alien existence into one of them and the mercy killing of dogs; between the sheep David wants to set free not knowing what he will do with them and his own sense of being a free man, but with nothing to do. The rapist becomes the father, just as the dog-killer becomes the dog-lover.

This human-animal analogy is not just a way of reinforcing the main themes. It is in fact a major theme itself. There is no difference between the human and the animal world. Certainly not the way David understands it: 'We are of a different order of creation from the animals. Not higher necessarily, just different.' Not even the way Lucy

understands it. Humans and animals both belong to one world equally. No privileges either way. 'Like a dog. Yes, like a dog.' Life reduces itself to a bare physical level and accepting that brings relief. All grand illusions over, one takes life as it comes. There is an emphasis on the physicality of things that do not leave room for thought. Life is at peace and in health 'doing ordinary tasks among the flower beds.' There is a deliberate statement of matter of factness of which Petrus is a perfect example. This reduction of life and emotion also creates a sense of terrible loneliness, of being trapped in one's condition controlled by others, dependent on others, but completely alone. Emotions that normally connect, sympathy here, for example, alienates. The only way to connect is by holding back one's spontaneous emotions and tutoring them to an acceptable pattern. This is the ultimate colonization—not of the Other but of the Self.

The novel's title *Disgrace* is under erasure. This is not just a graphic technique. It indicates the expressive content of the novel. It evokes disgrace through a complete annihilation of the self. If the self learns to treat itself as an object, it learns not to feel disgraced. Disgrace is under erasure in a completely Derridian way. Derrida puts the thematic burden of his writings—'Being'—under erasure and so puts all forms of expression that derive from it under erasure, conscious of the fact that all the statements that he makes erasing Being, by the necessity of his own epistemology, come under erasure. A deconstructionist reading dissolves the self and dissolves the text into a semantic mirage. A novel, in a way, has an ontological status. Its meaning is a constructed reality. Coetzee's novel deliberately puts its own meaning under erasure. All the ideas evoked in it cancel out each other and also themselves. Is it the disgrace of being or the disgrace of dying? Is dying subsumed in being? Is disgrace that ground of spiritual solitude which can lead to the emergence of a stronger selfhood without false illusions? Devoid of social and sentimental influences, does the self arrive at that pure subjectivity defined by a capacity for such honest, transparent, unmediated perception that it becomes objective. Or is this stronger self shed of illusions just another illusion? Cowardice and courage are just the way one sees things. And so is defeat and survival. So are honour and dishonour. But Coetzee does not make a statement for individual ways of seeing. He allows for several statements to emerge, countering each other, leaving one questioning the validity of each assumption at the same time that one is intensely aware of the truth of each. Disgrace is disgrace, is not disgrace. Not disgrace is disgrace.

Disgrace acquires its power by being under erasure

TOGETHER ON A PILGRIMAGE

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David Lodge, *Therapy*, Penguin, London, 1998.

The blurb on David Lodge's *Therapy* says 'A successful sitcom writer with plenty of money, a stable marriage, a platonic mistress and a flash car, Lawrence "Tubby" Passmore has more reason than most to be happy. Yet neither physiotherapy nor aromatherapy, cognitive-behaviour therapy nor acupuncture, can cure his puzzling knee pain or his equally inexplicable midlife angst.' It makes no mention of the therapy that succeeds in ridding Passmore of both. Yet it is here that the novel differs from David Lodge's trademark: delightful mix of social comedy and irony.

Lawrence Passmore—most names indicate something about the character—is a "Thatcher Kid". The son of a South London tram driver, Tubby has put his natural talent for theatre to good use and has risen to all that the blurb tells us about him. Therapies are his hobby, but they just don't work for him. The titles of Kierkegaard's books fittingly describe his condition: *Fear and Trembling*, *The Sickness Unto Death*, *The Concept of Dread*. To rid himself of his 'angst', Tubby is writing a journal which changes form to memoir, dramatic monologues and eventually a recapitulation of a pilgrimage. The print outs from Passmore's laptop comprises *Therapy*. Though Tubby's career has followed the Yuppy trajectory, he is markedly different from the usual commercial success story. Somewhere along his career, Tubby has "caught" or "got" values.

This involvement with value manifests itself in many ways: The "compassion fatigue" from which Tubby suffers, his faithfulness to his wife, his help to the "philosophic vagrant" Grahame. But most potently and at considerable financial loss to himself Tubby cannot sacrifice his literary integrity when required to do so by Heartland who produce his sitcom *The People Next Door*. He has not convinced himself that "greed is good", witness his attitude to Grahame, an attitude of guilt tempered with compassion.

Haunting his consciousness and gradually coming into sharper

focus is Maureen Kavanagh, Passmore's first girlfriend whom he has loved and deserted. The chapter entitled 'Maureen: A Memoir' is an excursion into another kind of therapy—psychoanalysis, as Tubby delves deeper and deeper into his 1950's boyhood and comes to the conclusion that much of what he is, much of what ails him is in fact traceable to Maureen. Maureen that Irish-catholic girl with 'convent-school' scruples who refuses to go all the way in Tubby's efforts to explore 'virgin territory', and who therefore he summarily dumps, is in fact the single person who has imbued Tubby's consciousness with value. Tubby, his life now in a shambles—Sally, his wife of thirty years has walked out of the marriage, his outraged efforts to initiate affairs have failed, Heartland is threatening to engage another script writer—turns his back on the mess and initiates a search for Maureen. He must seek 'absolution'.

Thirty-five years and more have intervened. Maureen now married to Tubby's boyhood *bete-noir*, Bede Harrington has her own crosses to bear. She has lost a son, Damien, a relief worker in Angola, to terrorist violence, and the breast Tubby had rhapsodised about in his Memoir has been devoured by cancer. Indeed, there is something almost Hemingway-like in this physical wound whose scar she bears. Yet Maureen has not given up. She is a voluntary nurse, and a Samaritan and when she finds religion no consolation in the loss of her son, she embarks on a pilgrimage. Her motive, as tickmarked in a form she is required to fill, is 'spiritual' in preference to 'religious'. Religion can only point towards the spiritual. It may sometimes be the agent of transformation. Eventually however the spirit must triumph over dogma. In Maureen it has done so.

In 1993 Maureen is walking 2000 kilometres to the shrine of St. James the Apostle reputedly buried in Santiago, Spain. Tubby finds her, footsore but determined on the Camino, the pilgrim route of this centuries old pilgrimage. Nothing will persuade Maureen to give up the pilgrimage or do it on Tubby's 'Richmobile'. The spirit is willing and the flesh must endure. She toils up with Tubby for company—and the knee gives not a twinge—sharing memories of 35 years. Tubby knows his Maureen now. She will not leave her husband for him. She will not agree to any physical intimacy during the pilgrimage, but as they sit together at Finisterre with only sky and ocean and the Milky way for company, Tubby has his absolution. This absolution is not from Maureen who has laughed it off, but from within himself. At this moment and with this woman, Tubby has found himself in his eternal validity.

The novel ends with Tubby's return to London. His flat has been stripped bare by Grahame and must be done up anew. Indeed, Tubby dose up his life anew. His cluttered up existence has been stripped to the essentials and then renewed and restored. Now there is a core to build around—Maureen, that Irish-Catholic woman with scruples that could also be called discipline.

Kierkegaard, whose philosophy forms the basis of this novel talked of the ethical and the aesthetic as two categories of persons. Neither kind is better and both kinds must seek salvation within 'God's mercy'. When one takes the leap into that 'absurd' condition, a condition that cannot be explained logically, an individual finally chooses one's self. Tubby, the aesthetic, and Maureen, the ethical, finally come together on a pilgrimage. The order that eventually comes to Tubby Passmore's life is in fact a form of the existentialist 'Repetition'. Repetition for Kierkegaard is something precious and desirable and it functions on two levels: a restoration of what seems to be lost and the enjoyment of what you have, "the blessed certainty of the instant". Perhaps it is this realisation that brings Tubby his deliverance.