

Engl. 328: Fiction Without Borders
Professor S. Shameem Black

Harmony of the Flesh:
The Primitivist Poetry of Disgrace

by Samuel Ayres

“There are people who have the capacity to imagine themselves as someone else, there are people who have no such capacity (when the lack is extreme, we call them psychopaths), and there are people who have the capacity but choose not to exercise it.”
Elizabeth Costello, *The Lives of Animals*¹

“I’m sorry, my child, I just find it hard to whip up an interest in the subject. It’s admirable, what you do, what she does, but to me animal-welfare people are a bit like Christians of a certain kind. Everyone is so cheerful and well-intentioned that after a while you itch to go off and do some raping...”
David Lurie, *Disgrace*²

Our world is increasingly filled with ‘Africas’: places, like that in J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*, where the terrain of human relationships is barren of sympathy and understanding, and whose soil is no longer rich with the imagination needed for human harmony. As such, the borders of our world are no longer the frontiers of nations, but lines of race, and gender, and age. In this essay, I seek to examine what sort of philosophical approach is needed for reconciliation of human relations in the Africa of Coetzee’s *Disgrace*. I argue in this essay that traditional, canonical, or Western representations are impotent—and indeed dangerous—in Africa. To again find harmony with those around us, we—and our literature—*Disgrace* claims we must embrace a philosophy of primitivism, which “celebrate[s] the primitive and repudiate[s] the Western

¹ Coetzee, J.M., *The Lives of Animals*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001. Subsequent references will be abbreviated *LA* and cited parenthetically in the text.

² Coetzee, J.M., *Disgrace*, New York: Penguin Books, 2000. Subsequent references will be abbreviated *D* and cited parenthetically in the text.

bias toward abstract thought” (LA 52). I will introduce a second text by Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals*, to examine how language, humanity, sympathy, and animals function within this primitivist philosophy, and within *Disgrace* itself.

* * *
Cape Town

In Cape Town, David Lurie’s embraces a life of compartmentalization. Stimulated by its duplicity, Lurie seeks to inhabit many worlds of dark secrets and dark desires. Early, this form of existence is marked by the geographic separation from Soraya, the ‘escort’ he frequents. He must travel to “[solve] the problem of sex” (D1). Indeed, he accepts human compartmentalizing, as well: he accepts that Discreet Escorts can, and does, own “this part of [Soraya], this function” (D 2), referring to her sexuality.

The fragility of this compartmentalization is evident, though, when Lurie encounters Soraya outside of “No. 113,” the room that seals away Soraya’s secret life. David sees Soraya, “flanked by two children, two boys” (D 6) on St. George’s Street. Lurie is “at home amid a flux of bodies where eros stalks and glances flash like arrows” (D 6), because it is a world whose currents of passion can sweep up and transform one’s identity: Lurie is “all for double lives, triple lives, lives lived in compartments” (D 6). Soraya is not. For Soraya, “[t]he 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” (D 6). Lurie has a bizarre ability to be present, but not *inhabit*, another’s world, and thus, “in Soraya’s arms he becomes, fleetingly, their father... shadow-father” (D 6). For this reason, his impermanence precludes his sympathetic facilities. The weight of the children’s presence, of their incongruous innocence among the sweaty sheets, weighs

much more heavily on Soraya: it is not they who become his sons, and it is not Soraya who becomes his wife. Lurie, as the outsider, achieves only a peripheral human understanding.

David, then, casts himself as the outsider in these compartmentalized worlds, as a device of control and power. He maintains no world of his own—no room one might enter, where he might be for once threatened. He has no ‘No. 113’ where he might have his own specters. For this reason, sex is the consummate physical extension of David’s metaphysics: David is able to move, quite literally with a thrust of his pelvis, in and out of others’ worlds.

For this reason, Melanie is the perfect woman for Lurie, as her “body is clear” and “simple...in its way perfect” (D 19). She becomes is a blank page upon which he can ink his fantasies. David’s sex with Melanie is a physical act of escapism, for when it is over, David “tumbles into blank oblivion” and “comes back” to the world where Melanie “is lying beneath him, her eyes closed, her hands slack above her head, a slight frown on her face” (D 19). Sex allows for David a paradoxical physical existence, because during the act he so completely inhabits another’s physical space, but not their emotional, human territory. Later, his jealousy reflects this *spatial* conception, as David thinks, “*I have been there!*” when he sees her “with knees wide apart, pelvis arched” (D 35). Melanie is a world to him, not a human.

David’s fantasy of invasion proves to have painful human consequences because of the intense physical unification of sex. He intertwines himself *physically* with another world (Melanie’s), but excepts himself from its limitations. Rape occurs because David and Melanie inhabit separate realms of passion and desire and *desirability*, but yet are

engaged in the same level of physical action; when these emotions are funneled into a physical union, one realm must triumph. While David fails to accept his act is rape (“not quite that”), he is “undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core” (D 25). In this moment of violation, she “go[es] slack, die[s] within herself for the duration” (D 25)—as if, in this moment, she has no world to inhabit; he inhabits her not only physically, but has made null her world where she can control her desires. Her world of desires and identity no longer exists, and instead inhabits a realm of Lurie’s dark fantasy.

Lurie’s lust is mapped upon his language. For example, Lurie changes Melanie’s name by changing the final phoneme.³ He decides that Melanie is “not a good name for her” for it connotes a “melody: a meretricious rhyme” (D 18). Instead, he decides to “shift the accent” to make it “Meláni: the dark one” (D 18). In changing Melanie’s name, he also changes its *etymology*. Through this etymological violation, Lurie changes Melanie’s origin and her identity, which constitute the world she inhabits. This shift of a morpheme places her into his world of dark morals and fantasies, which would be the origin of such a name. Lurie’s first act of aggression is *lingual* violation, whose narrative becomes distinctly *physical*.

To justify his status as an outsider, again David appeals to language—this time in the form of the Western literary tradition. He romanticizes his role of the outsider through one of Byron’s poems, and in doing so establishes the Western prejudices of sympathy:

He stood a stranger in this breathing world,
An erring spirit from another hurled;
A thing of dark imaginings, that shaped
By choice the perils he by chance escaped.
(D 32)

³ It should be noted that Coetzee has a Ph.D. in linguistics.

David embraces Western poetry as a way of *abstracting* his actions, and in doing so, abstracting his *identity*. David's analysis of the poem is representative of the Western paradigm wherein sympathy is based upon the object (whether one is human, monster, or dog) and not the subject. He asserts that we "are invited to understand and sympathize" with the creature, "but there is a limit to sympathy" because "though he lives among us, he is not one of us. He is exactly what he calls himself: a thing, that is, a monster" (D 33-34). David, and Byron, base their *bounds of sympathy* upon the identity of the object of our sympathetic focus. "Byron"—and Western philosophy—"suggest, it will not be possible to love him, not in the deeper, more human sense of the word. He will be condemned to solitude" (D 33-34). David will be forced to confront his conception of Sympathy when he leaves Cape Town for Africa.

* * *
Africa

David believes he enters 'dark Africa' when he leaves cosmopolitan Cape Town and enters the countryside. When he enters (his conception of) Africa, the great irony (and the great punishment) is that for once, he is attempting to inhabit a world that he cannot: he is thrown into a world whose air he cannot breathe. Where before he fantasizes of his outsider status, Africa proves to be truly chasmic. This is immediately apparent in the incongruity of his language, and its accompanying ethical grammar; they become futile and fickle in Africa. This is most apparent in the scene of Lucy's rape. Lucy and David are discussing grammar when, as they walk upon three men with "country steps" (D 91): when he is about to come face-to-face with Africa for the first time. Lucy remarks to him that Bev is "frightened of making grammar mistakes in front of you" (D

91). This is a fear of Cape Town, of the West, of liberalism. And this fear of breaking a grammar rule is soon thrust painfully into perspective in a world where bones are broken: where the West's normative rules of human conduct are as irrelevant as grammatical structure—and the entire Western tradition to which this worry is a part. Africa is soon shown to be a place where the fear is not that syntax will be violated, but one's body.

Lucy's rape further reinforces the futility of language. In an effort to save Lucy, David "speaks Italian, he speaks French" (D 95)—two languages of the classical tradition. But, "Italian and French will not save him here in darkest Africa" (D 95). Further, his earlier belabored emphasis on the perfective (D 71) tense seems so silly, and, of greater irony, so impotent—the three tenses of *burned*, *burnt*, and *burnt up*, fail to even capture what is happening: he is *burning*. (Never once does David actually say this.) It is not dainty morphemes of *-ed* and *-t*, which will not help him to articulate in Africa, but rather hollow, harrowing sounds: "as he throws himself about," David only "hurl[es] out shapeless bellows that have no words behind them, only fear" (D 96). If (as *Disgrace* suggests with Melanie's changed etymology) a world's morals are mapped upon its language, what are the morals of a land where the only echoes of human language and voice are shapeless, without words—much less grammar?

These shapeless, grammarless bellows reveal a tendency toward primitivism in dark Africa. The grammar of Africa is not English; it rejects English's need for representation, and *abstraction*. Instead, *Disgrace* presents Africa's speech—and thought—as literal, primitive. Thus it is not just David who is the outsider, the outcast: in dark Africa, English, and the moral systems that are founded upon its words, are unwelcome and impotent. "More and more," David "is convinced that English is an unfit

medium for the truth of South Africa” (D 117). The language seems insufficient to carry such truth—such heft.

The abstract is not only insufficient within the dark walls of Africa, but it is in fact dangerous. English’s abstraction—what is sublimed in Cape Town—becomes dangerously base, dangerously literal in Africa. David’s manners of abstracting his Cape Town actions with Melanie take a literal form in Africa. In Cape Town he was alive with fiery sexual passion; in Africa, he is “bathed in cool blue flame” (D 96). Lurie thinks of his affair with Melanie as in a paternal manner. He even goes so far as to “make love to [Melanie] ... on the bed in his daughter’s room “ (D 29). Soon enough, however, this pseudo-incestuous dynamic becomes literal—as David’s daughter is the object of sexual violation in her *actual bed*. Before, David tried to woo Melanie quoting Shakespeare’s first sonnet, “ ‘From fairest creatures we desire increase ... that thereby beauty’s rose might never die’ ” (D 16), in an effort to assert that “a woman’s beauty does not belong to her alone,” and that “she has a duty to share it” (D 16); in this moment, he “believes in” these words, that “she does not own herself” (D 16). In dark Africa, these words become literal—and Lucy’s control of her body is grossly wrested from her. It is, furthermore, wrested from her by three men, and, thus, “share[d] more widely” (D 16), to quote Lurie’s seduction of Melanie. Back in Cape Town, referring metaphorically to his lusty sensations, David says, “even when I burn I don’t sing” (D 171). Africa proves to David that one does, indeed, scream when one burns. In Africa, Western ideas, beliefs, and fantasies—abstractions—are inverted, *perverted* into something horribly real.⁴

⁴ Africa is the West’s Dantean Hell, where the fantasies of the individual are perverted into his punishment. The idealized notions derived from classical literature in *Disgrace* are thus

Abstractions and language have no place in Africa as Lurie—or we—know them to in our own Cape Towns. Lucy understands this, and understands the danger of Lurie’s initial attempt to approach her rape through abstraction. Lurie tries to rationalize the rape (“*Oh dear, what can the matter be?*”), and in doing so connects it with his own sexually violent acts: “Lucy’s secret” is “his disgrace” (D 109). Further, he believes that she is “*too ashamed to tell*” (D 110), and that in doing so, Lucy is “conced[ing] them that victory” (D 110). He believes it is all a game. According to David, Lucy is “trying to remind” him of “what women undergo at the hands of men” (D 111). But in abstracting the entire event, he dilutes the *fleshy* terror of the act. That is our tendency, too, however, as the reader: to reconcile painful dissonance of *Disgrace* and of David’s life—Lucy rape *must* be connected to David’s whilom violations, the reader says. But Lucy seems to disprove that line of thinking: by rendering her rape simply a part of David’s life, after all, makes it petty—merely a reflection of David’s erring concupiscence. This belittles the fleshy horror she underwent, and Lucy knows it. David asks, “Is it some form of private salvation you are trying to work out? Do you hope you can expiate the crimes of the past by suffering in the present?” (D 112). Lucy responds that David is hopelessly “misreading” her (D 112). Lucy is, at this point *African*, in a sense, for David cannot read her, he does not speak her same language. Lurie is reading her in the grammar, the language, of Cape Town, and, again it fails, because he is dealing in abstractions. Lucy remarks that “[g]uilt and salvation are abstractions. I don’t act in terms of abstractions. Until you make an effort to see that, I can’t help you” (D 112).

seen as sins, and their literalizing is David’s *contrapasso*. We will soon see that David himself realizes that Africa is his hell, where the “punishment is fitted to the crime” (D 210).

The underlying problem, she says, is that it “has nothing to do with you, David” (D 112). David operates with an egocentric frame of reference; everything in the world is related (back) to him. David tries to explain the world, as the West is trained to, through his actions, through his words. This very *egocentrism* has no place in Africa. Just as the English language is impotent, impossible, and fickle, so too are the abstract moral systems that are accretions of these Western words.

The problem is that the “Western bias toward abstract thought” (LA 52) is really an *anthropocentric* bias. For this reason, if we are to find a more powerful imaginative capacity and get outside of ourselves, we must in fact escape this *anthropocentrism* and get outside of our *species*. David notes that we must try to see the world as a “vast circulatory system, to whose working pity and terror are irrelevant”—“in its schematic aspect” (D 98). If we are to view it formulaically, then there is a need to deal with a common variable—the most common denominator, or, really, the *lowest* common denominator. In a place where violence is endemic, it is only in lowering representation to a subhuman level can the characters connect in Coetzee’s dark Africa. There is a sense in which we must first acknowledge our drool, our hackles, and our blood, before we can return to the “big words” (D 129). One can only escape God-forsaken Africa if he forsakes man, and his preconceptions.

Coetzee’s characters thus need an imaginative capacity to survive in Africa that gets outside of the *ego* and the *man* and is predicated upon the *flesh*. Inherent in this argument is one of the darker claims of the novel: Coetzee is arguing that, to an extent, we as humans have *speciated*—along lines of gender, race, sexuality. In other words, our

differences are no longer a matter of degree, but a matter of type. Lucy's rape informs us how this speciation precludes sympathetic imagination:

‘It was so personal, she says. ‘It was done with such personal hatred. That was what stunned me more than anything. The rest was...expected. But why did they hate me so?’
(D 156)

The personal hatred is what ruptures her existence to the core. Lucy was “in fear of [her] life...afraid that after [she] had been used [she] would be killed,” because she was “nothing to them” (D 157). The existential shock to Lucy was not the physical violation (that “was...expected” (D 157)), but rather the fact that in that dark moment, in the darkness of Africa, she did not exist. Her attackers saw her as nothing; she was not alive to the world because her attackers *could not* imagine themselves in her place: she was seen as an animal, a different species, whose consciousness the attackers could no more inhabit than that of the dogs they had recently slaughtered. Lucy “could feel” she “meant nothing to them, nothing” (D 158).

In Africa, when one ceases to be imaginable to others, when one is another species, one is as good as dead—just like the dogs. There are “too many people, two few things” (98). For this reason, Lucy says the rape was “like fighting with death” (D 159): they “push[ed] the knife in,” “exit[ed] afterwards,” and left “the body behind covered in blood” (D 158). Even *rape* in the Coetzee’s dark Africa is different than in Cape Town. David thinks that none of the women who “no doubt” would have called their encounter with Byron rape “had cause to fear that the session would end with her throat being slit” (D 160). In Africa, “from where David stands, from where Lucy stands” (D 160), this *Western*, or *liberal* representation of rape “looks very old-fashioned indeed” (D 160). In the West, no woman under Byron was so far across lines of gender that she was outside

of his potential sympathy. However, in Africa *Disgrace* argues, the imaginative capacity we afford other humans will not suffice anymore. To reconcile these chasms, we must learn a new form of imagination that really *is* across species, as we know it: we must learn to love the *animal*.

* * *
Animals

To more fully understand this argument, we must look toward another book by Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals*, originally given as two lectures. In *The Lives of Animals*, Elizabeth Costello, a novelist like Coetzee, herself delivers a series of lectures regarding animal welfare. While Coetzee’s voice is ambiguous in both *Disgrace* and *The Lives of Animals*, we find ideas that resonate between the two works. Both texts, at certain points, take up the same philosophical rhythms and intonations of a primitivist philosophy that ““celebrate[s] the primitive and repudiate[s] the Western bias toward abstract thought” (LA 52). In doing so, they argue, we will find sympathy for animals—and for our fellow humans.

First, Elizabeth Costello and *Disgrace* object to the philosophy Descartes, and really, Western Philosophy itself. Indeed, *Disgrace* adduces the realism and brutality of Africa for this objection, as the Cartesian basis for identity is ridiculous in dark Africa: the sheep, David observes, “exist to be used, every last ounce of them, their flesh to be eaten, their bones to be crushed and fed to poultry. Nothing escapes except perhaps the gall bladder, which no one will eat. Descartes should have thought of that. The soul, suspended in the dark, bitter gall, hiding” (D 124). Descartes is not at home “in the country...in Africa” (D 124). Instead of the ““cogito ergo sum’...formula,” Costello proposes “fullness, embodiment [sic], the sensation of being—not a consciousness of

yourself as a kind of ghostly reasoning machine thinking thoughts, but on the contrary the sensation—a heavily affective sensation—of being a body with limbs that have extension in space, of being alive to the world” (LA 33). This definition, this conception, provides us the imaginative capacity to see that “an animal—and we are all animals—is an embodied soul” (LA 33).

David’s salvation will only come in his ability to grasp this philosophy, as an indirect way to reconciling his relationship with Lucy. Lucy declares that David doesn’t “understand what happened to [her] that day.... Because [he] can’t” (D 157). David must show that he has it within him to gain a new imaginative capacity, one suited for Africa: if he might imagine himself across species, he might imagine himself into the place of Lucy.

In asking whether David “[has] it in him to be the woman” (D 160)—Lucy—the novel is asking whether David has it in him to be the dog. David must come to lower himself—his consciousness—to the level of the dog. Elizabeth Costello decries that if “we are capable of thinking our own death, why on earth should we not be capable of thinking our way into the life of a bat” (D 33). So, David must avow himself of Nagel’s idea that there *can be* “a fundamentally *alien* form of life” (N 168; LA 31). David must reject, in his own words, that “we are of a different order of creation from the animals” (D 74)—or from the “jackal boy” (D 202) Pollux. He must show that there is “no limit to the extent to which we can think ourselves into the being of another,” that there “are no bounds to the sympathetic imagination” (LA 35).

At first, it seems it is only Bev Shaw who has the capacity to somehow enter into the consciousness or the extended space of the animal. Her ability to do so soothes these

animals when they are about to die, when they are living but about to be a corpse. Her ability calms that terrifying contradiction. Her interaction with the animals embodies the primitivism: she “kneels down again beside the goat, nuzzles his throat, stroking the throat upward with her own hair” (D 83), “looking him in the eyes” (LA 52) as Costello suggests. There, in that moment of concealed profundity, her hair meets his hackles, her flesh is upon his, her human nerves touch his animal nerve: one could hardly argue that in those points of connection they are alien or “different” (D 74). Coetzee describes the scene as if there both transcend of the conscious frontiers of self that separate them: the “goat stands stock still as if hypnotized” and “she seems to have lapsed into a trance of her own” (D 83).

David sees Bev Shaw as “a priestess, full of New Age mumbo jumbo, trying, absurdly, to lighten the load of Africa’s suffering beasts” (D 84). As such, he lacks the imagination to “question ‘What is it like for’ ” (LA 32) him to be that goat. David is marked by that profound “willed ignorance” (LA 20) that Elizabeth Costello adduces as our “lost humanity” in the practice of animal slaughter in the West. As such, he does not like that Petrus “bring[s] the slaughter-beasts home to acquaint them with the people who are going to eat them” and would instead “prefer...the slaughtering be done in an abattoir, so that [he] needn’t think about it” (D 124). However, Lucy tells him to “wake up,” for “this is the country. This is Africa” (D 124).

David’s recognition that death exists—even outside of the abattoirs—marks the beginning of his transformation and movement toward a powerful imaginative capacity. As mortality becomes more salient to David, he gains the perspective of Elizabeth Costello. She describes in her lecture, “I know what it is like to be a corpse. The

knowledge repels me. It fills me with terror” (LA 32). She goes on to distress that “for an instant, before my whole structure of knowledge collapses in panic, I am alive inside that contradiction, dead and alive at the same time” (LA 32). This is exactly the core panic, the terror that strikes at the nucleus Lucy during the rape: she is dead—not imaginable to the world—and yet mercilessly alive in a to the world’s physical movements. She is living the contradiction of body and mind under the weight of her attackers. As David recognizes his own mortality (“all of us have such moments, particularly as we grow older” of dying (D 32)) and that of the dogs, he begins to understand Lucy’s contradictory pain.

As David himself is increasingly anxious of his old age, his anxiety toward mortality is transformed into the needed sympathetic imagination: David, in a sense, imagines himself as the dogs’ corpses. David’s job is to take the dogs to the incinerator, where he “consigns the bodies in their black bags to the flames” (D 144). David “intervenes” (D 146) on behalf of the dogs when, after one night, “rigor mortis had stiffened the corpses” and the workmen had “to beat the bags with the backs of their shovels before loading them, to break the rigid limbs” (D 145). It is here that David shows his changed philosophy, his swollen sympathetic imagination. He does not wish not to see the dogs in this manner; he does not drive away in his kombi and never again deal with the singed fur. In this decision, he accepts that there will be no opaque abattoirs in his life, no willed ignorance. He does not let these animals lie in “the dump with the rest of the weekends’ scourings”—“waste from the hospital wards, carrion scooped up at the roadside, malodorous refuse from the tannery” (D 144); he does not let these dogs come “riding back...blackened and grinning, smelling of singed fur, its plastic covering

burnt away” do to the indifference of the workmen. He finds that “he is not prepared to inflict such dishonour upon them” (D 144).

David then has shown himself to, according to Elizabeth Costello, and Bev Shaw—to have “no bounds to [his] sympathetic imagination” (D 35). One is only capable of “dishonoring ... corpses” (LA 34) when one “refuses to think themselves into the place of [the] victims” (D 34). Descartes, the West—*Cape Town*—asks the question “do we have something in common—reason, self-consciousness, a soul—with other animals?” (D 34), “with the corollary that, if we do not, then we are entitled to treat them as we like, imprisoning them, killing them, dishonoring their corpses” (D 34). David has ceased to ask those questions, has left Cape Town, and Byron, and the West behind, and has thought himself into the place of the grinning, singed carrion. This experience, while to a lesser degree, is that which Lucy suffered: here, David has imagined himself as a corpse, and yet is living the contradiction, for he knows how the corpses are treated. By knowing “what a corpse cannot know: that it is extinct” (LA 32), and yet still protecting the carcasses from dishonor, he is *sympathizing* with them—he is imagining himself into the postmortem consciousness of the dogs.

David’s work with the dogs is powerfully symbolic for his relationship with Lucy. The forsaken canines “are brought to the clinic because they are unwanted, *because we are too menny*,” and “that is where he enters their life” (D 146). Similarly, David enters Lucy’s life when she has become the *too many* in the vast system of money and food in Africa. David proves that while he “may not be their savior” (D 146)—or Lucy’s savior—“he is prepared to take care of them once they are unable, utterly unable, to take care of themselves” (D 146). While he did not save Lucy, and he may not save Lucy, he

proves he has the capacity—the utterly humane, living capacity—of sympathetic imagination.

In this act of sympathy, he, like Bev, like Lucy, transcends the “circulatory system, to whose workings...pity is irrelevant” (D 98). In helping the dogs, in caring for them when no one else will, he excepts himself from the anfractuous circuitry of hunger, and greed. He cares for the dogs “because there is no one else...to do it” (D 146). Even the “vagrants” who scrounge the refuse do not care for the dogs, “because the parts of a dead dog can neither be sold nor be eaten” (D 145). The incinerator is the ultimate regenerator of this vast circulatory system—reducing everything in its path to ash, so that there may room for more in our world; for its perverted generative agency, it “operates six days of the week” and “on the seventh day it rests” (D 145)—like God. David thwarts this circulatory system by showing that pity is relevant in dark Africa. He brings a variable other than what can be supplied and what is demanded into the currents of Africa, so that in his world “men do not use shovels to beat corpses into a more convenient shape for processing” (D 146); for once in their lives, these dogs, and animals, are more than objects bred and sold and beaten or eaten: by taking care of their “body with limbs that have extension in space” David is assuring that they are “alive to the world” (LA 33). David shows that light, or salvation, seeps up between the piles of refuse, even in the darkest corner of darkest Africa.

Following his experience with the dogs, David concludes that “Lucy’s intuition is right after all: he does understand” (D 160) what happened to her, through the black walls of her house. He can, at this moment, see inside the abattoir; he *wants* to peer into its abyss of pain. David feels that “he can, if he concentrates, if he loses himself, be there, be

the men, inhabit them, fill them with the ghost of himself” (D 160). Similarly, his new paradigm causes him to painfully inhabit Pollux: he recognizes that he and Pollux are *literally* similar, and for this reason, David feels an “elemental rage” he has “never...felt” (D 206). He thinks, “This is what it is like to be a savage!” (D 207). Abstractions and changed morphemes and all of Wordsworth’s tomes cannot change the fact that he too was once the man above the woman, and that he too peered voyeuristically at his victim—that he, too, is of the same flesh. Its color, really, does not matter. This, in a sense, is the final punishment for David—the punishment fitting the crime: the literal answer to his sins he has diluted in abstractions.

* * *
Literature

What, then, is the role of literature if its occupation with abstraction is dangerous in our dark Africas, where we struggle to find the sympathetic imagination?

The answer is that literature, like the characters of *Disgrace*, must “celebrate the primitive and repudiate the Western bias toward abstract thought” (LA 52). Elizabeth Costello argues that literature must adopt a sort of “primitivism” in the line of “Blake and Lawrence” and “Hemingway” (LA 52). Literature must present us with “a primitive experience (being face to face with an animal), a primitivist poem, and a primitivist theory of poetry to justify it” (LA 53). *Disgrace* is exactly that poem, and presents us exactly that experience through David. Interestingly, Elizabeth Costello notes that the primitivist tradition is “deeply masculine, masculinist [sic],” and these strains “are to be mistrusted” (*Lives of Animals*, 52). For this reason, Coetzee’s (nouveau) primitivist poetry deftly removes these masculine strains: it is indeed the female characters who first

learn to look others humans and animals in the eye (in the clinic—the epicenter of sympathy—Bev “kneels down ... beside the goat, nuzzles his throat, stroking the throat upward with her own hair” (D 83), “looking him in the eyes” (LA 52)).

However, one might question the power of poetry to affect the human relations that inspire such primal rage and pain. Indeed, Elizabeth Costello’s son John (a physicist and astronomer) questions whether “poetry” will or can “close down the slaughterhouses” (LA 58). He is skeptical of the primitivism of his mother in the way that the Romantic David is of Bev’s primitivist spirituality. John doubts the visceral potency of poetry to combat our “atavi[sm]” (LA 58) by simply “admiring the muscles of the big cats in verse” (58)⁵: “the level of behavior” is “too elementary, too elemental, to be reached by talk” (LA 58). For this reason, Coetzee’s poetry does not celebrate, does not elevate, the animal; *Disgrace* does not paint us pictures of the dogs’ coruscant muscle striations, but rather the image of the charcoaled fluff of their fur. In doing so, Coetzee reminds us that we humans are the architects of the incinerator and abattoir, and thus the agents of our baseness: our treatment of animals inextricably links our fate with that of the animals we mistreat. Instead of ennobling the animals to the human level, Coetzee depresses our notion of what *is* human to that of the animal. Our baseness is not atavistic because it is not *anachronistic*—our baseness is painfully contemporary and ubiquitous in every ‘Africa’ of our world.

⁵ This is a reference to Rainer Maria Rilke’s “The Panther,” and Ted Hughes’ “The Jaguar” and “Second Glance at a Jaguar,” which are discussed earlier by Costello. See *The Lives of Animals*, 50.

For this reason, *Disgrace* is largely about our ability, our *need*⁶, to think ourselves inside the places and people obscured by walls—either of flesh, or consciousness, or brick. Coetzee argues that to raze the abattoirs of our Africas we must first permeate the abattoir of the human mind. While it is an endeavor of great difficulty, the sympathy is our true *human privilege*—it is this capacity for imagination, and not for *grammar*, that might raise us the level of the dogs. Our privilege and salvation lies in our imaginative ability to see beyond the walls—either of mud or a different color of skin—that opacify the human experience. “What the dog will not be able to work out” and what we must, Coetzee argues, “what his nose will not tell him,” but our supreme imagination can inform, “is how one can enter what seems to be an ordinary room and never come out again” (D 219). These are rooms where “force is exerted upon the physical being of an individual...with the purpose of, if not destroying [her], then at least destroying the kernel of resistance within [her]” (IN)—Lucy’s room, or an abattoir, or Bev’s clinic.

Coetzee presses that we must be able to look into these rooms to be able to again *speak* to our human brethren, for in these dark places paradoxically lie the origins of our humanity: in these rooms reverberate the sounds of *pules* and *screams*—the human songs that exist because of our “need to fill out with sound the overlarge and rather empty human soul”; these, Coetzee says, are “the origins of [human] speech.” (D 4).

Because of our need to see the humanity obfuscated by walls of flesh or brick or consciousness, fiction is the medium for our salvation. “It is precisely because [he] stands

⁶ “The response of South Africa’s legislators to what disturbs their white electorate is usually to order it out of sight. If people are starving, let them starve far away in the bush, where their thin bodies will not be reproach...If the black townships are in flames, let cameras be banned from them. (At which the great white electorate heaves a sigh of relief – how much more bearable the newscasts have become!)” from Coetzee, J.M. “Into the Dark Chamber: The Novelist and South Africa.” New York Times 12 Jan 1986, Sunday, Late City Final Edition: Section 7, Page 13, Column 1. Subsequent references to this article will be abbreviated *IN* and cited parenthetically in the text.

outside the dark door, wanting to enter the dark room but unable to, that he is a novelist, that he must imagine what takes place beyond the door. Indeed, it is that tension toward the dark room that he cannot enter that makes that room the source of all his imaginings – the womb of art” (IN). This is especially true for our time, so that we might look beyond barriers of gender, and race, and sex, and age, to the contents within. Fiction is “proof” (LA 35) of our human capacity to imagine ourselves in another: Elizabeth Costello declares that “to write [her] book [she] had to think [her] way into the existence of” her character—who “*never existed*” (LA 35). If we can “think [our] way into the existence of a being who has never existed, then [we] can think [our] our way into the existence of ... any being with whom [we] share the substrate of life” (LA 35). The sympathetic imagination allows the inhabitants of ‘Africas’—places barren of human understanding—to become an author of human fiction. “The novelist is a person who, camped before a closed door, facing an insufferable ban, creates, in place of the scene he is forbidden to see, a representation of that scene and a story of the actors in it and how they came to be there” (*Into the Dark Chamber*). This is our contemporary predicament. Thus, in our world, we must become a novelist in the book in which we too are a character. And, once recognizing that the crack and clink of the rigor mortis doglegs meeting the cold metal of the shovel is the *moral echo* of Africa—of our time, we might begin to, like Coetzee, create a narrative out of our human sympathy.

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