

Reconcile, Reconciled: A New Reading of Reconciliation in J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*

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It happens every day, every hour, every minute, he tells himself, in every quarter of the country. Count yourself lucky to have escaped with your life. Count yourself lucky not to be a prisoner in the car at this moment, speeding away, or at the bottom of a donga with a bullet in your head. Count Lucy lucky too. Above all Lucy. (*Disgrace* 98)

“It happens every day” is a phrase often invoked by critics of J.M. Coetzee’s novel *Disgrace* (1999) as a sobering reminder of how disturbingly unremarkable assault, rape, abduction, and murder have become in post-apartheid South Africa. David Lurie’s tone of voice in the passage above is one of resignation and dismayed epiphany. The fight, at this moment, has left him. The rape of his daughter, Lucy, by three black men leaves Lurie no choice but to accept his experience of the social reality of South Africa as one variety of violence (rape and assault) preferable to others (kidnapping and death).

And yet, if we look at the rest of the sentence, we find that there is something even more shocking about this clause. “It happens every day” is in fact wishful thinking on Lurie’s part. It is the sunniest part of a darker vision. If only this happened just every day! Or, if not that, then if this occurred only every hour. But no. Rape in South Africa has entered the domain of the minute hand—it “happens every minute.” This is because rape (or so it can seem at times) is something that just “happens,” a fact of life in South Africa, something that is simply happening but never, the line tells us, exactly to anyone or by anyone. The day of his daughter’s rape is merely “the day of testing,” as Lurie calls it, not a day one can avoid but an examination, a citizenship test of one’s resolve and mettle that South Africans must sooner or later sit for. This, at least,

is what one must tell oneself (what “he tells himself” (98)), not so that one can make sense of what has happened or to console oneself, but because it really *is* happening every day, and one really *is* lucky to have escaped alive. One can make sense out of what has happened and feel better having made sense of it by saying to oneself that one’s experiences are simply the price one must pay to live in a violent country:

Too many people, too few things. What there is must go into circulation, so that everyone can have a chance to be happy for a day. That is the theory; hold to the theory and to the comforts of theory. Not human evil, just a vast circulatory system, to whose workings pity and terror are irrelevant. That is how one must see life in this country: in its schematic aspect. Otherwise one could go mad. Cars, shoes; women too. (*Disgrace* 98)

Lurie “tells himself” this as well, tells himself: yes, this is how the world is. He feels not despair but something close to it. It is a case of things being in a bad state at the same time as one is trying to be perfectly honest with oneself. The message is that coping with the reality of South Africa is best achieved through acquiescence to reality, not through pointed criticism or revolt. What has so troubled critics of *Disgrace* is that the possibilities for social change are highlighted only, it seems, so that they can be discounted more noticeably.

Still, returning to the passage I began with, the disheartening movement from “every day” to “every hour” to “every minute” will become, given time, every second. But if crime continues to occur ever more frequently (following the pattern of “every day” becoming “every hour,” which becomes “every minute”) then eventually, according to Lurie’s logic, a violent crime will occur every fraction of a second. Could it be, if nothing is done by the government to curtail an epidemic of sexual violence, that the incidence of rape (and HIV? and annihilating poverty?) will dive headlong into the dizzying terrain of tenths of seconds, hundredths of seconds, milliseconds? At what reduction of time, Coetzee asks us, will this happen to every woman at every moment of every day? Are we approaching a rate of sexual assault and HIV transmission (the only other “event” in South Africa that rivals sexual assault in terms of predominance and damage

done) from which no one will be spared? The splintering of time into ever smaller parts is a movement toward an absolute and universal state of violation. Victimhood becomes a ubiquitous national condition at the moment when (inevitable?) violence is given free rein.

This is what the text suggests, and yet we balk at such a dystopic vision. The rate of HIV infection could never skyrocket to one hundred percent. Rape of South African women will never become universal. And yet, truth be told, was there a day, a minute, a second during the twentieth century in which a black man or woman was not experiencing a form of assault (metaphorical or otherwise) and subjugation from a white government? Lurie's thinking in the disheartening passage I quoted earlier tells us something important about the message of *Disgrace*. Rape is an event, the novel seems to suggest, whereas apartheid was a condition. Apartheid is rape on a continuum. Lurie's teleology that ends in universal subjection (moving from hours, to minutes, to seconds) and which had seemed so morbidly implausible when applied to the sexual subjugation of an entire gender is an historical reality that had, so the novel suggests, applied to an entire race for decades. Though this is an extreme position and one that the novel certainly does not hold to single-mindedly throughout, it is one that the novel entertains at the moment of its greatest cynicism and disillusionment (the period after Lucy's rape). Although surveys of South African violence are appalling, in their separation of the harmed from the as-yet-unharmed (the counted from the yet-to-be-counted), they imply that it may be impossible to apply such rational, empirical methods of study to apartheid because apartheid created a condition of unceasing, unbroken oppression.

In this same passage, Lurie reminds himself to "Count yourself lucky," by which he means lucky not to be dead. Both Lurie and Lucy could have become data plot-points in the murder category instead of the slightly better rape and assault categories (some crimes are better to become a plot-point in than others). More to Coetzee's point, however, is how fortunate Lurie and Lucy (both white, educated, free to emigrate) are that their misfortunes are countable—in other words, that they have never been victims of the continuum of political and racial oppression that was apartheid. Even in the newly democratic South Africa, their wealth,

skin color, education, and property mean that they are still in the realm of enumeration. As staggeringly abysmal as the rates of sexual assault are in South Africa, there are still spaces of non-violent respite for them.

This difference—between those whose relative freedom is punctuated by horrific violence and those who have no freedom and whose subjugation is permeated by horror—is what separates Lurie’s own experience of disgrace (for refusing to show proper contrition for having sex with a coloured student named Melanie Isaacs) from that of the non-white population under apartheid. Lurie’s disgrace is bound to a single event, but Melanie’s disgrace is part of a long history of white men like Lurie leveraging their skin color and power for personal gain and pleasure. Lurie’s disgrace can be recovered from; one can, in theory, confess it, and atone for it; one can move to the country to escape from it. The disgrace of apartheid was that it exploded statistics by universalizing subjugation.

Both the passage I began with and *Disgrace* as a whole engage profoundly with the form that “forward-thinking” (by which I mean not only progressive thinking but all forms of thinking, wondering, and dreaming about the future) should take among both white and black South Africans, and how forward-thinking is both impeded by and facilitated through backward-thinking (by which I mean the possibility of engaging with the history of apartheid thoughtfully and productively while avoiding re-entrenching the newly democratic South Africa in a heritage of racially motivated violence that it desperately wishes to transcend). For obvious reasons, many critics have compared the sociopolitical dimension of *Disgrace* with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in South Africa. Briefly, the TRC was the result of a compromise between the African National Congress and vocal anti-apartheid leaders, an attempt to blaze a path leading to a “new South Africa” by implementing a system of public confession whereby perpetrators of gross human rights violations could publicly atone for their actions in front of a panel of “judges” who would grant amnesty based on whether the panel members felt that the confessant had fully disclosed what had transpired. In “Narrative and Healing in the Hearings of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission,” Sandra Young writes of the TRC:

It was born in compromise, during the negotiations for a new constitution, in the hope of addressing the atrocities of the past without recourse to the criminal justice system which, it was anticipated, would prove unwieldy and divisive to South Africa's fragile social fabric. The offer of amnesty to self-confessed perpetrators was suggested as a means to arrive at the truth of apartheid atrocities, while enabling the victims of apartheid's human rights abuses to benefit from public acknowledgment of the truth after years of harassment and denials. (147)

At its best moments, the TRC was able to lift the dark veil of apartheid by affording a voice and a deeply compassionate audience to those who for so long suffered in abject silence. Its 3,500 page report is an archive of personal memory that depends for its profound emotional impact not only on the extraordinary candour of those who were brave enough to describe the torture they suffered or committed but also on the voluminous weight of the five tomes that constitute the report, a weight necessary to give heft to a verbal catalogue of testimony and confession that, if it were any thinner, would feel vastly incommensurate with the anguish of apartheid. Anglican Bishop David Beutge described the process in mellifluous terms:

There were so many unhealed wounds before the [TRC] began its work. The evidence of those who have given witness [is] that, by telling their story, they have shared a burden and found a new sense of peace. This is very obvious from the sheer look of some of them as they walk out of the meetings of the Commission. There are ways and ways of telling our stories and we are not encouraging people to relive and retell stories endlessly and promiscuously—never moving forward, never leaving the past behind. We retell our painful stories so that we shall remember the years that lie behind with all their struggles and terror as the way that led to new life. (*Final Report* 5.9.5: 351)

Faced with the task of reconstituting a nation in the name of creating a harmonious reconciliation, the TRC operated nobly in a great many respects.

Still, as Young acknowledges, the reality was that “many of those applying for amnesty acknowledged very little responsibility, and apartheid’s political leaders have been sheltered by the testimony of those who did accept responsibility” (147). Individuals were given *carte blanche* to recount their participation in criminal acts without fear of legal retribution and with the distinct possibility of being granted state-authorized amnesty for the crimes they committed. Human rights abusers became innocent once they could properly describe their manifest guilt. Rebecca Saunders notes that “it was this spectacle of perpetrators eviscerated of remorse and shame, if not humanity itself, that led some South Africans to regard the TRC’s ‘truth for amnesty’ deal as essentially exchanging justice for truth, or as merely canceling debts rather than exacting payment for them” (101).

Disgrace contains moments of ritualized interrogation and confession that mirror—or are at least relevant to—the confessions made in front of the TRC by those seeking amnesty: Lurie’s hearing in front of the University Disciplinary Board, the failed attempt by Lurie to implicate Petrus, the black farmhand who lives adjacent to Lucy’s home, in the plot to rape Lucy, Melanie’s father’s inquisition of Lurie at dinner in Melanie’s family home, the charged moment when Melanie’s boyfriend sits menacingly in Lurie’s classroom (and later shoots spitballs at him as he watches Melanie perform a comedic role in a screwball play). Each is a moment when the tools for information extraction call into question whether there can exist a form of secular atonement and confession that is satisfying for all parties. Often in *Disgrace* the possibility of achieving reconciliation—understood, in this sense, as a patchwork harmony between whites and blacks, the past and the present—through a commitment to uncovering the truth is jeopardized by the limits of language to describe such a truth.

The question that the novel and the TRC raise is a difficult one. In the absence of a transcendent moral arbiter (God), can public confession still be a vehicle for cathartic self-revelation and atonement, or does such theatric contrition always imply either an unattainable degree of self-knowledge (the knowledge of what is truly in one’s heart) or a calculated attempt to atone that is exculpatory and self-serving? In “Confession

and Double Thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoevsky,” a meditation on the philosophic limitations of the confessional form, Coetzee argues for the impossibility of verbal atonement in a secular age and dissects “how authors confront or evade the problem of how to know the truth about the self without being self-deceived, and of how to bring the confession to an end in the spirit of whatever they take to be the secular equivalent of absolution” (*Doubling the Point* 252). Though Coetzee’s essay was published in 1985, pre-dating the first democratic elections in South Africa by nearly a decade, it remains the definitive explication for how Coetzee imagines the logical underpinnings of confession to function and of what means are available to a confessant to achieve moral closure. Coetzee’s argument is extensive (nearly fifty pages) and complicated but ultimately arrives at the deconstructionist notion that confession—the desire to achieve moral absolution by articulating “an essential truth about the self” (*Doubling the Point* 252) —inexorably enters into a ceaseless self-conscious regression toward the truth in which each attempt to achieve perfect self-awareness is undermined by a deeper truth or by a self-interested motive for confessing that poisons the sincerity of the impulse to confess that is necessary for confession to be meaningful. Language and self-knowledge are procedures of signification that supplant the “real” truth with a constructed one. Coetzee writes:

What I have written thus far indicates that the project of confession when the subject is at a heightened level of self-awareness and open to self-doubt raises intricate and, on the face of it, intractable problems regarding truthfulness, problems whose common factor seems to be a regression to infinity of self-awareness and self-doubt. (*Doubling the Point* 274)

For Coetzee, even as early as 1985, reconciliation is predicated upon the unsustainable notion that one can know oneself, and that even if one could know oneself (one cannot), language, being a system of arbitrary signifiers, prohibits the expression of such self-knowledge in its true form.

Seen in this light, Lurie’s antagonistic attitude at his sexual harassment hearing begins to make sense. What he has no patience for is the

demand that he do more than plead guilty and serve his sentence, that he perform the spectacle of contrition that the faculty committee believes is an authentic and obligatory manifestation of shame. Lurie starts off by saying, “I am sure the members of this committee have better things to do with their time than rehash a story over which there will be no dispute. I plead guilty to both charges. Pass sentence, and let us get on with our lives” (48). After a great deal of supercilious needling on the part of the faculty (“The question is not whether it is good enough for me, Professor Lurie, the question is whether it is good enough for *you*” (54)), Lurie balks at the type of histrionic and fallacious confession they are asking for, “I have said the words for you, now you want more, you want me to demonstrate their sincerity. That is preposterous. That is beyond the scope of the law. I have had enough. Let us go back to playing it by the book. I plead guilty. That is as far as I am prepared to go” (55). Coetzee suggests here that the brand of reconciliation that South Africa is hoping for will not come from a public forum for manufactured confession. This is not, however, to say that Lurie’s refusal to elaborate on his guilty plea is a virtuous act borne out of a reasonable philosophical conviction. His pettiness at the trial is not noble, though the theoretical underpinnings of his refusal are credible when taken as a critique of the TRC. It is only through the story of what happens to Lucy and Lurie after the hearing that Lurie’s behavior makes sense as part of a greater crisis of accountability, blame, and atonement born of Lurie’s personal crisis as a middle-aged white man fretting over his waning virility.

Some critics have argued that Lurie’s complaints actually align him with the TRC. For example, in a review of *Disgrace*, David Attwell writes, “That the actual TRC avoided making atonement a condition of amnesty places Coetzee in agreement with it, however, not in opposition, as one might assume” (866). However, as Mark Sanders has pointed out, there was “confusion between the legal requirement of perpetrators to make a full disclosure and the unlegislated moral pressure to express remorse, make repentance, and even ask forgiveness of victims” (370). Archbishop Desmond Tutu at times unabashedly lobbied for contrition. Tutu “tutored perpetrators in the art of remorse” and “proved

so determined to produce remorseful confessions that TRC leaders from the legal community felt compelled to clarify the purpose of the commission” (Payne 70).¹ To read Lurie’s comments as endorsements of the TRC seems imprudent; to do so would be an injustice to the satiric and critical purpose of the scene. It is more likely that in making contrition an integral part of Lurie’s hearing Coetzee is suggesting that displays of remorse were central to the sort of national catharsis the TRC hoped to achieve, even if contrition was never written into the commission charter. Judging from Lurie’s hearing and from Coetzee’s essay on confession, Coetzee is skeptical that confession, absolution, and self-growth can occur in the way that the TRC seems to imagine they can.

So from where will reconciliation come then? If confession is a misguided practice, what is the alternative? I think it will be helpful to return to the passage with which I began:

It happens every day, every hour, every minute, he tells himself, in every quarter of the country. Count yourself lucky to have escaped with your life. Count yourself lucky not to be a prisoner in the car at this moment, speeding away, or at the bottom of a donga with a bullet in your head. Count Lucy lucky too. Above all Lucy. (*Disgrace* 98)

The sort of reconciliation described here, and which to my knowledge has never been discussed elsewhere regarding *Disgrace*, is different from the form of reconciliation prescribed by the TRC or the faculty panel that censures Lurie. The TRC’s species of reconciliation values the harmonizing of dissonances through a mutual commitment to a more equitable and prosperous future. This is reconciliation as the burying of hatchets, the settling of quarrels, the restoration of good-will.

The novel begs for a newly inflected meaning of the term reconciliation: reconciliation as acquiescence. The novel, in this instance and in many others, takes reconciliation as meaning *to accept grudgingly the reality with which you are presented*. Reconcile, reconciled. To reconcile *with* the Other, to become reconciled *to* the Other. These are the two sides of the reconciliation coin. “Count yourself lucky not to be a prisoner in the car at this moment, speeding away, or at the bottom of a

donga with a bullet in your head. Count Lucy lucky to. Above all Lucy” (*Disgrace* 98). Clearly this is a profession of the ultimate reconciliation: reconciled to rape, reconciled to assault in the daytime, reconciled to the social realities of South Africa.

Taken to mean what I think it does, reconciliation is one of the cornerstones of *Disgrace*. Lurie, forced into grandfatherhood by a dimwitted teenager from the neighborhood, becomes reconciled to his own mortality by volunteering at an animal clinic and attending to the needs of dying animals. He must also, of course, come to terms with his own powerlessness to convince his daughter to care for herself as he would like her to. Lurie becomes reconciled to his impending old age, to the waning of his sexual magnetism, to his own mortality, and to the continued erosion of his power and position as a white man in South Africa. Troubling to most readers is the depth of Lucy’s reconciliation: to suffer rape, to raise a child begot from hate, to become the concubine of a man she not only does not love but for whom she can never feel sexual desire. Taken to such lengths, Lucy’s reconciliation brands her as a Christ figure. The sins of South Africa are heaped on her body, and she, for better or worse, bears them in near silence. This may be why Christ screamed out to his Father when nailed to the cross, so that he would not appear reconciled to his fate. Here, Christ hangs silently, or to be more accurate, he bites his tongue. Coetzee sees acquiescent reconciliation as a sad but more appropriate and realistic near future for a nation still climbing out of segregation.

Furthermore, Coetzee’s thoughts on the expressiveness of the perfect tense support a philosophy of acquiescence. “Two weeks ago,” Coetzee writes of Lurie, “he was in a classroom explaining to the bored youth of the country the distinction between *drink* and *drink up*, *burned* and *burnt*. The perfective, signifying an action carried through to its conclusion. How far away it all seems! I live, I have lived, I lived” (*Disgrace* 71). If the perfective signifies “an action carried through to its completion,” then to have become utterly reconciled to reality in the way I have been describing is acquiescence taken to its logical conclusion. This is a politics of the perfective, in which acquiescence shows itself to be sincere and legitimate by being carried to its finish. Acquiescence that is

buffered by sentimental pretensions or bogged down in tired ideological battles is nothing more than reconciliation in the TRC mold.

However, for Coetzee, acquiescent reconciliation is more complex than just complete, unconditional assent. As Attwell has written about Coetzee's use of the perfect tense in *Disgrace*, "A more complete description of the perfective would note that the action has been carried through to its conclusion in the recent, rather than the distant, past and that its consequences are still very much in evidence" (865). This is very much the case with reconciliation in *Disgrace*. Acquiescence, however conclusively arrived at, does not eclipse the knowledge of the evils that gave rise to the realities now submitted to and does not necessarily signal the prompt beginning of a more prosperous and socially responsible future. Reconciliation as a political philosophy is "the embodiment of the perfective" (Attwell 865) because the reality acquiesced to is understood as, and felt to be, the direct result of the recent past. The world is a constant reminder that past wrongs have not been taken to their completion. Apartheid is far from being in the perfect tense. Whatever hope there is for peace and racial harmony can only lie in the near future, where small gains will be made through a continued willingness to live with the consequences of recent mistakes.

This version of reconciliation is a life philosophy derived from Nietzsche, an affirmation of difference that supplants a secure epistemology for discerning stable truths. It is, after all, Zarathustra who speaks of "[s]omething higher than all reconciliation" (Nietzsche 202). What Zarathustra is speaking of is affirmation, "something higher than all developed, resolved, and suppressed contradiction" (Deleuze 16). Historical schisms are utterly submitted to, rather than being "resolved" or "suppressed" so as to paper over contradictions. Just as Nietzsche sought to neutralize "*ressentiment* (it's your fault) and bad conscience (it's my fault) and their common fruit (responsibility)" (Deleuze 20), Coetzee repeatedly voices in *Disgrace* and in his later novels his misgivings about truces of any kind. As Lucy says, "You tell what happened to you. I tell what happened to me" (99). This is a pact that the novel never breaks. This is not simply the acknowledgment of injustices for which there are no adequate reparations but a confirmation of irropa-

rable difference that, because it submits fully to hopelessness (does not dare ask for forgiveness it does not deserve), begins to build anew from the present forward. Lucy says,

Yes, I agree, it is humiliating. But perhaps that is a good point to start from again. Perhaps that is what I must learn to accept. To start at ground level. With nothing. Not with nothing but. With nothing. No cards, no weapons, no property, no rights, no dignity. (205)

This sort of forward-thinking is bleak. It has upset many critics, especially female critics, who see Lucy's mute subjugation "as involving the subjection of the female body, as part of a long history of female exploitation of which the narrative itself takes note" (Boehmer 344). This is too narrow a reading, I think. It ignores the value that the novel places on non-verbal reconciliation, which is exemplified most poignantly in the dignity that is bestowed upon the dying dogs under Bev Shaw's care. In an interview with David Attwell, Coetzee states his case straightforwardly:

Let me put it baldly: in South Africa it is not possible to deny the authority of suffering and therefore of the body. It is not possible, not for logical reasons, not for ethical reasons (I would not assert the ethical superiority of pain over pleasure), but for political reasons, for reasons of power. And let me again be unambiguous: it is not that one *grants* the authority of the suffering body: the suffering body *takes* this authority: that is its power. To use other words: its power is undeniable. (*Doubling the Point* 248)

This deferment to the body in matters of truth has the effect of ranking some forms of reconciliation over others. Returning to the passage I began with, Lurie's concession that one must become reconciled to those things that "happen every day" is, in fact, a positive movement away from the performance of confession. However, because the reconciliation itself is verbalized by Lurie, it cannot be privileged over the corporeality of Lucy's reconciliation. As the formal construction of the

sentence demonstrates, Lurie's reconciliation ("Count yourself lucky"), despite seeking to resign itself to the violent whirlwind that whites brought upon themselves and thus must suffer through, is nevertheless entrapped in a regression toward annihilation (moving ever closer to a point of ubiquitous violence, a possibility carried in Lurie's intoning of "every day," "every hour," "every minute").

In *Disgrace*, reconciliation to social realities—particularly those of the body—is proffered as a lumbering movement toward a more viable future. It will always remain difficult to understand how acquiescence to a racially motivated comeuppance (Lucy's rape, which the novel suggests is historically motivated) could be one part of a prescription for how South Africa can move forward after apartheid. This is because it is not a solution that Coetzee offers us but a workable beginning point from which to build—utter reconciliation to reaping what one has sown. The novel seems to presume the very worst about human nature and about what sort of psychological violence must come from a long history of humiliation and proceeds from there.

This process is what Coetzee has elsewhere called "truth-directedness," which "arises out of an attentiveness and responsiveness to an inner impulse" (*Doubling the Point* 261). Though Coetzee never clearly expands upon what he means by "inner impulse," it seems that this inner impulse, because it is something *felt* (not thought) and visceral (not articulated), it transcends the self-deception of confession. This inner impulse, understood as forward-thinking and connected to the body, seems in many respects to be embodied in Lucy's unborn child. Half-black and half-white, it is the outgrowth of epic historical currents and the "inner impulse" governing Lucy's inchoate but unflinching belief that she must keep the child and not abandon the farm. The child's experience may function as a litmus test for the post-Apartheid experience. The form that reconciliation takes within its body (on its body) may indicate the future fortunes of South Africa. Let's hope for it.

Notes

- 1 One such exchange between Tutu and Winnie Mandela illustrates this point perfectly.

TUTU: There are people out there who want to embrace you. I ... I still embrace you because I love you and I love you very deeply. There are many out there who would have wanted to do so, if you were able to bring yourself to say: "Something went wrong." And to say: "I'm sorry. I'm sorry for my part in what went wrong." I beg you! I beg you! I beg you! Please! You are a great person and you don't know how your greatness would be enhanced if you had to say: "Sorry. Things went wrong. Forgive me." I beg you!

WINNIE MANDELA: I am saying it is true. Things went horribly wrong. For that I am sorry. (Payne 70)

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