

“No country, this, for old men”: A View of the Aging Artist through Intertexts in J. M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*

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ABSTRACT

J. M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace* (1999) features two emblematic modernist representations of the aging artist, William Butler Yeats’s “Sailing to Byzantium” and T. S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” which have not been given enough critical attention. Focusing on the Romantic notions underlying David Lurie’s worldview, current critical discourse, with the notable exception of Mike Marais, suggests that Lurie’s career follows the patterns of the Bildungsroman. Taking its cue from Marais, the present intertextual reading discusses Lurie’s “anti-Bildungsroman” in the light of the novel’s non-Romantic intertexts. It argues that they highlight, on the one hand, Lurie’s chiasmic thought-processes, which are likely to bracket any progress or development. On the other hand, they reveal his (self)-ageism and the entrenched ageism of the literary tradition he relies on. Those, in turn, also give a pessimistic prognosis of his discovering a protective discourse or worldview which would allow him—and post-apartheid South Africa—to “age gracefully.” Likewise, they manifest yet another aspect of the novel’s unreliable narration, which—unlike Lurie’s sexism and racism—is rooted in so universal fears that, instead of alienating readers from his perspective, it makes his bleak vision of post-apartheid South Africa even more compelling. (AR)

KEYWORDS: (self)-ageism, unreliable narration, intertextuality, anti-Bildung, chiasmus



At fifty-two, a scholar of Romantic poetry and the writer of an opera about Byron, David Lurie, the protagonist of J. M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace* (1999), clearly qualifies as an aging artist figure. Indeed, in the study that most sharply focuses on aging in *Disgrace* up to date, Robert Scott Stewart and Michael Manson argue that it is a novel about aging at two levels: it is a story about the rather “stereotypical” personal crisis of “a middle aged white man” (169, 175), and it is an “obliquely” political narrative about the capability of the post-apartheid South African state to age gracefully (169). Key to both, they propose, is a need for a “radical shift from a European based liberal conception of the self to one that is more community based and relational” (169–70). Such a shift, they argue, might enable Lurie to overcome his central failure: his inability to sympathize with others and treat them not as

abstractions (176–77) but as subjects, to recognize them as the other (170). Limited as Lurie’s development in this respect is, Margot Beard demonstrates—in contrast with Stewart and Manson—the centrality of the European literary tradition to it: in her reading the trajectory of Lurie’s *Bildung* leads from misreading to understanding Wordsworth and Byron, Lurie’s “dead masters,” and particularly the “empathetic imagination” crucial to the Romantic vision of morality and creativity (63–73). In this context, Beard also draws attention to the fact that Lurie broadens his conception of disgrace to mean “a state of being” (Coetzee, *Disgrace* 172), thus evidencing a Wordsworthian reading of the term, since the Romantic poet thought that “the state of being without grace is the condition of us all and the beneficence of grace is a gift rarely bestowed and never guaranteed” (66).

In my view, Beard’s reading exposes a third level of interpretation for the disgrace of aging in Coetzee’s text which both Stewart and Manson and she herself ignore: *Disgrace* in many ways is about death, and not only does it represent aging as a problem of middle-aged men but also uses it as the image of the shared human condition—it meditates on whether life, the time allotted to humans in general, is anything else but the disgraceful ante-room of death. And that meditation—owing largely to the inherently ageist discourse of the unreliable focalizer—ends on a much less optimistic note than readings focused on Lurie’s development would suggest. While those interpretations highlight Lurie’s empathy to the euthanized dogs, which is evidenced, for instance, in the last chapter, and the Wordsworthian overtones of his last scene with Lucy, his ageism surfaces in the proliferation of negative stereotypes in his vision of himself and in his evocation of a set of intertexts from outside Romanticism.¹ These, on the one hand, deny a lasting nature to any insight within the novel’s fictional world by unmasking the inherently subversive chiasmic operations of Lurie’s consciousness. On the other hand, besides effectively undermining the narrative’s Romantic discourse, they also demonstrate the cultural codedness, even social entrenchment of negative stereotypes about the aged, which explains why literature in the novel seems to be unable to provide Lurie with a lasting, protective worldview in the face of his own approaching death. Lurie’s unreliable perspective of the aging artist, shaped by the often contradictory Romantic and modernist legacies together, largely contributes to a bleak and at the same time perplexing image of post-apartheid South Africa, an effect further intensified by intertextually coded suggestions of cyclical repetition.

Lurie as unreliable focalizer: ageism

Coetzee's vision of his mother country is, indeed, perplexing: although *Disgrace* was awarded the Booker Prize, it has received a mixed reception owing to charges that the novel paints an extremely negative image of post-apartheid South Africa which proliferates racial stereotypes and does harm to the evolving new state (Attridge 105). Set in Cape Town and the Eastern Cape, presumably in the years preceding its 1999 publication, *Disgrace* features Professor Lurie's forced resignation from his university position following charges of sexual harassment, an event which is juxtaposed to the gang-rape of his lesbian daughter by three black intruders later on. Most difficult of all is to accept at face value Lucy's resignation to the consequences—as her father understands—in the name of white guilt and historical justice. That is, she decides to give birth to her child conceived from rape and to accept the marriage proposal of his tenant-neighbor Petrus, which will entail the loss of her land in exchange for the protection of the black man. This alleged acceptance of Lucy's rape is what Athol Fugard called “a load of bloody bullshit” (qtd. in Mardorossian 73).² Fugard's comment might be only a more outspoken version of the main character David Lurie's and many lay readers' sentiments. And the two opinions, as Carine M. Mardorossian also highlights, are inseparable from each other (73) because *Disgrace* uses Coetzee's trademark narrative technique (a story told in the present simple tense through the main character as the focalizer) and is thus limited to Lurie's perspective and narrative consciousness.

One explanation for the novel's bleak but compelling vision of post-apartheid South Africa might be the fact that, as Mardorossian and Mike Marais both point out, Lurie as a focalizer is unreliable because his perspective is defined by a sexist and racist ideology; nonetheless, it is still difficult to establish the necessary critical distance from his views.³ Importantly, Lurie's opinions also speak of his internalized ageism, which largely contributes to the novel's apparently pessimistic vision of the future almost in terms of a blind street leading to inevitable destruction, while making his assessment of his situation extremely difficult to refute. Ageism in the narrower sense means a “stereotypical construction of older people, aging and old age” (Ayalon and Tesch-Römer, “Introduction” 1), and in *Disgrace* that construction is a negative one right from the start.⁴ The very first sentence suggests an ageist perspective by posing sex as an age-related problem and thereby confirming “key myths”—ageist stereotypes, in other words—of “older people's sexuality” (Gewirtz-Meydan et al. 150): “For a man of his age, fifty-two, divorced, he has, to his mind, solved the problem

of sex rather well” (Coetzee, *Disgrace* 1). There is another stereotype implied by this overture which is related, but certainly not limited, to the issue of sex: Lurie’s opening statement also points to the stereotype of old-age loneliness (Shiovitz-Ezra et al. 139). That threatens Lurie not only because of his two failed marriages, but more importantly because the literature professor, as Derek Attridge highlights, has “a deeper sense of being unfit for the times in which he lives” (110) and an “immense distaste [for] a new global age of performance indicators and outcomes measurement, of benchmarking and quality assurance, of a widespread prurience that’s also an unfeeling puritanism” (105–06). In short, he feels alienated in a “post-Christian, posthistorical, postliterate” world (Coetzee, *Disgrace* 32). Stereotypical as Lurie’s self-conception as a lonely old man might be, loneliness is a matter of subjective experience not to be confused with, but potentially rooted in social isolation (Shiovitz-Ezra et al. 131), and his experience of that is hard to discredit.

In the light of the negative feedback Lurie receives about himself from his environment, it is understandable that his ageism seems to be directed predominantly against himself in the solipsistic world of *Disgrace*. In the new, highly utilitarian world he can have a special course on Romantic poetry only because it is held “good for morale” in his department (Coetzee, *Disgrace* 3), and most of his presumably non-white students find it difficult to relate to the monuments of European patriarchal culture he defends. A telling demonstration of this is Melanie’s “involvement” in contemporary (non-white) women’s writing—Adrienne Rich (1929-2012), Toni Morrison (1931-2019), and Alice Walker (1944-)—as opposed to her lack of interest in Wordsworth and her inability to remember the German title of a work she claims to have actually liked (12–13). Although Lurie’s contempt for the new world modeled in the utilitarian reorganization of his university is obvious, he cannot dissociate himself from the negative implications of the changes with regard to his self-conception: as a white male humanist intellectual, he finds himself powerless, a prematurely obsolete and marginalized remnant of pre-globalization apartheid South Africa. His manifold falls from power have occurred in the novel’s prehistory and are only aptly allegorized post-factum in his dismissal from his university position. In that sense, his evocation of Romantic representations of the fallen angel (32–34) is both a reflection of past trauma and a foreshadowing of his future: identifying himself with the magnanimous but demonic figure of Lara/Lucifer through the image of the snake/serpent (2–3, 16), Lurie clearly outlines a downward trajectory for both

his past and future career. Such a negative stereotypical self-perception which emerges through people's "internalizing the negative representations of old age that are prevalent in society" is described in reference literature as "self-ageism" (Kite et al. qtd. in Lev et al. 62). The resultant image of an aging man of intellect, a character associated with art and humanities, who feels redundant in the new South Africa, might give rise to empathy rather than distancing audiences. Regardless of its veiled but nonetheless morally unacceptable sexist and racist foundations, Lurie's clearly stereotypical dark vision of aging is difficult to discard as simply the biased view of an unreliable focalizer.

Readers might also find themselves unwittingly complicit in Lurie's views because the ageist discourse they are enveloped in highlights a universal fear of passing away, which probably strikes a sensitive cord with many. This is spectacularly evidenced in Lurie's mental treatment of the already mentioned "problem of sex," which almost predestines his affair with Melanie to confirm his darkest fears. From the start, Lurie seems preoccupied with "the physical unattractiveness and undesirability of older people" and "the idea that it is shameful and perverse for older people to engage in sexual activity" (Hafford-Letchfeld qtd. in Gewirtz-Meydan et al. 150). Both of these convictions are obstacles in his attempts to establish a sexual relationship with the—typically much younger—women he desires. That is, he envisions (incidentally evoking a Kafkaesque metaphor) young women who feel only disgust at the thought of his body: "They [prostitutes] tell stories, they laugh, but they shudder too, as one shudders at a cockroach in a washbasin in the middle of the night. Soon, daintily, maliciously, he will be shuddered over. It is a fate he cannot escape" (Coetzee, *Disgrace* 8). Because of that disgust, the idea of subjecting a young woman to sexual intercourse with an older man is perceived to be as good as perverse. In response to his ex-wife's reminders of that idea ("Do you think a young girl finds any pleasure in going to bed with a man of that age? Do you think she finds it good to watch you in the middle of your. . . ?" [44].) Lurie feels compelled to concede that "[p]erhaps it is the right of the young to be protected from the sight of their elders in the throes of passion. That is what whores are for, after all: to put up with the ecstasies of the unlovely" (44). Consequently, through Lurie's own perspective his own image is established as that of a—not only metaphorically—near-castrated, powerless, undesirable old man, who is unable to accept the inevitable facts of his own aging and death, which he can interpret only in terms of disgrace: "He ought to give up, retire from the game. At what age, he wonders, did Origen castrate himself? Not the most

graceful of solutions, but then ageing is not a graceful business. A clearing of the decks, at least, so that one can turn one's mind to the proper business of the old: preparing to die" (9). A major irony of this negative self-image is that, strictly speaking, Lurie might certainly be aging but not old at all: middle-aged at worst.⁵ Indeed, at the individual level it is especially middle-aged people whose ageism is most often rooted, as Lurie's train of thought suggests, in "the threat of death, the threat of animality, and the threat of insignificance" (Martens qtd. in Lev et al. 57), of which the old are constant reminders. Cruel as Lurie's stereotypical and ageist view of himself is, it partly originates in a fact that is impossible to explain away—the universal fear of one's own inevitable mortality—which blissfully hides its more specifically South African roots in post-apartheid history: Lurie's loss of the privileges that he as a white male humanist intellectual held before.

Anti-Bildung through intertexts I: Dostoevsky's *Devils* and chiasmic thought

It is not so much Lurie's fear that might establish a distance between his ageist self-perception and readers but rather the premature and extremely bleak nature of his views: he is at an age when typically people are still able to "unconsciously sustain faith in cultural worldviews, which enable them to portray human life as meaningful, important, and enduring" (Lev et al. 55). The quoted readings of *Disgrace* suggest that the prime candidate for such a protective discourse, as far as Lurie is concerned, is literature/art in general and Romanticism in particular. Nonetheless, much of the literary tradition with which Lurie is familiar is nothing but the promoter of the negative stereotypical vision of sexuality in old age, which is his major concern. This is what Lurie's hindsight, his mental comment on the perception of his own affair with Melanie as "unnatural" (Coetzee, *Disgrace* 190), reveals:

On trial for his way of life. For unnatural acts: for broadcasting old seed, tired seed, seed that does not quicken, *contra naturam*. If the old men hog the young women, what will be the future of the species? . . . Half of literature is about it: young women struggling to escape from under the weight of old men, for the sake of the species. (190)

Lurie's scandal with Melanie proves Romanticism—at least in the version Lurie endorses at the beginning of the narrative—to be inadequate as a protective worldview against the terror of aging and death. By implication, it fails to provide Lurie with a paradigm for finding meaning in his remaining

life in a globalized, post-apartheid South Africa. Beard's optimistic reading implies that Lurie's reinterpretation of the Romantic legacy brings about a fundamental change in both these respects. Let me argue, however, that the opposite scenario seems to be coded from the start in Lurie's utterly negative view of aging itself and himself as an aging man,⁶ as do his references to modernist literary texts focusing on the same.

The non-Romantic intertexts in *Disgrace* which address aging directly or indirectly seem to bracket, as is demonstrated below, those relatively optimistic readings of the novel based on Lurie's development—however limited it might be—and his concomitant changing perspective. A closer look at those intertexts apparently confirms Mike Marais's more pessimistic interpretation. In "J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* and the Task of the Imagination," Marais indirectly questions Beard's optimistic reading in terms of Lurie developing a true understanding of empathetic imagination. Marais points out that "there is much evidence in *Disgrace* to support the claim that Coetzee has furnished *Disgrace* with the structure of an anti-*Bildungsroman*, a novel which involves the forfeiture rather than consolidation of the protagonist's self" (79). While apparently the plot of *Disgrace* follows an "ethical trajectory" leading from "selfish egotism to cathartic altruism," in his view this movement proves to be "chiastic," "doubling back on itself" to "dispute . . . what it seems to assert even as it is asserted" (79). Key to understanding this paradoxical nature of Lurie's plot line is the realization that he faces the "impossible task" of "infinite sympathy"—one that would be based on an "uncommitted non-position . . . outside of language and the positions that it inscribes in culture"—which would thereby enable him to feel sympathy even "despite himself," even for Pollux, one of the rapists (81–82).⁷ Taking my clue from Marais, let me add that the "impossible task" of "infinite sympathy" would also involve Lurie's taking up an "uncommitted non-position . . . outside of language" and approaching his own present (aging, therefore emasculated and powerless) and future (dead) self from it. His sustained references to intertexts outside Romanticism point towards a failure—or rather a "chiastic" back and forth movement—in that respect, too. Readers, however, might find it rather complicated to dissociate themselves from the subtle intricacies of Lurie's approach to his own death, even though it is shaped by a markedly white and male intellectual's perspective in post-apartheid South Africa. If anything, his allusions highlight the shared quality and the cultural embeddedness of his stereotypical views, just as well as the paradoxical nature of the discourses transcending the limitations of those,

and Lurie's own inability to commit himself ultimately to any saving paradigm.

This chiastic movement of Lurie's consciousness—and thus perspective—is clearly indicated by one of the novel's intertexts from outside Romanticism: Dostoevsky's *Devils* (1872). At the same time, the Russian novel links chiastic habits of thought to the problematic nature of established discourses especially in the context of addressing the ultimate questions of human existence. The intertextual connection of the two novels is predicated on the similarity of the crimes Dostoevsky's Stavrogin and Lurie commit, which calls attention to less obvious but highly significant parallels between the two central characters.⁸ The importance of this Dostoevsky novel in Coetzee's oeuvre and, in particular, in his addressing the political crisis that surrounded the birth of post-apartheid South Africa can hardly be overestimated: Dostoevsky's seminal, tragic vision of terrorism at a moment of political crisis is the fundamental intertext behind *The Master of Petersburg* (1994). The book is technically Coetzee's first post-apartheid novel, a text overtly concerned with artistic dilemmas in the face of death and anarchy. It appears to be just logical that faint echoes of the same narrative should reverberate in *Disgrace*, as if reinforcing the relevance of Dostoevsky's artistic vision when it comes to representing intellectual crisis at the time of a major historical/political turnover.

In the present context, the Russian novel's sharp critique of Romanticism aside, Stavrogin and his disciples' obsession with utopian thoughts of bringing (historical) time to an end (see Kroó) seems to be the novel's most relevant aspect, since it is directly connected, if not to aging in *Disgrace*, then to the political allegory centered on it: to the potentially graceful aging of post-apartheid South Africa. Specifically, Stavrogin's desire for a completely new discourse of spiritual and political rebirth is, as Katalin Kroó demonstrates, directly linked to two central tropes of *Devils*: the image of demonic possession by “old philosophical clichés” (250) (старые философские места [Достоевский 148]) is countered there with images of exorcism (Kroó 227–61)—a chasing out of devils. The “old philosophical clichés” in *Devils* are nothing but the established discourses addressing the ultimate questions of human existence, which fail to provide acceptable answers for those who are—like Dostoevsky's Stavrogin and Coetzee's Lurie—“not cold but not hot” with respect to faith (Coetzee, *Disgrace* 195).⁹ It is this Dostoevskian context, evoked through the tropes of old thoughts and exorcism in *Disgrace*, which not only qualifies some of Lurie's established ideas as obsolete and based on stereotypical preconceptions, but also widens

their scope way beyond their direct reference to Lurie's sexual tastes: "He does not like women who make no effort to be attractive. . . . Nothing to be proud of: a prejudice that has settled in his mind, settled down. His mind has become a refuge for old thoughts, He ought to chase them out, sweep the premises clean. But he does not care to do so, or does not care enough" (72). The drift of Lurie's thoughts suggests a generalizing tendency; therefore, the final call for the dismissal of his earlier convictions and a clean start comes to involve all his ideas in its scope—whether they pertain to sex, race, life, and death, or art and literature. At the same time, Lurie's similarity to Stavrogin, specifically his inability to ultimately commit himself to any discourse of truth, provides a rather bleak prognosis for the potential outcome of his attempt to introduce a new one. Stavrogin, also a character rooted in Romanticism, commits suicide after his failed attempts at spiritual rebirth—a plot element which distinctly echoes in Lurie's professional "suicide," that is, his refusal to defend himself during the disciplinary action, and his final stasis-like waiting.

The context of *Devils* also suggests that the two allusions in *Disgrace* between them describe Lurie's thought processes as chiasmic while they also perform such a chiasmic movement. Both have rich metatextual implications with regard to interpreting Lurie and therefore the entire text of *Disgrace* narrated through his consciousness. As to representing Lurie's thought processes, "not cold but not hot" suggests a state of permanent doubt, a fundamentally subversive attitude, which Coetzee associates elsewhere with Dostoevsky in general: "The outrage felt by many of Freud's first readers—that he was subverting their moral world—was therefore misplaced. This is, I trust, a Dostoevskian point" (*Doubling the Point* 244). Lurie's doubtful, subversive attitude is confirmed by the paradoxical contrast between his self-description through the metaphor of "refuge for old thoughts" and his immediate call to get rid of those very thoughts. The working of subversion as chiasmus, in turn, is exemplified by the same call to leave behind well-established discourses (assertion) and by Lurie's immediate recognition of his inability to do so (doubling back). Nonetheless, if "refuge for old thoughts" is read as an ironic comment on the "post-Christian, posthistorical, postliterate" world surrounding Lurie, it reveals itself to be a hidden assertion that he should indeed maintain an asylum in his mind for discarded ideas and thereby resist the dominant tendencies of his era. That would mean another, implicit doubling back on the explicit assertion—the call for change—in his train of thought. This performance of chiasmic movement can also be read as a metatextual comment on the consciousness of the focalizer, which suggests

an intertextual approach to *Disgrace* only to discard it immediately. That is, “refuge of old thoughts” first asserts the relevance of the novel’s intertextual reading by being as it is, an allusion, and suggesting that *Disgrace* can be understood by tracking down intertextual references in Lurie’s thoughts. But allusions—old thoughts in the sense of being by definition pre-existing texts, ideas formulated prior to the context in which they are evoked—are also subject to the purifying urge behind “sweeping the premises clean,” which metatextually discredits all the insights that Lurie and his readers supposedly derive from literary texts (including the present ones suggested by *Devils*). This might concern all conclusions based on pre-existing discourses, which may all be ill-fitting paradigms for post-apartheid South Africa.

Anti-Bildung through intertexts II: Eliot, Yeats, and Beckett

In the light of the Dostoevskian revelations about Lurie’s habits of thought, it might come as no surprise that *Disgrace* evokes fundamentally contradictory intertexts with reference to aging and the trope of the aging man. On the one hand, there are Lurie’s attempts to find meaning in the remainder of his life through a Romantically based reinterpretation of empathy and thus to create a renewed protective discourse against the disgrace of death, which is also reflected in the Wordsworthian representation of the novel’s closing scenes. On the other hand, *Disgrace* also refers to major modernist intertexts which counter that optimism by corroborating stereotypical views of old men, especially in terms of “the problem of sex” and the decline of (artistic) creativity. If anything, they highlight the inadequacy of available discourses for addressing the issue of one’s own demise.

The first of these allusions to appear in the novel is a sequence which evokes T. S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” (1917) through its rhythm and music rather than through exact quotation: “He is mildly smitten with her [Melanie]. It is no great matter” (Coetzee, *Disgrace* 11). Possibly, one of the parallel places in Eliot’s text is the weighty “Though I have seen my head (grown slightly bald) brought in upon a platter, / I am no prophet—and here’s no great matter,” a straightforward denial of the speaker’s own significance and a disassociation of the aging artist figure, shown as ridiculous (“I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker”), from the Romantic mediators of transcendental truth. The other potential candidate for the source of this allusion is Prufrock’s imaginary evocation of a failed attempt to connect with a woman. It reinforces the connotations above and combines them with an ambiguous reference to a

failure to satisfy (women's) expectations and to the inappropriateness of both nonverbal ("bitten off the matter with a smile") and verbal ("That is not what I meant at all") expression, thus underpinning Lurie's inability—or the general impossibility—of finding an adequate discourse to address his situation. The reference to "Prufrock" in its entirety calls for a figurative reading of Lurie's aging, since it also evokes the artist Eliot in his twenties, who prematurely created the persona of the aging Prufrock as a mask. Prufrock, who sees "the spiritual impotence" surrounding him but is "powerless to act upon" his "longings to unite the physical and spiritual realms" (Manganaro 85), clearly parallels not only the Lurie who is unable to defend his daughter from her assailants, but also the one whose action is finally limited to profound inertia in waiting. Even Lurie's chiasmic thought processes find their equivalent in Prufrock's vain attempts to comfort himself for his inaction with the mantra-like "there will be time," only to find that reversals—chiasmic movement, if you like—are immanent to his concept of time: "In a minute there is time / For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse." As opposed to Romanticism, here the artistic imagination offers as much of an escape from this ostensible action of moving back and forth as it poses a threat: "We have lingered in the chambers of the sea / By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown / Till human voices wake us, and we drown." The Eliot allusion—just like the Dostoevskian—undermines the very idea of Lurie's commitment to a final credo, with the added bonus of targeting Romantic notions of art and the artist with shattering irony, while highlighting how central negative stereotypes of old age are to the European literary tradition.

Apparently, Coetzee's allusion to another definitive figure of modernism, W. B. Yeats, embodies a strong counterpoint to the implications of the "Prufrock" reference. That is, Stewart and Manson, who anchor their comparative analysis of Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men* and *Disgrace* in the two novels' shared Yeatsian intertext, "Sailing to Byzantium" (1927), start out from the premise that the poem is an element and continuation of the Romantic tradition. Thus they equate reaching Byzantium with achieving transcendence in the Romantic context (160–62).¹⁰ Ultimately, they recognize Lurie's changed purpose with his opera rather than its contents as an indication that he might still be able to develop. They argue that abandoning the idea of using his opera for a triumphant return to society (177–79), just like his evolving empathy for the euthanized dogs (180), signifies a potential to move beyond thinking and acting only in terms of the self and thereby "to begin to overcome his disgrace and to begin the difficult

task of aging gracefully” (181). That is, the quotation towards the end of the narrative “The young in one another’s arms, heedless, engrossed in the sensual music. No country, this, for old men” (190)¹¹ can be read as the clue to the final word in *Disgrace* about Lurie’s moderately successful *Bildung*, yet again rooted in the Romantic tradition through “Sailing to Byzantium.” The very fact, however, that in chronological terms this reading presupposes a major step backwards to Romantic solutions from the modernist anxieties and skepticism implied by the allusions to “Prufrock” and *Devils*, which would be yet another blatant example of Lurie’s thoughts doubling back on themselves, should raise at least some suspicions. So should the context of the allusion: it directly follows Lurie’s meditations—quoted previously at some length—on the uniform negative literary images of old men’s sexuality (Coetzee, *Disgrace* 190), which have been shown to be stereotypical and of which the Yeatsian representation, by implication, can be exemplary.

Upon closer inspection, the Yeatsian intertext as a Romantic final word to Lurie’s dilemma and a key text of his development proves to be an odd choice, indeed. As the context of the almost verbatim quote suggests, the poem—instead of moving away from them—to a large extent reiterates those views on old age that determine Lurie’s self-image right from the start: it generalizes that “An aged man is but a paltry thing, / A tattered coat upon a stick” and envisions a speaker desperate to be liberated from his body, which is seen as animalistic and as the cause of his approaching demise (compare “the threat of animality” mentioned among the root causes of ageism in middle-aged people): “Consume my heart away; sick with desire / And fastened to a dying animal / It knows not what it is.” As far as the poem offers art as a solution to that problem, the art the speaker prefers is not necessarily associated either with transcendence or with Romanticism. Some readings of the poem suggest that the world of “transcendent order” is “rejected” by the speaker in preference for the “golden bird”—“a worldly artefact of time”—in a culture that keeps the sacred and the profane in an “aesthetic balance” (Vendler 82–83). The bird itself has been linked with “Modernist toys” due to its automatic quality (Albright 72), rather than the heritage of Romanticism. The straightforward identification of Byzantium (and art) with transcendence is also undermined by the companion poem, “Byzantium” (1932). There again, as Helen Vendler argues, the speaker turns his back on a disembodied existence and “the poem ends in an eternal standoff” (93) as a result of the speaker’s rejection of a final choice. This seems to be consistent with Margaret Mills Harper’s characterization of Yeats, the poet as “a continually moving figure, perhaps turning or spinning

rather than moving in a single direction, to indicate that movement is not necessarily progress” (145). The contradictory readings of “Sailing to Byzantium” suggest that instead of following a trajectory of development—either within the context of Romanticism or taking Lurie from Romanticism to Modernism—Lurie’s career is associated with ambiguities, doubts, indecisions, and going through the motions of progress, yet not achieving it.

Such an implication of indeterminacy is also confirmed by another, though this time vague, Yeatsian allusion in *Disgrace*: the repeated evocations of “Leda and the Swan” (1923).¹² In Yeats’s poem the word “shudder” signifies Zeus’s definitive sexual act, a beginning which coincides with the end in this mythic vision and brings about the momentary collapse of time (“A shudder in the loins engenders there / The broken wall, the burning roof and tower / And Agamemnon dead”). In *Disgrace* shudder appears—apart from the excerpt previously quoted excerpt, which forms a heavily ironic contrast with the later instances, though also links it to a sexual context—twice with reference to Lurie’s desire for Melanie: “on the pillion, [she] sits with knees wide apart, pelvis arched. A quick shudder of lust tugs him” (35) and “[a]gain it runs through him: a light shudder of voluptuousness” (78). The second occurrence is triggered by a memory only, resulting in a collapse of time in this text, as well: the fateful beginning, Lurie’s desire for Melanie, lives on in the present. Though it has brought Lurie’s career to an end, the sensual experience itself is not willing to pass into oblivion. Thus, this Yeatsian intertext brings into relief a collapse of binaries, which results in the impossibility of providing unambiguous solutions for the dilemmas proposed. This is also underpinned by the poem’s open ending, the rhetorical question closing Yeats’s famously ambiguous sonnet on history, colonization, and also poetic creation. Strengthening the implications detailed above, “Leda and the Swan” also explicitly introduces into Coetzee’s narrative the cyclicity of mythic time and thus overtly raises the possibility of a repetitive plot structure.

Repetition, or rather eternal return, is a key element to the (post)modernist intertext of *Disgrace*, which again challenges the discourse of art in general as “saving grace”: Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* (1953).¹³ In “Sailing to Byzantium,” Yeats does represent art as the way out from the impasse of inevitable aging and death, and *Disgrace* repeats the same gesture. As Attridge highlights in his interpretation of an often-quoted excerpt of the novel’s closing chapter, the text associates a potentially adequate discourse to address the issue with a moment of grace through art (113):

His hopes must be more temperate: that somewhere amidst the welter of sound there will dart up, like a bird, a single authentic note of immortal longing. As for recognizing it, he will leave that to the scholars of the future, if there are still scholars by then. For he will not hear the note himself, when it comes, if it comes—he knows too much about art and the ways of art to expect that. (Coetzee, *Disgrace* 214)

Nonetheless, the passage immediately brackets this possibility by displacing that moment (of grace) into an indefinite future beyond the scope of one's own lifetime and consciousness. In that sense, Lurie seems to hope against hope, clinging to a promise like Beckett's Everyman-like characters in *Godot*. Indeed, Lurie's final fate of waiting in a desolate courtyard for the birth of his grandchild, the faint promise of a (better) future and a new relationship with his daughter, and his whiling away time with music on a childish banjo might in themselves remind readers of Beckettian waiting on an almost barren stage. Especially so, because *Disgrace* has earlier evoked a vision of life as infinite waiting (for a child) through Lucy's words, which first refer to finding out whether she is pregnant but then trail off into a seemingly irrational comment on eternal waiting: "Science has not yet put a limit on how long one has to wait. For ever, maybe" (125).¹⁴ Lurie has called his life in the provinces and helping out in the animal clinic a punishment of indefinite end, a "disgrace without term" (172), which also amplifies the Beckettian resonances of his final state. This indirect evocation of *Waiting for Godot* is actually also the culmination and combination of the earlier references to Eliot and Yeats. Not only can the bird be conclusively interpreted as a version of Yeats's golden bird, but also the descriptions of the kind of music Lurie is writing at the end of the novel evoke both Yeats and Eliot as well as the chiasmic movement of their "decisions and revisions." The "music itself . . . , the voice that strains to soar away from the ludicrous instrument but is continually reined back, like a fish on the line" (184–85), on the one hand, recalls Yeats's "[t]he salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas, / Fish, flesh, or fowl" in "Sailing to Byzantium." On the other hand, because of its strange back and forth movement it is described as forming a "crablike motif" (Coetzee, *Disgrace* 186), which is loosely reminiscent of the crab motif in the "Love Song," that is, of Prufrock's desperate cry: "I should have been a pair of ragged claws / Scuttling across the floors of silent seas." It is in a skeptical spirit inspired by both Romanticism and his modernist masters that Lurie is "trying to accept disgrace" as his "state of being" (Coetzee, *Disgrace* 172).

He is trying, but does he accept it? Or does he accept it unconditionally? True to the metatextual implications of its Dostoevskian intertext, *Disgrace* ends, in my opinion, with a gesture that in yet another modernist context doubles back on the above-quoted humble acceptance of aging and death, confirms an ongoing preoccupation with the finite nature of allotted human life-time, and rejects the vision of patient infinite waiting as a version of “aging gracefully.” The novel’s ending, where Lurie symbolically gives up a young dog for *lösung*—one that he feels particularly attached to and could probably keep alive for one more week—has invited various interpretations in Coetzee criticism. So far, however, to the best of my knowledge, no special significance has been attached to the facts that the dog is number twenty-four on the list of those to be exterminated that day, and the closing chapter bears the same number. Taken as a banal reference to the twenty-four hours of the day, the number can be seen as an almost redundant confirmation of the finite nature of the text—of its inevitable ending, together with the dog’s life and through that, metaphorically, Lurie’s own.¹⁵ This strong emphasis on the limitations of time contradicts the acceptance of infinite waiting, indeterminate disgrace and expresses a preference for putting an end to it even as an act of mercy, rather than prolonging suffering indefinitely. The gesture can be interpreted as a rebellion which—by this time not really surprisingly—takes the reader back to the beginning of the novel and Lurie’s self-image as a Romantic figure. This time, however, it appears in the context of the modernist novelistic tradition: modernism is associated with the one-day novel, with the condensation of subjective life-experience ostensibly into the objective timespan of one single day. This is what the twenty-four “hours” of the chapters also evoke: they might make up only one day, after which another one begins, equally rich in “decisions and revisions” in an endless (mythic?) cycle of repetitions. Indeed, after the allusion to cyclical time through Yeats and the day as a reference unit in repetitive structures through Beckett’s play,¹⁶ the twenty-four chapters are only one among the multiple indications that Lurie’s narrative is conceivable in terms of returns rather than progress.

Conclusion

A closer look at the non-Romantic intertexts of *Disgrace* can inform the novel’s interpretation in two closely intertwined ways and thereby confirm readings which—instead of an optimistic, humanist narrative of development and progress—emphasize Coetzee’s tendency of “doubling the point,” a phrase rich in Dostoevskian overtones.¹⁷ That is, tracing down those

allusions first of all strengthens an aspect of the focalizer's unreliability, which is especially hard to overcome: the stereotypical, ageist nature of his discourse, which draws on established (literary) discourses. Directed largely against himself, this bias is something readers might find extremely difficult to distance themselves from, because it is fed by the fear of one's own inevitable death, against which the focalizer, or rather the novel, does not—cannot—offer any unquestionable “cultural worldviews” as protection. The Romantic solution, countering the fear of death by finding transcendence and grace through art, is compromised by the non-Romantic allusions, which, in their turn, can offer a much more skeptical vision. This results at the close of *Disgrace* in the parallel presence of Romantic visions and the skeptical solution of placing the moment of grace beyond the limits of one's own lifetime and consciousness. Lurie's stereotypical conception of himself and his depressing vision of post-apartheid South Africa are thus enveloped in a highly intellectual discourse which partly masks its own roots in the self-same historical context by redirecting attention to universal and ultimate issues of passing time and mortality. It provokes empathy from readers regardless of the narrative's implicit sexist and racist biases and can foster their acceptance of Lurie's various judgments at face value. Furthermore, the intertexts from outside Romanticism (predominantly from Dostoevsky and Eliot) highlight the chiasmic thought processes associated with the narrative consciousness, which discredit all of Lurie's attempts to find meaning or solace for what he is facing—be it old age or life in post-apartheid South Africa—in already existing discourses. That does not mean, to return to Attridge's point, that *Disgrace* does not represent the proposed and at the same time rejected solutions—in this case, art in a Yeatsian context—as bearers of “value” (109). Nevertheless, the simultaneous presence of various contradictory literary legacies largely contributes to the hardly resistible bleakness of the aging artist's vision in *Disgrace*. They concurrently suggest Lurie's constantly shifting allegiances within a circle of views marked out by pre-existent discourses, a process of endless Beckettian repetitions, in which glimpses of a final solution, impressions of Lurie's finding a place for himself in “this country,” can always prove to be momentary.

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Notes

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¹ The abundance of intertexts in *Disgrace* can be explained as a general feature of Coetzee’s novelistic art and as a feature brought to the fore here because the main character is a professor of English literature. As for the former aspect, Coetzee’s often-quoted artistic credo, itself formulated in the intertextual context of Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*—hence the image of cannibalism for imitation and plagiarism—runs as follows: “For it seems to him now that there are but a handful of stories in the world; and if the young are to be forbidden to prey upon the old then they must sit for ever in silence” (Coetzee, “He and His Man”). In Coetzee’s art, however, systematic rewritings of seminal European texts—*Robinson in Foe* (1986) and Dostoevsky’s *Devils* in *The Master of Petersburg* (1994)—in hindsight seem to form rare exceptions, which he produced at the heyday of postmodernism and which largely comply with its poetics of virtuoso playful intertextuality (see Hutcheon 124–40). As Otilia Veres demonstrates in her study of mythical allusions in Coetzee’s four early novels (*Dusklands*, *Foe*, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, and *The Life and Times of Michael K*), fragmentary—and often implicit—intertextual references form a typical aspect of his art that, nevertheless, deserve close scrutiny. Veres’s analysis calls attention to intertextual fragments in Coetzee’s art which establish continuity among a number of his novels. Notwithstanding their brief and impressionistic nature, they can provide a major insight into the discussion of his central themes, among which Veres focuses on “colonial encounters” (19–24). Indeed, my reading of similarly fragmentary and, in Beckett’s case, implicit literary allusions in *Disgrace* relies on the same fundamental assumptions.

² In somewhat more sophisticated terms, many scholars contend that “the novel is implicated in the very economy it seeks to criticize” and thus “reproduces and perpetuates stereotypical representations of black and white relationships in South Africa” (Mardorossian 73).

³ Central to Mardorossian’s argument is the juxtaposition of the representations of the two instances of rape in *Disgrace*—Lurie’s “affair” with Melanie and Lucy’s gang rape (76–80). That is, through Lurie’s perspective readers are encouraged to see Lucy’s rape (black on white sexual violence) as a horrible crime that goes unpunished, while Lurie’s “not rape, not quite that” of Melanie (25) is represented in the light of an excessively and unjustly punished, almost innocent, affair. Key to this effect is the fact that “authorial complicity moves in and out without clearly allowing readers to discern where it begins and ends” (78). Although from the very beginning of the novel “Coetzee is encouraging readers to distance themselves from his protagonist,” they still find themselves easily identifying with his views on events, because “the safe distance between the authorial narrator and the character constantly vanishes” (77). Thus, Lurie’s racial and gender bias remains oblique and largely unnoticed, as if his white male perspective was a neutral one and the norm (79). Mardorossian concludes that it is “impossible not to participate in his way of thinking” (79)—at least not until his reaction to Lucy’s rape reveals how deeply biased his opinions are (80). Similarly to Mardorossian, Mike Marais also repeatedly calls attention to the difficulty of keeping a critical distance from the perspective of the novel’s unreliable focalizer, which is grounded in the discourse of race (“J. M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*” 83–85; “Violence” 102).

⁴ Ageism has both positive and negative forms (Ayalon and Tesch-Römer 2). Stereotypes may vary from society to society and usually include both positive and negative traits. Thus, Hummert's 2011 research "yielded seven general stereotypes, four negative and three positive, shared by people of all ages about older adults: Severely Impaired; Despondent; Shrew/Curmudgeon; Recluse; Golden Ager; Perfect Grandparent; and John Wayne Conservative" (qtd. in Shiovitz-Ezra et al. 136), while Cuddy and Fiske's surveys suggest that older people are generally believed to have "lower competence" and to emanate more "warmth," and are thus often approached with "pity and sympathy" (qtd. in Shiovitz-Ezra et al. 136).

⁵ That category is defined in gerontology as including adults "from 35-40 to 59-65 years" (Lev et al. 54).

⁶ Since ageism often works as "a self-fulfilling prophecy" in real life (Ayalon and Tesch-Römer 2), it can hinder subjects from developing effective short- and long-term strategies for coping with aging such as "successful" or "active ageing" and acceptance of the inevitable (in later life) (Lev et al. 65-67).

⁷ Lurie's inability to do so—his violent assault on the "disturbed child," Marais argues in "Violence, Postcolonial Fiction, and the Limits of Sympathy"—is a "failure of sympathy" (103) and a "failure of imagination" ("J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*" 80). Both surface in Lurie's inability to look at Lucy as if she was a stranger, from a position outside history and culture, and thus his inability to fully sympathize with her and not to misread her (81-83). Marais, however, goes on to emphasize that while the novel "denies the reader direct access to Lucy" (84), it also encourages readers to supplement *Disgrace* with a reading of her that is left "unsaid" in the novel (85-87)—to do "what cannot be done" (87). This is what he elsewhere interprets as Coetzee's strategy to counter what Slavoj Žižek calls "symbolic violence" (qtd. in Marais, "Violence" 94) "in an attempt to secure unlimited sympathy through limiting the degree to which the text and reader's situatedness in culture limit sympathy" (99).

⁸ Since Coetzee's reception rather mentions than interprets them (Kossew, "The Politics of Shame and Redemption" 156-59; Marais, *Secretary of the Invisible* 168), they seem to call for further critical attention. Their detailed discussion falls beyond the scope of this study, but see Reichmann.

⁹ See the Biblical quote characterizing those unable to commit themselves either to faith or to disbelief, which both Stavrogin and the Elder Tikhon know by heart: "So because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth" (Dostoevsky 458).

¹⁰ Stewart and Manson emphasize the parallel between the artist-speaker of Yeats's poem and Lurie, the writer of an opera about Byron, though they argue that his "connection to Yeats's speaker is mostly ironic, since David's art is a failure, at least in the traditional terms" (161). Nonetheless, in their reading Lurie does change and the critics directly connect his limited development with the Yeatsian allusion: they interpret *lösung* as the (Freudian) sublimation of the self (and desire) in art and identify it with achieving transcendence as artistic re-creation of the self in Byzantium (180). See: "What is being asked for is, in fact, *Lösung* (German always to hand with an appropriately blank abstraction): sublimation, as alcohol is sublimed from water, leaving no residue, no aftertaste" (Coetzee, *Disgrace* 142). The term translates into English as "solution," both as in the Nazi's Final Solution (Endlösung), to which *Disgrace* clearly alludes apropos of the killing of sick, old, unneeded

dogs, and as in dissolving solid material in liquid. It is this second meaning that Lurie rephrases as sublimation, to pun on both Freudian terminology and a notion central to Romanticism.

¹¹ See: “That is no country for old men. The young / In one another’s arms, . . . Caught in that sensual music” (Yeats).

¹² The relevance of the mythic narrative to the discussion of *Disgrace* is beyond doubt, see “they [Lurie’s students] might as well have been hatched from eggs yesterday” (Coetzee, *Disgrace* 32) and a dialogue between Lurie and his daughter which calls readers’ attention to the unusual name one of the rapists bears: “Not Mncedisi? Not Nqabayakhe? Nothing unpronounceable, just Pollux?”—‘P-O-L-L-U-X. And David, can we have some relief from that terrible irony of yours?’” (200). These excerpts clearly evoke one of the most archetypal rape narratives in European culture as an interpretative context of the rape narratives in *Disgrace*. In contrast, evidence for the presence of the Yeatsian version seems to be rather circumstantial. One might argue that between them the emphatic allusions to the myth and Yeats—though not to “Leda and the Swan”—indirectly recall the memorable sonnet, as well. Given the fact that the other allusions discussed here testify to the generally fragmentary nature of Coetzee’s quotations, which are almost never exact ones, any trace of the Yeatsian “Leda and the Swan” in *Disgrace* can suffice to evoke the poem. In my reading, the relatively rarely used word “shudder,” appearing in a distinctly sexual context, is such a trace. The number of repetitions and the similar contexts do not only establish the significance of this motif, but also point towards the Yeatsian sonnet as its potential source.

¹³ Samuel Beckett’s profound influence on Coetzee is a matter of critical consensus, the details of which would exceed the limitations of a footnote—or of an article, for that matter. See, for example, Kannemeyer 149–52. Let it suffice to recall that for Coetzee Beckett “was an artist possessed by a vision of life without consolation or dignity or promise of grace, in the face of which our only duty—inexplicable and futile of attainment, but a duty nonetheless—is not to lie to ourselves” (qtd. in Kannemeyer 572). Beckettian waiting is a most prominent motif, for example, in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, but elements of a desolate scenery and futile, repetitive human action also associate other Coetzee texts with *Waiting for Godot*, notably *Foe*.

¹⁴ Seeing life as infinite waiting is not alien to the Yeatsian paradigm, either. See his proverbial observation that “life is a long preparation for something that never happens,” which actually appears in *Reveries over Childhood and Youth* as “all life weighed in the scales of my own life seems to me a preparation for something that never happens” (XXXIII). I wish to express my appreciation to Mária Kurdi for drawing my attention to this parallel.

¹⁵ Through the leitmotif of disgrace, Coetzee builds up a consistent parallel between rejected, victimized dogs and marginalized humans—Lurie and his daughter—in the new South Africa. That culminates in Lucy’s final comparison of her condition and status to a dog’s: “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. . . . No cards, no weapons, no property, no rights, no dignity.’ [David:] ‘Like a dog.’ [Lucy:] ‘Yes, like a dog’” (*Disgrace* 203). Lucy’s final description of dispossession could just as well apply to her father, whose empathy for disowned and later euthanized dogs thus has a somewhat narcissistic aspect to it: he feels for them, among others, because they suffer a fate similar to his. The parallel seems to be more apt in Lurie’s case because of his strong sense of being redundant and useless and his pessimistic view of having only one thing to look forward to:

death. Consequently, offering up the music-loving dog for *lösung* gives a reading of the dog metaphor diametrically opposed to Lucy's in its tone and attitudes. Lucy's words, at the same time, widen the scope of the dog metaphor and thus the scope of disgrace, whether it refers to being victimized, aging, or dying. In the narrower sense, the trope includes all white South Africans, regardless of their physical age, sex, or sexual orientation, while in the wider sense her words call for an acceptance of the disgrace of aging and dying as the general human condition.

¹⁶ Apart from the well-known structure of *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame*, and Clov's particular "definition" for yesterday—and therefore all days—might also be relevant here: "Hamm: 'Yesterday! What does that mean? Yesterday!' Clov: 'That means that bloody awful day, long ago, before this bloody awful day'" (Beckett 28). I wish to express my appreciation to Mária Kurdi for bringing this similarity to my attention.

¹⁷ Coetzee's *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews* includes his insightful reading of *Devils* in "Confession and Double Thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoevsky." He borrows the title of that essay from Dostoevsky's *The Idiot* and identifies double thoughts with a "doubling back of thought" (222, emphasis in the original). It is in the context of this mechanism that he interprets the thought processes of major Dostoevskian characters, including Stavrogin—and his confession—in *Devils*. Most importantly, he sees Dostoevsky as associating "true confession" or "self-truth" with "faith and grace" (230–31). Interpreting Coetzee's essay in the light of his later comments, Rachel Lawlan comes to the conclusion that Coetzee's contrast of two kinds of representations of confession (Tolstoy's vs. Dostoevsky's) embodies two conflicting voices and desires in Coetzee himself: those of "cynicism and grace." In her view, Coetzee "affiliates" himself to Dostoevsky because he is also "obsessed with the possibility of transcendence over self-doubt and the infinite regress of double thought" (140–41).

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