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Language's Grace: The Redemption of Education in J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*

How does the work of the Nobel Prize winning yet 'questionably literary' novelist J.M. Coetzee bear on the question of the relations between philosophy, literature and education? This paper extends recent discussion of the ways Coetzee's literature can speak to a broad range of philosophical questions (Hayes and Wilm, 2017), by showing how the novel Disgrace is open to exploration in relation to education. Working through some early scenes in Coetzee's novel, I suggest that Disgrace points us towards forms of degeneration that can be understood in the light of certain conceptions of language. Yet consideration of flickering moments of redemption found in later parts of the novel shows also that Disgrace reveals the possibilities of grace. Grace, as we shall see, is to be understood not as a matter of elegance and refinement, or as a decorative extra, but rather in relation to language and to what gives in the word. This reveals something about the role of literature in education, providing means to test the prevalent view that literature is a moral or cultural enclave.

'The Great Rationalisation'

Once professor of modern languages, he has been, since Classics and Modern Languages were closed down as part of the great rationalisation, adjunct professor of communications. Like all rationalised personnel, he is allowed to offer one special-field course a year, irrespective of enrolment, because that is good for morale. This year he is offering a course in the Romantic poets. For the rest he teaches Communications 101, 'Communication Skills' and Communications 201, 'Advanced Communication Skills.'

– Coetzee, *Disgrace*, p. 3

One of the first things we learn about David Lurie, the central character in J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*, is of the altered state of his working life in an educational institution. Lurie is a scholar in Romantic poetry who, after the closure of the Modern Languages Department at the Technical University of Cape Town, has been re-deployed to teach something called 'communications.' The titles of the new courses Lurie is responsible for suggests the training of certain sets of transferable competencies: 'presentation skills', 'listening skills', and 'reading skills' perhaps. Such courses have become fairly commonplace within higher education institutions today. Indeed, for a university curriculum that is properly focused on 'student outcomes', and the production of 'socially responsible citizenry', they appear an indispensable component. Lurie has been permitted to teach a course in Romantic poetry as a token gesture by his institution. It is labelled 'special field.'

Lurie characterises the process that has led to the changes in his academic position as that of 'the great rationalisation' – a regime geared to bring about increased output and productivity. As it happens, these utilitarian ways of thinking contrast with Lurie's own intellectual inheritance and predilections. Lurie recites the first premise of the Communications 101 textbook: 'human beings have created language so that they might communicate their thoughts, feelings and intentions to each other' (Coetzee, 1999, pp. 3-4). Lurie himself finds such a view 'preposterous'. For him, the Literature professor, 'the origins of speech lie in song, and the origins of

song in the need to fill out with sound the overlarge and rather empty human soul' (p. 4). Is it merely incidental that 'the great rationalisation' is exemplified here by the rise of communications – and a certain conception of *language* – over literature? But we ought to approach these questions more slowly.

The tone of the educational scenes we are introduced to at the start of *Disgrace* feels to be one of emptiness, depletion. 'Communications' pronounces on how to use language for more effective, efficient transactions. Yet Lurie's students 'look through him when he speaks, forget his name. Their indifference galls him more than he will admit' (p. 4). Lurie is a 'poor teacher', Elizabeth Lowry (1999) quickly tells us. Although it is interesting to note that Lurie does not, on the whole, fail to meet standards and requirements assigned to him as the communications instructor. Lurie 'sets, collects, reads and annotates their assignments, correcting lapses in punctuation, spelling and usage, interrogating weak arguments, appending to each paper a brief, considered critique' (p. 3-4). 'Correcting' implies a task in which the right outcome – in this case rules for efficient communication – have been decided in advance. 'Interrogating' suggests something of a macho activity: communications are like a boxing match where we are knocking down opponents. Lurie is an efficient administrator and he 'fulfils to the letter his obligations' (p. 3). He also recognises that these obligations extend beyond his students, to their parents, and the state (p. 3). Yet Lurie performs all these activities as a kind of automaton. Something seems to be missing. To explore this further, let us turn to the element of David Lurie's life that is juxtaposed to his academic employment the start of *Disgrace*. Sex.

The overflow of Eros

Lurie's reflections on teaching occur to him during his visit to 'Soraya': a female prostitute who Lurie sees for an hour and a half once a week. For his sexual companion, Lurie has developed a certain fondness. But he is not passionate, and feels no deep emotion. On the contrary, their relationship is efficiently ordered and managed. 'For a man of his age, fifty-two, divorced, he has, to his mind, solved the problem of sex rather well' (p. 1). The first verb in the novel – 'solved' – serves to introduce a scene that is neatly ordered in terms of its meaning. Lurie's relations with Soraya involve nothing unnecessary or superfluous to the task: 'It surprises him that ninety minutes a week of a woman's company are enough to make him happy, who used to think he needed a wife, a home, a marriage' (p. 5).

Is Coetzee setting up a mirroring here between the world of education and the world of Eros? Does the transactional nature of sex between Lurie and Soraya echo the transactional nature of communications and education? But in the realm of sex there seems to be more obviously something wrong with attitudes of ordering, management and control. The classical philosophical discussion of Eros is found in Plato's *Symposium*. Socrates' speech (or rather his re-telling of Diotima's words to him) is often taken to be Plato's the final word. Socrates presents the idea that love is something that transcends bodily attraction and desire. Love is a harmonious relation between the lover and what is 'universally, a-temporally and virtuously attractive' (as Eileen John's discusses in her paper in this volume). Yet the presentation of love in the *Symposium* does not end with Diotima's vision. Those gathered at the symposium suddenly hear a loud knocking at the door. In comes a drunken Alcibiades, infamously in love with Socrates and finding himself frustrated by his love. The neat picture of love Socrates delivered is cleverly disturbed and undercut. It seems that Eros cannot be as controlled as all this.

The frustration inherent in love, as suggested by Plato's account, is repressed in Lurie's relationship with Soraya. But notably, in Coetzee's novel too, the settled picture cannot be sustained for too long. When Lurie unexpectedly spots Soraya in town, he is led to follow her home and telephone her house. The carefully laid out terms of their arrangement is disturbed. Lurie not permitted to see Soraya again. He starts to pursue Melanie Isaacs, a student in his Romantic Poetry class.

Procedures and classifications

After the university authorities discover his affair with Melanie, Lurie is summoned before a committee of inquiry on a charge of harassment. We would expect Lurie's relationship with Melanie to be questioned, because it raises complex issues not least around equality, justice, and forgiveness. The mechanism for delivering justice at the University of Cape Town is a tribunal with a carefully prescribed procedure. Lurie and Melanie are required to present separate statements that will inform the committee of their side of what happened, on the basis of which the committee will make 'recommendations' (p. 47). The committee appear to steer Lurie towards acceptable forms of justification that he might employ in his defence ('we have all had a weak moment' (p. 50)), as well as the acceptable gestures of repentance he might make ('have you consulted anyone - a priest, for instance, or a counsellor? Would you be prepared to undergo counselling?' (p. 49)).

Lurie, to some extent, accedes to the committee's demands for a statement: 'I took advantage of my position vis-à-vis Ms Isaacs. It was wrong, and I regret it. Is that good enough for you?' (p. 54). Yet the chair of the university committee on discrimination, Dr Farodia Rassool, declares that Lurie's responses are 'fundamentally evasive' (p. 50). She sees the committee as having particular responsibilities: 'we fail to perform our duty if we are not crystal clear in our minds, and if we do not make it crystal clear in our recommendations, what Professor Lurie is being censured for' (p. 50). Rassool declares that Lurie must therefore speak 'from his heart'; the committee can then judge whether or not his words are 'sincere' reflections of his feelings (p. 54). Lurie protests that this is excess of what is required from him: 'that is beyond the scope of the law' (p. 55). He appears to want to guard his sovereignty as an individual. Yet what the committee want from Lurie is an expression of conformity and submission. They want him to acknowledge himself as a member of an established category, so that they can deal with him accordingly.

Eventually, a 'statement' for the inquiry is produced – but by a sympathetic colleague, not Lurie himself. The fact that such a forged document would ultimately be all it takes to satisfy the committee's requirements, and, presumably, save Lurie his job, only serves to highlight the superficiality of the entire procedure. The tribunal, we might say, is an example of the university performing its commitment to a moral standard: a mechanism through which the university can be *seen* to uphold a principle, or rule of propriety. There is something deeply troubling about the self-satisfaction of the participants in this performance, most particularly that of Rassool who takes herself to be righteously battling 'discrimination' and serving the cause of 'justice'. Yet all the while these terms have become empty markers: moral judgement has degraded into the imposition of fixed criteria and classifications.

Wised-up cynicism

David Lurie himself represents other possibilities than those at play in 'this transformed and, to his mind, emasculated institution of learning' (p. 4). Lurie is a specialist – 'a scholar' (p. 2) – of Romantic poetry. To be steeped in the venerated literature of Romanticism conjures the image of someone highly cultured and intellectual ('educated' in an Arnoldian sense of the word of knowing 'the best of what has been thought and said'). Lurie's ways of speaking and thinking are at variance with the broadly utilitarian sensibilities besetting education. Note his allusion to reservations 'of a philosophical kind' at the outset of the tribunal, which makes the committee feel uncomfortable and awkward: 'A general shifting and shuffling' (p. 48).

Lurie's opening gambit at the tribunal is to offer a 'confession' (p. 52). This involves the narrative of meeting Melanie 'one evening ... not long past': 'Our paths crossed. Words passed between us, and at that moment something happened which ... I will not try to describe. Suffice to say that Eros entered' (p. 52). Lurie could almost be telling a story of romantic fiction: 'I was not myself. I was no longer a fifty-year-old divorcé at a loose end. I became a servant of Eros' (p. 52). Submission to 'ungovernable impulse' is a trope of the classic image of the Romantic poet: the virile, passionate, male, perhaps epitomised in the figure of Lord Byron. At the start of *Disgrace*, we learn that Lurie's next academic project is to write an opera on Byron. Lurie imitates *Don Juan* – a text he assigns to his Romantic poetry class (p. 35) – in his evocation of the romantic intensity of passionate love (in *Don Juan*, Byron connects passionate love to the fall in the garden of Eden, so perhaps it is not by accident that Lurie recalls meeting Melanie in 'the old-college gardens' (p. 52)). Yet *Don Juan*, at least on the standard reading, is a Casanova: an adept seducer who, beneath the charm and fun-loving swagger, is cold and emotionless. An anonymous letter depicts Lurie in similar terms: 'YOUR DAYS ARE OVER, CASANOVA' (p. 43).¹ Is Lurie's elegant and refined way of talking thus merely an intellectual veneer? Lurie later quotes William Blake in an attempt to justify his seduction of Melanie to his daughter Lucy: 'sooner murder an infant in its cradle than nurse unacted desires' (p. 69). Yet Lurie wilfully distorts the ambiguity of Blake's lines in using it as a charter for the rights of desire.² It remains unsaid that Lucy is the daughter whose cradle he has tended. Notably, Lurie's relationship with Lucy is itself more distant and cool than it is intense or affectionate. Lucy, acting as a chorus reader, often calls out Lurie's intellectual grandstanding. For example, she meets Lurie's declaration that 'every woman I have been close to has taught me something about myself, to that extent they have made me a better person', with the fine put down 'I hope you are not claiming the reverse as well, that knowing you has turned your women into better people' (p. 70).

Lurie's response to Lucy's remarks is defensive ('He looks at her sharply' (p. 70)). This apparent guardedness takes shape more broadly in the orderly and calculated way Lurie conducts his romantic relations with people. We already saw that Lurie thinks of sex as a 'problem' – one he takes himself to have 'solved' through a transactional arrangement with Soraya (a further reason his evocation towards Eros at the tribunal feels unconvincing). He extends this rationalising pathology to other areas of his life: 'he lives within his income, within his temperament, within his emotional means' (p. 2). His seduction of Melanie is similarly calculated, almost scripted: 'Wine, music: a ritual that men and women play out with each other' (p. 12); 'Smooth words, as old a seduction itself' (p. 16); 'he has forgotten how to woo' (p. 20). He is 'wary' of Melanie, that she might disturb the careful pattern he has mapped out: 'When he had made the first move ... he had thought of it as a quick

little affair ... Now she is here in his house, trailing complications behind her ...' (p. 27). Lurie and Melanie exchange words between themselves, but there is little of substance that Lurie (or we) come to learn about Melanie. Lurie calls her: 'Meláni. The dark one' (p. 18). His intrigue in her seems mostly supercilious: 'So Melaine-Meláni, with her baubles from the Oriental Plaza and her blind spot for Wordsworth, takes things to heart. He would not have guessed it. What else has he not guessed about her?' (p. 37).

Lurie's stance towards Melanie is somewhat comparable to that of his objects of study. He reminisces about the role of literature in his life: 'For as long as he can remember, the harmonies of *The Prelude* have echoed within him' (p. 13). But there seems to be a pointed coldness about Coetzee's style here, which makes the thought that Lurie has been so influenced by these 'harmonies' come through with a kind of irony. Lurie seems to have a wisened-up attitude towards Melanie: 'Too young. She will not know how to deal with him' (p. 18). Reading Wordsworth's *The Prelude* to his class, Lurie demonstrates a similarly wisened-up attitude of an accomplished literary-critic. He approaches the text with a mastery, which is also central to his image of the teacher: 'man of the book, guardian of the culture-hoard' (p. 16). The texts he is reading are works that, in aesthetic terms, demand connection. Yet Lurie is not conversant with his class, and they are not conversant with the ideas being delivered to them: 'Silence again. The very air into which he speaks hangs listless as a sheet. A man looking at a mountain: why does it have to be so complicated, they want to complain?' (p. 21).

It is, notably, Lurie who interprets his students' 'silence' in this reductive manner. This well encapsulates Lurie's overall disillusioned outlook. He has a jaded attitude towards the prospect of his new academic project on Byron: 'he had thought it would be another book, another critical opus. But all his sallies at writing it have bogged down in tedium. The truth is he is tired of criticism, tired of prose measured by the yard' (p. 4). He seems to have settled with expertise, and with his (somewhat limited) capacities as a teacher: 'He continues to teach because it provides him with a livelihood and because it teaches him humility. The irony does not escape him: that the one who comes to teach learns the keenest of lessons, while those who come to learn learn nothing' (p. 5). Lurie is far from demonstrating the kind of openness and answerability to what is beyond oneself associated with the term 'humility' – I shall return to this point later. At a more profound level, Lurie is 'not prepared to be reformed' (p. 77). He is hardened and set in his ways: 'That is his temperament. His temperament is not going to change, he is too old for that. His temperament is fixed, set. The skull, followed by the temperament: the two hardest parts of the body' (p. 2). Being of a 'certain age' (p. 67), Lurie has come to be sure of himself, taking himself to be in a fully-grown state of maturity. He views the very notions of 'reformation' and 're-education' with cynical disdain (p. 66).

Lurie, with his intellectual and refined way of speaking, in some sense represents a contrast to the mechanistic language exemplified by communications and the university committee. But Lurie's pomposity and wisened-up disillusionment enacts its own kind of moral blindness and barriers to thought. But do Lurie's own protestations against change propel us forward towards educative possibilities that are to come in the novel - is the irony is proleptic? Note that *The Prelude* Lurie teaches is the account of Wordsworth's coming to attain a new relation to his childhood. Might this suggest that Lurie's present state is its own prelude? After

Lurie is dismissed from the university, he leaves his life the city to live on Lucy's smallholding in the countryside.

Further in *Disgrace*

The place in the South African countryside onto which Lurie moves is not a plush environment, but consists rather in: 'hills dotted with sparse, bleached grass. Poor land, poor soil ... Exhausted. Good only for goats' (p. 64). Lurie has always disliked the countryside, and he does not hold back from letting Lucy know that he looks down on her way of life – indeed he gives her a 'homily' on this (p. 74). He withdraws to his familiar disgruntledness; 'his mind has become a refuge for old thoughts, idle, indigent, with nowhere else to go. He ought to chase them out, sweep the premises clean. But he does not care to do so, or does not care enough' (p. 72). The themes from the first half of the novel continue to take shape here.

Lurie's preaching eventually irritates Lucy, and she tells him that he needs to find something to do. She suggests he try working at an Animal Welfare clinic that is 'desperate for volunteers' (p. 77). The animals that are mainly housed at the Animal Welfare Clinic are stray dogs that are being euthanized to control numbers. Lurie seems less than enthused at the prospect of helping out the lady who runs the clinic and administers the dogs' lethal injections, Bev Shaw: 'a dumpy, bustling little woman with black freckles, close-cropped, wiry hair, and no neck' (p. 72). He capitulates with Lucy's plan, but only conditionally: 'as long I don't have to become a better person.'

The novel takes us into bleaker territory when, one day, three young black men violently attack Lucy's farm. Lurie is knocked unconscious and locked in a bathroom, while Lucy is gang-raped. The perpetrators steal their car; they shoot the guard dogs that Lucy had been looking after on her farm. Lurie is doused in petrol and they set his hair on fire, causing burns to his scalp. Lurie and Lucy have conflicting responses to this event. While Lurie seeks punishment and vengeance, Lucy does not want to lay charges with the police and decides that she will keep the baby she has conceived as result of the rape. At the end of the novel, Lurie is spending more and more time at the Animal Welfare Clinic, taking on the role of disposing of the dead dogs' bodies.

This summary of the later parts of *Disgrace* is surely too brief, but it helps to show how the novel takes us further into degradation: the abject strains of familial relationships, rape, and the carcasses of unlovely, ugly dogs. It could be said that Coetzee here invokes, in order to flout, the trope of a 'rural idyll' and the saving power of man's connection with nature – itself a Romantic theme, and a Wordsworthian theme in particular.³ As Derek Attridge points out, then, there are no 'reassurances', 'silver linings' or 'utopian moments' to be found in *Disgrace* (2000, p. 108). Nevertheless some flickering moments of redemption do also unfold in these later scenes. These have important implications for education: they help us to better understand what is lacking in the scenes of degeneration and depletion.

Caring for dogs

Let us look more closely at what happens when David Lurie reluctantly agrees to help out Bev Shaw at the local Animal Welfare Centre. As we saw above, the clinic mainly houses stray dogs. As we also noted, by the end of the novel Lurie is

spending more and more time at the clinic: 'he goes off to the Animal Welfare clinic as often as he can' (p. 142). What is Lurie actually doing here? He starts to help Bev Shaw out with the euthanasia of the unwanted dogs. He also takes on the task of driving of the euthanised dogs' dead bodies to the incinerator at the tip. Lurie loads the bodies of the dogs 'one at a time, onto the feeder trolley': 'He cranks the mechanism that hauls the trolley through the steel gate into the flames, pulls the lever to empty it of its contents and cranks it back, while the workmen whose job this normally is stand by and watch' (p. 144). He does not take the bodies of the dogs directly to the tip once they have been put down, but drives them around in Lucy's van overnight so as to avoid 'leaving them with the rest of the weekend's scourgings: with waste from the hospital wards, carrion scooped up at the roadside, malodorous refuse from the tannery' (p. 144):

On his first Monday he left it to [the incinerator crew] to do the incinerating. Rigor mortis had stiffened the corpses overnight. The dead legs caught in the bars of the trolley, and when the trolley came back from its trip to the furnace, the dog would as often as not come riding back too, blackened and grinning ... After a while the workmen began to beat the bags with the back of their shovels before loading them, to break the rigid limbs. It was then that he intervened and took over the job himself (p. 145-146)

Lurie reflects on the curiosity of how 'a man as selfish as he should be offering himself to the service of dead dogs': 'he is prepared to take care of them once they are unable, utterly unable, to take care of themselves, once even Bev Shaw has washed her hands of them' (p. 146).

Lurie's care for the dogs is something different from the attitudes he exhibited at the start of the novel. Recall how, earlier in the novel, Lurie's relation to the world was one of mastery and control: his sense of other people, the Romantic texts, even himself, was ordered and controlled, all sewn up. But caring for the dogs has wider ramifications for Lurie's character. Indeed, it leads him towards a somewhat climactic moment when:

One Sunday evening, driving home in Lucy's kombi, he actually has to stop at the roadside to recover himself. Tears flow down his face that he cannot stop; his hands shake. He does not understand what is happening to him. (p. 143).

With his tears there melts the previously frozen veneer of order and control ('the skull, followed by the temperament: the two hardest parts of the body' (p. 2))? That they are inexplicable to himself further suggests a break-up in the wised-up, articulate persona that has carried him through life. Through this relation of care, then, a wider change is taking place. He is beginning to be 'reformed'.

But we should be careful at this point. For what is it that has allowed this change to happen? Note that the care that Lurie comes to show towards the dogs is not a state he has consciously chosen to adopt. Put otherwise, it is not as though he has himself planned or willed himself to undergo a change – indeed Lurie was precisely resistant to working in the Animal Welfare Centre because of the hint of the idea that it might be a way of him 'bettering himself'. The change that is taking place in Lurie is also not something that we can understand in terms of a received formula for

rehabilitation or reformation – the kind of thing that the university tribunal were suggesting should happen, for example, when they asked Lurie if he would be prepared to undergo a course of counselling. On many levels, the reasons why Lurie comes to do what he does for the dogs cannot be decoded; it resists explanation. So how has this position of care in which Lurie now finds himself come about? In what ways can we understand it?

Grace in *Disgrace*

It is notably when he first visits the Animal Welfare Clinic that Lurie admits that he is in ‘what I suppose one would call disgrace’ (p. 85). At one level ‘disgrace’ means dishonour in general or public estimation, ignominy, shame. This fits Lurie’s public shaming by the university, as exemplified in the newspaper reports on the story: ‘The report is on page three: “Professor on sex charge”, it is headed. He skims the first lines. “. . . is slated to appear before a disciplinary board on a charge of sexual harassment”’ (p. 46). Yet the term ‘disgrace’ also gestures beyond this meaning – for in a different register ‘disgrace’ invokes its counter-term; it is the state of being ‘want of grace’. Understood in this sense, Lurie’s confession, made in the presence of the dogs, could be read as pointing towards what is lacking and in need of recovery.

But let us not move too quickly. For grace, and its derivatives, are commonly understood today in terms of the adornment of an action: ‘She walked gracefully into the room’; ‘he is a gracious host.’ It is a term that praises a certain kind of refinement or elegance of style. Grace in this sense is often connected with literature itself – as a feature of ‘the literary’ or ‘poetic’ language. But does this understanding constitute a degradation of grace – as well as of literature? In the Elizabethan era, the idea of the ‘heavenly graces’ bore some comparison with the Muses of Ancient Greece. Both conceptions took the artist (the performer, the individual more generally) to be receiving something and allowing it to pass through them as if they were a conduit or conductor for this energy. Grace, in this sense, is not simply understood an additional extra to an action, but is rather something given that is internal to the possibility of the action happening at all. The individual is hereby placed in a position of being open to something that is given. Reception, rather than the active will of a self-sufficient subject, makes aesthetic composition possible. Without this, the action is an empty performance, and a sham.⁴ Does *Disgrace* invoke such a sense of grace?⁵ Before answering, let us consider how this understanding of grace may be extended – by considering the nature of language.

No doubt, the link between language and grace will be a difficult one to see on the basis of the conceptions of language seen thus far in the paper. The communications courses that Lurie teaches are premised on the assumption that human beings have invented language in order to pass our thoughts to each other. The first lines of the communications 101 textbook comes very close to a conception of language that has a veritable philosophical pedigree. One source of this view is John Locke, who portrayed language as a tool that enables an individual to convey and communicate his thoughts to his fellow man (Locke, 1994 [1690], pp. 176-180). Language is understood in this way to be a vehicle for passing meaning along: it is like an envelope that carries a message inside it, but is not the essential thing (it can be discarded and thrown away once the message has been delivered). This view of language goes hand-in-glove with the idea of the self as the origin of meaning and of language merely externally representing pre-constituted thought. It is worth noting how such a view of language gains new impetus with the conjoining of the term

'communications' to mobile and digital technologies. As Jacques Derrida has suggested, 'telecommunications' helps to bolster the idea of meaning as data or units of information that are transmitted via the 'transitional medium' of language (1998 [1972], p. 1).

Yet this view of language may be contrasted with other philosophical conceptions. Heidegger claims that 'language gives.' Words do not merely represent and label pre-constituted meaning but rather produce and generate possibilities of meaning. Words are projective: they are open to use in new contexts and carry new pathways of meaning within themselves.⁶ As Thoreau a century before put this: '[T]he volatile truth of our words should continually betray the inadequacy of the residual statement. Their truth is translated; its literal monument alone remains' (1992, p. 217). The literal statement is always going to be inadequate because meaning necessarily overflows the sign – the words on the page, pixelated, or in the air. Meaning is excessive. The sign, as Derrida has it, is unsaturated. This has implications for the ways we relate to language and use it: Cavell expresses a similar thought: '[t]hough "in a sense" we learn the meaning of words and what objects are, the learning is never over, and we keep finding new potencies in words and new ways in which objects are disclosed' (1999 [1979], p. 180). Our lives in language are not settled. Words do not fix, but extend our ways of seeing, opening new paths of thought.

Does this suggest a kind of grace? Like the accounts of aesthetic inspiration, this view of language is pointing towards something being given, which is not merely an extraneous or decorative factor. Rather, the idea that the word gives is something that is internally contained by the possibilities of language itself. It is a *structural* possibility, and not merely contingent and an aspect of certain words. But let us consider further. Paul Celan suggests that Heidegger in his emphasis on the way that '*language speaks*' impersonalises language or renders it neuter. This obscures the way that language has the essential character of the address (see Celan, 2005, p. 181). The notion of the address is important for the accounts of language developed by Derrida, and by Cavell, and helps us to further understand the projective nature of language. In and through what I do with language, my words are given to others. Projection is not an arbitrary affair (I do not use words in any old way I choose), and I am bound by the possibilities language affords me, and drawn towards finding words that others will have a chance of understanding. There is no guarantee my words will express what I want, no guarantee of the way they will be taken up and interpreted by others. Other people are open to receiving my words and interpreting them in new and unexpected ways. The work of meaning is not something that is controlled and contained; it is rather something that happens by way of what we do together in language. Meaning has its basis, not in the self, but in the dynamic structures of the address. It depends on us holding a kind of faith.

The addressal structure of language brings us to see that in language I am in the position of being in response. Language, we might say, breaks us open, in ways that are poignantly expressed by Emmanuel Levinas: 'I am, myself, torn from my beginning in me, from my equality with myself' (2000, p. 193). An immediate illustration of this essential responsiveness can be found when we consider the phenomenology of thinking and what happens when we think.⁷ For the most part, my thoughts come to me. When I think, my thoughts move me on from one thing to another. My thinking does not, more usually, follow an algorithmic structure. The signs that constitute my thoughts are unsaturated: they open up new connections

that overflow any final or fixed meaning or direction. Everyday phrases such as ‘it strikes me that ...’, ‘the thought has just crossed my mind that. . .; ‘an interesting thought came into my head ...’ bear witness to this movement of thought. It would be misleading to say that this is something that I actively do, but its passivity is constituted by a kind of availability to thought, and readiness for response. Such thoughts can also be crowded out, perhaps by a frenetic busyness or anxiety. But if my mind is not resistant, if I am open in this way, I can become receptive to these new thoughts that come in to my mind. I can be inspired.

The point being made here is not that thinking is simply ‘passive.’ The idea being explored here precisely challenges the dichotomy of activity/passivity – and the subject/object metaphysics that informs an overheated philosophical division of these notions. Elsewhere Coetzee writes of the importance of the middle-voiced verbs – which he also links to the practice of writing – in ways that further these ideas:

Though modern Indo-European languages retain morphologically distinct forms for only the active-passive opposition, the phantom presence of a middle voice (a voice still morphologically present in Sanskrit and ancient Greek) can be felt in some senses of modern verbs ... ‘To write’ is one of those verbs. (1992, p. 94).

Middle-voiced verbs are one way of showing how much more complicated our thinking is and our language is, and how the subject-object superstructure is apt to misconstrue the nature of this (through too-simple and too-ideal notions of the ‘autonomous agent’, for example). Following Coetzee’s lead, we might consider here the example of writing an essay. If, in writing an essay, you are too held by the idea you must be planning it out thoroughly, mapping out everything that is to be said in advance, then that will block the possibility of thought that the writing of the essay might otherwise enable.

Do these ideas help to bring out what is at stake in the scenes with Lurie and the dogs in *Disgrace*? Of course, Lurie’s own practices of academic writing seem to have reached an *impasse* at the start of *Disgrace*, with his project on Lord Byron being at a standstill. Similarly, Lurie’s scholarly reading of Wordsworth enacts a kind of closure and depletion of aesthetic engagement and interpretation. Later on in the novel, what Lurie is dealing with are not canonical poems, but something much messier, less immediately attractive, and more everyday. The dogs Lurie comes to care for have become destitute: ‘the dogs that are brought in suffer from distempers, from broken limbs, from infected bites, from mange, from neglect . . . from malnutrition, from intestinal parasites’ (p. 142). Is it too much to take the dogs as a metaphor for the neglect and degradations being suffered by language in earlier parts of the novel? Certainly, the way language is used in the examples of teaching and learning, in Eros, and in juridical practices, aesthetic, administrative, and political seem to stand in the way of any acknowledgement of the givenness of language. The dogs in the clinic are ‘a mob of scrawny mongrels filling two pens to bursting point, barking, yapping, winning, leaping with excitement’ (p. 84). They have a natural inclination to breed and ‘multiply and multiply’ (p. 85); they ‘suffer most of all from their own fertility’ (p. 142). Is it too much to see the dogs as allegorising, on one level, the hybrid, fertile unruliness of language itself? Later in the novel, it seems that something has been allowed to enter in, something has been

given – not because it has been earned or merited, but rather because Lurie finds himself in a position of being open to response.

Language's grace

On a religious understanding, grace is a blessing, not something earned or deserved. Yet we can live in a way that prepares us for it ('ask and you shall receive, seek and you shall find', Matthew 5:7). The conception of language we have just been discussing in effect reworks this religious notion. Language gives, through the unsaturated nature of the sign of which Derrida speaks, its persistent availability to new connections and associations. Its givenness is unmerited. But I must be ready to receive.

Notably, at different stages in *Disgrace* words themselves come back and echo through the novel. One example of this is with the terms 'burned, burnt'. When Lurie initially uses these terms, he does in with his characteristically intellectual manner, glossing them as 'the perfective, signifying an action carried through to its conclusion' (p. 71). During the attack, Lurie himself is 'burned, burnt' (p. 97); and the dogs are 'burned' in the incinerator. Later, when he thinks about the weakening flame of desire, the words come back to him as if in conjugation: 'burned – burnt – burnt up' (p. 166). And so it is also with love. We saw earlier how Lurie describes himself as a 'servant of Eros' in accounting for his relations with Melanie Isaacs. Yet, as we also saw, Lurie's managed and intellectualised idea of sex acted as a veneer that ultimately repressed Eros and the unsettled conditions that make it possible in the first place. Later in the novel, however, the word comes back in a different form: 'He has learned by now ... to concentrate all his attention on the animal they are killing, giving it what he no longer has difficulty in calling by its proper name: love' (p. 219). Lurie's education in the use of this word has come from an unlikely source – his tending the dogs. It is through this that the word is retrieved from the depleted senses to which he had consigned it before. This recovery of the word, which is at the same time a recovery of his connection with the world, is his quiet redemption.

The novel also comes back to humility. It is worth re-citing a quotation from earlier in full:

He continues to teach because it provides him with a livelihood; and because it teaches him humility, brings it home to him who he is in the world. The irony does not escape him: that the one who comes to teach learns the keenest of lessons, while those who come to learn learn nothing. It is a feature of his profession on which he does not remark to Soraya. He doubts that there is an irony to match it in hers (p. 5).

There is a jaded quality to Lurie's use of 'humility' here; the term suggests a kind of nihilism. In his tribunal he uses the word also, again suggesting a kind of passivity – submission: 'you mean, will I humble myself and beg for clemency?' But later (p. 160) the word occurs also in Lurie's expressed concern that his daughter should not 'humble herself before history'. The text that leads up to this is a reflection on rape – on the Rape of the Sabine Women and on the 'countless countesses and kitchenmaids Byron had pushed himself into.' Yet Lurie acknowledges that, rape though that may often have been by today's standards, none was ever in danger of getting their throat slit. The reality of South Africa is rather different from the literary Romanticism that has been Lurie's preoccupation.

Humility, with its religious resonances, has connotations beyond modesty – a term that suggests something more like understating or downplaying one’s abilities. Humility suggests rather being in relation to that in the face of which I am as nothing. It is a displacement of the anxious ego and a filling out of experience with this turn towards what is beyond me, but towards which I allow myself to be drawn. It is unsettling, disturbing my complacency in the world, my acquiescence in settled identities, in received views, ideological, slogans and clichés. And it is intimately tied to education insofar as this implies the reaching after ways of thinking and understanding that expand, extend, and deepen the more I approach them – a liberal education.

These lines of connection work to show the following: to respond well to our thoughts and words we must keep them moving, adding to them and connecting them in a thought that remains mobile. Without this there is just the residue of the statement, the letter turned monument, translation lost. Words stand in need of recovery – of a going over and a covering again, as if to cure, to preserve, and to make better.⁸ The risk of our *not* responding in this way may seem oblique in relation to the examples of ‘burned’, of ‘Eros’, or of ‘humility’ – but consider what it would be like if we did not see terms like ‘freedom’, ‘justice’, and ‘democracy’ as requiring recovery, if we allowed ourselves instead to think that the meaning of these terms was already simply settled.

This brings us around – albeit in a different way – to the political dimensions of Coetzee’s novel. Of course, these have been much discussed by other commentators, and when the novel was first published it was strongly criticised for the bleak picture of post-apartheid South Africa it represents. Coetzee was himself charged with evading his ethical responsibilities as a writer in a post-colonial context. Yet on my reading *Disgrace* can be seen as demonstrating how our political ideals are always *to come*: democracy is a fine thread we are always catching for and weaving again each day. As Coetzee himself puts it elsewhere, reflecting on his own sensibilities in relation to language:

As far back as he can see he has been ill at ease with language that lays down the law, that is not provisional, that does not as one of its habitual motions glance back sceptically at its premises. (1994, p. 394).

The ugly and brutalised politics – like the ugly and brutalised dogs, but culpably ugly, unlike them, in its deadened constrictions of language and thought – is something that demands a response from us. It cannot be simply transcended by means of some grand political ideal or concept. Indeed, to become fixated on a political position or on particular political concepts would after all repress the unsettledness of human life that is internally related to the openness of the sign. Far from being politically adept or practical, this repression is *irresponsible*. But within it there is the possibility of a release if we go over things again, find new meanings and new possibilities in our words. *Disgrace* shows that the political, in human life, goes all the way down.

Education and dis/grace

In concluding this paper, it is worth recalling the way Coetzee’s *Disgrace* opens with a stark presentation on a contemporary educational problem much discussed today,

namely, the marginalisation of the humanities. At the Technical University of Cape Town instrumental and functional courses ‘Communications’ have come to occupy the curriculum space that was once accorded to Literature, which has become consigned to a ‘special field.’⁹ We may want to reflect on how far the teaching and learning of literature, which of course does remain in educational institutions today, has itself *already* become a matter of ‘communications.’ That the flickering moments of redemption we find in *Disgrace* do not take place in traditionally conceived institutions of education (and happen only after Lurie has *left* the university), maybe a further sign of the extent to which ‘the great rationalisation’ is foreclosing the possibilities of education today.

Of course, the marginalisation of the humanities is an issue that has provoked much response. Moreover, as Helen Small has helped to clarify (2013), it has provoked different forms of response. Lurie, at the start of *Disgrace* represents a reaction that is perhaps all too familiar. It would be interesting to consider how far strains of Lurie’s cynical attitude can be detected in contemporary defences of the humanities – and it is notable that contemporary forms of humanities advocacy precisely take such forms: they are *defences*. Yet how far does this type of approach collude with ‘the great rationalisation’ and its prevailing logic? There is perhaps something more to be said here about the way that the idea the humanities stand in need of justification was a way of thinking that itself emerged around the time of the industrial revolution, when utilitarianism was starting to take hold, and thus there emerged the sense that the humanities needed to be valued and weighed according to the same logic of applicability that was being used to appraise the sciences.

A more confident assertion of the humanities would need to start elsewhere than this. The care that Lurie comes to show for the dogs is his quiet redemption from rationalising ways of thinking. What is happening with Lurie is not something that can be decoded into a formula or a technique: it resists explanation. Yet, as I have suggested in this paper, we can start to understand what is at stake in it when we turn our attention to language and the nature of our lives in language. For we here see how language *gives*: it is an opening to new possibilities for our thinking that are not merited or earned – but which require our readiness for response.

The humanities develop responsive ways of thinking. Their objects of study – our ‘meaning making practices’ – call for engagement and connection, interpretation and judgement. Reading Coetzee’s literature itself calls us to think like this. Coetzee’s writing gives us no convenient, obvious hooks on which to hang our interpretations; the footholds by which his works are to be scaled are there, though they require careful attention, a feel for the contours and fissures in the hard rock. Of course, it is too much to suggest that thinking in the humanities is always like this. But the bigger issue is how ‘the great rationalisation’ makes these ways of thinking seem inessential to learning and thinking. If my argument is right, then what is being marginalised here are precisely the ways of thinking afforded to us and given to us on account of our lives in language, which is to say, on account of our *human* condition. The degradation of the humanities is thus a degradation of the human being. It is to allow human lives to fall into disgrace. Can education recover its grace?¹⁰

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Notes

¹ Lurie's daughter refers to him with the adage, famously ascribed to Byron, 'mad, bad, dangerous to know' (p. 77).

² Lurie's usage here might be compared to that of academic Howard Kirk in Malcolm Bradbury's *The History Man*. Kirk also attempts to use Blake's lines as a 'seducer's charter' (Bradbury, 2000, p. 153), but a colleague from the English department

suggests a different interpretation: ‘read the lines carefully, and you’ll find the fulcrum is a pun around the words “infant” and “nurse.” The infant and the desires are the same. So it doesn’t mean kill babies if you really have to. It means it’s better to kill desires than nourish ones you can never satisfy.’ (p. 153).

³ Anti-pastoralism and the sense of man’s dominion over with the land also connects to the colonial themes that are discussed, for example, by Rita Barnard (1994). It would be interesting to consider further somewhat complex relationship between Coetzee’s literature and Romanticism. As Coetzee writes elsewhere in his autobiographical fiction *Youth*:

As for the other English poets, Pound has taught him to smell out the easy sentiment in which the Romantics and Victorians wallow, to say nothing of their slack versifying. Pound and Eliot are trying to revitalize Anglo-American poetry by bringing back to it the astringency of the French. He is fully in accord. How he could one have been so infatuated with Keats as to write Keatsian sonnets he cannot comprehend. Keats is like watermelon, soft and sweet and crimson, whereas poetry should be hard and clear like a flame. Reading half a dozen pages of Keats is like yielding to seduction. (p. 21).

⁴ Plato’s *Ion*, for example, depicts the poet as ‘an airy thing, winged and holy,’ and unable ‘to make poetry until he becomes inspired’ (1997, p. 942).

⁵ Derek Attridge has suggested that what comes to happen to the character of David Lurie in *Disgrace* implies a notion of grace, which Attridge also partly connects to the idea of grace as it is found in accounts of aesthetic inspiration. As Attridge puts it: ‘to claim that by the close of the novel Lurie achieves something approaching a state of grace is to claim that his daily behaviour testifies to some value beyond or before the systems – moral, religious, emotional, political – of reward and punishment, of blueprint and assessment, of approbation and disapprobation that have brought about his disgrace, that he is true to an excess, an overflow, an alterity that no calculation can contain, no rule account for.’ (2000, p. 112). In what follows I seek to give the ‘excess and overflow’ Attridge discusses here a slightly different inflection by conjoining it more fully to the nature of language.

⁶ See Cavell’s discussion of ‘projecting a word’ in *The Claim of Reason*, for example.

⁷ I discuss these ideas more fully in Williams (2014) (2016) (2018).

⁸ It may also bring us back to Romanticism or, more specifically, the kind of romantic sensibility Cavell registers:

‘That language as such has fallen from or may aspire to a higher state, a state, say, in which the whole world is more perfectly expressed ... this vision that the world as a whole requires attention, say, redemption, that it lies fallen, dead ... is essential to what we call ... romanticism.’ (Cavell, 1989, p. 82)

⁹ Anthony Cascardi (in this volume) explores similar themes in relation to Henry Sidgwick’s 1867 essay on ‘The Theory of Classical Education’ where Literature is understood as being pursued for ‘pure curiosity’ and should be ‘left to students of special bias.’

¹⁰ Thank you to Paul Standish for very helpful thoughts on drafts of this paper.