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Dis/Graceful Liberties:  
Textual Libertinism/ Libertine Texts in J.M. Coetzee's  
*Disgrace*

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**Abstract**

This essay addresses J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*, a Booker Prize winner in 1999. The novel captures South African political and cultural turmoil attending the post-apartheid transitional period. Far from overlooking the political allegory, I propose instead to expand on a topic only cursorily developed elsewhere, namely liberty and license. The two terms foreground the textual dynamics of the novel as they compete and/or negotiate meaning and ascendancy. I argue that *Disgrace* is energized by Coetzee's belief in a total liberty of artistic production. Sex is philosophically problematized in the text and advocated as a serious issue that deserves artistic investigation without restriction or censorship. This essay looks into the subtle libertinism in Coetzee's text, which displays pornographic overtones without exhibiting a flamboyant libertinage. *Disgrace* acquires its libertine gesture from its dialogue with several literary works steeped in libertinism. The troubled relationship between the aesthetic and the ethical yields an ambiguous text that invites a responsible act of reading.

**Keywords:** J.M. Coetzee, South Africa, Post-apartheid, intertextuality, liberty and license, literature and philosophy, libertinage, freedom, sexuality

[Rosalind]: "What was the principle you were standing for?"

[David Lurie]: "Freedom of speech. Freedom to remain silent."

(Coetzee, *Disgrace* 188)

Published five years after the official demise of the apartheid regime in South Africa, J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999) narrates, among several

other things, South Africa's grappling with freedom. The novel, set in a transitional period, raises anxieties over a blurred political and cultural landscape. This essay addresses a South African literary interregnum wherein the old practices of censorship are dying and new free acts of writing cannot be born. It locates *Disgrace* within an ongoing discussion, which started during apartheid, on the freedom of writing. André Brink's advocacy of a literature of offense (1983) as well as Nadine Gordimer's treatise on the writer's freedom (1975) find ripples in Coetzee's narrative. Indeed, despite the political freedom acquired after the collapse of apartheid, the tension between ethics and poetics poses a threat to a fully liberated literature.

Among J.M. Coetzee's writings, "*Disgrace*, in particular, has undergone critical excavation" (Chapman). Indeed, three monographs have so far investigated this novel (McDonald's *Encountering Disgrace* 2009; Van der Vlies' *J.M. Coetzee's "Disgrace"* 2010; Wright's, Poyner's and Boehmer's *Approaches to Teaching Coetzee's Disgrace and Other Works* 2014), while innumerable articles and essays have probed its narratological and thematic facets. The major controversy that energizes the critical debate surrounding *Disgrace* is whether it offers an allegory (Engle 2010) or rather calls, as Derek Attridge proposes, "for reading as event . . . for opening oneself to the text's forays beyond the doxa" (63). The novel is further examined through the lenses of philosophy (Leist and Singer 2010), feminism (Graham 2003), and queer studies (Canelli 2013), to cite but a few approaches. This sheer amount of criticism testifies to an important turn in Coetzee's fictional production. Unlike his previous oeuvre, often attacked for being non-representational, *Disgrace* displays a more realistic literary mode, albeit steeped in ambiguity. It is precisely this reluctance to provide clear-cut statements and stands that has triggered such a cornucopia of critical responses. My reading of this text, based on close textual analysis, responds to Michael Chapman's statement that Coetzee's "rich, ambiguous, ambivalent, even ideologically suspect novels" have driven literary criticism from an exhausting "critique of theory back to the intricacies of the text." This article adds a new perspective to the large amount of readings examining the explicit and implicit intertextual dialogue informing the novel.

*Disgrace* charts the masculinity crisis of David Lurie, a middle-aged university professor who grapples with a waning sexuality. The affair with his student, Melanie, ends up in a public scandal causing his resignation from his teaching post with Cape Town university. He takes refuge in his daughter's farm in the Eastern Cape, where he cherishes the hope to write an opera on Byron. His hope of a peaceful retreat, however, is dramatically jeopardized by the gang-rape of his daughter. Set in a troubled post-apartheid period, Coetzee's text cannot be severed from the political and cultural debates attending the difficult birth of a new democracy in South Africa. My interest lies in Coetzee's narrative of sexual/ textual politics, which brings to the fore two competing terms: 'liberty' and 'license.' *Disgrace* interrogates the dividing line between liberty and license. The tense relationship between the two words is exemplified by David Lurie's rather licentious amorous relationships. Throughout the narrative, he strives to aestheticize his libertine conduct by inscribing it in a literary tradition of libertinism. The novel offers a dense intertextual milieu wherein Coetzee engages an intricate network of mainly European libertine texts. I argue that *Disgrace* adopts libertine overtones, verging on pornography, without indulging in a flamboyant libertinage.

Starting from the premise that Coetzee advocates a total liberty of artistic production, I show that his novel subverts the ethical discourse restricting a free discussion of sexuality. His subtle intertextual play on 'liberty' and 'libertinism' shows that sex, philosophically problematized in the narrative, should be freed from any type of restraint or censorship. This essay engages with liberty and license as its thematic backbone, and therefore starts by explaining the etymology of these two words which converge and diverge, exchange subtleties and nuances, and collide in meanings and implications. Because *Disgrace* is energized by a philosophical discourse on the nature of liberty and its limits, the term 'freedom' is located in a philosophical context. The essay proceeds by examining Coetzee's strategic use of intertextuality as a textual maneuver to anchor his narrative in an erudite libertinage. This is achieved by interpolating libertine figures (Byron, Casanova) and texts (*Clarissa*, *Lolita*, and *Philosophy in the Bedroom*) showing, thus, that libertinism in

his novel acquires significance within an aesthetic textual exchange. The aesthetic, however, collides with the ethical, mainly in the case of Melanie's and Lucy's rape. Coetzee's *Disgrace* provides a challenging text that engages reading as a responsible act.

#### Variations on Liberty: Libertine, Libertinism, and Licentiousness

Because Coetzee's *Disgrace* engages in a dialogue with a European libertine tradition that prospered mainly in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Johnson's *A Dictionary of the English Language*, compiled in 1755, offers an adequate starting point in understanding the different shades of meaning related to the terms 'liberty' and 'libertine.' The dictionary shows the semantic leakages attending the term 'liberty.' While 'liberty' is etymologically linked to 'libertine,' the term 'libertine' semantically intersects with 'license' and 'licentiousness.' Johnson's dictionary captures the meanings and implications of the word 'liberty' and its derivations as they were used and circulated in the eighteenth-century. The three explanations he provides for this word show an important semantic development: "1- One unconfined; one at liberty. 2- One who lives without restraint or law. 3- One who pays no regard to the precepts of religion." His entry on 'license' combines the meanings associated with 'liberty' and 'libertine': "1- Exorbitant liberty, contempt of legal and necessary restraint," and "3- Liberty, permission." As for 'licentiousness,' he provides two meanings: "boundless liberty, contempt of just restraint." In his study *Libertinage et révolution*, Péter Nagy stresses the semantic slippages between liberty and libertinage. From the Greek *libertinus* (a liberated slave), the French word '*libertin*' combines "the aspiration to a free spiritual criticism" and "the dissolution of morals and sexual licentiousness" (18). The etymology of the word, he adds, accommodates a double meaning: "the liberation of both spirit and body" (19, my translation).

These definitions, which fuse and confuse liberty with license, raise philosophical questions on the dividing line between morality and liberty. John Locke's concept of the natural state of men promotes "a state of

perfect freedom to order their actions, and dispense of their possessions and persons as they think fit, within the bounds of the law of nature, without asking leave, or depending upon the will of any other man" (8). And yet, he hastens to clarify that "though this be a state of liberty, yet it isn't a state of licence" (9). In the same vein, John Stuart Mill makes of morality a prerequisite for liberty, for whenever "there is a definite damage, or a definite risk of damage, either to an individual or to a public, the case is taken out of the providence of liberty, and placed in that of morality or law" (in Gray and Smith 282). Isaiah Berlin sums up this debate on liberty and its constraints in the two senses he gives to freedom: the "negative sense," which is the area that secures total freedom without the interference of any other person, and "the positive sense," which deals with any source of control or interference determining someone's freedom (194). While liberty in these works is discussed within the realm of political philosophy, Coetzee brings the debate to the aesthetic arena of literary production. His protagonist's licentiousness may well be explained in light of these philosophical ruminations on liberty. The philosophical meanderings of freedom reverberate in the novel's slippery lines between the aesthetic and the ethical. This licentiousness is also backed by several literary texts, writers, and fictional characters who indulged in libertinism, as I will explain in the subsequent parts of this essay.

### Textual Libertinism

By textual libertinism I refer to the intertextual network Coetzee creates in *Disgrace*. The novel itself becomes a space of libertinage gathering a host of libertine writers and thinkers. *Disgrace* displays an orgiastic quality by interpenetrating texts or textual "promiscuous encounters" (17), as Antoinette Marie Sol describes "the widespread exchange of ideas through conversation and correspondence in the eighteenth-century" (9). I read intertextuality in Coetzee's novel as a strategy to locate the narrative in an erudite libertinage. Libertinage or libertinism flourished as a literary category in Europe between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. Its major adepts, Charles-Pinot Duclos, Marquis de Sade, and Pierre

Choderlos de Laclos, among others, offered paradigmatic cases of social and religious mutiny. Jean-Pierre Cavaillé provides two major categories of libertinism: “*libertinage flamboyant* and *libertinage érudit*” (13). Erudite libertinism, also called “high libertinage” (Carlyle 49), refers to

an ensemble of networks of scholars, to specific forms of writing, even to an identifiable form of thought. Such thought bears the stamp of philosophical eclecticism, skepticism, the rejection of dogmatism (and therefore of any system), the valorization of experience, a more or less radical critique of a wide range of church dogma, of the constituent beliefs of Christianity, and possibly of the moral rules derived from them. (Cavaillé 13)

Erudite libertinism finds aesthetic and epistemic routes to promote, propagate and sanction a libertine mode of thinking often anchored in an intellectual and political dissent.

Intertextuality, a type of intellectual exhibitionism, mirrors David Lurie’s vision of knowledge, power, and women. “By profession,” the reader is informed, “he is, or has been, a scholar, and scholarship still engages, intermittently, the core of him” (2). The use of “intermittently” has an ironic significance as Lurie fills in the intervals between reading and writing with women. While scholarship is placed at “the core,” seducing women is presented as “the backbone of his life” (7). Roland Barthes’s concept of “*la drague*” (“cruising”) explains the textual/ sexual dynamics of the narrative. “*La drague*,” Barthes explains, “is the voyage of desire. The body is in a state of alert, on the lookout for its desire” (231). This definition matches Lurie’s continuous pursuit of what he calls “the rights of desire” (89). In a metaphorical move, Barthes astutely transfers the notion of *la drague* “from the order of the erotic quest, where it originates, to the quest for texts, or for novelistic features” (231). Lurie is a “predator” (11), a hunter of both books (knowledge) and women (sex). He has a predilection “for a specific type of women, “compliant, pliant” (5). While Soraya is “rather quiet, quiet and docile” (1), Melanie is “too innocent . . . , too ignorant of her power” (39).

As a critic, Lurie manages to publish three books; as a man, he “has a degree of magnetism” (7) that secures the seduction of any woman he wants. The scholar and the womanizer amalgamate in a metaphor of

taming texts and women. Susan Sontag provides a pertinent image of the aggressive act of interpretation: “the project of interpretation is often prompted not by a piety towards the troublesome text (which may conceal an aggression), but by an open aggressiveness, an overt contempt for appearances” (98). Lurie's relation with Melanie reenacts the violent relationship, also based on desire, between texts and readers. He imposes his desire on Melanie the way he would impose his interpretive desire on a text. His amorous relationship with his student soon becomes a public scandal after Melanie files a charge against him for sexual harassment. As he imagines the way Melanie fills in the form that incriminates him, David Lurie draws an analogy between the page and the bed: “Two names on the page, his and hers, side by side. Two in a bed, lovers no more but foes” (40). The page equated to the bed provides a good example of my metaphorical use of textual libertinism. The nexus bed/ page (page being a metonym for text) offers a space of licentiousness and sexual gratification. His relationship with Soraya, the prostitute, is also presented within this metaphorical play on the word ‘book’: “He has been on her books for over a year” (1). Within this frame of analysis, the pun on the word book is unmistakable.

This power which stamps the acts of reading texts and seducing women interlaces with intertextuality as a strategy of narration. Julia Kristeva describes intertextuality as “a perpetual challenge of past writing” (69). Harold Bloom clarifies further this tense rapport between texts by equating intertextuality with “the power of usurpation”: “we read to usurp, just as the poet writes to usurp. Usurp what? A place, a stance, a fullness, an illusion of identification or possession” (*Agon* 7). Coetzee's text is dominated by a usurpatory mode of intertextuality as the narrative draws on several texts and even inserts quotes without references. Textual usurpation, or the way the text behaves, offers an insight into Lurie's libertine conduct. The verb ‘to usurp’ itself is interpolated in the text; it makes the subject of a discussion in Lurie's class on Romantic poetry: “*usurp upon* means to intrude or encroach upon. *Usurp*, to take over entirely, is the perfective of *usurp upon*; usurping completes the act of usurping upon” (21). While intertextuality is an act of usurpation and appropriation, Lurie's relationship with women is based on the same quest

of intrusion and possession. His story with Soraya comes to an end when he stumbles upon her in the street accompanied by two children, presumably her own sons. Soraya, who feels that this discovery is an intrusion on her private life, decides to disappear. Lurie, however, who deeply believes that she is his property, continues chasing her. In their last phone call, she accuses him of harassing her (10), the same charge Melanie files against him.

Textual usurpation, or encroaching upon other texts, in *Disgrace* intertwines and mirrors Lurie's desire of intrusion and possession. Coetzee's narrative displays a complex intertextual network and draws on a wide range of texts difficult to catalogue. While aware of the rhizomatic intertextual plateau informing the text, my aim in this essay is not to provide an exhaustive inventory of the subtexts, or what Gérard Genette calls "hypotexts" (5), in *Disgrace*. In order to keep to the major line of argument in this essay, namely the concomitance of libertine texts and textual libertinism, I limit my investigation of intertextuality in the novel to the libertine writers and texts that stimulate the narrative.

### Libertine Texts

"Satire, philosophy and pornographic literature had a common source of inspiration" (79) claims Marc Serge Rivière. By the mid-eighteenth century, philosopher and libertine were conflated and figures such as Voltaire were condemned for infringing social and religious rules (Carlyle and O'Connell 8). The pornographic gesture in Coetzee's narrative, however, does not consist in an excess of explicit sexual scenes. It is fertilized by a philosophical trend of thought that endorsed an open discussion of sexuality. Coetzee's subtle dialogue with Schopenhauer's philosophy is examined by Lawrence Right in two essays. His first article provides an ecocritical reading of Coetzee's *The Lives of Animals* (1999) informed by Schopenhauer's "post-Kantian epistemology" ("Ecological Thinking" 26), while his second article traces an intertextual affinity between Schopenhauer's concept of music and Lurie's noumenal metamorphosis at the end of the novel ("David Lurie's Learning" 161). In this essay, I continue building on the conversation between the South



African writer and the German philosopher. Schopenhauer's study of the metaphysics of sexual love provides Coetzee with an interesting philosophical background to investigate the question of sexual drives. *Disgrace* significantly opens with "the problem of sex" (1). Problematizing sex, or investigating it as a philosophical category, tunes in with Schopenhauer's belief that sexual love deserves a more serious study: "we should be surprised that a matter that generally plays so important a part in the life of man has hitherto been almost entirely disregarded by philosophers, and lies before us as a raw and untreated material" (532). Schopenhauer's philosophy of passion seems to inform Lurie's ungovernable sexuality. What Lurie calls "temperament" (2), "rights of desire" (89) or being the "servant of Eros" (89) echo Schopenhauer's belief in the supremacy of the sexual impulse: "man is concrete sexual drive; for his origin is an act of copulation, and his impulse alone perpetuates and holds together the whole of his phenomenal existence" (514). His philosophy of sexual love in *The World as Will and Representation* (1844) explains the importance and priority of sexuality in one's life.

In "The Harms of Pornography: Catherine Mackinnon," Coetzee tries to show the limits of Mackinnon's harsh feminist attack on pornography and "the liberal defense of its right to exist" (61). His essay does not defend pornography *per se*; it rather claims the writers' right and freedom to explore seriously "the darker areas of human experience" (74). He also laments the fact that "any assertion of male desire, and the exploration of the nature of that desire . . . such as serious erotic art may undertake, must enter the lists in an adversarial relationship to Mackinnon's enterprise" (74). Coetzee's preoccupation with a liberated artistic examination of sexuality resonates with Bertrand Russell's defense of "thinking clearly and wholesomely" on this issue: "the writer who deals with a sexual theme is always in danger of being accused, by those who think that such themes should not be mentioned, of an undue obsession with this subject" (327). It is through a character obsessed with sexuality that Coetzee tries to explore this dark, and often tabooed, topic. Lurie is likely to have found an explanation to his obsession in Russell's summation: "sex is a natural need, like food and drink" (327). While I do

not claim here that Coetzee openly draws on Russell's text, I find the latter's conversation with Schopenhauer on the sexual drives pertinent to *Disgrace*. Indeed, Schopenhauer and Russell agree on the seriousness as well as the nature of the sexual drive being an inherent natural impulse. They diverge, however, in their view on the implication of this drive. While Schopenhauer believes that all "amorousness is rooted in the sexual impulse" (53), which has only one end: reproduction, Russell believes in the importance of love to satisfy the "mental hunger" (331). Lurie is trapped between these two views, that's why the text keeps burrowing for aesthetic solutions for this dilemma by interpolating libertine writers and characters.

Lord Byron stands as a major libertine figure informing Lurie's characterization. In his lecture on Byron, Lurie draws a double parallel: one between the poet and his personae; the other between Byron and himself. Like Lucifer, Byron/ Lurie "doesn't act on principle but on impulse, and the source of his impulses is dark to him" (*Disgrace* 33). Lurie shares Byron's licentiousness and his professional career ends with a scandal that pushes him into 'exile,' "The scandal will follow me, stick to me" (88), he tells his daughter, who, in one of their conversations, quotes Lady Caroline's description of Byron: "mad, bad, and dangerous to know" (77), a description that she jokingly ascribes to her father. Even though he considers Wordsworth as "one of his masters" (13), Lurie is totally fascinated with Byron's dis/graceful licentiousness and debauchery. This fascination is consolidated by the great esteem some of the nineteenth century writers and poets had for Byron. Gustave Flaubert, whose eponymous character, Madame Bovary, is summoned as a libertine character in *Disgrace* (5-6), expressed openly his admiration for Byron in a letter to Ernest Chevalier (1838): "I profoundly value only two men, Rabelais and Byron, the only two who have written in a spirit of malice toward the human race and with the intention of laughing into its face" (qtd. in Bloom, *George Gordon Byron* 26). Coetzee seems aware of Flaubert's esteem for Byron. This explains his insertion of a quote from *Madame Bovary* while Lurie is reading Byron and quoting from his letters. Between two quotes from Byron, he casually slips the following sentence without indicating its reference: "In adultery, all the tedium of

marriage rediscovered” (87). The allusion to Flaubert strengthens this rhyzomatic plateau of libertine discussion.

Flaubert’s admiration for Byron was heartily shared by Shelley, who entertained a close relationship with the poet. Shelley congratulated Byron for his open discussion of incest in *Manfred*. In a letter to Maria Gisborne, he claims that “incest is like many other *incorrect* things a very poetical circumstance” (qtd. in Brewer 66). Byron’s incestuous relationship with his sister, Augusta, finds a subtle echo in Lurie’s incestuous feelings towards his daughter, Lucy. Incest in *Disgrace* works more on the level of insinuation than indication, as Lurie’s relationship with Melanie is conflated within a father-daughter rapport. In the episode in which Melanie, miserable and clearly in trouble, asks to stay in his house, he tries to console her the way a father does with his child: “He sits down on the bed, draws her to him. In his arms she begins to sob miserably. Despite all, he feels a tingling of desire. ‘There, there,’ he whispers, trying to comfort her. ‘Tell me what’s wrong.’ Almost he says, ‘Tell Daddy what’s wrong’” (26). The incestuous overtones of this scene are consolidated in the following one in which he “makes love to her one more time, on the bed in his daughter’s room” (29).

If Byron is openly acknowledged as an influential source in Lurie’s characterization, Giacomo Casanova, one of the most notorious libertines of the eighteenth century, is named only once in *Disgrace*. After his relationship with Melanie breaks into a public scandal, Lurie finds a pamphlet slipped under the door of his office: “‘*WOMEN SPEAK OUT.*’ Scrawled in pencil at the bottom is a message: ‘*YOUR DAYS ARE OVER, CASANOVA*’” (43). Not only does Coetzee mold a Casanova-like character, he also draws heavily on Casanova’s autobiography. The first pages of *Disgrace*, in which Lurie is presented to the reader, are strikingly similar to the preface of *History of My Life* (1894), in which Casanova presents himself to his readers. Even though Coetzee uses a third person focalizer, the opening pages of the narrative are steeped in a confessional tone parodying Casanova’s opening sentence: “I will begin with this confession” (23). In juxtaposing the two following extracts, respectively from *History of My Life* and *Disgrace*, one can clearly see the intertextual conversation between the two texts:

The chief business of my life has always been to indulge my senses; I never knew anything of greater importance. I felt myself born for the fair sex. I have ever loved it dearly, and I have been loved by as often and as much as I could. (Casanova 27)

The company of women made of him a lover of women and, to an extent, a womanizer . . . if he looked at a woman in a certain way, with a certain intent, she would return his look, he could rely on that. That was how he lived, for years, for decades, that was the backbone of his life. (Coetzee 7)

Self-proclaimed womanizers, Casanova and Lurie squarely boast about their sexual prowess. Both base their case on their temperament and believe in the impossibility of changing it as it is an inherent part of them. Casanova's statement: "the errors caused by temperament are not to be corrected, because our temperament is perfectly independent of our strength" (29) resonates Coetzee's description of Lurie: "his temperament is not going to change. . . . His temperament is fixed, set. The skull, followed by the temperament: the two hardest parts of the body" (2). The aesthetic quality of Lurie's libertinage acquires its force from such an intertextual dialogue between libertine writers and fictional characters.

Libertinism in Coetzee's text works more on the level of artistic exchange than of mere crude eroticism. The narrative is energized by libertine fictional figures conjured from a European libertine literary tradition. Their role is to maintain an ongoing debate on the different manifestations of the libertine mind. Pamela Cooper argues that Coetzee is preoccupied with "the paradigms for erotic feeling and behavior offered by literature and art" (23). While Cooper only focuses on rape in the novel, I propose to extend her argument with more focus on literature and eroticism. To illustrate the conjunction between textual libertinism and libertine texts, I propose to analyze the intertextual negotiation between *Disgrace* and three paradigmatic texts steeped, truly or allegedly, in a libertine literary tradition. Indeed, Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955), Richardson's *Clarissa* (1748), and Marquis de Sade's *Philosophy in the Bedroom* (1795) sneak their way into Coetzee's narrative and endow it with a libertine touch.

Sue Kossew traces the motif of the male adult's coercive sexual relationship with a girl child, present both in *Disgrace* and *Lolita*, to

Dostoevsky's Stavrogin in *Devils* (1871). Lurie, Kossew argues, is "a smooth talker of the Stavrogin and Humbert Humbert school, those who, in the very act of confession, are seen to be justifying themselves" (158). Nabokov's *Lolita* is particularly significant to Coetzee who has always been a fierce opponent of censorship. "Lolita was a taboo-breaking book," claims David Lodge, "a landmark in the liberation of writers from censorship." The novel, first published in France in 1955, was banned in America and Britain on the ground of its pornographic content. Later criticism of *Lolita* has investigated the poetics of eroticism in the narrative, "as the aesthetic eminence of the scenes [Nabokov] describes transcends their sexual and ethical dimension" (Lodge). It is precisely this "poerotic" (Lodge) touch that Coetzee purports to install in *Disgrace*. In an imitative gesture, he parodies Nabokov's famous opening sentences of his novel: "Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul, Lolee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo.Lee.Ta" (9). Lurie's play on Melanie's name gives the following: "Melanie-melody: a meretricious rhyme. Not a good name for her. Shift the accent. Melàni: the dark one" (18). Humbert Humbert's pedophilic and incestuous relationship with his step-daughter is reenacted in Lurie's affair with his student. Although Melanie is "twenty of age. Old enough to know her own mind" (45), he tells his ex-wife, Lurie keeps fretting over her age. He is aware that he is treading on a forbidden zone; not only is she thirty-two years younger than him, but she is also his student, "under his tutelage" (12). Melanie, whose "hips are as slim as a twelve-year-old's" (19), becomes a replica of Lolita.

The violation of women's bodies, the act of displaying them as a usurped site of pleasure, is at the core of libertine literature. This idea brings forth Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* as the second text innervating the libertine discourse in *Disgrace*. Although the intertextual dialogue between the two texts is very subtle and carefully hidden, several critics have established a clear link between *Clarissa* and *Disgrace*. Blakey Vermeule argues that Coetzee's fiction is powerfully influenced by *Clarissa* (224). In the same vein, Sorchá Gunne reads Richardson's Lovelace and Coetzee's Lurie as masculine embodiments of a virility obsessed with possessing "the object of feminine beauty" (18). Gunne

bases her reading on Coetzee's own interpretation of *Clarissa* and quotes his statement: "the rape is his attempt to break the grip of soul-harrowing beauty upon him by familiarizing himself (over familiarizing himself) with its earthly embodiment" (18). The two texts intersect at the two libertines' fixation on ravishing the female body. Richardson's Lovelace seduces Clarissa, traps her in a brothel, and rapes her after being drugged. In the case of Coetzee's text, rape is complicated as Lurie himself describes his second sexual encounter with Melanie as "Not rape, not quite that, but undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core" (25). While Gunne presents a thorough and perceptive examination of the different nuances attending rape on the cultural and legislative levels, I locate Coetzee's deliberate obfuscation of the boundaries between rape and consent within his emulation of a high libertine literary tradition.

Peter Carlyle argues that high libertinage "trades in nuances, in subtle assessments of desire and resistance. The objects of such assessments are typically women, and the questions posed about them cover a predictable range. To what degree is a given woman *sensible*, sensitive to pleasure? To what degree is she merely coquettish?" (52). These questions around women's prudery or masked debauchery are raised in both *Clarissa* and *Disgrace*. "The notorious question of what Clarissa herself wanted" (Vermeule 225), that is whether she willingly joins Lovelace or she is forced to do it, is recuperated in Melanie's case. The first sexual encounter is not a forced one, nor is the third time Lurie makes love to her on his daughter's bed. Not only does Melanie come willingly to Lurie's house, but she also shows signs of pleasure as he reports: "one moment stands out in recollection, when she hooks a leg behind his buttocks to draw him in closer: as the tendons of her inner thighs tightens against him, he feels a surge of joy and desire" (29). The completely passive girl in the two previous encounters morphs into an avid voluptuous woman. Melanie's behavior is codified within a libertine "nuance" as she is "more something than something else; she may be neither one thing nor the other" (Carlyle 54). Such a nuance marks Lurie's first encounter with her: "her smile sly rather than shy" and her "maroon miniskirt" (11) promises an exhibitionist nature. As he touches her cheek, she "does not withdraw, but she does not yield either" (16). Melanie is

depicted as half prudish, half licentious. This type of girls is fundamental to libertine literature where part of the pleasure resides in corrupting the ingénue or unmasking her debauchery.

Although *Clarissa* is not classified as a straightforward pornographic narrative, its writer was charged with immorality. Coleridge describes Richardson as “so oozy, so hypocritical, praise-mad, canting, envious, concupiscent” (qtd. in Eagleton vii). Richardson’s narrative is considered as a foundational text of literary libertinism on the Continent. Mario Praz claims Choderlos de Laclos’s *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* (1782) to be inspired by *Clarissa*. He also argues that Marquis de Sade was an imitator of Richardson (97). Coetzee’s subtle dialogue with libertine writers and texts ineluctably includes the most notorious figure of literary debauchery: Sade. While Sade is never mentioned in *Disgrace*, his *Philosophy in the Bedroom* (1795) secures a place in the interstices of Coetzee’s text. Lurie’s motto: “when all else fails, philosophize” (60) finds an echo in Sade’s Dolmancé who has “above all else an exceedingly philosophical bent to his mind” (*Philosophy* 5). In Sade’s narrative, Dolmancé plays the role of the teacher with the mission to teach the young Eugénie all the pleasures of the flesh. *Disgrace* intersects with *Philosophy in the Bedroom* in creating a porous space between the classroom, wherein Lurie exerts his authority as a teacher, and the bedroom, wherein he gives rein to his libertine mind. The two spaces overlap in his relationship with Soraya, the prostitute, and Melanie, the student. He calls his weekly ninety-minute encounter with Soraya in the brothel “a session” (2), another word for a tutorial. Indeed, Soraya proves a “ready learner, compliant, pliant” (5). The docility of the learner is presented as fundamental in the teaching procedure as Sade’s Dolmancé asserts: “Now, my pretty little student either you pay attention to me or be-ware lest, if you are not docile, I exercise over you the rights amply conferred upon me by my title as your mentor” (13).

Melanie’s first tutorial of libertinage takes place in Lurie’s house: “A woman’s beauty does not belong to her alone. She has a duty to share it” (16). The teacher’s unmistakable authoritarian and confident tone reverberates in Dolmancé’s first instruction to Eugénie: “Modesty is an antiquated virtue which you, so rich in charms, ought to know

wonderfully how to do without” (11). Both invite the two girls to adopt a libertine mind and surrender to voluptuousness. The dividing lines between the bedroom and the classroom are further obfuscated when Lurie, in the same episode, quotes Shakespeare to push his point home. The spell, however, is broken as Melanie recognizes the teacher again, something she might have forgotten for a while: “He has become a teacher again, man of the book, guardian of the culture hoard” (16). Lurie’s conscious transgression of spatial lines continues in the classroom. In the presence of Melanie, the bedroom is now brought to the classroom. As he explains Wordsworth’s complex idea of imagination and reality, the memory of his sexual intercourse with Melanie invades his mind: “A memory floods back: the moment on the floor when he forced the sweater up and exposed her neat, perfect little breasts” (23). Diderot’s “I abandon my mind to all its libertinage” (qtd. in Carlyle and O’Connell 5) seems to regulate Lurie’s perception of private (bedroom) and public (classroom) places. Libertinism complicates the undecided relationship between the private and the public as well as the aesthetic and the ethical.

#### Undecidable Meanings: The Aesthetic and the Ethical

Coetzee’s text poses questions without offering clear-cut answers. Kossew ascribes ambiguity in *Disgrace* to “Coetzee’s reluctance to deal in absolutes” (159). This is due partly to the nature of the questions themselves. Freedom is a highly controversial subject and Coetzee is fully aware of that. “Like all desires,” he argues, “the desire for freedom is devious, does not fully know itself, cannot afford to fully know itself” (“The Harms of Pornography” 74). In exploring such a slippery terrain as the desire of freedom and/or the freedom of desire, the text can only negotiate meaning. This explains the ambivalent gesture of the narrative in building and destroying the meaning of liberty. Lurie’s liberty of desire is also a type of slavery. His confession to the committee complicates the issue: “suffice it to say that Eros entered. After that I was not the same” (52). Does this mean a liberation or an incarceration? His confession to his daughter shows that he has become “the servant of Eros,” fully controlled by “*a god who acted through*” him (emphasis in the original 89).



Lurie's unrestrained sexuality is legitimated within an aesthetic discourse of *graceful* liberty. And yet, beautifying libertinism does not exempt it from its ethical dimension. "Ethics," claim Anton Leist and Peter Singer, "lies at the bottom of most of Coetzee's writings" (3). Coetzee believes that a serious handling of eroticism compels upon the artist "an imperative limiting the aesthetic and the ethical" ("The Harms of Pornography" 73). The rape of Melanie and Lucy clearly illustrates this limit. While Melanie's rape is aestheticized and normalized through a network of literary references and allusions, Lucy's violation stands as an indictment of any poeticization of sexual violence. Even though Lurie uses the word "rape" without acknowledging the act, the narrative itself establishes a parallel between the two episodes of rape through reverberating images and phrases. The novel, which indulges in textual libertinism, is deeply grounded in an ethical quest. Ironically enough, *Disgrace*, based on a dense intertextuality which keeps pushing the reader outside the text for aesthetic resolutions, claims full authority now by obliging the same reader to keep to the text for an ethical confrontation.

Within the same gesture of creating porous zones, textual (intertextuality) or spatial (bedroom-classroom), the two episodes of rape leak into each other. In both cases, rape takes place in the two girls' flats. Both are duped into opening the door to their aggressors. Melanie "opens the door ... He has given her no warning; she is too surprised to resist the intruder who thrusts himself upon her" (24). In a similar way, Lucy "unlocks the door and enters. The tall man follows. After a moment the second man pushes past him and enters the house too" (93). The juxtaposition of the two episodes inscribes Lurie's second sexual encounter with Melanie in its ethical dimension: it is *definitely* rape. Because the angle of narration cannot allow a direct description of Lucy's rape, the parallel between the two episodes is carried on an intratextual level. Instead of the intertextual slippages, the text shrinks back into itself and reiterates its own images and metaphors. A pertinent example is offered in the description of the two violated girls' body language. During her forced sexual rapport, Melanie "turns her back on him" (25). Similarly, after she opens the door of the toilet where her aggressors have locked her father, "Lucy has turned her back on him" (97). The same

image of cleaning the body after being sexually usurped reverberates in the two episodes. After violating Melanie's body, Lurie imagines the girl trying to wash out his imprint on her: "He sees her running a bath, stepping into the water, eyes closed like a sleep walker" (25). What he imagined earlier concretizes now with Lucy "wearing a bathrobe, her feet are bare, her hair wet" (97). The two girls also share the same feeling of emotional death. Lucy's interjection: "I am a dead person" (161) echoes the description of Melanie during the forced sexual rapport: "As though she had decided to go slack, to die within herself for the duration" (25). While creating a parallel between the two episodes, Lurie is significantly conflated with his daughter's aggressors. The two porous episodes not only serve to fill in narrative blanks created by the angle of narration, they also function to confront recalcitrant readers with the ethical counterpart of Lurie's erudite libertinage. His aesthetic defense as he forces himself on Melanie: "Strange love! Yet from the quiver of Aphrodite, goddess of the foaming waves" (25) sounds limp and rather grotesque when juxtaposed to Lucy's rape.

Presented as a savage act, devoid of any aesthetic aura, Lucy's rape is nevertheless foreshadowed in libertine terms. The day of her rape, as she is watching the wild geese, Lucy unconsciously presages her doom: "They come back every year. The same three. I feel so lucky to be visited. To be the one chosen" (88). A short time later, three male visitors will turn out to be her violators. The ominous statement foretelling an aggressive sexual encounter is converted in Lurie's mind into a libertine fantasy: "Three. That would be a solution of sorts. He and Lucy and Melanie. Or he and Melanie and Soraya" (88). Lucy's rape by two men, a forced 'threesome,' is a deliberate reminder of Lurie's crude debauchery. This *ménage à trois*, in which Lucy and Soraya are interchangeable not only alludes again to an incestuous fantasy, it also takes us back to the beginning of the novel where sex is posed as a problem. The only difference is that aesthetic justifications are conflated now with political concerns.

If Melanie's rape is grounded in a romanticized libertinage, Lucy's violation is anchored in a politicized one. Social and political dissent attending libertinism, as explained above, find ripples in Lucy's rape. The

word ‘libertine,’ etymologically referring to a freed slave, regains significance in the case of the three black aggressors, politically standing for liberated slaves after the demise of apartheid. “To behave as a libertine is a political act” (152), argues Jacqueline Pearson. Similarly, in her reading of Restoration drama such as Thomas Shadwell’s *The Libertine* (1676), Jennifer L. Airey concludes that images of rape are used to express political opinions (99). Lucy’s belief that her aggressors “do rape,” that is their ultimate objective is rape, is politically explained in her statement: “They see me as owing something. They see themselves as debt collectors, tax collectors” (158). The two episodes of rape propose two different, albeit intertwined, facets of libertinism. In his attempt at obfuscating the demarcating lines between the ethical, the aesthetic and the political, Coetzee manages to create a textual space of competing readings.

### Conclusions

Coetzee’s preoccupation with freedom is at the core of *Disgrace*. In a talk he gave at the University of Cape Town (March 17, 2009), Coetzee asserts that “the nature of open dialogue and discourse is inscribed in the nature of freedom of speech” (“In Defense of Blasphemy”). In this address, he attacks religious dogmatism and claims his freedom of belief or disbelief together with his right to blasphemy. The narrative complicates the question of liberty as Coetzee links it to sexuality. The oppressive apartheid regime had long regulated people’s intimate lives through legislative interventions. Within a repressive act of usurping people’s rights of desire, the Immorality Act, passed in 1927 and amended several times between 1950 and 1985, prohibited interracial sex. “Our sexuality is a deeply political issue,” claim Melissa Steyn and Mikki van Zyl, “continually subject to various contesting discourses of moral regulations” (4). Sex in South Africa is a national concern; in *Disgrace*, it is “a problem.” Coetzee brings the highly politicized issue of sexuality to the realm of artistic creation.

My reading of the narrative has underlined the artistic rendition of the freedom of desire, which mirrors Coetzee’s liberty to explore the dark

recesses of the psyche. *Disgrace* fantasizes about licentiousness and libertinism. It flirts with pornography without really engaging in it. Coetzee's aim is to promote a free play of the mind, an artistic communication with desire that subverts taboos and strictures. His defense of literary libertinism chimes with D.H. Lawrence's view of pornography and obscenity. Lawrence perceives a pornographic gesture in the fact of hiding desire, as pornography thrives in the realm of silence and concealment: "the whole question of pornography seems to me a question of secrecy. Without secrecy there would be no pornography" (243). That's why he believes Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, for instance, to be a novel "verging towards pornography" (240). Coetzee seems to align with Lawrence's conclusion that "only a natural fresh openness about sex will do us any good" (242). Sex in *Disgrace* becomes "a creative flow" (Lawrence 242).

Liberty and license, however, clearly collide in the novel. The aesthetic and the ethical vie in a process of negotiating ascendancy. Coetzee dramatizes this competing relationship without providing a clear-cut position. Salman Rushdie believes that "the weakness of *Disgrace*" resides in this detached and ambiguous attitude. He perceives in Lurie's unrestrained rights of desire, which he fails to justify, "psychological and moral lacunae." What he finds particularly unacceptable is the fact that Coetzee endorses his protagonist's stand: "when a writer's created beings lack understanding," Rushdie contends, "it becomes the writer's task to provide the reader with the insight lacked by the characters. If he does not, his work will not shine a light upon darkness, but merely become a part of the darkness it describes" ("May 2000: J.M. Coetzee"). Rushdie's prescriptive reading of *Disgrace*, however, sounds puzzling for someone who defends the writer's freedom and right to offend: "What is the freedom of expression? Without freedom to offend, it ceases to exist" ("A Pen Against the Sword" 53).

*Disgrace* is anchored in a South African literary tradition marked by a long and exhausting struggle against censorship. Coetzee clearly aligns with Brink's hearty defense of a free literary production: "a literature which does not constantly and insistently confront, affront, offend – and thereby explore and test and challenge – the reader and the

world is moribund" (126). While *Disgrace* is steeped in a post-apartheid South African reality, it raises the question of liberty and license as a philosophical and aesthetic concern. Contrary to Rushdie, I read Coetzee's detached stand as a crucial strategy to confront the readers with their ethical duty to take a position. While defending the freedom of artistic creation, Coetzee's text seeks responsible readers.

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