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"(A)n unfit medium for the truth:"Race, power and the role of the English language in J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*

In a novel filled with a great deal of ambiguity and circumlocution, a rare instance of clarity is found in the pages of J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*. The moment is revealed near the end of the post-apartheid narrative and could be considered prescient if it had not already been reduced to antiquation: "He would be a fool to underestimate Petrus" (202). The recipient of this piece of wisdom is David Lurie, the protagonist of the book (and foil of the aforementioned character), a man whose mental faculties are sharp at times but blunt at others. The latter term can be applied in reference to the above statement. After several interactions with Petrus, a black South African, throughout the course of the novel, the white Lurie finally realizes that this man is capable of much more than he had expected. The epiphany, however, has come too late. Much like the English language that he himself proposes is dying, "like a dinosaur expiring and settling in the mud," Lurie's exalted place in South African society is rapidly becoming obsolete (117). While this demise can be credited to other sources (the change from an apartheid government to a constitutional democracy being the greatest determinant), Lurie's personal and professional foibles have hastened this decline. If *Disgrace* involves a "crisis of definitions," as Rita Barnard states, then it is also one of misjudgments (385: 2002). Such errors permeate the book, involving race, violence, family, sex, and, especially for Lurie, the English language and its relationship to power. The shift of power in discourse is concomitant with the shift of political power, and just as the apartheid government is no longer the governing entity, the word of the white South African is no longer indisputable. It is not the language that has lost its efficacy, as Lurie contends, but that he

no longer maintains hegemonic control of its authority. It can now be seen as an equalizing forum of discourse. Lurie's enervation (and the parity that accompanies it) is demonstrated during his encounters with Petrus and these conversations reveal that English's capacity has not diminished but that control of the language is no longer under the exclusive domain ofthe white members of South African society. In my paper I will argue that English language discourse is the basis on which the national power dynamic is established in the novel and that Lurie's failure to recognize this change of power not only engenders his misjudgment of Petrus but also his view of the language's role in post-apartheid South Africa.

The novel takes place in the years following the end of apartheid rule. Nelson Mandela and the African National Congress are in power and measures are taken through the Truth and Reconciliation Committee to provide a forum for healing and accountability in regard to the crimes committed during the previous era. Like South Africa, David Lurie is in a time of unsettling transition. A twice-divorced Cape Town college professor, Lurie is forced to contend with the country's changing socio-political environmentwhile also addressing his own personal issues.After having an affair with one of female students, he is dismissed from his position at the university and flees the city to rusticate at the home of his daughter, Lucy. During this sojourn, the discord that arises between Lurie and Petrus is an example of the conflation of this changing society and the protagonist's unsettled personal circumstances.

As a character, Petrus avoids easy classifications. While there are several possibilities offered in the book-“gardener,” “dog-man,” “co-proprietor” of a kennel with Lucy-they fail to adequately categorize him (62, 64). He can, however, be seen as a “man of his generation” (117). The democratic government had provided him with opportunities that were once prohibited to black South Africans and he is considered, according to Lars Engle, an example “what the New South Africa is supposed to be all about” (116). For Petrus, being on the smallholding is a chance for a better life and his situation, like Lurie’s,can be seen to mimic the country’s circumstances: starting anew but granting leeway to the past. In this scenario, Petrus’s position is on the rise. “In the ‘the new South Africa’ of the novel, the urge to stake one’s claim, to own, and to procreate is forcefully present” and Petrus fulfills each of these criteria (Barnard 389: 2002). He has a land grant, a new wife, fecund livestock, and the shared ownership of the kennel business. He is hardworking, industrious and intelligent and therefore considered by “Eastern Cape standards…a man of substance” (77). Despite these admirable traits, Lurie is immediately suspicious of his daughter’s “co-proprietor,” who lives on a part of her property not far from her house.Luriespeculates repeatedly about the extent of Petrus’s aspirations, believing him to be a “plotter and a schemer,” someone who has set his sights on acquiring his daughter’s property by any necessary means (117). As Istated earlier, the English language is in supposed decline. According to Lurie, it has “stiffened” over time, lost its efficacy, and is“arthritic, bygone,”-no longer useful (117). What is at stake in the novel is the power of the language itself. Not only is it “tired” and “friable” in Lurie’s opinion but its exalted position in the country’s discourse hierarchy has been lost (129). According to Lurie, English no longer retains a place of power but can now be

considered “an unfit medium for the truth of South Africa” (117). Tacitly connected to this statement is the subject of race; more specifically, the change in the racial demographics of power that run the country and influence its linguistic composition and usage. Lurie, the white South African male, laments this perceived demise of the language and his encounters with Petrus demonstrate this animosity.

In 1988, Coetzee wrote of the “quest for an authentic language” for Africa. He posed the question: “Is there a language in which people of European identity, or if not of European identity then of a highly problematical South African-colonial identity, can speak to Africa and be spoken to by Africa?” (*White Writing* 7). Whether this language exists is debatable, however, the change in the South African government after apartheid has provoked a powerful socio-political shift in relation to the usage of English by the country’s citizenry. While Jacques Derrida observes that “there’s no racism without a language,” it does not mean that the language once used by the oppressors cannot be redeemed by those once repressed by it (*“Race,” Writing and Difference* 1985/1986).

In order to demonstrate how English can be transfigured to fit post-apartheid society, I will focus on the works of Pierre Bourdieu. To follow Bourdieu’s view, language must be considered not only as a means of communication but as a medium of establishing power through discourse. According to him, language is the result of complex social developments and is closely connected to “the process of state formation.” It is during this process when the “conditions are created for the constitution of a unified linguistic market” (Bourdieu 45). It is this “market” that “becomes the theoretical norm against which all linguistic practices are objectively measured.” I posit that these criteria are met by the post-apartheid state and are connected with the English

language, “both in its genesis and in its social uses” (Bourdieu 45).The country’s constitution has equalized the “properties which part or all of its members possess in other contexts (e.g. properties of nationality, age or sex), and which might serve as a basis for other constructions,” in other words, the creation of power dynamics through discourse (Bourdieu 130). Bourdieu also claims that individuals will use their knowledge of the language to pursue their own interests, usage which can be understood as a direct result of their relations in society. Thus, every interaction will exhibit the signs of the social structure that manifested it and this structure is built “on the distinctive value which results from the relationship that the speakers establish, consciously or unconsciously,” through discourse (Bourdieu 38). However, it is contingent on the speaker having “access to the legitimate instruments of expression” i.e. knowledge of the language, in order to be able to “participat(e) in the authority of the institution.” It is this “access,” states Bourdieu, that “makes *all* the difference” (Bourdieu 109).

In the novel, Petrus’suse of Lurie’s first name is an example of such “access” via the newly-equitable society. The simple utterance of “David” can be seen as profound (136). In the apartheid-era, Petrus could not call a white man by his first name in such a manner without consequences. Now, such usage is up to the discretion of the speaker and Petrus employs this prerogative for his own means. As stated in his collection of essays, *Giving Offense,* Coetzee claims that while the simple act of naming “can draw the named one affectionately nearer” it can also “put the one named at a measured arm’s length”- the latter of which is Petrus’s intention (96). He is clearly not interested in Lurie’s affection. His usage of “David” is meantto remind Lurie that the old rules no longer apply. He is not a peasant but a property owner. A man amongst equals. He utters the

name “David” insouciantly, in a voice devoid of histrionics but not fully-disengaged from the past. Petrus chooses his words carefully, rarely betraying emotion, but these choices belie their power.

The precedent for such behavior can be found in a brief but significant passage earlier in the novel. While little is said, the few words spoken are imbued with the intention to establish a new precedent. In the beginning of the scene, Lurie is sitting on the couch in the front room of his daughter’s house and a soccer match is playing on the television. To say that he is watching it, however, would not be completely accurate. The match commentary is being broadcast in Xhosa and Sotho, a pair of languages that the Eurocentric Lurie doesn’t speak. As for the action on the field, what he has seen of the match hasn’t appealed to him and Lurie soon falls asleep. When he awakens, however, Lurie finds that he is not alone. Petrus has arrived and is watching the discarded match. We must give pause to acknowledge the tableau. This particular scene would have been inconceivable under apartheid rule—a black man sitting casually in the house of a white woman. It is apparent that Petrus has not chosen his seat by accident. This position contains multiple meanings but all serve to demonstrate to Lurie that *he*has a right to be there. Petrus shows Lurie that he has access to the house and its possessions (television, couch, etc.), and he further proves his point linguistically by employing emphatic speech and verbal imperatives in his discourse with Lurie. “Bushbucks,” he declares enthusiastically while watching the soccer match. “My team” (75). In its curtness, the declaration is definitive and exclusionary. *My team*, Petrus says to Lurie. In other words, not yours. By delimiting possession of the soccer team, Petrus’s remarks serve to marginalize Lurie, the possessive pronoun “my” barring Lurie from what he,

Petrus,deems his possession. In addition to verbally claiming proprietorship, Petrus evaluates the team's action on the field. When the goalie for the Bushbucks stops a corner kick Petrus declares, "He is good! He is good!" Then, in a fervent use of the imperative, he shouts, "They must keep him" (75). These remarks demonstrate Petrus's pliant knowledge of the language and, more importantly, his ability to use it.

Verbal imperatives and emphatic speech are not Petrus's only linguistic skills. When hecalls on Lurie to help him lay pipes on the property, Petrus is met with resistance. Lurie's protests are based more on weak semantic posturing and Petrus demonstrates his abilities by circumventing these excuses. Couched in languid ignorance ("I know nothing about regulators. I know nothing about plumbing," says Lurie), thestatements are quickly amended by Petrus in a manner that the pedantic former Professor of Communications would seemingly appreciate: "It is not plumbing," says Petrus. "It is pipefitting. It is just laying pipes" (136). This correction is an indication, not only of Petrus's linguistic capacity, but of the power of English in national discourse. Here Petrus is able to "remind…Lurie of the resources of language…of the *English* language" in the "new" South Africa(Sanders 372). This correction further legitimizes Petrus's "claims to authority and ownership" of the language and "gives him a voice and an identity" that would have been unheard of in the apartheid era (Smit-Marais/Wenzel 33).

Early during Lurie's sojourn, he and Lucy are attacked one afternoon at her homestead. Lurie is beaten and set alight and locked in a bathroom and his daughter is raped.During this incident, Petrus is absent from the property. He only returns the following day, with a truckload of building materialsand no information concerning his

absence. This disappearance is a sign of possible culpability, accordingly to Lurie, who complains when Petrus does not “report” to Lucy upon his return (114). He decides to confront Petrus about this matter but his questions engender responses different than those he expected:

> He strolls over, exchanges greetings. "You must have heard, we had a big robbery on Wednesday while you were away." "Yes," says Petrus, "I heard. It is very bad, a very bad thing. But you are all right now." Is he all right? Is Lucy all right? Is Petrus asking a question? It does not sound like a question, but he cannot take it otherwise, not decently. The question is, what is the answer? "I am alive," he says. "As long as one is alive one is all right, I suppose. So yes, I am all right." He pauses, waits, allows a silence to develop, a silence which Petrus ought to fill with the next question: And how is Lucy? He is wrong. "Will Lucy go to the market tomorrow?" asks Petrus.
>
> (114-15)

Lurie is clearly nonplussed by this behavior. While Petrus’s responses could be credited to “subtle failures of linguistic competence,” I suggest instead an alternative view (Barnard 211: 2003). I believe that these perceived shortcomings are in fact intentional acts of dissemblance on the part of Petrus. These displays of verbal disengagement are meant to declare his equalized position in discourse by circumventing Lurie’s attempts at redress for his absence. The basis of Lurie’s difficulty with Petrus in this scene is his underestimation of the potentiality of the English language. His belief that it is in danger of imminent collapse, that it has become archaic “like a dinosaur,” reflects his ignorance not only of its continued viability but of Petrus’s linguistic capabilities (71). In contrast to Lurie, Petrus redeems the language, giving it a new identity based on Bourdieuian symbolic power, that emanates not from a native speaker but from the mouth of the former apartheid-era subjugate.

In this encounter, Petrus distinctly indicates that he has “heard” what has happened. His knowledge of the language is more than sufficient to pass judgment on the event, declaring what has happened as “a very bad thing.” He is equally declarative of his belief in Lurie’s condition: “you are all right now,” he states, and Lurie does not dispute this. Yes, he is “alive,” Lurie concedes, and "(a)s long as one is alive one is all right, I suppose. So yes, I am all right.” Lurie’s reasoning in this equation is circumspect. His statement that “(a)s long as one is alive one is all right” cannot be taken at face value. The declaration is dubious, lacking in empirical and rational justification. If he posed the same statement to Lucy, I doubt she would agree. However, there is another explanation. Lurie’s repetition of Petrus’s statement is not uttered as an agreement but asan acquiescence to the power of the language. It is indicative of the relationship between the two men, a post-apartheid role reversal where the “servant's voice is reduced to an echo of the master's,” and demonstrates Petrus’s understanding of English as a language of authoritative influence (Barnard 208: 2003).As for his reaction to Lurie’s tacit expectations for his answers, Petrus’s silence can be justified by the same reason he did not notify Lucy about his absence during the attack. It is Petrus’s *right* to no longer be accountable to Lurie in such a way. This is no longer the apartheid era, a time when “one could have had it out with Petrus” based purely on suspicion (116). Times have changed however, and Petrus has adapted to them.

The evolution of their relationship has brought Lurie to this point. He approaches Petrus to ask him to consider taking over the responsibilities of Lucy’s business on the landholding and her portion of the property if she were to take a “holiday” from these duties. When offered the “job,” Petrus does not immediately seize the opportunity. He

investigates the offer with a keen mind and weighs the obligations accordingly. Such scrutiny is seen in his deft usage of the language to evaluate the situation. “I must keep Lucy’s farm running,” Petrus says. “I must be the *farm manager*” (152). This use of this term indicates Petrus’s knowledge of the responsibilities of the position and selects it from the lexicon. However, Petrus’s use is misjudged by Lurie. He understands it as an indication of Petrus’s *want* of a title instead of his weighing the responsibilities of the position. Such usage indicates not only Petrus’s confidence with the language but his confidence in the situation. He is the one in charge of making the decision; a fact to which Lurie is seemingly oblivious. He answers Petrus’s statement by verifying that if he wants a title he can have it. Not only is Lurie wrong in this evaluation but he is also one step behind in the conversation. “The limits of my language mean the limits of my world” stated Wittgenstein and Lurie is guilty of this circumscription ([1921] 1961 proposition number 5.6). Petrus knows much better than Lurie what it takes to maintain the farm and he does not take the responsibility lightly. “And Lucy will come back one day” he says (152). This is not a question (which is how Lurie perceives it) but is instead a rumination on the extent of his interest in the position. Petrus is interested in certitudes, not oblique jargon such as titles. He is sufficiently conversant in the language to comprehend the meaning of an unspecified time commitment. Lurie’s expression of a “holiday” in regard to Lucy’s time away from the property is not enough to satisfy Petrus. When he directly questions Lurie (“How long I must be farm manager?”) he is met with uncertainty. “I don’t know,” is all that Lurie offers (153). Petrus takes this uncertainty as another red flag. He will not be manipulated into a situation where such uncertainties rule. He responds to this exclamation with a concise outline of the responsibilities that he will be

expected to fulfill in Lucy's absence. This delineation is not only to remind Lurie of the great task involved in such an endeavor but to further demonstrate his deft knowledge of the language. It also has a third usage: to serve as a possible oral contract. Petrus uses the opportunity to specify the expected duties if he decides to accept the offer. Ultimately, Lurie pushes too hard. He attempts to force Petrus into making an agreement where the time period is vague and the duties are open ended. *Just agree now*, Lurie is saying. *We will take care of the details later*. However, Petrus does not agree. Their relationship is now one where the "former owner is in no position to set terms" (Sanders 372). In the "new" South Africa, it is just as important for those like Petrus to be able to utter the word "no."

It is this passage that subsequently engenders Lurie's revelation that I referenced in the introductory paragraph. In a society as brutalized as South Africa by the blinding machinations of power such epiphanies are rare. Often times such blindness continues in perpetuity, where, as Walter Benjamin claims, "the pain of the past must be continually revisited upon the present" (Poyner 137). But can this reoccurrence be halted? In South Africa, can the English language divorce itself from its relationship with the past? Can it be absolved of its connection with those who used it to denigrate and demean? Should it be exorcized like a demon from the country, not just South Africa but all places and all languages used by history's oppressors? Or canthey be utilized for the betterment of these new societies? Can English itself stand alone? While these are not necessarily new questions, they are questions still in need of answers. If Coetzee's *Disgrace* gives us any indication, English's role in the world is only compromised by those who believe so. Ultimately, the language's power is dictated by those who speak it, regardless of their

relationship to its past. For they are the ones who preserve it, alter it, update and ameliorate it, and they do so, as many have before them, in order to make it their own.

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