

Teaching Passion: “Disgrace” and South Africa
(II Samuel 12: 1-13 and Jonah 4:1-11)

In the Book of Genesis, shortly after Adam is created, God says, “lo tov he’ot adam levado”. “It is not good for man to be alone.” (Genesis 2:18) But David Lurie, the protagonist in J.M. Coetzee’s dark post-apartheid novel, Disgrace, is alone. A middle-aged literature professor who has been reduced to teaching communications in a technical college, a twice-divorced father distant from his only daughter, a passionate man without a steady companion, David Lurie is alone. Although, he elevates desire to a source of salvation, the women with whom his desires are satisfied scarcely save him.

The novel begins by describing a weekly rendezvous with a Black Muslim prostitute, a relationship only in the most limited sense, but one that sours when David chances to encounter her in town living her normal, attached life, mothering her two young children.ⁱ Searching for a new recipient of his passion, he seduces, even forces himself upon Melanie Isaacs, a young theatre student in his Romantics class. When he persists in pursuing her, she drops out of school and files a complaint against him. Professor Lurie is investigated, not only for sexual harassment, but also for fraudulently recording a passing grade on a test Melanie did not take. There is a hearing of his peers. Lurie freely admits guilt both to his affair with the student and to the subsequent academic misconduct, but he shows no remorse, claiming that he was “a servant of Eros.”ⁱⁱ His colleagues try to save him from himself, but he refuses to provide them with the confession and repentance that they seek. He pushes his colleagues away. At an

impasse, they have no choice but to recommend to the Rector that he leave the university. Professor David Lurie resigns in disgrace.

Like his namesake, the biblical David, Professor Lurie is accused of both a sexual violation and an abuse of power. In the Bible, King David, too, is compelled by Eros to act in a way that violates the trust placed in him. David seduces Batsheva, who is married to Uriah, David's loyal subject. She becomes pregnant. To avoid unmasking his disgrace, David arranges for Uriah to fight at the front, in a dangerous battle, thus engineering his death. Nathan confronts him, rebuking him for his misconduct. David begins to recognize the enormity of his sin, to acknowledge right and wrong and to accept his punishment and its lesson. But, unlike King David, David Lurie has no Nathan. Fundamentally alone, there is no one whom he trusts. He pushes away those who might bring him to an understanding of his sin or the possibility of repentance. Instead, he chooses exile.

Exile, for David Lurie is both physical and existential. He leaves Cape Town, his city, his library, his home, his academic identity, his station in life, and he travels to his daughter, Lucy. Since her lover Helen left, she also lives alone, raising dogs and growing flowers. She is one of a handful of whites in a poor rural South African neighborhood. An older black man, Petrus, assists her around the farm, incrementally buying parcels of the land by his labor. To occupy himself, David begins to help Lucy's friend, Bev, at the Animal Welfare League. While Bev ostensibly takes care of sick animals, more often than not, she euthanizes diseased dogs.

Shortly after David's arrival, while Petrus is away, three black men, two older men and a boy, strangers, ask to use the phone in the house. Lucy lets them in, but David senses that something is wrong, and he goes in after them. One of the men assaults him and locks him in the bathroom. Frantic with fear for Lucy's safety, David is unable to escape. He calls to Lucy, but she does not respond. Craning to see out of a small window, he watches one of the men systematically shooting the dogs in the kennels. A man returns to the bathroom. He sets fire to David's hair and then locks him up again. Finally, David hears his car being driven away, and then, silence. He calls again for Lucy. She unlocks the door. With David unable to save her, Lucy has been brutally raped by the three men.ⁱⁱⁱ

Although she reports the robbery to the police for insurance purposes, Lucy refuses to report the rape. She considers it her disgrace; tied up, as it is in her mind, with the history of South Africa. David argues that she is trying to expiate the crimes of the past by suffering in the present.^{iv} His impotence to save his daughter deepens his own disgrace. Their differing beliefs about how to handle their mutual, yet distinct traumas estrange them. David implores Lucy to leave the farm, to heal and find safety in the city. She insists that this is her home, and she refuses to be forced out of it. David is driven further into isolation, his disgrace compounded, his exile still darker.

David in exile reminds me of Jonah, the prophet slow to awaken to compassion. God asks Jonah to prophecy in sinful Nineveh. Rather than encourage the Ninevites to repent so that God will forgive them, Jonah runs away to the sea. He fruitlessly hopes

that he can escape God. Jonah is a strange seer—his is the most successful prophetic mission in the Bible. He walks across the city for three days calling out one short sentence—“Forty days more and Nineveh shall be overturned.” And he receives an instantaneous response. Fasting, sackcloth, and ashes, from the loftiest king to the lowliest beasts. As Jonah fears, God renounces the punishment. Yet, for Jonah, success is failure. He desires strict justice rather than mercy. “This displeased Jonah greatly, and he was grieved...Isn’t this just what I said when I was still in my own country? That is why I fled beforehand to Tarshish. For I know that You are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in kindness, renouncing punishment.”(Jonah, 4:1-2)

At the end of the book, God-- compassionate, gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness-- tries to teach Jonah the value of repentance and compassion. God provides a castor bean plant to shade him, and then causes it to wither. Jonah harbors strong feelings for the plant. He is distressed at its loss, even begging for death since he must live without it. This almost comical object lesson is, for Jonah, the dawning of compassion, of concern, of care for anyone or anything outside himself. God uses it to extrapolate, “You cared about the plant, which you did not work for and which you did not grow, which appeared overnight and perished overnight. And should I not care about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not yet know their right hand from their left, and many beasts as well?”(Jonah 4:10-11)

For David, too, compassion and repentance begin to dawn slowly in his exiled life with Lucy. Like Jonah reacting to the castor bean plant, David begins to break through his isolation and armor not by being protected, but by protecting. Unable to protect his daughter, he attempts to protect the dogs that she so appreciates—if not in life, then at least in death. At the Animal Welfare League, after Bev puts the dogs to sleep, David carefully and almost ritually disposes of their remains. He takes upon himself a priestly role, treating the corpses of the dead dogs with honor.^v David thus creates for himself a kind of penance. He takes on this obligation--which nobody asked for and for which he receives no acknowledgment. And in doing so, David starts to change. He is not yet accompanied by people, but he is learning how not to be alone. He begins to learn about a different kind of passion than that of the flesh. He starts to learn about passion with others--compassion.

In Cape Town, David had refused to confess to his own sexual improprieties. He had justified his passions. But within Lucy's orbit, he comes to make two confessions. The first one is to Lucy, herself. In their only direct conversation about the rape, Lucy conveys how strong she felt the rapists' hatred was for her. She thinks they see themselves as exacting a debt from her, for owning land, for living in their territory. In response, David confesses to her his own horror-- that he did nothing to save her.^{vi} Trying, belatedly, to protect her, he pleads again with Lucy not to remain, not to "humble [herself] before history". She rejects his pleas. She insists that if she leaves the farm, she "will leave defeated, and will taste that defeat for the rest of [her] life. Silently, David imagines himself at the scene—imagines what the men, physically intimidating, egging

each other on and reveling in her fear, might have experienced. But then, he challenges himself—Can he imagine what a woman in such a situation might feel?^{vii} Perhaps, he even reconsiders the relationships that he has earlier so valorized, a white man paying an otherwise reputable Black woman for sex. An older man coercing a younger woman to please him, ignoring her resistance and capitalizing on her ambivalence.

This leads him to his second confession, a confession born of identification. David goes to see the father of Melanie Isaacs, the young theatre student he forced into a sexual relationship. From one helpless father to another. He sees a wide distance between Lucy's experience and Melanie's, but he also has a glimmer of recognition. However, in Mr. Isaacs, he encounters a man far different than himself. Mr. Isaacs is a religious man. Even after his daughter's ordeal, he welcomes David into his home, breaks bread with him and listens as David asks for his forgiveness. Then, like a minister or a persistent teacher, Mr. Isaacs probes deeper. "The question is, what does God want from you, besides being very sorry?"^{viii} Although David didn't divulge the violence at his daughter's farm, he confesses, "Normally I would say, that after a certain age one is too old to learn lessons. One can only be punished and punished. But perhaps that is not true, not always. I wait to see...I am being punished for what happened between myself and your daughter. I am sunk into a state of disgrace from which it will not be easy to lift myself. It is not a punishment I have refused. I do not murmur against it. On the contrary, I am living it out from day to day, trying to accept disgrace as my state of being. Is it enough for God, do you think, that I live in disgrace without term?" Mr. Isaacs prods David to learn what God is telling him. In response, David does not speak; rather he

assumes a posture foreign to him. He prostrates himself before the only two women in the house, Melanie's mother and her sister. Then he thanks them for their kindness. And then he leaves.

Like Jonah and the castor bean plant, David may have learned to identify with a protector. He may have experienced confession, and through his penance with the dogs, he may have known the possibility of expiation. But his individual atonement does not alter the larger reality. It cannot change the South African landscape and moment in time in which he lives.

When David returns to the farm, he discovers that, as a result of the rape, Lucy is pregnant. Still, she insists upon remaining in her home. To complicate matters further, they learn that one of the three violators, the boy, is kin to Petrus. He has come to live on the land. This prompts Petrus, protecting the boy like a father, to make an offer. Petrus explains that if the boy were older, he would marry Lucy. But since the boy is too young, he, Petrus, will marry Lucy.^{ix} David is wild with horror at the possibility that Lucy will ever consider this proposal. But Lucy recognizes the offer for what it is—a sensible, even honorable, if somewhat strange, alliance. Petrus would acquire the farm as her dowry, and in exchange, he would protect Lucy as a member of his family. Lucy accepts Petrus' proposal, but she insists upon two conditions. The first is that she will keep her house and kennels. The second is that nobody will enter the house. David rebels against her determination, naming it as humiliation. “Yes, I agree, it is humiliating. But perhaps that is a good point to start from again. Perhaps that is what I must learn to accept. To

start at ground level. With nothing. Not with nothing but. With nothing. No cards, no weapons, no property, no rights, no dignity.” “Like a dog” David adds. “Yes, like a dog.”^x

How difficult it is for David, and perhaps for most of us, to imagine a way forward in Lucy’s circumstances. In the post-apartheid South African world Coetzee describes, there is darkness and confusion. Oppression builds to pent-up fury, exploding into rage and brutality. Guilt leads to accommodation and humiliation. Justice is absent. A mixed race child, seed of the future, conceived in hatred, but also borne of tentative alliances and attempts at honor, make of one family the disparate dwellers of the land.

In both King David’s sin and Jonah’s prophecy, there is a discontinuity between the feelings of the individual and the implications for the community. This is true in Disgrace, as well. In the final pages of the book, David comes to some peace. The conclusion of his repentance is marked by his readiness to sacrifice the one dog that has been his special companion. This dog has witnessed his attempts at reconciliation. This dog is the one he has grown the most attached to. David has come to acknowledge the ties that bind him, practicing those ties first by finding honor and companionship with dogs, in preparation for a struggle to find honor and companionship with human beings. After so much disgrace, even David has come to know grace, even though, along with grace, comes the reality of losing that which one loves.

But just as the repentance in the Book of Jonah is not only his, but the Ninevites, finally, the disgrace Coetzee describes is beyond David's experience and even beyond the novel. It is the disgrace found in a country divided by race. It is the disgrace of the powerful oppressing the powerless, whichever race prevails at a given moment. It is the disgrace of unequally sharing a country, without coming to know one another.

I know of a white South African woman living in Canada who had a stillborn child. Distraught and suffering, she sought out the people who had comforted her as a child. She wanted to contact her Black gardener, in particular, a man who had been present at all the important moments of her young life. He had taught her to grow from seed. He had cleaned her scraped knees. He had brought her fresh cut flowers. But when she tried to track him down and reconnect with this man, she realized that she had never known his last name. So close and yet so far. He was lost to her.

“Then the Eternal said: You cared about the plant, which you did not work for and which you did not grow, which appeared overnight and perished overnight.” (Jonah 4:10) It is not only our individual capacity for compassion, but also our collective capacity to find compassion and to pursue justice that will enable us to translate care for the plant into care for the gardener. Not only in South Africa, but here, in our community, in our country, race has been filled with disg/race. May God implant within us with the seeds of hope, of reconciliation and of courage, to transform hate into love, to transform injustice into justice, to transform ignorance into knowledge, to create

closeness and kin. May we be worthy of God's grace. Ken yehi ratzon. So may this be God's will.

ⁱ J.M. Coetzee, *Disgrace*, p.6

ⁱⁱ Coetzee, p. 52

ⁱⁱⁱ Coetzee, p. 93ff

^{iv} Coetzee, p. 112

^v Coetzee, p. 146

^{vi} Coetzee, p. 157ff

^{vii} Coetzee, p. 160

^{viii} Coetzee, p. 172

^{ix} Coetzee, p. 202

^x Coetzee, p 205