DISGRACE

Mark Sanders
Brandeis University, USA

An analysis of verbal tense and aspect in J. M. Coetzee's Disgrace *reveals parallels between Coetzee's opposition to the neo-liberal restructuring of the university and Njabulo Ndebele's critique of the use of English in the interests of global capital in South Africa. It shows how the novel's syntax reinforces the critical reflection it provokes about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's attempts to come to terms with the historical legacy of apartheid.*

Disgrace

English language learning and teaching

J. M. Coetzee

literary syntax

Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa

university in South Africa, 1994–

What is disgrace? What brings an end to disgrace? These questions allow us to hear, at once, the whisper of a common noun and the title of J. M. Coetzee's novel. Its title is being mimed by that of my essay as I propose an

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

interventions Vol. 4(3) 363–373 (ISSN 1369-801X print/1469-929X online)
 DOI: 10.1080/1369801022000013798

entry into these questions. This doubled hearing, and this miming, is essential to the textual performance of the novel itself. Its title operating according to the formal structure governing all titles, a novel under this title not only contains a tale of disgrace but *is* or *does* disgrace, or a bit of disgrace, by virtue of being entitled *Disgrace*. Taking up this script, the work enters into the wager of elaborating, in its own way, upon disgrace. *Disgrace* not only takes it upon itself to narrate the fall from grace of Professor David Lurie of Cape Technical University, but, through its syntax, performs disgrace, what it is to be in disgrace, and, perhaps, what it takes to end disgrace. With my title miming that of Coetzee, I enter into a comparable wager.

1

The reader of *Disgrace* notes from the outset that, in general, its third-person narration, with Lurie as its focalizer, takes place in the present tense. An analysis of tense on its own does not, however, capture the complexity of the novel's mode of narration and its significance.

Turning to Coetzee's own work in literary stylistics, particularly 'Time, tense, and aspect in Kafka's "The Burrow" ' (1981), allows us to reflect further. In his analysis of narrative time in Kafka's tale, Coetzee supplements his account of tense by drawing on Gustave Guillaume's description of verbal aspect. Aspect refers to whether an event or action is in progress (immanent), has been completed (transcendent), or is habitual (iterative). Once its aspect is established, an event or action can be placed in a sequence of events and actions (Coetzee 1992: 222–3).

Let us read the first sentence of *Disgrace*: 'For a man of his age, fifty-two, divorced, he has, to his mind, solved the problem of sex rather well' (Coetzee 1999: 1). Indicating transcendent aspect, the perfective 'has solved' secures the narrative present. Before its syntax can be completed, however, the perfective is sundered by an aside alerting the reader that the action narrated is not over – that, as the narrator gently intimates by splitting 'has solved' in two with the words 'to his mind', the solution Lurie imagines himself to have found is premature. The verbs in the next two sentences are iterative in aspect – 'On Thursday afternoons he drives to Green Point. Punctually at two p.m. he presses the buzzer . . . speaks his name, and enters' (ibid.: 1) – and retroactively permit one to read the perfective 'has solved' as iterative: indicating habitual action, not the completed action it typically indicates. The novel opens by resisting the perfective which has anchored it, provisionally, at the end point of 52 years of Lurie's life, a period punctuated at intervals by such events as Lurie's divorce and the emergence for him of sex as a problem.

Narration in the present tense is, as Derek Attridge notes (1999: 79),

frequently found in Coetzee. In *Disgrace* the reader is repeatedly alerted to why present tense narration is significant for the tale this particular novel tells. To the extent that the novel's preference for the present tense implies an eschewing of the perfective, and of the perfective as a reliable marker of completed action, it may be that verbal aspect rather than tense alone is what is most crucial to the meaning of the novel – that what matters is not so much the successful temporal ordering of events and actions as their lack of completion.

The deeper motivations for this strategy, I propose, become clearer when *Disgrace* is read along with Coetzee's critical reflections on confession, and when the novel's stylistic complexities are grounded in ongoing debates about the English language in South Africa, and in the context of controversies surrounding the Truth and Reconciliation Commission – to which the novel alludes when Lurie is summoned before a university committee of inquiry into sexual harassment.

2

The constant reflections of David Lurie on language and his insistence on correctness of grammar and usage suggest motives for the novel's particular narrative mode.[1] Formerly professor of modern languages at Cape Town University College, when the institution is renamed Cape Technical University Lurie is appointed adjunct professor of communications. His change of status is 'part of the great rationalization' (Coetzee 1999: 3). In this context, Lurie becomes a figure of silent resistance to the instrumentalization of language and learning implicit in Communications, the subject he now teaches:

> Although he devotes hours of each day to his new discipline, he finds its premise, as enunciated in the Communications 101 handbook, preposterous: 'Human society has created language in order that we may communicate our thoughts, feelings and intentions to each other.' His own opinion, which he does not air, is that 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. (pp. 3–4)

The word 'rationalization' signals that the reduction of language to a communication tool takes place, in the final analysis, in the interests of global capital. This echoes Coetzee's concerns as an academic at the University of Cape Town (UCT), which, in recent years, has undergone a massive rationalization of its own: the reduction of faculties from ten to six, the amalgamation of departments, the institution of executive deans, the creation of new majors and programmes with a greater vocational emphasis (UCT 1999:

1 In another recent South African novel, Ivan Vladislavić's *The Restless Supermarket* (2001), the protagonist, a retired proof-reader disaffected with the political and social transformation that follows the end of apartheid, assimilates an erosion of civility with a decline in standards of linguistic correctness.

9–17). Examples of the latter are the major in media and writing, and the film, media and visual studies programme offered now by Coetzee's home department, English language and literature.

Coetzee, who has publicly criticized aspects of the university's transformation (ibid.: 36), offers a broader context for his criticisms in a brief response to an essay by political scientist André du Toit on the responsibility of university intellectuals confronting 'the realities of globalisation and the new economic and information world orders' (Du Toit 2000: 91). Whereas Du Toit had pointed to a legacy of 'colonial institutional structures imported from the late 19th century' in the universities, and a 'colonisation of consciousness' among mission-educated African intellectuals (ibid.: 94), Coetzee identifies the current 'intellectual colonisation' as an aspect of United States-centred globalization and neo-liberal economic policies rather than as a residue of the British Empire:[2]

> There is a process of intellectual colonisation going on today that is far more massive and totalising than anything that Victorian England could muster. It originates in the culture factories of the United States. . . . This colonising process is the cultural arm of neoliberalism, of the new world order. (Coetzee 2000: 111)

2 For an account of the post-apartheid South African government's embrace of neo-liberalism, see Marais (2000).

Coetzee's stand against this new global imperialism aligns him, more closely than most scholars of South African literature might expect, with the writer and public intellectual Njabulo Ndebele. The latter became Vice-Chancellor of the University of Cape Town in 2000, replacing Mamphela Ramphele, who, after leading the restructuring of the university, was appointed to a senior position at the World Bank in Washington DC.

In his 1986 keynote address to the English Academy, 'The English Language and Social Change in South Africa', Ndebele memorably challenged the hegemony of English in South Africa. In so doing, he also offered a detailed materialist critique of how the reduction of the learning of a language to 'functional instruction' can contribute to 'the instrumentalisation of people as units of labour' (Ndebele 1994: 112, 114) in the interests of transnational capitalism.

Towards the end of his address, Ndebele adverts to the consequences of this instrumentalization of language for literature and the world of learning. Although the latter are arguably 'aspects of English . . . not tied to any manipulative interest', the fact that English is used to exploit workers more effectively must limit what can be done with it.

> English is an international language, but it is international only in its functionally communicative aspects. For the rest of the time, indigenous languages fulfil the range of needs that English similarly fulfils for its native speakers. . . . [I]ndigenous

> languages can be a refuge from the manipulative impersonality associated with corporate English language acquisition. (ibid.: 114)

Although Ndebele does not say so explicitly, it is clear that, for him, literature can be produced only in a language which meets a range of needs beyond the merely functional. His address can be read as sounding a warning: there will be no anglophone literature by black South African writers until English is freed sufficiently from its functional use as to enable self-recognition and self-respect on the part of its African speakers. Until such time as the English language makes it possible for those learning it to exist as human beings, and not as tools, there will be no literature.

Yet, there is a sense in which English has been free from merely functional use. When Ndebele contemplates English being open to the influence of African vernaculars, he footnotes Mothobi Mutloatse's introduction to *Forced Landing*, a 1980 anthology of new writing by black authors:

> We will have to *donder* [smash] conventional literature: old fashioned critic and reader alike. We are going to pee, spit and shit on literary convention before we are through; we are going to kick and pull and push and drag literature into the form we prefer. We are going to experiment and probe and not give a damn what the critics have to say. Because we are in search of our true selves – undergoing self-discovery as a people. (Mutloatse 1980: 5; quoted in Ndebele 1994: 116, n. 17)

As Mutloatse's multilingual prose, a 'township' English peppered with Afrikaans, Zulu, and Xhosa suggests, there is a black South African literature in English – and it goes against the conventions, the models, the mission-schooling, of the Academy.[3] Here, as in Ndebele, language is linked to 'self-discovery' and the project of black consciousness, which Steve Biko articulated in the early 1970s in his SASO Newsletter column 'I Write What I Like'. Shaped in 'proximity ... to indigenous African languages', the English of Mutloatse's introduction is a 'new language' (Ndebele 1994: 112), one of the world's Englishes. In the literature Mutloatse describes, English has become an indigenous language, and not only challenges traditional teaching but provides a 'refuge' from the merely functional use of corporate English.

3 For a slightly different account, which proposes a complementarity of English and Zulu within novels, see Ndebele (2000).

It is surely no coincidence that *Disgrace* is set near to Grahamstown, traditionally the seat of the English language in South Africa. We see unheralded continuities between Ndebele's address to the English Academy, Coetzee's recent public stand on the university, and the textual performance of *Disgrace*. It is in their respective senses of literature for overcoming the instrumentalization of human beings through the merely functional use of language that we again detect unanticipated resonances between Njabulo Ndebele and J. M. Coetzee.

3

Echoing Coetzee's discussion of verbal aspect in Kafka, David Lurie takes pains to explain to his students the difference between the perfective, which indicates that an action has been completed, and other inflections of the verb. Lurie is teaching Wordsworth, 'Book 6 of *The Prelude*, the poet in the Alps': 'we also first beheld/Unveiled the summit of Mont Blanc, and grieved/To have a soulless image on the eye/That had usurped upon a living thought/That never more could be.' Impatient with his reticent class, Lurie explicates: 'If you had [looked it up in a dictionary], you would have found that *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' (Coetzee 1999: 21). We are still held in the gentle irony of the post-apartheid campus satire with which the novel begins. But, even after Lurie leaves Cape Town and his position at the university, following his affair with his student Melanie Isaacs, the distinction between completed and uncompleted action continues to haunt him: 'Two weeks ago he was in a classroom explaining to the bored youth of the country the distinction between *drink* and *drink up*, *burned* and *burnt*. The perfective, signifying an action carried through to its conclusion. How far away it all seems! I live, I have lived, I lived' (p. 71). No longer simply a minute point of literary interpretation, a point to introduce into classroom practical criticism, the distinction plots at least three, at moments converging, trajectories.

I summarize them briefly. Involving the series *burned*, *burnt*, *burnt up*, the first trajectory concatenates violence, eroticism, and death. 'Everything is tender', Lurie thinks after being injured in the attack on the farm, 'everything is burned. Burned, burnt' (p. 97). 'Burnt up' joins the series when Lurie attempts to explain his attraction to Melanie to Mr Isaacs: ' "It was that kind of flame your daughter kindled in me. Not hot enough to burn me up, but real: real fire." Burned – burnt – burnt up' (p. 166). The series appears for a third time at the end of the novel, when Lurie decides to delay no longer the euthanasia of the stray dog from Bev Shaw's veterinary clinic which has become his companion: 'the next day [he will] wheel the bag into the flames and see that it is burnt, burnt up. He will do all that for him when his time comes' (p. 220).

When Lurie responds to Bev Shaw's question, 'Are you giving him up?' (p. 220), there is, however, no certainty that his giving the dog up has been completed. His reply is phrased in the progressive, leaving the aspect of the verb 'to give up' undecided, its meaning suspended between an anticipatory affirmation and a statement about action that is under way: 'Yes, I am giving him up' (p. 220). The grammar lesson that *Disgrace* has been teaching us throughout undercuts the final moment in the novel's narrative trajectory, producing an allegory of reading in which the progressive tense suggests that

the book's *ending* may not be an *end*. Another way of reading Lurie's reply is as a performative. Like the old-fashioned words 'THE END' or 'FINIS' at the end of a book, there *being no end*, by uniting verb and action his words *put an end* to things.

In the second trajectory, the reader witnesses how the semantics of perfection and its cognates that obsesses Lurie assimilates him with Lucy's rapists. A response, perhaps, to Bev Shaw's idea that 'you weren't there', he has the presentiment that 'they were not raping, they were mating . . . testicles . . . bulging with seed aching to perfect itself' (pp. 140, 199). This thought only repeats the offence which had brought Lurie into disgrace in the first place. Though he seems not entirely to register it himself, a train of associations is available to the reader, who recalls how, for Lurie, the penultimate time he and Melanie have sex it is rape under the sign of negation ('Not rape, not quite that'); and how, with Melanie in Lucy's place, he constantly figures as her father (pp. 25–7). Although his imagined notion of perfection, which also drives his rivalry with Melanie's boyfriend (p. 194), involves procreation, Lurie's partially acknowledged identification as rapist-father (see p. 160) ties perfection to violence and the threat of death. This is a version of perfection that offers him no way to bring an end to his disgrace.

The third trajectory directly allies verbs and concepts of perfection, and its lack, with the nature of disgrace itself. If Lurie's identification with the dog (he is the 'dog-man') produces one of the darker verbal jokes of *Disgrace* – for the students who jostle him as he leaves the hearing of the panel of inquiry, he is 'a strange beast' that they 'do not know how to finish . . . off', for which they cannot find the '*coup de grâce*' that the attackers 'do . . . not . . . bother to administer' when they shoot Lucy's dogs (pp. 56, 95) – the novel is explicit in staging disgrace as a temporal predicament. Disgrace, Lurie suggests to Mr Isaacs, is a 'state of being . . . without term', an interminable state – as the repetition helps to emphasize – in which '[o]ne can only be punished and punished' (p. 172). Disgrace, assuming that it can be understood as a withholding of 'grace' (admittedly not the usual derivation of 'disgrace'), is not simply the denial of perfection in any theological or metaphysical sense. Rather, it is, in the novel, somewhat like the interdiction of certain letters of the alphabet by a Georges Perec, a deprivation or restriction of access to the perfective and its resources. Transcendent verbal aspect is proscribed in favour of immanent and iterative aspect. Exploiting grammar and syntax to generate narrative temporality 'without term', the language of the novel performs a motivated privation.

What motivates Coetzee's strategy first becomes apparent when the three trajectories I have summarized converge at the hearing of the university committee of inquiry. This episode forms the hinge between the campus satire of the novel's first six chapters and Lurie's retreat to his daughter's farm and the violent events that ensue. There are clues that the committee is a 'Truth

Commission' in miniature: for example, the confusion between the legal requirement of perpetrators to make a full disclosure and the unlegislated moral pressure to express remorse, make repentance, and even ask forgiveness of victims.

Lurie's response to the members of the committee is anticipated by some of Coetzee's own observations on confession in his 1985 essay, 'Confession and double thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoevsky'. 'Confession', Coetzee writes:

> is one component in a sequence of transgression, confession, penitence, and absolution. Absolution means the end of the episode, the closing of the chapter, liberation from the oppression of the memory. Absolution in this sense is therefore the indispensable goal of all confession, sacramental or secular. (Coetzee 1992: 251–2)

Authors of secular confessions, according to Coetzee, 'confront or evade the problem of how to know the truth about the self without being self-deceived, and of how to bring the confession to an end in the spirit of whatever they take to be the secular equivalent of confession' (ibid.: 252). For Coetzee:

> Stavrogin's confession in [Dostoevsky's] *The Possessed* raises the question . . . of whether secular confession, for which there is an auditor or audience, fictional or real, but no confessor empowered to absolve, can ever lead to that *end of the chapter* whose attainment is the goal of confession. (ibid.: 252–3)

Another word for absolution, as Coetzee implies in 'Confession and double thoughts', is *grace* (ibid.: 287, 291). Sacramental confession brings, for the one confessing, a return to grace, a relief, one might say, of dis-grace. But secular confession brings only a continual revelation of the truth of the self, a process in which there is either an escalation of shame (it is shameful to be without shame) or further explanation, which, as we know from Paul de Man (1979: 278–301), can function as an *excuse* instead of confession.

That confessing may compound the offence is apparent in *Disgrace* when Lurie tells Mr Isaacs that the trouble for Melanie was that he lacks 'the lyrical' (p. 171). Although Lurie kneels before Mrs Isaacs and her other daughter, he is calculating – 'Is it enough? he thinks' (p. 173) – and there is no making the past past, no liberation from the 'oppression of the memory', only an increasing and ambiguous knowledge, which, in Lurie's case, brings, in part, a disastrous identification with the men who rape his daughter. Even though what takes place between him and Melanie Isaacs is '[n]ot rape, not quite that' (p. 25), the novel increasingly invites its *reader* to interpret Lurie's acts as *historical* in the way that disciplinary committee member Farodia Rassool says he disavows when she observes that he makes 'no mention of the long history of exploitation of which this is part' (p. 53). When Lurie rejects what he sees as the quasi-sacramental confession the committee

demands of him – '[r]epentance belongs to another world, to another universe of discourse' (p. 58) – the question then becomes: if disgrace, as a state of being 'without term', is a secular state, what is the secular solution? How to end disgrace, thought in this way? Is there any ending of it?

The answer – or rather, an interrogation of these very questions – lies in the way in which tense and aspect propel the narrative of *Disgrace* itself, resisting the reduction of language to functional communication denounced by Njabulo Ndebele and silently rejected by Coetzee's David Lurie. The instrumentalization of language in question, I propose, includes its use, in confession and other acts of disclosure, in coming to terms with the past *in ways which render it simply past*. In other words, the novel resists not only a position of judgement separated in time from the acts and events in question (see Attridge 1999: 81–2), but, in a more basic way, denies itself and its reader the capacity to say: these acts and events are over. *Disgrace* demands, in terms of stylistics, that an analysis of tense, as Coetzee's essay on Kafka helps us to see, be supplemented by an attention to verbal aspect.

As if its ascesis of tense and aspect were not enough, the novel ultimately points beyond language and narrative in the narrow sense, with the music and song of the opera Lurie composes; we recall that Lurie thinks that '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). Hinting at a break with his obsession with perfection and its cognates, a decisive turn taken by his opera makes it the place where he might evade the trajectory that keeps him in the position of rapist-father. It is, in some sense, where he can shift position, 'be the woman', as 'another track' – the singing parts of Teresa and Allegra, Byron's mistress and daughter respectively – takes over the musical work (pp. 160, 181, 186).

Disgrace does not, however, make Lurie's opera a resolution. When the narrative comes to an end, we continue to witness a resistance to the perfective. This may be a message that, although to Lurie's mind the English language in South Africa has fallen into decrepitude, the novel – exploiting the grammar of English, but not only of English – can still supplement history:[4] what has happened, and what will have happened (the perfect subjunctive is also eschewed: 'It would have been nice' (p. 214)). This is not only a lesson for Lurie's students of English literature (or, rather, Communications), but also a warning that the summary making past of crimes that the university committee of inquiry, or even the Truth Commission, appears to invite, leaves something out. From this point of view, these bodies employ a ruse of an end, a formal trick of narrative or social closure, when things are far from over. There is a certain truth in the interminable quality of disgrace. A truth of history, perhaps, guarded by literature. The book *Disgrace* can have an ending – THE END, FINIS – but, it asks its readers to hear, the disgrace it generates syntactically is without term.

4 I allude to Coetzee's lecture, 'The novel today' (1988).

When contemplating this *différance* of literature and history, it remains important to remember that it is Petrus, Lucy's 'hired help' become '*neighbour*' – 'It is hard to say what Petrus is, strictly speaking' (p. 116) – who reminds David Lurie of the resources of language, even of the *English* language. What Petrus has to say may be in a colloquial English, it may even be in an English inflected by Xhosa. (Who knows what it is, in any case, since all we have is what Lurie hears?) What seems certain enough, however, is that it contradicts Lurie's notion that 'Petrus's story . . . the truth of South Africa' cannot be heard in English (p. 117). This echoes Susan Barton's sense in *Foe* that '[t]he true story will not be heard till by art we have found a means of giving voice to Friday' (Coetzee 1987: 118), where there is also the suspicion that she is simply not listening to the black man who, for her, it may be convenient to regard as a 'slave', in relation to whom language need be only instrumental. No longer merely a 'unit of labour', Petrus turns the tables on Lurie, making him *his* '*handlanger*' (pp. 136–7).

It is here that the continuities between Coetzee and Ndebele are strongest. English is transformed by its speakers. This transformation may or may not be in, or through, the vernacular. Whatever the case, if English will have a part, it will have undergone a change of ownership. *Disgrace* performs this open-endedness. There is no term to it, no way to end it. The former owner is in no position to set terms. Having taken notes at Lurie's lessons, we suspect that grammar will, in the end, trump narrative. We suspect that when, in the aftermath of the attack on the farm, Petrus says 'It is finish' (p. 201), and Lurie contradicts him with 'It is not finished. On the contrary, it is just beginning' (p. 202), Petrus is not simply saying that 'what happened' is over. It is by registering this difference, this lack of the participial ending '-ed', which, ironically, David Lurie, professor of modern languages, cannot or will not register, that we can read the novel not merely as a grammar lesson, or a lesson about the instrumentalization of language for global capital in Communications 101 or in all-too-easy rituals of secular absolution – but also as a lesson, nearer in spirit to that of Njabulo Ndebele, about the capacity of language to alter itself and its speakers long after losing articulateness for those who have claimed privileged ownership of it.

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