The Limits of Sympathy: J. M. Coetzee's Evolving Ethics of Engagement

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"It helps to try to imagine ourselves into her argument"
(Linda Kintz *Between Jesus* 29)

I would like to open this article with two quotations: "Despite Thomas Nagel, who is probably a good man, despite Thomas Aquinas and René Descartes, with whom I have more difficulty in sympathizing, there is no limit to the extent to which we can think ourselves into the being of another. There are no bounds to the sympathetic imagination" (Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals* 35); "We are invited to understand and sympathize. But there is a limit to sympathy. For though he lives among us, he is not one of us. He is exactly what he calls himself: a *thing*, that is, a monster" (Coetzee, *Disgrace* 33–34). These brief passages from two of J.M. Coetzee's texts, when placed in tandem and out of the context of the narrative developments in which they appear, form a neat little disagreement, a paradox to which this paper's attention will finally tend in its investigation of what one might term—whether or not one chooses to see it as superficial or essential—the affective aim of Coetzee's fictions. Both quotes are taken from lectures delivered by fictional characters, and since both of these characters are academics and writers, the contrast at hand between these dueling viewpoints and how they come to be represented could reverberate forcefully within a larger discussion over the more general public role of the writer or intellectual, as well as of literature and the criticism of literature.

Certainly, no one can accuse Coetzee of having shied away from such issues during his career as a novelist and scholar; if one charges him with any crime, it is usually that of refusing to offer quick and easy prescriptive solutions to the debate. In her assessment of Coetzee's two most recent publications[1]—the Booker Prize-winning novel *Disgrace* (1999),

and *The Lives of Animals* (1999), the Tanner lectures Coetzee delivered at Princeton—Elizabeth Lowry asserts that "*Disgrace* is a deeply pessimistic book. It may have made the Booker short-list [Lowry writes, of course, before the novel actually wins the Booker], but it will not win unqualified praise from Coetzee's more prescriptive critics in the South African literary establishment" (14). It is not difficult to imagine the average size and shape of the sternly prescriptivist criticism that Lowry predicts will be leveled at Coetzee, because we have seen it before, in the form of Mike Marais' and Benita Parry's somewhat reproachful critiques of *Age of Iron* (1990). I will explore the specifics of their trouble with *Age of Iron* later; suffice it to say, for the present, that Parry and Marais both maintain in these essays that Coetzee's novels, because of their disinclination to realist narrative modes and their willful contestation of any claim to positional authority, become mired in paradox and thus renounce the possibility of any movement toward real, practical, political engagement.

Coetzee's critics are both right and wrong, I believe, and it is around a charting of the strengths and limitations of their cases that this paper will organize itself. It is going perhaps too far to argue, as Parry and Marais have done, that Coetzee's fiction does not offer the option of any sort of practical engagement, and I do not exclusively mean the highly theoretical, deconstructive sort of pre-practical engagement whose presence in Coetzee's novels has been profitably formulated by Derek Attridge (in "Trusting the Other" and "Literary Form"), David Attwell, Barbara Eckstein, and Lance Olsen. In addition to this crucial attention to work at the level of the epistemological, one finds, at least in some of Coetzee's more recent efforts (I will focus on *Age of Iron* and *The Lives of Animals*, and finally *Disgrace*) a mode of everyday engagement that is at least offered for the reader's consideration, even if it is not wholeheartedly sponsored by the text. While Parry and Marais have read all potential for practical engagement out of Coetzee's novels, they are perfectly correct to hold that any tacit solutions lurking in the margins of his fictive works are ruthlessly complicated, to the point of near-total inadequacy. This paper will first elaborate the disagreements between the prescriptivists and their challengers, pointing to possible theoretical

forebears of both sides of the debate, but focusing most concertedly on a political aesthetics that operates at the level of representation in the writings of theorists like Theodor Adorno and Jacques Derrida. My tracing of what one might call Coetzee's middle road—a practical agenda for transformative action that occurs on a seemingly non-political plane, at sites of interpersonal sympathy—will satisfy neither his most ardently theory-grounded nor his most dogmatically prescriptivist critics.[2] Yet, into whatever balance is established between the camps, this paper will finally adduce the very complexities that so frustrate these politically committed critics, points at which Coetzee's impulse toward a sympathetic ethics meets its limit; it is this limit itself that marks the boundaries of Coetzee's formulation of the possibility for and the potency of both literary and practical engagement.

I. Unlimited Sympathy

The intellectual squabble over the practical potential of literature is at least as old as Plato's *Republic*, but the shape of the argument has shifted drastically in the last few decades; it is certainly disingenuous today to believe that the aesthetic occupies a realm comfortably removed from the ethical or political, and dangerous to place the aesthetic above the ethical or political as a Julien Benda (*La Trahison des clercs* [1927]) or a Thomas Mann (*Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen* [*Observations of an Unpolitical Man* 1918]) might previously have done. Consider, for example, Fredric Jameson's call to arms at the outset of *The Political Unconscious*, a book that "conceives of the political perspective not as some supplementary method . . . but rather as the absolute horizon of all reading and all interpretation" (17). "Everything," Jameson has famously assured us, "is 'in the last analysis' political" (20). Despite his occasional early caution as regards figures like Derrida,[3] Jameson's placement of the political at the center of all things literary is partially organized by the so-called linguistic turn, for if all springs from language, political action included, then media that set language into motion and put it under pressure (that *work* on language, as Moroccan author Tahar Ben Jelloun has said of Joyce's writing [qtd. in Spear 34]) can and must be perceived as key players on the political stage. It may be

worthwhile at this point briefly to characterize, then, the disagreement mentioned above over the ethical and political potential of Coetzee's novels. Adorno, Derrida, and political thinker Rudolf Bahro will help to frame the discussion, as well as serve to move the subject immediately at hand—the discussion surrounding Coetzee's narrative politics—quickly to what one must see as clear, *almost* prescriptive moments in Coetzee's fictions, moments that seem to breathe best on a middle ground somewhere between the demand for prescribed social engagement on the one hand, and the call for attention to more elemental, pre-practical transformation on the other.

Mike Marais concludes his article, "Places of Pigs: The Tension Between Implication and Transcendence in J. M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron* and *The Master of Petersburg*," with the following *j'accuse*:

> In conclusion, then, one finds in Coetzee's fiction a minimalist programme for prompting change which is, quite literally, undermined even as it is articulated. Convinced of the need for change in the society in which he writes but, at the same time, aware of the compromising nature of the ineluctable "worldliness" of the literary text, this writer has had to choose between subsiding into silence and adopting a strategy of paradox. Premised as it is on this uneasy balance between knowledge of implication and hope for transcendence, this strategy can, at best, generate only "intimations" of an alternative to the *status quo*, intimations which are therefore often either overlooked or ignored. (94)

Paradox seems to insinuate itself strongly within even a glance at critical reconstructions of Coetzee's "agenda." Marais' basic claim here is, of course, that Coetzee's novels will never raise themselves to the regal status of collective calls to practical action, because they refuse, by virtue of their dabbling in paradox, to shout univocally and in a ruthlessly, propagandistically uncomplicated manner. Hence, their mere "intimations" too often go unheard. In her dismissal of any possible affective power in *Age of Iron* Parry follows the same line of thought as Marais:

> What I have attempted to suggest is how a fiction which in its multivalence, formal inventiveness, and virtuoso self-interrogation of narrative production and authority remains unmatched in South African writing, is marked by the further singularity of a textual practice which dissipates the engagement with political conditions it also inscribes. (164)

Such distrust of the political power of paradox and of the experimental refusal of generic and formal comfort has a long history, of course. One could turn here to several sources, but Sartre's *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* seems the best place to start, not only because much current scholarship constantly makes him the barometer against which all other "committed" writers are measured,[2] but also because Sartre is Adorno's chosen theoretical adversary in his essay on "Commitment"; the anti-innovation agenda that Adorno constructs in order to refute it is built solidly on Sartrean foundations.

I will only briefly point to several moments of Sartre's essay on engaged literature that aptly highlight the aesthetic paradigm of critics such as Marais and Parry. His repeated haranguing of the surrealists, and especially of Breton, reveals Sartre at his most realist and most prescriptive:

> Si Breton croit pouvoir poursuivre ses expériences intérieures en marge de l'activité révolutionnaire et parallèlement à elle, il est condamné d'avance; car cela reviendrait à dire qu'une libération de l'esprit est concevable dans les chaînes, au moins pour certains gens, et, par conséquent, à rendre la révolution moins urgente. . . . Cette expression métaphysique et abstraite de leur révolte est évidemment celle qu'ils choisissent de préférence. Seulement c'est aussi celle qui laisse le monde rigoureusement intact. . . . Ils en arrivent donc à souhaiter que d'autres se chargent, en marge de leurs expériences spirituelles, d'opérer par la force des destructions concrètes. (188–89, 190–91)

Sartre concludes that such "déclarations révolutionnaires demeurent purement théoriques," and the implication of his critique is that the

theoretical and the really revolutionary—the practical—will always be at incompatible odds (192–93). Echoes of Sartrean political aesthetics abound in Marais' and Parry's doubt as to the effectiveness of Coetzee's fiction, which refuses, in Sartre's words, to "prendre une position dans *notre littérature*" (276). For Sartre, of course, as for any prescriptivist reader, "la littérature est par essence prise de position," unequivocally and positively.

On the opposing side of this ongoing exchange are Attwell and Attridge, whose defense of the political import of Coetzee's interrogating authoritarian structures of representation strikes resolutely Adornian chords in its insistence on the necessity of an epistemological change, the very change that will in turn enable, perhaps even constitute, practical transformation. In Attwell's response to Parry's criticism of *Age of Iron*'s shortcomings in the arena of *praxis*, he makes it clear that Parry's "argument's purchase depends on the notion of a fairly simple correspondence between the play of events in the narrative and the kind of social order that well-meaning people would like to see brought into being" ("Dialogue" 167). Attridge contextualizes this desire for what Attwell terms "a fairly simple correspondence" between narrative and *praxis*:

> The demand that the production and judgment of literature be governed by its immediate effectiveness in the struggle for change (or against change) has been immensely powerful, and has given rise to a suspicion of anything appearing hermetic, self-referential, formally inventive, or otherwise distant from the canons and procedures of the realist tradition. ("Literary Form" 243)

Against this tradition, against the Sartrean conception of properly political art as a *dévoilement*, an unveiling of the truth in whose presence no reader can remain uncommitted and disengaged, Attridge supports an attention to the manner in which novels can be effective "by interrupting or disturbing the discursive patterns in which we are at home"—that is, by operating at the primordial level that grounds or conditions (following the logic of the linguistic turn) practical action (250). One is reminded of modernism—or, rather, of caricatures of modernism—"as

being defined precisely by the avoidance of political responsibility, by the vaunting of an artistic autonomy that has little interest in modes of otherness in cultural and political life," and of the fact that Coetzee's two most acknowledged influences were those bastions of modernism, Kafka and Beckett (244–45).

Adorno, too, points to Kafka and Beckett as exemplars of a political art that functions in the pre-political mode by calling into question the very epistemological structures that give birth to unsavory political or social formations such as National Socialism, or Apartheid (which, as Regina Janes recalls, was originally founded on a National Socialist model [108]). "Eulogists of relevance," Adorno claims, "are more likely to find Sartre's *Huis clos* profound, than to listen patiently to a text whose language challenges signification and by its very distance from meaning revolts in advance against the positivist subordination of meaning" ("Commitment" 179). No, Adorno says, "committed art in the proper sense is not intended to generate ameliorative measures, legislative acts or practical institutions . . . but to work at the level of fundamental attitudes [*Haltung*]" (180). The "shock of the unintelligible" can and does communicate, according to Adorno. Indeed, Attridge has highlighted just such textual strategies in the overture to *Age of Iron* and "its largely paratactic and often verbless sequences," in an almost Adornian fashion ("Literary Form" 251). Adorno, in his essay on Hölderlin's flouting of grammatical and syntactic normalcy, points to Hölderlin's "artificial disturbances that evade the logical hierarchy of a subordinating syntax" and unsettle "the category of meaning" ("Parataxis" 131, 136). The defense of the most formally innovative high modernism, like that of Kafka and Beckett, requires an appreciative understanding of unintelligibility and of the disruption of accepted interpretive practices, a disruption that ultimately reverberates within the political sphere, Adorno believes. In this spirit, it may be appropriate here to let Derrida have the last word before the discussion shifts more specifically to Coetzee's novels:

> I will simply add that it is not necessary to point to a flesh-and-blood example, or to write moralizing pamphlets demanding the exclusion of wicked parasites (those of language or of the

> *polis*, the effects of the unconscious, the *pharmakoi*, people on welfare, nonconformists or spies) in order to speak an ethical-political language or . . . to reproduce in a discourse said to be theoretical the founding categories of all ethical-political statements. (96–97)

"Ethical-political" writing, Derrida contends in a very Jamesonian spirit, need not always appear in the form of ethical-political writing.

Attwell's response to Parry's indictment of *Age of Iron* pulls back a bit from a celebration of the "theoretical" accomplishments of the novel, in a way that leads nicely into what I believe is a middle road of ethical (interpersonal, in Emmanuel Levinas's understanding of it) possibility that Coetzee charts between prescriptions for action and acknowledgements that effective change must first take place at a more fundamental level. Attwell points out that *Age of Iron* is not at all the deliberately anti-realist continuation of Coetzee's earlier novelistic project: "In *Age of Iron* it is quite different; here ethnographic and class differences are revealed in their specific detail. Far from being thematized as a rather inscrutable if compelling force, alterity is given a social destiny in the later novel" ("Dialogue" 168). The same certainly holds true for *Disgrace*.[3] Cherry Clayton offers a similar assessment of *Age of Iron*, going so far as to insinuate that Coetzee has slowly but surely withdrawn from the project of purely theoretical engagement:

> In the trajectory of Coetzee's fiction, which in this respect has been opposite to Gordimer's, he has not further problematized the historical subject but gradually granted it more power, just as he has gradually granted narrative—as opposed to meta-narrative—more power, so that *Age of Iron* is the least interrupted and problematized of his narratives and is also cast in a most intimate familial form, a letter from mother to daughter. Mrs. Curren, unlike Magda in *In the Heart of the Country*, does not doubt her own ontological status. (163)

It is true that Coetzee's more recent novels *appear* on the surface more realist and less theoretically challenging, perhaps by virtue of their great-

er historical specificity, but I think that Clayton pushes this further than one ought. Attridge's essays on *Age of Iron* offer compelling evidence that Coetzee's narrative has not become any less problematic, even if he does go so far as to narrate apparently realistic and historically situated human experience. Clayton, though, comes close to arguing that Coetzee has made the move to traditional modes of realist narrative. Attwell's and Clayton's notion is paramount here—the idea that *Age of Iron* represents a change in strategy for Coetzee—because it allows us to see that Elizabeth Curren's lengthy and intimate epistle grits its teeth and takes a step further than *Michael K.*'s narrator and the Magistrate of *Waiting for the Barbarians*, for example, are willing to go. The difference is that *Age of Iron* offers a solution, one that is not without its myriad complications but that surely casts itself as an option for practical—though not, perhaps, what one would term immediately political—engagement: the exercise of interpersonal sympathy.[4]

Coetzee's glances toward sympathy are analogous to Adorno's political aesthetics because both posit interior, theoretical transformation—Adorno's "fundamental attitudes"—as a necessary precursor to broad-based cultural and political reformation. Whether Coetzee can ultimately trust in sympathy as a real, workable answer is another story, and will figure in the discussion of *Disgrace* later. In the interest of keeping this methodology from being articulated solely from within the academy, it may be intriguing to consider also the writings of Rudolf Bahro, a German Green Party founding member, who corroborates the Adornian claim that societal change must be initiated at a fundamental level, a level that Bahro terms "spiritual." The goal, rather than acting "superficially—in a merely political way"[5] is to "produce the soil of a different culture, a culture of peace," by returning "to those strata of consciousness which are traditionally described as religious" (86–88). For Bahro, this entails retreat-centered forms of communitarianism that eschew any sort of "repressive monotheistic" organized religion but that provide an arena for personal and local betterment that will reverberate within the larger community outside, a local ethics that forces a global politics (89). For Elizabeth Curren, as for Elizabeth Costello in *The Lives of Animals*, it entails the pursuit of a lifestyle based on sympathy, wherein

one transforms oneself by moving outside of oneself and into the shoes of another, and, for both of these characters, the quest slips into the language of the "soul," a vocabulary, in Bahro's words, "traditionally described as religious."

Because the turn toward sympathy occurs in quite explicit and immediate fashion in *The Lives of Animals*, it will serve as a beginning from which Elizabeth Costello's words can then be read retrogressively into Elizabeth Curren's situation in *Age of Iron*, and one can start by reiterating the second epigraph from this paper's commencement: "Despite Thomas Nagel, who is probably a good man, despite Thomas Aquinas and René Descartes, with whom I have more difficulty in sympathizing, there is no limit to the extent to which we can think ourselves into the being of another. There are no bounds to the sympathetic imagination" (35). Elizabeth Costello's lecture on the mistreatment of animals does little to convince her son or his wife of the validity of a sympathy that extends itself to include even non-humans, beings whose right to human sympathy has for centuries been rationalized away. The reluctance to envision animal suffering on par with the suffering of human beings is exemplified by the Holocaust survivor Abraham Stern's reaction to Elizabeth Costello's lecture; Stern bristles at the stockyard/concentration-camp parity invoked by Costello. Amy Gutmann, in her introduction to *The Lives of Animals*, rightly contextualizes this conflict as a sympathetic impasse, an inability for both Stern and Costello to envision themselves in each other's mindsets. When Costello is asked, though, by the president of the university hosting her lectures, whether her vegetarianism "comes out of moral conviction," she responds in a way familiar to those who have read *Age of Iron*: "It comes out of a desire to save my soul" (43). Mrs. Curren, in the earlier novel, answers the unasked question in the same way, claiming that she is "trying to keep a soul alive in times not hospitable to the soul," and that she "want[s] to be saved. How shall I be saved?" (130, 136).

The language of salvation upon which Mrs. Curren leans to express her notion of self-transformation is decidedly religious, a fact that perhaps recalls us to Bahro's insistence on the suitability of such transcendental models of self-transformation to enable broader immanent, polit-

ical and social reform. That the object to be changed first is the speaking subject, the self, is highlighted in *The Lives of Animals* by an exchange between Mrs. Costello and her son:

> "Do you really believe, Mother, that poetry classes are going to close down the slaughterhouses?"
>
> "No."
>
> "Then why do it? . . . .Wasn't your point about talk that it changes nothing? It seems to me that the level of behavior [Adorno's "fundamental attitudes," perhaps?] you want to change is too elementary, too elemental, to be reached by talk." (58)

Mrs. Costello's answer is a long time coming, but it runs as follows: "I just don't want to sit silent" (59). She later acknowledges that her words will not "bring home to you the wholeness, the unabstracted, unintellectual nature, of that animal being"; clearly, her desire to speak harbours no illusions that her words will *directly* affect the world, and so it seems that, along the way to saving her soul, she is focussing rather on changing her self. The "sympathetic imagination"—probably the same thing that Taylor, in her review of *Disgrace*, christens "imaginative identification" (25)—stands in *The Lives of Animals* as an alternative to the ontology of the stockyards, as a possible means of self-transformation.

Elizabeth Curren would concur with Mrs. Costello's opening of the boundaries of sympathy, even to beings whose otherness stands in the way of one's ready sympathy; this, she would suggest, is precisely where the extension of sympathy is most required. Curren first overcomes her aversion to the vagabond lodger, Vercueil—"Because I cannot trust Vercueil I must trust him" (130)—then to the youthful African activist/militant, John—"I must love . . . the unlovable. I must love, for instance, this child. Not bright little Bheki, but this one. He is here for a reason….I must love him. But I do not love him" (136). Later, however, Mrs. Curren speaks differently of John, and although it is never emphatically phrased as "love," it is embedded in language that clearly speaks to the essence of sympathy, to the *sym* in sympathy, the *com* in *compassion*, the *with*: "I want to tell you that, despite my dislike of him, he is *with me* more clearly, more piercingly than Bheki has ever been. He is *with me* or

I am *with him*" (175, emphases mine). She even retraces the moment of his death, situating herself within it, and within him: "He is listening to the murmur of the voices outside, and I listen with him" (175).

It would be misleading, though, to believe Mrs. Curren without sympathy until the novel's end, for she pinpoints early on a mode of sympathetic relation that reintroduces a concern to which I alluded at the outset of this paper: the role of intellectual and authorial labor at this elemental level. "Six pages already," she writes to her expatriated daughter in America, "and all about a man you have never met and never will. Why do I write about him? Because he is and is not I. Because in the look he gives me I see myself in a way that can be written" (9). Attwell is probably alluding to this passage when he states that "Mrs Curren is capable not only of refusing to see the other as non-human, but also of reading herself through those whom she is disinclined to love" (170). This must be pushed further, however, for she not only reads herself through the other, but writes herself as well, constructs her own self through the other. And if writing—or at least the writerly imagination—becomes an integral part of the sympathetic mode for Mrs. Curren, it is pinpointed even more specifically by Elizabeth Costello, immediately following the passage that I have already cited, her assurance to us that "there are no limits to the sympathetic imagination":

> If you want proof [that there are no limits to the sympathetic imagination], consider the following. Some years ago I wrote a book called *The House on Eccles Street.* To write that book I had to think my way into the existence of Marion Bloom. Either I succeeded or I did not. If I did not, I cannot imagine why you invited me here today. In any event, the point is, *Marion Bloom never existed.* Marion Bloom was a figment of James Joyce's imagination. If I can think my way into the existence of a being who has never existed, then I can think my way into the existence of a bat or a chimpanzee or an oyster, any being with whom I share the substrate of life. (35)

One's own literary imagination, Mrs. Costello maintains, can serve as both a means of cultivating or realizing sympathy within oneself, and

may even provide a tool for breeding sympathy in others, in readers. After admitting the poverty of her own lecture's language and its impotence to convince her audience, she counsels them "to read the poets who return the living, electric being to language" (65). Short of that, she says, one can always strive for sympathy by walking, "flank to flank, beside the beast that is prodded down the chute to his executioner."[6] Elizabeth Curren dramatizes the sympathetic reach of the writer's imagination as she envisions herself beside John, at the moment of his death; while the young boy waits with eyes open, Mrs. Curren's are closed, as they must be to highlight that it is precisely the imagination that constructs this scenario. She also places the act of writing on a quite practical—almost corporeal—plane, one that seemingly links Mrs. Costello's very physical example of walking "flank to flank" with the beasts, with the sympathy inherent in the process of literary writing. *Age of Iron* as a novel is nothing if not a fiction generated by a body, by Elizabeth Curren's dying body; she writes to her daughter, in the seeming tone of an apology, "This was never meant to be the story of a body, but of the soul it houses," an admission that the novel is, in fact, the "story of a body" (185). This immediately precedes her account of "the story . . . of how [Vercueil] lost his fingers. . . . I always knew he had a story to tell, and now he begins to tell it, starting with the fingers of one hand" (186–87). It is the flesh of Vercueil's human hand that begets the story he relates to the narrator, and the two bodies of the vagabond and the novel's narrator become "folded one upon the other like a page folded in two" (189). Fiction-writing, which opens the limitless sympathetic imagination, begins with the very real, practical physicality of the human body and the damage it sustains.

It would certainly be going too far to contend that these two works of Coetzee's sponsor, overtly and in an uncomplicated manner, a movement toward sympathy as a means of self-transformation. However, the option is presented, and given, in *Age of Iron*, a largely sympathetic treatment. When Elizabeth Curren and Elizabeth Costello speak together, Coetzee's case for sympathy is strengthened, along with the role of intellectual endeavor and the fictive imagination in the equation. How does, or can, this change of personal *Haltung* work, though, as a strategy

for social progress, for widespread change? *Age of Iron* and *The Lives of Animals* both seem unprepared to answer this question in too optimistic a way, and with good reason; by the end of both works, it is unclear that anything has been changed. Any complications that arise in these two fictions, though, are aired even more powerfully in *Disgrace*.

II. The Limits of Sympathy

In many ways, the problem of sympathy can be read as perhaps the central organizing concern of Coetzee's *Disgrace*. The passage that I have already cited at the outset of this paper introduces the issue starkly into the novel's narrative, and highlights the demands of alterity that call for one's sympathy: "We are invited to understand and sympathize. But there is a limit to sympathy. For though he lives among us, he is not one of us. He is exactly what he calls himself: a *thing*, that is, a monster" (33–34).[7] David Lurie's opinion on the power of sympathy in an explicitly literary context runs counter to that of Elizabeth Costello, but the fact that the language that he employs to contradict her so closely matches her own only calls one's attention to what seems an ongoing debate within Coetzee's recent *œuvre*. And just as Lurie begins by throwing a spanner into the works of Mrs. Costello's not entirely unblemished proclamations on the sympathetic imagination, *Disgrace* depicts sympathy at its most troubled. This becomes clearer if, in reading *Disgrace*, one chronicles Lurie's anti-sympathetic beginnings in the narrative and charts his progress as he transforms himself by the novel's end, an end which forces the entry of various complexities into the novel's understanding of sympathy and its power to improve anything. Asked another way, precisely how sympathetic is Coetzee's treatment of the sympathy that David Lurie seems to enact in the novel's final pages?

From the outset, Lurie's emotional engagement with others is suspect, probably even absent. (One must recognize that it is specifically an *emotional* engagement at stake in relations of sym*pathy*. Elizabeth Costello in *The Lives of Animals* speaks to the "unintellectual nature" [59].) The narrator categorizes Lurie's interaction with Soraya, the prostitute that he sees regularly in his efforts to solve what he rather intellectually terms "the problem of sex," as a relationship based not on Lurie's relation to

the object of his desire, but rather on an act—almost a violent one—of apprehension: "Because he takes pleasure in her, because his pleasure is unfailing, an affection has grown up in him for her" (1–2). Lurie's affection for Soraya follows simply from what he takes from her, but his disinclination to sympathy is named even more specifically during the relating of his first encounter with her. "The first time Soraya received him," the narrator explains, "she wore vermilion lipstick and heavy eye shadow. Not liking the stickiness of the makeup, he asked her to wipe it off. She obeyed, and has never worn it since. A ready learner, compliant, pliant" (5). The last sentence of the passage captures in a tidy trick of language the lack of sympathy in Lurie's associations with Soraya, for the prefix *com* is sharply dropped, as if the *sym* in *sympathy*, and with it any real togetherness or interpersonal connection, were disappearing before the reader's eyes.

Lurie's direction changes when he quits Cape Town for the home of his daughter, Lucy, near Grahamstown. The narrator points out that this farmhouse was once home to a commune to which Lucy belonged; the commune, however, has moved on to New Bethesda, while Lucy has elected to stay in Salem. That Lucy's friends have taken themselves to a place named after a Biblical site of healing perhaps indicates that Lucy's home is not quite such a place, and the narrative seems to bear this out, as it quickly becomes a locus of suffering. It hardly requires mentioning, though, that there can be no sympathy without suffering (without *pathos*[8]) on someone's part, no compassion without passion, and Coetzee's novel enacts this soon after Lurie's arrival at Lucy's place. For the first time, "he hears [his whole tirade] through another's ears" and realizes that it "sounds melodramatic, excessive" (66). Soon afterward, he is introduced to the dogs for which Lucy cares, in a moment that will resound throughout the rest of the novel for its alertness to the otherness of animals that becomes a central theme of *Disgrace*. In an unguarded gesture, "he squats down, tickles [the bulldog bitch] behind the ears. 'Abandoned, are we?' he murmurs," lightly employing a plural first-person pronoun that joins him to the dog (78).[9] Following Lucy's rape at the hands of three strangers, Lurie explicitly ponders the limits of his own sympathy, and touches on another type of alterity with which

he is at an obvious loss for means of real relation: women. Replaying his worst nightmares of Lucy's rape, he finds it easier—at least possible—to place himself in the position of the rapists than he does to envision himself suffering along with his own daughter: "Lucy's intuition is right after all: he does understand; he can, if he concentrates, if he loses himself, be there, be the men, inhabit them, fill them with the ghost of himself. The question is, does he have it in him to be the woman?" (160). That is indeed the question: does he have a sympathetic imagination potent enough?

It is curious that Lurie comes around to asking himself this question in the first place, that he takes any interest at all in his powers of sympathy. One cannot help but relate this sudden introspection, though, to another moment at which he interrogates the boundaries of his sympathetic imagination, during a long discussion over his motivation and reason for painstakingly caring for the corpses of the dogs that veterinarian Bev Shaw has had to put down to control the animal over-population of the area and stem the tide of animal suffering. He initially denies that he performs this service "for the sake of the dogs," concluding that it must be "for himself" (146). The language the narrator uses to describe his association with the animals, however, closely mirrors that of Elizabeth Costello in her defense of the limitless sympathetic imagination; it is in the clinic that "he enters their lives," as if, in Costello's words, "thinking himself into the being of another" (*Disgrace* 146; *Lives* 35). His conclusion that he performs these acts of post-mortem kindness for himself, and because there is nobody else "stupid enough" to do it, speaks to a later moment in the novel, when he considers Lucy's admonishing him to "be a good person": "A good person. Not a bad resolution to make, in dark times" (216). The sentiment here recalls again Bahro's call for individual efforts at self-transformation as a means of ultimately illuminating these "dark times." From Lurie's lips, the tone is resigned, but resignedly willing; it is a design to which he seems open.

What does one make, then, of Bev's office, the site that seems to inspire in Lurie an instinct for sympathy, for what he later is able to refer to as "love"? The clinic, "this bleak building is not a place of healing—her doctoring is too amateurish for that—but of last resort" (84). Bev's clinic

discovers, at this textual moment, an affinity with Elizabeth Curren's pen in *Age of Iron*, which she mournfully refers to as the "weapon of last resort" (53); I have already attempted to demonstrate the manner in which Elizabeth Curren seems to corroborate Elizabeth Costello's elevation of the writerly imagination and the act of writing to the level of sympathy. Bev's clinic, though, is far more complicated than Mrs. Costello's straightforward formulation of the sympathetic potential of the fictive imagination, for despite its situation at the center of Lurie's discovery of love and sympathy, Coetzee gives to the weekly act of euthanasia a name with disturbing and shamelessly unconcealed historical resonance: *Lösung*, or *solution*, which must invoke the Nazis' *Endlösung*, or *Final Solution*. David Lurie learns to give "love" (a word he settles on only with great difficulty) to the alterity of the animals, but he describes the moment of that love in the following manner, equal parts moving and disturbing:

> He can save the young dog, if he wishes, for another week. But a time must come, it cannot be evaded, when he will have to bring him to Bev Shaw in her operating room (perhaps he will carry him in his arms, perhaps he will do that for him) and caress him and brush back the fur so that the needle can find the vein, and whisper to him and support him in the moment when, bewilderingly, his legs buckle; and then, when the soul is out, fold him up and pack him away in his bag, and the next day wheel the bag into the flames and see that it is burnt, burnt up. He will do all that for him when the time comes. It will be little enough, less than little: nothing. (219–20)

What is one to think of a sympathy, of a love, whose resolution is a merciful murder, whose gift is death? Coetzee refuses to deliver into his readers' hands and heart a single-minded, unproblematized strategy for social betterment.

This is not even to mention the complications that arise when a narrative that probes the difficulty and redemption in having sympathy for the animals, consistently dissolves the conceptual difference that separates humans from animals. Two prime examples will suffice, tex-

tual instances of equation between animals and people. Lurie's student Melanie Isaacs, for example, submits to the likely unwanted and unwarranted advances of her professor, "like a rabbit when the jaws of the fox close on its neck" (25); the reporters, following the inquest into Lurie's behavior toward Melanie Isaacs, "circle around him like hunters who have cornered a strange beast and do not know how to finish it off" (56); and Laurie objects to Bev's truncated nickname because "it reminds [him] of cattle" (79). Not to be unfair, Coetzee ensures that it is not always humans who are compared to animals, but also animals who are humanized, as when a woman in Bev's clinic refers to her goat in human terms, saying, "Five hundred rand you pay for a man like him" (82). Does Coetzee's narrative erase a good measure of the potential of sympathy for the animals by continually eroding the difference between the subjects and objects in this sympathetic relation, by animalizing the actions of men and humanizing the animals? When the degree of alterity to which the animal kingdom lays claim is degraded by constant comparison to the human world, the overall punch and power of human sympathy toward the lives of animal others is weakened, and it is on this particular sympathy that the novel stakes the larger and more general case for sympathy. Elizabeth Costello's seemingly visionary proclamations on a sympathetic imagination without limits lie somewhat tarnished in the incinerator afterglow of *Disgrace*.

III. Conclusion

In the debate over Coetzee's political efficacy—between, on the one side, the Sartrean prescriptivists who demand a mimetic realism accompanied by a clear call to arms, an uncomplicated recommendation for practical, political action, and, on the other side of the disagreement, the heirs to Derrida and Adorno who believe that the most effective literature operates at far more fundamental a level than that of immediate, tangible politics, that works, rather, at the level at which meaning and the structures of meaning that inform political praxis take shape—it is perhaps not going too far to suggest that Coetzee would side with the latter. He has argued that the desire for a realist portrayal of quick and simple solutions to complex social and political quandries has mired the South

African writer in "a situation in which his art, no matter how well-intentioned, is—and here we must be honest—too slow, too old-fashioned, too indirect to have any but the slightest and most belated effect on the life of the community or the course of history" (*Doubling* 98–99). Building from Adorno's belief that properly politically effective literature must work at the level of *Haltung*, of fundamental attitudes and behavior, I have attempted here to isolate a trend in Coetzee's recent fiction, which, when pieced together from *Age of Iron*, *The Lives of Animals*, and *Disgrace*, begins to resemble the revelation of a practical option for his readers. Coetzee's thematization of sympathy operates, then, somewhere between the prescriptivist call for political action and the Derridean/Adornian notion of transformation in the epistemological realm and as a necessary herald of practical change. Tempering the enthusiasm of Elizabeth Costello's belief in the boundless powers of the sympathetic imagination, however, *Disgrace* unrepentantly troubles a discourse of sympatheticism that is tacitly constructed in the previous works.

If it is true that, as Clayton has argued, "the project of [Coetzee's] fiction has been to explore the difficulties of any such gesture [toward representative committed action] in South Africa," then certainly the treatment of sympathy in *Disgrace* is just such an exploration of difficulties (154). And Frank Schulze-Engler, in an article mapping the literary project of creating civil society in South Africa, holds paramount the creation of "conditions of possibility rather than [the] furthering of particular political or cultural agendas" (35). Despite the reservations of Elizabeth Lowry in her review of *Disgrace*, the novel's tendency to disturb its own waters, to trouble its own exploration of sympathy, should not be surprising, even to the prescriptivist camp, for the political value and purpose of such an open-ended narrative (one that refuses to fix its solutions and refuses blithely to answer the very questions it poses) has already been approached in Coetzee's work by *Age of Iron*'s Mrs. Curren. In a blunt appraisal of her American grandchildren and their charmed lives, she recalls a photo of them in canoes, orange floaties attached to each arm to prevent their drowning, and laments the fact that these boys will float through life uncomplicated: "Perhaps it dispirits me that your children will never drown. . . . If by some mischance they ever tip out of

their canoe, they will bob safely in the water, supported by their bright orange wings, till a motorboat comes to pick them up and bear them off and all is well again" (195). She prizes and requires, on the contrary, the complication and the suffering—the *pathos*—of harshly lived experience. Likewise Coetzee's novels deny their readers the validating *deus ex machina* of the motorboat, the comfort and safety of bright orange wings.

Notes

1 I am, of course, excepting the memoir, *Youth* (2002), from this list, as well as the novel, *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), although it would have been perfectly apposite here, for reasons that will become obvious. Hopefully, the Elizabeth Costello of *The Lives of Animals* can represent her novel-length corollary.

2 See, for example, Denis (esp. 265–99), which, despite its pretensions to historical sweep, uses blatantly Sartrean criteria to assess each writer treated; Winock; Boschetti, for whom Sartre's engagement is a "domination sur tous les fronts" (315); and Ory and Sirinelli. I give a more skeptical overview of Sartre's lingering influence in my "Pressing Engagement" (71–78). Jameson, too, is cautious in his praise of Sartre in *Marxism and Form*, and in his earlier *Sartre: The Origins of a Style*.

3 See Poyner for a convincing example of how well this novel can be linked to political reality.

4 It could be argued that *Life & Times of Michael K*'s closing passage, with its teaspoon and string, also functions as an offered solution. Regina Janes' careful reading of this passage asserts convincingly, however, that the "concluding affirmation: 'one can live'" is "carefully guarded and hedged" and not to be taken seriously—but rather comically—as a legitimate answer to the more local questions posed by Michael's story (116–18).

5 Statements like this have earned Bahro the suspicion of his more practical critics, who have, in a very Sartrean fashion, accused him of withdrawal and quietism, as when an interviewer for Lower Saxony's *Grüne Information* wryly asked him, "How are we to count on these happy people [those who have decided to opt for less visibly practical modes of transformation]?" (Bahro 110). I am indebted here to John McClure—who first pointed me to Bahro's political essays—and his *Late Imperial Romance* (182).

6 While the purpose of the similarity eludes me, I am struck here by how close Coetzee's language is here to that of the narrator of Karl Philipp Moritz' *Anton Reiser* (1785–90): "Thenceforth, whenever [Anton] saw an animal being slaugh-

tered, he always compared himself to it mentally. . . . He would often stand for hours staring at a calf, with head, eyes, ears, mouth, and nose, . . . often in the foolish delusion that he might gradually manage to think himself into the being of such an animal" (183). As Moritz' narrator proceeds to speak of sympathy for dogs—a crux of Coetzee's *Disgrace*—the parity becomes even clearer.

7 This piece of Lurie's lecture could of course be adduced with regard to Lurie himself and his status, perhaps, in the eyes of the reader of *Disgrace*, who might find it difficult at times to find Lurie a sympathetic character at all—a fact that makes one wonder whether Coetzee is deliberately provoking if not outright testing his audience's sympathetic limits.

8 Depending on the context, the Greek παθος can denote a range of things, according to Liddell and Scott's lexicon: "*that which happens* to a person or thing"; experience, be it good or bad; "calamity"; and "emotion" (1285–86).

9 Throughout this paper, I have made fairly liberal and uncritical use of the term "interpersonal," and this may be a good point at which to become less uncritical, for the term seems to exclude the very animals toward which Lurie learns to direct his sympathy. The word "humane" (*Lives* 64, for example) seems equally suspect, as if to treat anything with respect—humanely—were to treat it either as a human or as a human would treat another human. Such terms remind one of how inadequate our very vocabulary is for dealing with our relationship to animals.

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