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The “Dog-Man”:
Race, Sex, Species, and Lineage
in Coetzee’s *Disgrace*

Deirdre Coleman

In J. M. Coetzee’s most recent novel, *Summertime*, Sophie Denoël, one of the characters interviewed for a fictive posthumous biography of Coetzee, comments that the author took a “rather abstract, rather anthropological attitude” toward black South Africa. She continues: “He had no *feeling* for black South Africans. . . . They might be his fellow citizens but they were not his countrymen . . . at the back of his mind they continued to be *they* as opposed to *us*” (232; italics in original).¹ Sophie’s description of the fictional Coetzee’s “anthropological attitude” recalls the figure of David Lurie in *Disgrace*, puzzling over his daughter’s African neighbor, Petrus. On the one hand Petrus purports to be Lucy’s protector, but on the other hand he seems to have been complicit in some way in her gang rape, the massacre of her dogs, and the setting alight of Lurie himself. On Lurie’s best reading, Petrus would, as a fellow farmer, probably assist Lucy in a crisis. On the worst reading, Petrus engaged three men to teach his daughter a lesson. But all this is too simple, Lurie concludes:

The real truth, he suspects, is something far more—he casts around for the word—*anthropological*, something it would take months to get to the bottom of, months of patient, unhurried conversations with dozens of people, and the offices of an interpreter. (118; italics in original)

Here, in a humorously clichéd summary of the methodologies of anthropology, we see Coetzee’s narrative technique in action, a technique

learnt from Flaubert: namely, the ability “to enter and leave a character’s consciousness with a minimum of obtrusiveness and to express judgments without seeming to do so” (*Inner Workings* 7). Lurie, our focalizer, is caught here in characteristic mode, searching for the *mot juste* and, when he has found it, turning the word around in his head for the light it might shine on his incomprehension. In regarding Africans like Petrus anthropologically—as the other to be investigated—Lurie identifies himself firmly with the culture of Europe. He explains to Petrus that his proposal to marry Lucy is not the way “we” do things (*Disgrace* 202). Lurie’s habit of thinking predominantly in terms of racial difference can also be seen in the comically grotesque stereotype of white colonialism that springs to mind amidst the horror of the attack on the farm. Locked in the toilet, unable to protect his daughter, he reflects:

He speaks Italian, he speaks French, but French and Italian will not save him here in darkest Africa. He is helpless, an Aunt Sally, a figure from a cartoon, a missionary in cassock and topi waiting with clasped hands and upcast eyes while the savages jaw away in their own lingo preparatory to plunging him into their boiling cauldron. (95)

Nevertheless, while the italicized word *anthropological* and the cartoon caricature of darkest Africa signal the limitations—the racialism—of Lurie’s outlook he does not turn away from Petrus in blank incomprehension. Instead he persists in his dialogue, intent on finding an answer: “he will not let go of the subject . . . he continues to nag Petrus” (118).

This essay traces a tension in the character of Lurie between two versions of Darwinism. The first version, cloaked in the disinterested pose of scientific, anthropological enquiry, soon reveals that it sees struggle and competition in racial as well as sexual and generational terms. The second version moves away from struggle to focus on the continuity of life across species, promoting a view similar to that of Charles Darwin’s seminal work *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872). In this book Darwin traces a flow of sympathy between humans and animals, a bond of fellow feeling manifest in the expression of humanlike emotion in animals. This emotional bond is presented as crucial to the evolutionary history and future progress of human society. One expression of emotion analyzed by Darwin is of a dog’s licking the hands and face of her master, an act of love which, he speculates, “probably originated in the females

carefully licking their puppies—the dearest object of their love—for the sake of cleansing them” (114). He then writes of one female terrier who, having had her puppies destroyed, tried “to satisfy her instinctive maternal love by expending it on me: and her desire to lick my hands rose to an insatiable passion.” In *Disgrace* Lurie’s movement from revulsion to an acceptance of the dogs’ licking him signals his tentative approach to this second version of Darwinism. In the end he acquiesces in the licking of “his cheeks, his lips, his ears” (143), a sign that he recognizes and accepts a shared emotional life with animals (220). In moving from the first to the second version of Darwinism, Lurie sheds not only his anthropological outlook but his anthropocentric one as well.

The novel’s interest in the “anthropological” can be seen in its analysis of the category of the human, including the building blocks of human culture, such as the concept of the family, the relation of blood, kin and kind (one of Lurie’s many verbal doublets in the novel),² “my people and your people,” type and kind (she is “just your type” Lurie’s ex-wife Rosalind says of the young student Melanie Isaacs [189], whereas Melanie’s boyfriend warns Lurie to back off and “Stay with your own kind” [194]). This interest in type or kind goes together with glancing references to evolution, eugenics, blood mixing, and perfectibility, to unnatural acts and taboos, throwbacks and monsters, animal/human boundaries, the preservation of the species, and species-specific consciousness. And of course there is the anthropological interest in what is designated ironically in the very first sentence of the novel as “the problem of sex”: “For a man of his age, fifty-two, divorced, he has, to his mind, solved the problem of sex rather well.”

The “anthropological” exploration of issues such as race, sex, and lineage can be seen most clearly in the novel’s focus on intraspecies struggle—the competition between individuals of the same species to see which will survive and reproduce. In *Disgrace* this struggle is interracial, intersexual, and intergenerational: black against white, men against women, parents against offspring. Furthermore, in Coetzee’s fictional world, rapid social change in South Africa entails an intensified struggle for existence for all species. All animals, human and nonhuman, are pushed hard to maintain their equilibrium in this new environment. Nonhuman animals “come nowhere” in the nation’s priorities, according to Lucy; the Animal Welfare League in Grahamstown is stripped of funding and staffed entirely by volunteers. With the dismantling of apartheid, and Land Af-

fairs resettling Africans on their lands with the assistance of grants, white farmers like Lucy and her German neighbor Ettinger find themselves living in a more pressured, populous, and dangerous world. They have three options: adaptation to the new dispensation, migration, or extinction. Adaptation is the key concept here. In order to survive on her land Lucy must be open to change, a strength attributed to her by her friend Bev, who believes she is “adaptable” simply by virtue of being a woman (210). Lurie disagrees with Bev, bleakly concluding that if his daughter does not migrate, she “cannot last: leave her alone and in due course she will fall like rotten fruit” (205). Lurie’s view of Lucy is of course colored by his own inflexibility, especially prominent at the outset of the novel, where he concedes that his temperament joins his skull as one of the “two hardest parts of the body”: it is “fixed, set” (2). In comparison with her father, Lucy is adaptable, but the terms on which she must negotiate in order to survive form the controversial and troubling heart of *Disgrace*.

As a professor of literature, Lurie draws on a wide range of allusions, marshaling Shakespeare to propel his seduction of Melanie Isaacs and Flaubert to ironize his romantic and sexual longings. It is romanticism, however, that is Lurie’s literary specialization, so much so that there is a mosaic of allusions to the canonical romantic poets. It is fitting that Lurie should be a romantics scholar because it was in this period that the relationship between humans and other species became topical, and even urgent.³ A key romantic intertext of *Disgrace* that has not yet been noted by critics is Thomas Malthus’s *Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798), a gloomy book that, with its focus on the specter of insufficient resources for an ever-increasing population, played a key role in the development of Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* (1859). Described by Malthus himself as a work of “melancholy hue” and “dark tints” (15–16), the *Essay* opposes those, like William Godwin and the Marquis de Condorcet, who argued for the future perfectibility of man and society. The “problem of sex” invoked in the first line of Coetzee’s novel lies at the heart of Malthus’s disagreement with the utopians, but the “problem of sex” is also the first of two direct quotations in *Disgrace* from Thomas Hardy’s great novel about human sexuality, *Jude the Obscure* (1895), a work deeply colored by Malthus’s *Essay*. In his preface to the novel Hardy defines the “problem of sex” as the “deadly war waged between flesh and spirit” (23).⁴ The second quotation from Hardy occurs when Lurie starts working with Bev, putting down the dogs. He reflects:

“The dogs are brought to the clinic because they are unwanted: *because we are too menny*” (146). The words in italics invoke the suicide note (“*Done because we are too menny*” [Hardy 356; his italics]) left behind by Little Father Time after he has murdered his two half-siblings, a grotesque incident in a fictional universe dominated by the tragedy of the sexual instinct. Hardy’s dark novel, together with Malthus’s *Essay*, are powerful, if unnamed, presences in Coetzee’s novel about post-apartheid Africa, with the words *too many* repeated often.

With Lucy pregnant by her rapists and moving closer to her newly empowered neighbor Petrus, Lurie confesses to Bev Shaw that he is not getting on well with his daughter. The problem, from Lurie’s point of view, lies with “the people she lives among,” especially (as Bev intuits) with the youngest rapist Pollux, “who has moved in with Petrus” (210). Summoning the Malthusian specter behind Father Time’s “*too menny*,” Lurie explains to Bev:

“When I am added in, we become too many. Too many in too small a space. Like spiders in a bottle.”

An image comes to him from the *Inferno*: the great marsh of Styx, with souls boiling up in it like mushrooms . . . Souls overcome with anger, gnawing at each other. (209–10)

As was the case with Malthus, Lurie’s anxiety is not so much about the pressure of actual bodies as the pressure of too many people of the wrong kind—too many African consciousnesses that he simply cannot fathom from an anthropological point of view. He is also beginning to feel that just as he is being pushed out by Lucy in favor of Petrus, who acquires the sobriquet “Fatherly Petrus” (162), whites as a group will in the end have no place in the new South Africa. As a white man historically conditioned by apartheid’s paranoid political arithmetic, Lurie is subject to fears of racial swamping by a “rising tide of colour” (Dubow, “The Elaboration of Segregationist Ideology” 156).⁵ Petrus already has an established family with his first wife, his second wife is pregnant, and he plans to take Lucy as a third wife, both for her safety and because she is bearing the child of his “people.” With his Land Affairs grant securing “a hectare and a bit,” Petrus will (Lucy predicts) get another grant in order to build a new house, enabling him to move out of the stable in which he currently lives. Lurie is suspicious:

Petrus will not be content to plough forever his hectare and a half. Lucy may have lasted longer than her hippie, gypsy friends, but to Petrus Lucy is still chickenfeed: an amateur, an enthusiast of the farming life rather than a farmer. Petrus would like to take over Lucy's land. Then he would like to have Ettinger's too, or enough of it to run a herd on. (117)

Toward the end of the novel Lurie imagines that Petrus's new building on the eminence will "cast a long shadow" on Lucy's old farmhouse in the mornings (197), a shadow symbolic of the country's violent past and of the retribution that has begun and is sure to continue. Thus, while Malthus's dark vision was of "a society divided into a class of proprietors, and a class of labourers" (72), with the latter driven by want and misery to "rapine and murder" (68), Lurie's specter is a racial one, involving competition between whites and blacks for land and for women. That both land and women are crucial to victory, and that Petrus will engross both, is suggested by the pun on *plough*.

The specter of a struggle for survival between races is also to be found in Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* (1818), another important intertext for *Disgrace*. Frankenstein kills off the female mate he is making for his monster because he fears an interspecies war between his own kind (humans) and the "race of devils" his monster will propagate (114). A racial reading of Shelley's novel quickly gained currency in the nineteenth century, initiated by George Canning's speech before the House of Commons in 1824 advising caution in improving conditions for African slaves in the West Indies:

In dealing with the negro . . . we must remember that we are dealing with a being possessing the form and strength of a man, but the intellect only of a child. To turn him loose in the manhood of his physical strength, in the maturity of his physical passions, but in the infancy of his uninstructed reason, would be to raise up a creature resembling the splendid fiction of a recent romance. (qtd. in Barbour 45)

Canning's description of the negro slave is important for understanding Lurie's characterization of the rapist Pollux, a young man who seems to be a child but is not. For Lurie, Pollux is a "violent child in the body of a young man . . . like a jackal sniffing around." To Lucy he says: "In the old

days we had a word for people like him. Deficient. Mentally deficient. Morally deficient” (207–08). Racist notions that adult Africans are arrested developmentally—that they are children—have a long history in proslavery discourse, and they crop up pervasively in apartheid ideology.⁶ While Lurie reveals himself as captive to these views, Lucy resolutely rejects them, arguing instead that Pollux is a “disturbed child.” In countering her father’s views, Lucy “faces him squarely, squinting into the sunlight,” and the conversation ends with her father packing his bags (208). Lucy’s position here is consistent with her earlier rejection of her father’s exclusive focus on race and economics as the reason for her rape. Where Lurie sees her plight as one of “slavery,” she prefers the sexualized terms “Subjection. Subjugation” (159). Furthermore, in turning the discussion of what happened to her away from race to “men and sex,” she implicates her father in the rape:

“Maybe, for men, hating the woman makes sex more exciting. You are a man, you ought to know. When you have sex with someone strange—when you trap her, hold her down, get her under you, put all your weight on her—isn’t it a bit like killing? Pushing the knife in; exiting afterwards, leaving the body behind covered in blood—doesn’t it feel like murder, like getting away with murder?”

You are a man, you ought to know: does one speak to one’s father like that? Are she and he on the same side? (158–59).⁷

Lurie’s concept of a conflict between different sides is racially inflected: symbolically, the rape signals for him a transference of supremacy from one side to another. His and Lucy’s “side” is the blood tie between father and daughter, and racially that tie is whiteness. Shocked, affronted at the abyss that appears to open up in this conversation, Lurie nevertheless soon concedes that his daughter’s intuition had been 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” (160). As the word *ghost* suggests, however, there are bounds to Lurie’s ability to think himself into the minds of the rapists, for the act of sympathetic imagination cannot be abstract but embodied.⁸ These limitations later lead to his typecasting of Pollux as the conflated negro slave and monster of Canning’s landmark speech.

The tension in Lurie between abstraction and embodiment can be

aligned with the tension between the two versions of Darwinism outlined earlier. At the start of the novel, in his relationship with the prostitute Soraya, we see Lurie's tendency to abstraction; like the copulation of snakes, his lovemaking is "lengthy, absorbed, but rather abstract, rather dry, even at its hottest" (3). Later, when he rings Soraya at home, he is surprised by her shrillness; in self-defence his response is abstractly intellectual, mentally correcting her grammar. Only when he reflects bodily, in animal terms, does he see his action in a new light: "But then, what should a predator expect when he intrudes into the vixen's nest, into the home of her cubs?" (10). Similar tensions can be seen in his views of parenting. Early on in the novel he admits to Lucy that he "can't help feeling that, by comparison with being a mother, being a father is a rather abstract business" (63). This is borne out by his failure to understand why Lucy rejects the option of an abortion. Lucy meets her father's incomprehension with maternal instinct: "I am a woman, David. Do you think I hate children? Should I choose against the child because of who its father is?" (198). Gradually Lurie comes to terms with the unborn child, imagining himself as a grandfather who, taking lessons from Victor Hugo, the "poet of grandfatherhood," will eventually cultivate "the virtues of the old: equanimity, kindness, patience" (217). Again, because the price of Lucy's decision to switch allegiance from him seems so high, Lurie fails at first to understand the adaptive mechanism moving his daughter closer in under the protective wing of Father Petrus. By the end of the novel, however, Lurie has begun to understand in more concrete terms how it is in Lucy's self-interest to join the dominant group. In all these instances we see Lurie moving from abstraction to embodiment—from an egoistic outlook that sees only struggle and competition to one that surrenders this worldview to a new valuing of alterity.

Mary Shelley knew Malthus's work well, not least because he was engaged in a very public exchange with her father William Godwin, whose theory of perfectibility he questioned. There is a romantic dialectic in Coetzee's novel between a Malthusian population principle and a Godwinian drive of the species to perfect itself, a tension caught movingly by the "too many" dogs and the perfect "solution" to this populousness in their extermination. That *Disgrace* is concerned with species, and with the role that Malthusianism plays in Darwinian evolutionism, can be seen in the comedy of Lurie's belief that his trial at Cape Technical University was for performing

unnatural acts: for broadcasting old seed, tired seed, seed that does not quicken, *contra naturam*. If the old men hog the young women, what will be the future of the species . . . Half of literature is about it: young women struggling to escape from under the weight of old men, for the sake of the species. (190)

Nevertheless, unrepentant, incorrigible, Lurie continues to pursue Melanie, attending the play in which she is performing. When warned off by her boyfriend to stay with his “own kind,” Lurie rejects the idea outright with a classic Latin declarative sentence that appears to celebrate the sexual drive as a force propelling the utmost strangers into one another’s arms: “*Omnis gens quaecumque se in se perficere vult*. The seed of generation, driven to perfect itself, driving deep into the woman’s body, driving to bring the future into being. Drive, driven” (194).

Such biological perfectibilism is precisely what Malthus opposed in contemporaries like Godwin who were optimistic enough to believe in the inevitability of individual and social progress. For Malthus, excess population was the chief obstacle lying in the way of such perfectibility. Curiously, the novel’s translation of this Latin sentence is very loose, not much more than a gloss. Literally the Latin sentence reads: “every race (or nation) wishes to bring itself to perfection in itself,” or “every race wishes to realize the ideal concept that it has of itself.” In the context of apartheid, this literal translation has a sinister edge to it, suggestive of the ideology of “separate development”—that is, all races should have the chance to realize their racial genius. But whatever belief Lurie might have had in the upward-only momentum of evolution is arrested once he learns of Lucy’s pregnancy. Instead of perfectibility, the child of Lucy’s rape—his kin—represents a monstrous and mixed (racially miscegenated) form:

The gang of three. Three fathers in one . . . They were not raping, they were mating. It was not the pleasure principle that ran the show but the testicles, sacs, bulging with seed aching to perfect itself. And now, lo and behold, *the child!* . . . What kind of child can seed like that give life to? (199)

In a parody of the holy trinity, the gang of three demonstrates the meaning of the survival of the fittest. They show Lurie that in competitive, evolutionary terms, black seed prevails over white, youth over age.

In his bitter reflections on his daughter's pregnancy, Lurie swings between rage and self-pity. He is enraged that through rape—the “god of chaos and mixture” (105)—a weed “has been allowed to tangle his roots with Lucy and Lucy's existence” (209). But which weed? While the simpleton Pollux has “a flat expressionless face and piggish eyes,” another of the rapists is “handsome, strikingly handsome, with a high forehead, sculpted cheekbones, wide, flaring nostrils” (92). There is no natural selection according to beauty. While Lurie appears to think of Pollux as the child's father, there can be no certainty, only randomness; the “survival of the fittest” is not in any sense guaranteed. From rage Lurie moves to self-pity that he should have sired only a daughter: “A father without the sense to have a son: is this how it is all going to end, is this how his line is going to run out, like water dribbling into the earth?” (199). The imagined extinction of his line puts Lurie in the same doomed category as Ettinger, who defends his heavily fortified land with guns and dogs. His only son has returned to Germany, and it is only a matter of time before he dies or, as Lucy predicts, ends up with a bullet in his back. Lurie reflects: “In that respect Ettinger had been stupid. A good peasant takes care to have lots of sons” (118). Petrus, on the other hand, shows what a “good peasant” he is by his decided preference for sons over daughters (130).

Having no son is just one expression of Lurie's increasing marginalization. Once a traditional humanities professor, teaching literature and modern languages, he has been rationalized and restructured by his university into a professor of communications. Clearly he belongs to a threatened species, regarded by his department head as a “hangover from the past,” a “moral dinosaur” (89), a relic in the system who writes books about dead people. Furthermore, his students do not care much about poetry. For instance, Melanie Isaacs's tastes are more contemporary and feminist, centered on women's writing: Adrienne Rich, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker. She and her classmates do not warm to Wordsworth or to any of the great male poets. Inevitably they miss all the literary allusions. The three gods of Lurie's epic pantheon—the (un)holy trinity of Byron, Lucifer, and Cain—are promiscuously scrambled into one chaotic mix: “Heads bent, they scribble down his words, Byron, Lucifer, Cain, it is all the same to them” (34). His students are, Lurie reflects ruefully, “post everything”: “PostChristian, posthistorical, postliterate” (89). Regarding them as some new alien species, he adds, “they might as well have been

hatched from eggs yesterday” (32). With no cultural legacy to transmit to this generation of students, Lurie is like the rare and endangered cycads his daughter cultivates from seed. He is a living fossil, an evolutionary dead end. It is only in the course of the novel, when he begins to surrender his general vision of life as a struggle to survive and reproduce, that he can free himself from individual anxiety about evolutionary and reproductive failure.

And what about Lucy? In shock immediately after the attack, Lurie gropes for an explanation of what has happened to them. On account of the “too many” principle, there is risk, he thinks, in owning anything: “a car, a pair of shoes, a packet of cigarettes. Not enough to go around, not enough cars, shoes, cigarettes. Too many people, too few things” (98). What he and Lucy have suffered is a simple “re-distribution of goods.” That is the comforting theory anyway: “Not human evil, just a vast circulatory system, to whose workings pity and terror are irrelevant . . . Cars, shoes; women too. There must be some niche in the system for women and what happens to them.” The answer to the question about women’s “niche”—the place women must construct in order to adapt to a dynamic evolutionary system—is a bleak one, summed up in Lucy’s decision to remain silent about the rape and allow herself to be stripped of everything she has built up on the farm. Her silence about the rape persists as one of the novel’s most disturbing and challenging features.⁹ For in remaining silent, in warning Lurie that *her* story is not *his* story to tell, she runs the risk of conferring ownership of the story on her rapists. At least this is how Lurie sees it. With Lucy silenced by the shame and disgrace she feels, the rapists now own her story, telling it exclusively from their point of view, their victim’s lesbianism possibly adding extra piquancy: “How they put her in her place, how they showed her what a woman is for” (115). For Lurie, the pregnant Lucy’s place—her niche—amounts to a very pessimistic view of the racial, sexual, and social compact evolving in the new South Africa.

Before Lucy’s rape Lurie moved in an intellectual world of high literary culture. His imaginative domain is one of classical myth and learning, peopled with gods and angels and heroes and devils. His cosmography is Dantean or Miltonic, with heaven and hell, Eden and an underworld. Strictly hierarchical in his thinking, at one point he describes Lucy in evolutionary terms as a “throwback” (61). Turning her back on the intellectual, city circles of her parents, Lucy has opted for an alternative

“hippy” life on the land growing flowers and vegetables. That her name recalls the three-and-a-half-million-year-old hominid Lucy, discovered in the Serengeti region of east Africa in 1974, is jokingly suggested in the scene where, idly fondling his daughter’s foot, Lurie reflects “Good bones, like her mother” (76). But she is also, of course, Wordsworth’s enigmatic Lucy Gray, a ghostly child of nature who disappears on a stormy night leaving no trace except her footprints in the snow. Wordsworth’s Lucy is a border figure, less a creature of flesh and blood than the personification of human solitude, ordered out into the cold night by her father with no guide to assist her.¹⁰ To the extent that Wordsworth’s ballad is a tale of narrative estrangement, this fits well with Lurie’s frequent misreading of his daughter’s life and his inability to guide her. For instance, when he first comes to stay with her after his disgrace, she senses that he wishes she were learning Russian or painting, leading a higher life. Against this she argues that there is no higher life: “This is the only life we have. Which we share with animals” (74). Lurie agrees that “this is the only life there is,” but he cannot accept the proposition that humans and animals are the same or in any way equal. By all means let us be kind to them, he says, but let us not lose perspective: “We are of a different order of creation from the animals. Not higher, necessarily, just different.” Despite the disclaimer, “different” does, of course, mean “higher” in Lurie’s mind.

After Lucy’s rape, high romantic conceptions of art and literature lose their authority, as can be seen in the mismatch between the representation of rape and its reality. A memory from childhood comes to Lurie:

In an art-book in the library there was a painting called *The Rape of the Sabine Women*: men on horseback in skimpy Roman armor, women in gauze veils flinging their arms in the air and wailing. What had all this attitudinizing to do with what he suspected rape to be: the man lying on top of the woman and pushing himself into her. (160)

The rape of the Sabine women is nevertheless a highly suggestive inter-text, not least because of its story of two different “gens” (races, nations) warring over the reproductive bodies of women. Fearful of extinction, of their new settlement failing, the Romans seized upon the Sabine women because the Sabine fathers were prohibiting intermarriage. After their abduction, the Sabine women remained with their Roman husbands as loyal wives and peacemakers between the two sides. As we have already

seen, in the competition between her father Lurie and her “husband” Petrus, Lucy chooses the husband. To her father she says:

“I must have peace around me. I am prepared to do anything, make any sacrifice, for the sake of peace.”

“And I am part of what you are prepared to sacrifice?”

She shrugs. “I didn’t say it, you said it.”

“Then I’ll pack my bags.” (208)

Memories of childhood, such as the painting seen in an art book, do not feature prominently in Lurie’s consciousness, but the Wordsworthian tag “The child is father of the man” maps well onto the novel’s many historical inversions as white overlordship totters and the existing racial world gets turned upside down. If Lurie thinks of Lucy as a throwback, a leftover from some earlier evolutionary state, Petrus thinks of her as a “forward-looking lady, not backward looking” (136). If Petrus as husband is chosen over Lurie, he also usurps Lurie as a father. At the end of the novel Lurie has shape-shifted into the dog-man, the role Petrus once played. Now Petrus holds the descriptor *dog-man* in derision, along with the racist word *boy* used by some whites to refer to adult black men.¹¹ After the rape Petrus hones his skills of mimicry, doublespeak, and obfuscation. When he describes himself as just an unskilled laborer, “a boy,” Lurie thinks: “Petrus speaks the word with real amusement. Once he was a boy, now he is no longer. Now he can play at being one, as Marie Antoinette could play at being a milkmaid” (152).

For Lurie the bonds of kin—“my” people as opposed to “your” people¹²—are troubled by Lucy’s decision to move toward Petrus for protection. The betrayal is more than personal, however; it is also a betrayal of one’s race and class, for in switching allegiance Lucy moves from being Petrus’s equal to becoming his “bywoner,” a poor and propertyless Afrikaner (204). That his daughter should descend so far, thus risking her whiteness, fulfils the worst fears of the architects of apartheid, focused as they were on the problems arising out of poor whiteism.¹³ But in terms of the estrangement between father and daughter, the blurring of Lucy’s racial and class identity does not present as large an obstacle as that of their gender difference. Lucy and her friend Bev Shaw tell Lurie firmly that he can only ever be an outsider to the rape; he cannot understand what happened that afternoon: “You weren’t there. You don’t know what happened” (140). Lurie’s determination to own the terrible story of what

happened can be seen in his imaginative re-creation of it for Lucy. That he is narrating it successfully can be seen in his daughter's whispered "And?" encouraging him to continue. The plot is marred, however, by his intrusion as narrator: "And I did nothing. I did not save you," a self-obsessed comment summarily dismissed by Lucy with "an impatient little flick of the hand" (157-58). As she later says to her father: "You behave as if everything I do is part of the story of your life. You are the main character, I am the minor character" (198).

Ownership is a key issue in Lurie's relationship with women in the novel. It irks him that Discreet Escorts should get half of what he pays Soraya for each visit, a reminder of the fact that the agency owns "this part" of Soraya, the sex "function." That he himself would like to own more of her, on his terms and no one else's, is clear in his toying with the idea "of asking her to see him in her own time. He would like to spend an evening with her, perhaps even a whole night" (2). Ownership is also an issue in his seduction of the student Melanie. The first lesson he teaches her at the start of his campaign is that she does not have exclusive ownership of herself. A woman's beauty, he tells her, "does not belong to her alone. It is part of the bounty she brings into the world. She has a duty to share it" (16). Failing to convince her to spend the night with him, he dubs her "beauty's rose" and quotes the first two lines of the first poem of Shakespeare's sonnet sequence: "From fairest creatures we desire increase, That thereby beauty's rose might never die" (*Disgrace* 16). Elsewhere Coetzee has described these lines as both "Darwinian" and "Roman" in their imperative "that the finest representatives of the species owe a higher duty to their kind to mate" (*Stranger Shores* 32-33). Unsurprisingly, quoting these lines to Melanie falls well short of the mark:

Not a good move [Lurie reflects]. Her smile loses its playful, mobile quality. The pentameter, whose cadence once served so well to oil the serpent's words, now only estranges. He has become a . . . guardian of the culture hoard. She puts down her cup. "I must leave. I am expected." (16)

Instead of possessing the serpent's winning tongue, amazing Eve with "Language of Man pronounced / By tongue of brute, and human sense expressed" (Milton 383), the aging libertine mars his design with oddly inappropriate lines about the dynastic obligation to produce heirs, summed up in the command from Genesis to increase and multiply. But

while the word *increase* conjures up images of reproduction and lineage, it calls up as a rhyme not *decrease* but *decease*, an abrupt foiling of expectations, as noted by many Shakespearean scholars:¹⁴

From fairest creatures we desire increase,
That thereby beauty’s rose might never die.
But as the ripener should by time decease,
His tender heir might bear his memory. (Shakespeare 41)

Lurie’s subsequent pessimism about his lineage after the rape of Lucy is prefigured here in the oddity of that pairing “increase” / “decease.”

We do not see Lurie teaching Shakespeare or Milton but Wordsworth and Byron. The Byron poem he sets for study is *Lara, A Tale* (1814), one of the many intertexts for Byron’s ghost story competition of 1816 and hence for the origins of Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. Lara is a typical Byronic hero, a mysterious, gloomy, haughty outcast with the stamp of Cain on his forehead. Returning to his ancestral home after a very long absence, he appears to harbor some nameless, unspeakable secret or crime. His countrymen ask: “What had he been? What was he, this unknown, / Who walked their world, his lineage only known.” The lines Lurie analyzes with his students are these:

He stood a stranger in this breathing world,
An erring spirit from another hurled;
A thing of dark imaginings, that shaped
By choice the perils he by chance escaped (251)

Lara is here the archangel Lucifer, flung out from heaven for his rebellion. As a result of this disgrace—this fall from higher to lower—Lara is downgraded to a thing, a monster. This does not deter Lurie from being drawn to the glamorous figure of this dark angel, as well as to his “mad, bad, and dangerous to know” creator, Lord Byron. As he explains to his students, throughout his writing career Byron “found himself conflated with his own poetic creations—with Harold, Manfred, even Don Juan” (31). Lurie is drawn to the satanic; he identifies with it. If he were to choose a totem it would be the snake. He has even made an academic study of the origins of the Faust legend. At the conclusion of his class on *Lara* he urges his students to see that, rather than condemn the hero as a being “with whom there is something constitutionally wrong,” Byron invites us to “understand and sympathize” with him. But he warns, “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. Finally, Byron will suggest, it will not be possible to love him, not in the deeper, more human sense of the word. He will be condemned to solitude” (33–34).

Lurie appeals here to a human species-specific consciousness.¹⁵ Lara is not human, “not one of us,” but a thing. In words that look forward to his first exchange with Lucy concerning the status of animals, Lurie instructs his students that it is right to be kind and sympathetic to “things” (downgraded humans), but in the end they belong to a different (inferior) order of creation. Things are monsters, beyond the pale of human love. Ironically, by the end of the novel, Lurie has himself become a thing, a monster, for a monster is what a dog-man is. “[H]ow are the mighty fallen,” murmurs Melanie’s father (167). But in the process of “becoming dog” Lurie manages to jettison his species-specific conception of love. Every dog he is about to kill with Bev’s assistance is now given “what he no longer has difficulty in calling by its proper name: love” (219). The injustice inflicted on dogs that Lucy had earlier identified—“They do us the honour of treating us like gods, and we respond by treating them like things” (78)—is rectified at the point of death, on the operating table of Bev’s clinic. By the novel’s conclusion, Lurie has shaken himself free of the many questions associated with species-specific consciousness, questions such as: “Is it proper to mourn the death of beings who do not practise mourning amongst themselves?” (127). Or “what do dogs know of honour and dishonour anyway?” (146). In the end Lurie takes it upon himself to convey the dead dogs into the incinerator, not because it makes any difference to Bev or to the animals themselves. Instead he does it “For himself . . . For his idea of the world, a world in which men do not use shovels to beat corpses into a more convenient shape for processing.” The dogs’ anonymous deaths recall the death of Wordsworth’s Lucy, a death that passes unnoticed except for its effect on the one left mourning:

She lived unknown, and few could know
When Lucy ceased to be;
But she is in her grave, and oh,
The difference to me! (150)

Lurie’s gallantry, his “saving the honour” of canine corpses may conform to his idea of a more perfect world but it is also (he has to admit) “stupid, daft, wrongheaded” (146). Nevertheless he does it, on account of his “idea

of the world.” Now that he allows the doomed dogs to lick him, he has evolved from a “moral dinosaur” to a niche uneasily suspended between wrongheadedness and honor.

Frankenstein’s monster, a creature of mixed, indeterminate species, presents us with the moving spectacle of a creature driven to trace out some kind of lineage for himself. After finding a satchel of books and teaching himself to read, instead of finding enlightenment he becomes even more bewildered about what and who he is:

I found myself similar, yet at the same time strangely unlike to the beings concerning whom I read. . . . My person was hideous and my stature gigantic. What did this mean? Who was I? What was I? Whence did I come? What was my destination? These questions continually recurred, but I was unable to solve them.

(86)

Milton’s *Paradise Lost* takes him no closer to solving the riddle:

Like Adam, I was apparently united by no link to any other being in existence; but his state was far different from mine in every other respect. He had come forth from the hands of God a perfect creature, happy and prosperous, guarded by the especial care of his Creator; he was allowed to converse with, and acquire knowledge from, beings of a superior nature: but I was wretched, helpless, and alone. Many times I considered Satan as the fitter emblem of my condition; for often, like him, when I viewed the bliss of my protectors, the bitter gall of envy rose within me.

(87)

As the monster turns these questions around in his head, he draws on his literary education to interrogate what it means to be human. In doing so he shows us how the category of the human is a work of ongoing discursive construction. His arrival at this point of understanding marks, however, the limit of his literary education. For all his persuasive eloquence, the monster cannot, in the end, entice his creator’s sympathy to cross the species barrier. Frankenstein refuses to admit his creature to the ranks of the human.

At the end of *Disgrace* Lurie differs from Frankenstein in recognizing, as Darwin did, the evolutionary and emotional continuity between human and nonhuman species. Whereas once Lurie had sided with the an-

cients in their belief that, unlike humans, animals “don’t have proper souls” (78), he now accepts the animality of human life. The precise causes of this change of heart are hard to fathom, but for the most part they occur after the rape, when issues of the destiny of women (their “niche”) come to a head in Lucy’s surrender of everything to Petrus. Starting again at “ground level,” from a position of complete humiliation, she agrees with her father that she has become “like a dog”: “With nothing. No cards, no weapons, no property, no rights, no dignity” (204–05). The convergence between the lives of women and those of animals in *Disgrace* can be seen in Lurie’s uneasiness at the two young sheep who are to be slaughtered for Petrus’s party. He reflects: “Sheep do not own themselves, do not own their lives. They exist to be used, every last ounce of them, their flesh to be eaten, their bones to be crushed and fed to poultry” (123). A consideration of the fate of animals causes Lurie to shift somewhat from his patriarchal and proprietorial attitude to women. His destructive fury at Lucy’s rape lessens, and in the end he steps back to allow his daughter to emerge as the main character in her own story. To the earlier question, “what kind of child” could issue from such seed, Lurie now answers that the baby will not be a monster: instead it will be “just as solid, just as long-lasting” as its mother, and so it will go on, “a line of existences in which his share, his gift, will grow inexorably less and less, till it may as well be forgotten” (217). Here the competitive need for his own line to survive has opened out into a Shakespearean perspective; Lucy’s increase will inevitably entail the grandfather’s decease.

Lurie’s development and, in particular, his movement toward a Darwinist outlook less focused on struggle and more on human–animal continuity, is significantly shaped by his experience with Bev, who, in championing the ways of animals, exposes the Malthusian arithmetic as applicable only to humans:

“The trouble is, there are just too many of them,” says Bev Shaw. “They don’t understand it, of course, and we have no way of telling them. Too many by our standards, not by theirs. They would just multiply and multiply if they had their way, until they filled the earth. They don’t think it’s a bad thing to have lots of offspring. The more the jollier.” (85)

Lurie notes the dogs’ egalitarianism—“No one too high and mighty to smell another’s backside”—and their general peacefulness: “He is watching the dogs eat. It surprises him how little fighting there is. The small, the

weak hold back, accepting their lot, waiting their turn” (84–85). Nevertheless, for all that Lurie can see the irrelevance of Malthusian thinking when applied to animals, an ineradicable and systemic anthropocentrism prevails. Measured by human standards, the unwanted dogs are “too many” and must be eliminated. Incinerating the dead dogs respectfully constitutes a part of Lurie’s atonement for this anthropocentric logic. He becomes the dogs’ servant, a *harijan*—an untouchable, the lowest of the low. In honoring the dogs who know nothing of honor and dishonor, Lurie acknowledges the evolutionary kinship between human and non-human species.

Near the start of the novel Lurie tells Melanie that Wordsworth has been one of his “masters” (13). This reveals many things about Lurie, not least the belief he shares with Wordsworth that poetry is the defining discourse of the human species. Wordsworth’s poet typifies his kind, he is “a man speaking to men” using a common language, shared by all. After the rape, after continuing “to nag Petrus,” after fathoming Lucy’s behavior, and after helping Bev “liberate” the unwanted dogs, Lurie has become somewhat cynical about poetry: “So much for the poets, so much for the dead masters. Who have not, he must say, guided him well. *Aliter*, to whom he has not listened well” (179). Moreover, any belief in the distinctively human nature of literature, music, and art has disappeared. Theresa’s passion for Byron keeps her “howling to the moon for the rest of her natural life” (186) while the crippled dog who keeps Lurie company smacks its lips and seems on the point of singing too, or howling (215). In the contrapuntal music of Lurie’s comic opera, the species-specific consciousness of the human kind is nowhere in sight.

Notes

1. For Coetzee on the mischievous play of authors when it comes to similarities between themselves and the people in their books, see *Inner Workings* 147–48.
2. For more such verbal doublets see Derek Attridge.
3. See Christine Kenyon-Jones.
4. In this preface Hardy also refers to the “fret and fever, derision and disaster, that may press in the wake of the strongest passion known to humanity” (23).
5. For more on the power of numbers, statistics, and social measurement in apartheid South Africa, see Deborah Posel.

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6. See Coetzee, "The Mind of Apartheid" 15.

7. See Rosemary Jolly.

8. For a discussion of the sympathetic imagination, see Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* 35.

9. A clue to her silence might be found in Coetzee's essay on Breyten Breytenbach's memoir *Dog Heart*, where he criticizes the book for circulating horror stories of attacks on whites, a mechanism "that drives white paranoia about being chased off the land and ultimately into the sea" (*Stranger Shores* 312).

10. The lantern her father gives her is not for her sake but for her mother's:

To-night will be a stormy night,
You to the Town must go,
And take a lantern, Child, to light
Your Mother thro the snow. (Wordsworth 156)

For a reading of *Disgrace* in relation to the Lucy poems, see Margot Beard.

11. Ettinger says he will send over "a boy" to fix the Combi (109).

12. Elsewhere Coetzee has spoken of how the term *people* is "too loaded" for use today, especially in the context of Afrikaner racial identity (*Stranger Shores* 311).

13. For poor whites and fears of racial degeneration see Saul Dubow, *Scientific Racism*, and Susanne Klausen.

14. Helen Vendler argues that "we expect, by parallel with *increase*, the milder *decrease*" (46).

15. For a fascinating book on the link between romantic concepts of poetry and theorizations of the human, see Maureen N. McLane.

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