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Fear of Dogs/Dogs' Fear in Coetzee's *Disgrace*

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ABSTRACT

In the novel *Disgrace*, J.M. Coetzee entwines sexual, racial and species politics. By including dogs in the novel as characters, he shows that the connections between dogs and humans are intricately bound to a political place of privilege or of oppression. One way in which he demonstrates the political connection between dogs and humans is through their fear of one another. Privileged whites feared Africans and protected themselves with dogs; Africans feared whites and the dogs they protected. Dogs fear death.

Elizabeth Grosz tells us that bodily pain forms the identity of both the individual and the society and culture. She credits Nietzsche with "the insight that pain is the key in instituting memory"(Grosz 1994:131). Law, she claims, is branded on to the body through "a memory fashioned out of the suffering and pain of the body," and she quotes Nietzsche:

> One might even say that wherever on earth solemnity, seriousness, mystery and gloomy coloring still distinguish the life of a man and a people, something of the terror that formerly attended all promises, pledges and vows on earth is still effective (Grosz 1994:132).

I believe that J.M. Coetzee never flinches from examining the employment of this technique by those fashioning our political, including legal, relations in his brilliant novels of apartheid South Africa. But in the novel *Disgrace* he entwines sexual politics, racial politics and species politics in equal measure. Set in the new South Africa, the novel shows the struggle of the characters to reconcile their differences, set in concrete by the legal, political and social order of apartheid. In this paper, I will discuss only the relationship of fear between the canine species and the human species in the novel.

In the contemporary world, we are searching for another way of situating humanity in nature to discover the reality of our relations with other species. Possibly a fruitful move

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is to take into account both the difference in other species and our historical relations with them. This approach, an extension of cosmopolitanism, seeks to overcome the projection of ourselves or our needs on to the other species and to try to understand what the relation of species to other species means for either side. This line of reasoning has centered upon dogs as the contemporary paradigmatic domesticated animal and is succinctly presented in Donna Haraway's The Companion Species Manifesto (2003). Haraway is looking for a good relationship between a human and a dog that takes the dog into account as a different but equal component in the dyad. She examines the ways in which dogs work, both in those recognized tasks, such as sheep herding, and at being pets which requires a great deal of self-control. She advocates that humans work as hard at the relationship as they expect the dogs to. As she explains, her study is a step in improving our ethical and political relations with dogs. Of course, we already have ethical and political relations with dogs and they are as complex, difficult and unjust as most human political relations in the post-colonial world. In looking at our political, including legal, relations with dogs in Coetzee's novel *Disgrace*, dogs are actual characters as are men, women, a goat, two sheep, and some chickens. Through this intensely critical work, Coetzee reveals our actual treatment of dogs.

For the purpose of this work, I will discuss the relation of human fear of dogs in mediating human gender and race relations and inevitably canine/human relations. The complexity of companion species relationships will be recognizable. However, the strength of this great novel is the second part where Coetzee examines the canine fear of humans and takes the alarming step of alluding to the Holocaust when considering the canicide of those dogs who do not have the protection of being actual species companions. Ted Benton observes that there is no 'wild' any more and that humanity concedes an ever-shrinking space to certain species to live outside direct constant contact with humans (1993). Dogs continue to be well capable of such an existence but are forbidden any space in which to exercise an existence separate from intimate life with humans and are killed instead.

In the novel, the character, Lucy, defined as 'white' under the regime of apartheid, is determined to stay in South Africa, despite the shift in power, and to reconcile with her neighbour, Petrus. Lucy enters the novel when her father, David, the disgraced professor of the novel's title, arrives at her farm to stay for a while in the wake of his loss of job and reputation and with the vague hope of reconstructing his life. He has been fired for raping a student and refusing the reconciliation process offered by the university where he had been a Byron scholar and teacher of English. He is shocked to discover that Lucy lives alone on her farm but she reassures him by telling him that she is protected by the dogs that she boards and she has a rifle:

> The dogs are excited to see her. Dobermans, German Shepherds, ridge-backs, bull terriers, Rottweilers. 'Watchdogs, all of them,' she says. 'Working dogs, on short contracts' (Coetzee 2000:61).

David learns that Lucy is farming vegetables and flowers with her African neighbour, Petrus, who continues to work as a wage labourer for her but who is purchasing, with a government grant, part of her farm. She offered the deal as a gesture of reconciliation. Lucy cannot be moved from her intention to stay in South Africa on her farm and believes herself to have integrated well into the new life of South Africa.

In a scene where economy of words amounts to genius, the failure of Lucy's attempt at reconciliation explodes her life. Lucy and her disgraced father had taken some of the dogs for a walk. Upon their return, they discovered three young African men in the yard. One of them is by the dog pen and the penned dogs are in an uproar:

> The three are there, waiting for them. The two men stand at a remove while the boy, beside the cages, hisses at the dogs and makes sudden, threatening gestures. The dogs, in a rage, bark and snap (Coetzee 2000:92).

Lucy orders the boy to get away from the dogs. Lucy, then, makes her fatal trusting gesture of reconciliation. "At Lucy's approach the dogs calm down. She opens the third cage and releases the two Dobermann's into it"; her father considers, "A brave gesture, he thinks to himself; but is it wise?" (Coetzee 2000:92) No, it isn't. Using a pretext to enter the house, the young men lock David in the bathroom and rape Lucy. When they have finished, they load his car with booty, including the rifle, and then they proceed to the dog pens where they massacre the dogs. Those who don't die from bullets, they finish off by slashing their throats. Throughout both the rape and the massacre, the men are jubilant.

The complexity of human/canine relations in Africa reverberates from this scene to the end of the novel. Lucy has a loving commitment to the dogs for whom she cares and she cannot understand why others do not have it. But the dogs upon whom she lavishes care, exist and existed to provide security: security for the white population of Africa. From the perspective of the native African, they are seen fangs first. These dogs exist to brutalize, to terrorize, to dehumanize, to remind the African of his or her place. The simple presence of the young men sent the dogs into frenzy; teasing was not necessary. The killing of them is an assertion of manhood, of the warrior, of revelling in newly won power. David comes to this recognition when he buries the dogs:

> The dog with the hole in its throat still bares its bloody teeth. Like shooting fish in a barrel, he thinks. Contemptible, yet exhilarating, probably, in a country where dogs are bred to snarl at the mere smell of a black man. A satisfying afternoon's work, heady, like all revenge (Coetzee 2000:110).

The rape and the slaughter are equal political vengeance. However, David is learning his place in the new order of sexual politics, not racial. His education is mediated through his relationships with the character, Bev Shaw, and her relationships with animals. He first meets her in the Shelter where he at once grasps the purpose for the place and her job in it. He has walked into a death chamber. She is fated at once to be a human with an ability to communicate with animals, but who is forced to kill them in her capacity of running an ironically titled Animal Welfare Shelter:

> He has a first inkling of the task this ugly little woman has set herself. This bleak building is a place not of healing…but of last resort…Bev Shaw, not a veterinarian but a priestess, full of New Age mumbo jumbo, trying, absurdly, to lighten the load of Africa's suffering beasts (Coetzee 2000:144).

She is victimized, as the animals are, by that modernist boundary entitling humans to kill other species without fear of any legal, political or savage repercussion from the animals themselves and, indeed, a social order requiring that humans take the responsibility for killing them. Her abilities, which should lead to recognition of the value of lives of other species, are perverted into easing them as gently as possible into death for she has an unusual talent for calming and soothing them at the point of death. She and David argue about how animals meet death, and Bev says "I don't think we are ready to die, any of us, not without being escorted" (Coetzee 2000:84). Bev devotes herself to this task: "To each, in what will be its last minutes, Bev gives her fullest attention, stroking it, talking to it, easing its passage"(Coetzee 2000:142).

In the shelter, Bev does her best with inadequate resources to tend the animals, mostly dogs:

> The dogs that are brought in suffer from distempers, from broken limbs, from infected bits, from mange, from neglect, benign or malign from old age, from malnutrition, from intestinal parasites, but most of all from their own fertility. There are simply too many of them (Coetzee 2000:142).

These animals are excluded or expelled from the human social realm and found to be superfluous or a burden on humanity and therefore sentenced to death. Although they are the same species as Lucy's dogs, they occupy the opposite end of the socio/economic spectrum. They are not the property of any person and therefore have no protection of law or affection or companionship. For these dogs who are no longer useful as private property, humanity provides no place in the world but the individual human being does not want to think of him or herself as condemning an animal to death. They close their eyes, as they did while the extermination of European Jewry went on all around them:

> When people bring a dog in they do not say straight out, "I have brought you this dog to kill," but that is what is expected: that they will dispose of it, make it disappear, dispatch it to oblivion (Coetzee 2000:142).

After further experience with Bev, David begins to feel ambivalent about her:

> He does not dismiss the possibility that at the deepest level Bev Shaw may be not a liberating angel but a devil,that beneath her show of compassion may hide a heart as leathery as a butcher's (Coetzee 2000:143).

David believes that:

> the dogs know that their time has come…They flatten their ears, they droop their tails…locking their legs, they have to be pulled or pushed or carried over the threshold…none look straight at the needle in Bev's hand, which they somehow know is going to harm them terribly (Coetzee 2000:143).

These dogs have every reason to fear humans and they do. But unlike the Nazi butchers, we have not openly declared a canicide against an entire species.

Instead, for the past four centuries, we have carefully constructed a relationship between humanity and all other species and, at different epochs, different members of our own species to justify our dominating and killing them. One of these constructions is the dogma running from Descartes through to Heidigger and to Martin Amis, the last person I heard state it, that humanity is the only species that can contemplate its own death. Of course this requires a ludicrous level of denial of experience with other species. All those obvious signs of flight, fight, screaming, bellowing, yelping, foaming, twisting, all those signs of terror that we interpret in human response must be explained away in canines. If we acknowledge their fear of what we are doing to them, then our entire ethical relationship is at risk. We will have to take into account not only the privileged dogs that become companions but those who are not of that class. For the unprivileged, we might have to provide legal and political standing.

Coetzee is stripping such denial in the novel. He deliberately affronts the reader by alluding to the Holocaust and he places layer upon layer. David not only participates in the killing of the dogs but he is unable to leave them in piles and insists upon taking them to the incinerator where their final disposal takes place. While the dogs burn, the rejected of humanity, where he fears he belongs himself, line up against the walls to derive some warmth from the fire. He reminds us constantly that this is what we do to dogs. This is what we do.

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