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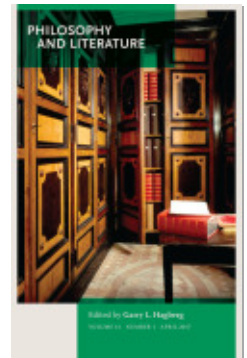
Hushed Resolve, Reticence, and Rape In J. M. Coetzee's  
*Disgrace*

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MARY LeBLANC

HUSHED RESOLVE, RETICENCE, AND RAPE IN  
J. M. COETZEE'S *DISGRACE*

**Abstract.** Select secondary literature regarding J. M. Coetzee's novel *Disgrace* frames Lucy Lurie's response to rape, or the apparent lack thereof, as a passive collusion with the degrading message of rape's native violence. In this essay, I deconstruct such a reading by exposing its conceptual prejudices regarding silence, agency, public speech, and the preemptive use of abstract terms. Taking Lucy's reticence as the guiding clue, I offer an alternative conceptual language to elucidate her hushed resolve and proactive silence.

THE MOST DISTURBING GIFT that *Disgrace* presents to its readers is the hushed resolve with which Lucy Lurie emerges from her rape to reaffirm her way of life. To consider that way of life, the reader is first invited to align oneself with David Lurie's initial normative reading of his daughter's rape; but then, in a second important step, to join in the change of mind by which David overcomes this initial blindness. Imagine what accepting the invitation to take both of these steps demands of the reader: Will you let yourself undergo a change of mind with David to resee Lucy as resolute and proactive? Will you allow yourself to think along with Lucy that horrific violence does not demand retaliation?

Descriptions of Lucy in select secondary literature (her "pitifulness,"<sup>1</sup> in addition to condemnations of her as "a passive recipient"<sup>2</sup> or "resigned"<sup>3</sup>) reveal a curious pattern: the normative reader agrees with David's initial judgment of Lucy but refuses to adopt his perspective when he sees her again, as if for the first time, near the end of *Disgrace*.<sup>4</sup> I call such a reading "normative" because it establishes and reinforces assumptions about human behavior that equate silence with

a lack of agency while insisting that the significance of an experience can only emerge through its translation into abstractly objective terms. A normative reader who clings to such assumptions deeply enough will strip Lucy of agency and reduce her to a symbolic trope. In refusing to accept *Disgrace's* invitation to undergo a process of seeing and reseeing Lucy, such a reader will blindly re-create the logic of Lucy's rape. In this essay I deconstruct the assumptions that support such a logic out of a refusal to subjugate Lucy to the same reduction as her rapists and, quite importantly, in order to hear the lesson that Lucy offers to David and readers of *Disgrace*.

## I

To work out the meaning of Lucy's speech (or lack thereof), I juxtapose the normative reading of Lucy's silence with a reading that attempts to hear the relation between what she asserts and what she elides. David asks Lucy: "Did you think, if you didn't lay a charge against them with the police, they wouldn't come back? Was that what you told yourself?' 'No.' 'Then what?' She is silent."<sup>5</sup> The normative reading may presume that Lucy's silence reveals a lack of meaningful choice: she does not answer David because she simply chooses not to act at all. Her choice to remain inert, expressed through a lack of speech, could be explained as an internalization of sexual assault itself, which forces the victim into passive inaction. When silence is understood as a manifest surrender to an abasing force, it is easily placed in opposition to active agency. This diametric opposition makes the concept of silence as reticence—a deliberate choice to selectively withhold speech—nonsensical; no matter the intention, silence is always seen as passive.

This conception of silence is precisely David's position, which he betrays when he asks, "Lucy, my dearest, why don't you want to tell? It was a crime. There is no shame in being the object of a crime. You did not choose to be the object" (*D*, p. 111). David attributes Lucy's silence to shame<sup>6</sup> and frames her as an object with no agency. Ironically, this presumption parallels the sentiment that he imagines her rapists possessing: "It will dawn on them that over the body of the woman silence is being drawn like a blanket. *Too ashamed*, they will say to each other, *too ashamed to tell*." He thinks of her rapists, who "chuckle luxuriously, recollecting their exploit" at the thought of successfully shaming their victim—but David also believes they have succeeded in this task (*D*, p. 110).

David's presumption is re-created by Elleke Boehmer, who writes of *Disgrace*, "More obviously so perhaps than in any of Coetzee's previous novels, this acceptance of reduced lives, of disgrace on several levels—the loss of possessions, of self-esteem—is tied to the surrender of individualist, self-justifying reason" ("SSS," p. 140). For Boehmer, silence *as* the absence of self-justifying reason displays a renouncement of self-respect. Such a perspective necessarily reads Lucy's reticence as passive self-subjugation. Lucy Valerie Graham puts forth a similar judgment: "Lucy's refusal to speak about her experience certainly does not empower her, and means that her story belongs to her rapists" ("RU," p. 265). Like Boehmer, Graham reads Lucy's silence as a failure, leaving Lucy disempowered and continually dominated by her rapists. Both perspectives presume that silence is not a choice; it is enforced by an oppressive, external force. The assumption that there is only one meaning to silence commits perpetual violence against women like Lucy Lurie who choose to remain silent, ensuring that resolute reticence will not be validated as respectable or active.

Alternatively, noticing Lucy's resolve necessitates reconciling her silence in this exchange with her assertions at an earlier time. She states, "You want to know why I have not laid a particular charge with the police. I will tell you, as long as you agree not to raise the subject again. The reason is that, as far as I am concerned, what happened to me is a purely private matter" (*D*, p. 112). At this point Lucy has staked out a boundary. She has deemed the rape to be private in both experience and speech and thus will not discuss it publicly. David relentlessly continues to ask for a greater explanation:

"I don't agree. I don't agree with what you are doing. Do you think that by meekly accepting what happened to you, you can set yourself apart from farmers like Ettinger? Do you think what happened here was an exam: if you come through, you get a diploma and safe conduct into the future, or a sign to paint on the door-lintel that will make the plague pass you by? That is not how vengeance works, Lucy. Vengeance is like a fire. The more it devours, the hungrier it gets."

"Stop it, David! I don't want to hear this talk of plagues and fires. I am not just trying to save my skin. If that is what you think, you miss the point entirely."

"Then help me. Is it some form of private salvation you are trying to work out? Do you hope you can expiate the crimes of the past by suffering in the present?"

“No. You keep misreading me. Guilt and salvation are abstractions. I don’t act in terms of abstractions. Until you make an effort to see that, I can’t help you.”

He wants to respond, but she cuts him short. “David, we agreed. I don’t want to go on with this conversation.” (*D*, pp. 111–12)

David pushes Lucy to explain her choices in an abstract context: salvation and collective guilt. She objects to these terms, making clear that he is allowing abstractions to obfuscate what she has already explained: the experience is hers alone. Her silence is a resolute choice that aligns with her assertion, “I don’t want to go on with this conversation.” Public self-justification is antithetical to the private, singular nature of rape. Accordingly, she preserves her silence and withholds her speech out of a refusal to act antithetically to her experience. While Lucy may not publicly express, as Boehmer says, “self-justifying reason,” she certainly possesses a sense of reason that is in accordance with her singular self-understanding. Opposed to the normative conception of silence as surrender, Lucy can be read as resolutely reticent. She deliberately withholds *certain* speech according to her own sense of reason, regardless of behavioral norms that deem her to be passive.

## II

How can two such radically different readings emerge? The normative reading concludes that Lucy expresses no agency, whereas an alternative reading finds Lucy actively resolute. If Lucy’s reticence is her singular reasoning in action, how does the normative reading label her as passive? The normative reading designates Lucy as passive because her actions are not visible or audible in the expected way: she does not talk *about* her experience objectively or publicly. Instead, she *speaks from* her experience. Speaking from an experience says nothing of *what* happened; rather, it divulges *who* emerges through the experience. In this way, listening to Lucy requires that we think along with her as the person who has undergone an experience.

This difficult distinction is drawn out most clearly in a scene where Lucy appears to be talking about the rape for the first time. “Halfway home, Lucy, to his surprise, speaks. ‘It was so personal,’ she says. ‘It was done with such personal hatred. That was what stunned me more than anything. The rest was . . . expected. But why did they hate me so? I had never set eyes on them’” (*D*, p. 156). Although Lucy addresses the rape

directly in this moment, her speech is not about the rape as an objective event. Instead, Lucy speaks as the individual who underwent the experience of rape. She speaks out of the experience, focusing on the moment of facing such hatred. This experiential dimension of rape was the most shocking, whereas “the rest”—the objective description of the event—was not as surprising. What harm was done in Lucy’s own terms? The unsettling experience of rape’s discursive power—the expression of personal hatred and violence, rather than the objective infliction of physical harm—was the most disturbing dimension.

The conversation continues: “He waits for more, but there is no more, for the moment. ‘It was history speaking through them,’ he offers at last. ‘A history of wrong. Think of it that way, if it helps. It may have seemed personal, but it wasn’t. It came down from the ancestors.’ [Lucy responds,] ‘That doesn’t make it easier. The shock simply doesn’t go away. The shock of being hated, I mean. In the act’” (*D*, p. 156). David provides a symbolic explanation for this hatred and violence, invoking historical tension: abstractly, Lucy represents white South Africans, her rapists represent black South Africans, and the rape itself is a figurative retribution for a “history of wrong.” He suggests that Lucy think of the rape in such abstract terms too.

David’s suggestion is steeped in blind irony, considering an earlier statement by Lucy: “I don’t act in terms of abstractions. Until you make an effort to see that, I can’t *help you*” (*D*, p. 112; emphasis added). David frequently feels himself to be Lucy’s “guide,” but she understands that David is actually the one who needs help to understand the nature of her injury and her response (*D*, p. 156). Again, Lucy refuses to submit to his phrasing and asserts that such abstractions do nothing to address the experience she has undergone. She redirects her father’s attention by *speaking from* the experience again; how it felt to undergo such hatred and the enduring residue of shock that it left. She focuses on her experience “in the act,” rather than abstracting it into an event of historic eventuality. When Lucy tells David that he does not and cannot understand what happened to her, he insists, “On the contrary, I understand all too well.” Of course, David is relentlessly abstract in his “understanding,” turning again to the objective particulars without acknowledging how Lucy described the experience just moments before: “You were raped. Multiply. By three men” (*D*, p. 157). He fails to hear Lucy, and he is not the only one.

## III

The normative reading prefers to think in David's terms of historical wrongs, turning away from the way Lucy speaks from her experience. Lucy and David's conversation nears its end:

"I think I am in their territory. They have marked me. They will come back for me."

"Then you can't possibly stay."

"Why not?"

"Because that would be an invitation to them to return."

She broods a long while before she answers. "But isn't there another way of looking at it, David? What if . . . what if *that* is the price one has to pay for staying on? Perhaps that is how they look at it; perhaps that is how I should look at it too. They see me as owing something. They see themselves as debt collectors, tax collectors. Why should I be allowed to live here without paying? Perhaps that is what they tell themselves." (*D*, p. 158)

Lucy's statement seems to prove that she does, in fact, think of herself and her experience in terms of the very abstractions she rejects. Carine M. Mardorossian focuses on this passage when she argues, "Lucy accepts her fate as a symbol of the redistribution of power in postapartheid South Africa" ("RV," p. 74). Similarly, Boehmer states, "She physically, if not verbally, accepts a burden of accountability for the wrongs of the past. . . . [H]er sorriness, her pitifulness, is fully internalized" ("SSS," p. 144).<sup>7</sup> Again, both perspectives express the equation between silence and surrender. Moreover, silence is taken to be an *internalization* of the abasing force—if Lucy did not see herself as a historical symbol, she would react against the conditions that make her socially recognizable as one.

These normative presumptions (preemptively understanding Lucy through abstractly objective terms like "passive") lead to a disturbing conclusion: by virtue of being a white settler, Lucy is primarily a symbolic object of apartheid's offense. To read Lucy in this way insists, just as her rapists do, that she is reducible to a political, historical, or racial trope. Ironically, this rhetoric *itself* is silencing, considering that Lucy explicitly objects to David's suggestion that she chooses to stay on the land to "expiate the crimes of the past by suffering in the present" (*D*, p. 112). A reader may see this symbolic interpretation as entirely

different in kind from the objectifying reduction that Lucy's rapists attempt to impose. However different these conceptions are in practice, they display a similar violence by prioritizing the empirical facts of Lucy's existence over her speech and thus ignore the force of such speech as a legitimate alternative to abstract terms. The use of abstractions preemptively deafens one from hearing Lucy's self-understanding as a self-determined being, capable of independence from the fateful limitations of empirical and historical circumstance. Such an analysis re-creates the logic of the rape by insisting that Lucy must serve as a historical symbol, despite her own self-understanding or way of life.

#### IV

I will reread the passage above without concluding that Lucy has internalized the opinion of her rapists or accepted the symbolic burden of historical wrongs. Consequently, this alternative way of reading does not re-create the logic of Lucy's rape. The subtle distinction that reorients the meaning of Lucy's statement is the difference between internalizing an opinion and reconciling with its facticity. We must again contextualize her speech by considering another of her statements that demonstrates how she reconciles herself with the facticity of living in South Africa for the sake of a way of life. She shows such reconciliation when she agrees to marry Petrus, a black South African who previously worked for her on her land:

Objectively I am a woman alone. I have no brothers. I have a father but he is far away and anyhow powerless in the terms that matter here. . . . Say I accept [Petrus's] protection. Say he can put out whatever story he likes about our relationship and I won't contradict him. If he wants me to be known as his third wife, so be it. As his concubine, ditto. But then the child becomes his too. And the child becomes part of the family. As for the land, say I will sign the land over to him as long as the house remains mine. I will become a tenant on his land. . . . A *byowner*. But the house remains mine. I repeat that. No one enters this house without my permission. Including him. (*D*, p. 204)

Lucy recognizes the importance of "the terms that matter here," crafting her life with reference to such facts in light of her own sense of meaning. Her reconciliation with such facticity, in the form of marrying Petrus as "an alliance, a deal," does not preclude her from continuing her way of life, as the house will remain hers; the significance



of the house and land she dwells on is further elucidated in the following section (*D*, p. 203). She shows that titles are irrelevant to her—concubine, byowner—so long as the house itself, her way of life, remains hers alone. She sees reconciliation on her own terms, indifferent to how her relationship with Petrus, her life, and her connection to the house are perceived from an objective standpoint or via socially recognized titles. Lucy shows us the meaning of proactivity: *a creative acceptance that incorporates facticity into her singular way of life*. Her agreement with Petrus both acknowledges “the terms that matter” in Lucy’s world and allows her to continue her sense of purpose on the land. Proactivity, as Lucy shows, procreates; it gives a new life that reconciles with existing facts. David believes such a possibility is “not workable” until he sees it in action (*D*, p. 204).

## V

The strength of Lucy’s reconciliation is shown when David finally reeses his daughter on her own terms. The terms of her reconciliation are, to his surprise, working: “Of Petrus there is no sign, nor of his wife or the jackal boy who runs with them. But Lucy is at work among the flowers” (*D*, p. 217). David does not see her as disgraced, as a rape victim, or as a tenant-concubine. He sees her as Lucy. He sees how Lucy’s terms of arrangement have played out—she is singular in her own world, unimpeded by the social titles that David found so troubling in the past. His moment of clarity begins with his oblique approach by foot and crystalizes when he sees her anew: “She looks, suddenly, the picture of health” (*D*, pp. 217–18). This observation is miles away from how he saw her during their conversation about marriage: “She is overweight in a slack, unhealthy way” (*D*, p. 205). From afar, David sees Lucy in keeping with her surroundings, and his entrance into that scene allows him to understand how Lucy is contextualized by the life she has chosen. His change of heart, his new understanding, is shown by the literal change in how he suddenly reeses Lucy.

Coming by foot, walking upon and through the land, he encounters Lucy unnoticed. He softly calls her, but his speech goes unheard. He leaves a moment to watch Lucy after his first interruption fails. He sees her immersed in “a moment of utter stillness which he would wish prolonged for ever” (*D*, p. 217). He is halted by the way the world opens up before him. It calls to him, helping him to listen to Lucy’s way of life, and he accepts such an invitation by entrusting himself to

the moment: his interior monologue does not interject to disrupt the moment's unfolding. The reader no longer hears his interior monologue of confusion at how "he and her mother, cityfolk, intellectuals, should have produced this throwback, this sturdy young settler" (*D*, p. 61). Instead, he is still and quiet. He does not justify his observations abstractly, setting himself at a distance from the intelligibility that lies in the moment itself. Finally able to see Lucy as a part of a world, he allows a moment of clearing to configure clarity.

After taking part in this stillness, he finally catches Lucy's attention. As they walk inside her home, he thinks: "She makes the offer as if he were a visitor. Good. Visitorship, visitation: a new footing, a new start" (*D*, p. 218). David's positive acceptance of this new role lies in stark contrast to an earlier rebuke from Lucy: "You behave as if everything I do is part of the story of your life. You are the main character, I am a minor character" (*D*, p. 198). Rather than pulling up into Lucy's driveway by car, as he did when he first arrived, David approaches Lucy's land as she would. He leaves his truck at a turnoff and approaches by foot; by land. He accepts that he is walking into her life, not vice versa. He has finally let her go—in the sense of who he thinks she ought to be and how she ought to act—enabling him to see who she is meant to be in her own terms. David finds himself silent with this realization.

What exactly *are* Lucy's terms? We have established that they are not abstract. They may be described as "hushed resolve"; an expression that exhibits the internal tension of this whole essay by placing passive and active words side by side. The combination of these two diametrically opposed concepts can be read, like Lucy's speech, in radically different ways: it could be resolve that is forcibly hushed or resolve of a quiet character. Lucy's actions are neither purely active nor passive. In one sense they are dictated by the way of life that has claimed her, making her a passive recipient. At the same time, they are deliberately confirmed and allowed by Lucy's reception and an active "yes."<sup>8</sup> Hushed resolve, as Lucy shows us, is a way of being that internally relates several concepts: refusal to act antithetically to experience through objective speech, speaking as the individual who has emerged through an experience, and proactive sensitivity to facticity. However, these phrases could easily mutate into terms of abstraction. Foundationally, Lucy's terms have to do with fidelity to a vocation, a calling. Moreover, they relate to how she entrusts herself to such a provocation—a movement wherein the calling singularly addresses and directs the called in a definite direction when one says "yes."

David finally finds such a calling intelligible with his new approach; a new angle from which to see Lucy and the land. “The farm opens out before him,” and he reflects: “City boys like him; but even city boys can recognize beauty when they see it, can have their breath taken away” (*D*, p. 216). He is halted by an intrinsically attractive configuration that answers a question for him. Throughout *Disgrace*, the question has been, “What has Lucy stayed for the sake of?” She has stayed for the sake of her singular sense of purpose on the land. Again, her purpose ought not to be defined abstractly: to be a settler; to go on living as she did before the rape. The meaning of her purpose is what David can now see so clearly: “here she is, solid in her existence” (*D*, p. 217). Whatever objective terms may define Lucy’s vocation, the stakes for following that calling are the experience of sturdiness, yielding to the land that has chosen her and given her the gift of grounding.

This conceptual reorientation is the force of the final scene of *Disgrace*. David’s change with his daughter prefigures his change with himself. David does not speak. He, too, acts with hushed resolve. He has learned to undergo the task at hand, giving the animals love<sup>9</sup> through his respectful, silent care. His ability to finally let go of Lucy is mirrored in his openness to give up the dog for whom he has grown to feel “generous affection” (*D*, p. 215). David has learned how not to, as Lucy puts it, “act in terms of abstractions” (p. 112)—the “appropriately blank abstraction[s]” that would diminish the final scene to a mere liquidation (p. 142).

The force of normative conformity is anchored so strongly that even the reorientation of *Disgrace*’s narrator cannot inspire a similar conceptual conversion in all readers. This resistance is radically unwilling to read Lucy as David can in the final scene; readers mirror David’s initial perspective but fail to take his eyes when he finally sees Lucy in keeping with her way of life.<sup>10</sup> Deep conceptual prejudices lie at the heart of the normative reading, resisting exposure and reconceptualization so strongly as to generate a reading that re-creates the logic of Lucy’s rape. The nature of Lucy’s resolution has nothing to do with norms, making reticence and hushed resolve completely unintelligible from the perspective of a normative reading.

The readers who refuse to let go of their prejudices inevitably resist giving up in the way David gives up the young dog. The particular challenge of hearing reticence speak in *Disgrace* stages the challenge we constantly meet as listeners: how can we read what is discursive about reticence and how can we listen to inaudible responses?

*The invitation to reread Disgrace was first provoked by Martin Heidegger's conceptions of silence, way of life, and Ereignis. I thank Julia Ireland for guidance and conversation regarding Heidegger's work. I would also like to acknowledge the significance of extensive ongoing conversations with Thomas Davis before, during, and after this piece. Finally, I thank Carly Lane for a particular conversation about proactivity and Patrick Frierson for his grounded skepticism, which provoked a clarification of the direction of this essay.*

1. Elleke Boehmer, "Sorry, Sorrier, Sorriest: The Gendering of Contrition in J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*," in *J. M. Coetzee and the Idea of the Public Intellectual*, ed. Jane Poyner (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2006), pp. 145; hereafter abbreviated "SSS."
2. "SSS," p. 144. See also Gareth Cornwell, "Realism, Rape, and J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*," *Critique* 43, no. 4 (2002): 307–22; Shadi Neimneh, "J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*: Eros, (Dis)grace, and the Body," *International Journal of Applied Linguistics and English Literature* 2, no. 2 (2013): 172–78; Carine M. Mardorossian, "Rape and the Violence of Representation in J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*," *Research in African Literatures* 42, no. 4 (2011): 72–83, hereafter abbreviated "RV"; Lucy Valerie Graham, "Reading the Unspeakable: Rape in J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*," *Matatu: Journal for African Culture and Society* 29/30 (2003): 255–67, hereafter abbreviated "RU."
3. Camille Nurka, "Feminine Shame / Masculine Disgrace: A Literary Excursion through Gender and Embodied Emotion," *Cultural Studies Review* 18, no. 3 (2012): 324.
4. For differing analyses of Lucy, see Graeme Harper, *New Ideas in the Writing Arts* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), pp. 127–40; Graham St. John Stott, "Rape and Silence in J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*," *Philosophical Papers* 38, no. 3 (2009): 347–62; Michael Marais, "Very Morbid Phenomena: 'Liberal Funk,' the Lucy Syndrome and J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*," *Scrutiny* 26, no. 1 (2008): 32–38; Elizabeth Alsop, "Refusal to Tell: Withholding Heroines in Hawthorne, Wharton, and Coetzee," *College Literature* 39, no. 3 (2012): 84–105.
5. J. M. Coetzee, *Disgrace* (New York: Penguin, 2000), pp. 156–57; hereafter abbreviated *D*.
6. As does Nurka, "Feminine Shame / Masculine Disgrace": 310–33.
7. Elleke Boehmer gives a perplexing interpretation, acknowledging that Lucy "insists that what the men did to her was not a historical act" while claiming Lucy "takes on the role of the victim of a history of violence and deprivation" ("SSS," p. 144). This analysis illustrates the confounding way in which critics seem to ignore Lucy's assertions in favor of David's conclusions.
8. This expression attempts to re-create "middle voice," a grammatical structure wherein the subject of a sentence represents both the agent and patient of an action. The conceptual trap of Lucy's passivity is enforced by the English language itself, to which a middle voice is not available. Consequently, one is linguistically coaxed into exclusively understanding Lucy through passive or active voice. Alternatively, this move toward "middle voice" gives attention to the way an event flourishes in its eventfulness: Lucy's hushed resolve is an event that is neither enforced upon her nor set into motion by her will alone.
9. For a similar interpretation see Neimneh, "J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*."
10. None of the articles cited include a substantial reference or analysis of the scene between David and Lucy in her garden, effectively overlooking the way in which this scene contradicts David's earlier reading and informs his change in the final scene.