Borrowed Forms
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This final chapter turns to J. M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace* (1999), a novel that commands a place in any discussion of musical forms in transnational literature through its provocative engagement with opera. The author’s first novel to be staged in post-apartheid South Africa, *Disgrace* calls on music to paint what one critic has called “an anxious, comfortless portrait” of a nation undergoing radical changes (Cooper, 2005, 22). The protagonist, David Lurie, a middle-aged literature professor at the University of Cape Town, falls into “disgrace” when his efforts to seduce an attractive young student misfire and he finds himself charged with sexual harassment. In his highly publicized university hearing, Lurie shows no remorse and stubbornly champions his right to act on desire. The adjudicating committee considers the case as part of a long history of racial oppression in South Africa, particularly because the student in question, Melanie Isaacs, is a woman of color. In keeping with the spirit of the national Truth and Reconciliation process, they demand his apology; his refusal to comply costs him his teaching post. In the wake of the scandal, Lurie withdraws to his daughter Lucy’s modest farmstead in the Eastern Cape. Lucy’s country lifestyle is the antithesis of his academic life in Cape Town. There, Lurie assists with daily chores while trying to make progress on his current project, an opera about the Romantic poet—and ruthless womanizer—Lord Byron. Ironically, although he has never written
music before, Lurie expects it to come more naturally and be more satisfying than academic prose. Needless to say, it is a ridiculous presumption on Lurie’s part and the opera does not come together as he had hoped. This chapter argues that the failed opera nonetheless fulfills an important function in the novel. It illustrates the problems of representing others and provokes an evaluation of the place of the English-language novel and other forms of artistic expression in democratic South Africa.

Published five years after the country’s first democratic elections, the novel offers an unusual twist on the bildungsroman. It presents a narrative of self-education and emerging social consciousness, but does so through an older protagonist whose arrogance and sense of entitlement alienate readers. Like the protagonists of many late twentieth-century novels, this central figure is a writer, but one who produces literary criticism and opera, not fiction. Lurie’s moral development commences after a brutal encounter with racial and sexual violence. Three armed Black men invade Lucy’s home, beat him, douse him in alcohol and set him alight. Leaving him locked in the lavatory, they gang rape Lucy and shoot the dogs in her care. The incident has far-reaching consequences for both father and daughter. Pregnant from the assault, Lucy agrees to become a second wife to her former farmhand and neighbor, Petrus, in exchange for his protection. She also announces she will keep the baby, whom she regards as a product of South Africa’s racialized history and whose racially mixed heritage offers an unassailable tie to the land she loves. For Lurie, the attack is a deeply unsettling experience of impotence and victimization. He must come to terms with his incapacity to protect his daughter and his failure to obtain the justice he expects. In its aftermath, he finally reassesses his own behavior towards women and questions the notions of justice, lyricism, beauty, and grace that he had hitherto taken for granted.

The incident provokes Lurie to revise the opera project in dramatic ways. The fact that he cannot know what exactly happened to Lucy—she remains resolutely silent about her experience, at least as far as he is concerned—forces him to acknowledge that women have stories of their own. For the first time, he questions whether he can tell those stories, and if so, on what terms. This points to the key issue at stake in the novel: can literature and art represent without dominating, or does all representation inherently overpower the subject and efface difference? Does music hold the potential to represent differently?

The following discussion aims to shed light on the critical role of opera
in *Disgrace*, while also seeking to bring Coetzee’s work into broader dialogue with transnational writing. The opera provides a vehicle through which to consider one of the core ethical challenges of writing, namely the task of representing others without overpowering their subjectivities. It also calls attention to the relationship between aesthetic forms and the project of nation-building. Across his fiction, Coetzee asks whether forms such as the English-language novel, opera, and lyric poetry can still speak to the postcolonial present. *Disgrace* thus extends an inquiry begun in earlier novels like *Age of Iron* (1990), which similarly evokes the devaluation of the humanities and the arts in contemporary Africa; it also anticipates the later novels, *Elizabeth Costello* (2003) and *Diary of a Bad Year* (2008), where Coetzee offers a cynical picture of a world given over to global capitalism in which artistic production is stripped of value.

Although Coetzee is thoroughly versed in the British literary tradition from Shakespeare, Byron, and Wordsworth to Pound and Eliot, he also engages extensively with French theory and fiction, and has in turn influenced contemporary writing in French. As is well known, the author completed his doctoral work at the University of Texas Austin on Beckett, the Irish modernist who wrote in French as a means of displacing English, a language he associated with Great Britain’s political oppression of Ireland. Writing in French also allowed Beckett to achieve a more transparent relationship to language itself, a path the Canadian author Nancy Huston later emulates, as we saw in Chapter 3. Coetzee’s affinity to French philosophy is evident in *Disgrace* as David Lurie liberally cites Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s views on the origins of language at the very opening of the novel, and ventures to compose an opera as did Rousseau. In the other direction, Coetzee’s fiction has inspired authors who write in French, including Maryse Condé, who appropriates elements of *Disgrace* in her own novel about South Africa, *Histoire de la femme cannibale* [2003, *Story of the Cannibal Woman*]. Surprisingly, however, no critic has considered Coetzee’s work in relation to the French philosophical tradition, or to postcolonial writing in French.  

In the years since its publication, *Disgrace* has generated a rich critical response, including readings by Derek Attridge, Rita Barnard, David Attwell, Mark Sanders, Graham Huggan, Rosemary Jolly, Sam Durrant, Mike Marais, Gayatri Spivak, Zoë Wicomb, and others. The novel’s musical content, however, has not been sufficiently addressed. The opera is incongruous on so many levels in the context of the novel. Not only does its subject matter—the dissolute ways of an English poet and the desires of an Italian
countess—have seemingly little bearing on contemporary South Africa, but the genre of opera itself has historically been associated with elitism and the European colonial project—certainly an odd detour for a novel set in a newly democratic African nation. Opera performances typically offer a striking display of narrative and representational power. They are often extravagant productions, in that they deploy a team of set designers, musicians, singers, and so on, requiring a budget that exceeds that of most other genres, with the exception of film. Lurie’s complete lack of experience in opera and misguided assumption that he will nonetheless be able to produce both the music and libretto himself, lend a touch of ironic comedy and implausibility to the text. He cuts a ridiculous figure: a solitary, bruised man with operatic aspirations, picking away at tunes on a child’s banjo with a stray dog at his heels. Why does Lurie turn to music at this stage in his career? Why an opera about Byron in Italy, instead of a piece of theater or another book of criticism? Why does the author choose to portray Lurie as so inept and ridiculously presumptuous, almost to the point of undermining the narrative’s credibility? How are we to understand the opera’s diminishing progression and eventual abandonment? Moreover, on a meta-textual level, what do the repeated references to opera achieve within the novel? To what extent do the novel’s references to music add to or disrupt the narrative?

In view of addressing these issues, it is helpful to consider the status of music in Disgrace against other major twentieth-century “musical” novels. Most of these novels draw on actual composers and existing compositions for inspiration, or include a score. For instance, as we saw in Chapter 3, Nancy Huston appropriates J. S. Bach’s Goldberg Variations for her novel Les variations Goldberg (1981), closely following the structure of Bach’s composition; Marcel Proust models the iconic Vinteuil Sonata of A la recherche du temps perdu on the music of César Franck, Richard Wagner, and Camille Saint-Saens (Adelson, 1942, 228–33); Thomas Mann addresses the music of Arnold Schoenberg in Doktor Faustus (1947); Assia Djebar dialogues with specific sonatas by Beethoven in L’amour, la fantasia (1985); and Vikram Seth evokes Bach, Schubert, and Beethoven in An Equal Music (1999). Beckett embeds original musical scores into his novel Watt (1953). In Disgrace, the opera narrative engages with historical material about Byron, but its music is entirely fictional. Coetzee offers no external referents to anchor that music. Because our only means of imagining it is through the vague descriptions offered by the protagonist, the music is all the more alienating. The opera thus takes on a performative function in the text, as it confronts the reader with a
knot of opacity and unreadability at the same time as the protagonist himself is coming to terms with the irreducible difference of others.

The opera that Lurie is writing, *Byron in Italy*, recounts the romance between the celebrated lyric poet and a young Italian noblewoman, the countess Teresa Giuccioli. It was one of Byron’s last love affairs; he lured Teresa away from her husband, only to leave her shortly afterwards. Although Lurie first conceived it as a chamber opera between “a passionate young woman and a once passionate but now less than passionate older man,” the attack leads Lurie to reimagine Teresa in middle age. In this revised scenario, Byron himself is long since dead, and Teresa lives alone with her ailing father and mourns the loss of her youth and her famous lover. Lurie introduces changes to the score as well. He had initially planned a lush orchestration, “a complex, restless music [...] sung in English that tugs continually toward an imagined Italian” (Coetzee, 1999, 18), but decides on a stark, minimalist score that includes banjo, cello, flute, and bassoon, and eventually, possibly a dog. He had intended to borrow melodies from others, but decides to write the music himself. He also puts aside the letters and historical documents he has been consulting and plumbs his own imagination for the libretto. Ultimately, however, Lurie realizes he will never complete the project. The opera will never be staged, and it will certainly not facilitate his triumphant return to society; instead, it reflects his alienation and disempowerment. Moreover, the increasingly limited status Byron comes to occupy in the opera as a ghostly off-stage voice, incapable of answering his young daughter’s cries, provides an image for Lurie’s own sense of failure as a father and his growing social marginalization. It also problematizes the place of English-language literature (a tradition Byron clearly represents) and white male privilege in the emerging post-apartheid South Africa.

The opera has perplexed critics, firstly because it is such a strange turn for a contemporary African novel to take, and secondly because it fails miserably. Many readers have understood the opera’s failure as an indication that Lurie has begun to confront the issues brought to the fore by his daughter’s rape. His newfound interest in Teresa’s experience indeed suggests that he has come to explore subjectivities other than his own. By creatively investing himself in the character of Teresa, Lurie is seen to possess a newfound respect for female subjectivity. Such a reading is problematic, however, because Lurie’s attempt to speak for Teresa demonstrates, on the contrary, his failure to concede limits to knowledge and to make space for another’s alterity. His usurpation of Teresa’s voice makes it clear that he has not heeded his daughter’s admonition
to allow the other to speak for herself, “You tell what happened to you; I tell what happened to me” (Coetzee, 1999, 99). Furthermore, Lurie relegates the feminine to the position of the “other,” which blinds him to the otherness of male characters (Petrus, the boy, Bill Shaw, and even, to some extent, Byron).

Critics have also tended to read the opera as a classic instance of *mise-en-abyme*, as a text within a text. Typical of embedded narratives, the opera repeats numerous thematic elements of the larger narrative, namely rape, abandonment, betrayal, the drama of aging, and the problems of desire. There is, however, a shift in genre between the novel and the opera embedded within it that merits our attention, especially since *mise-en-abymes* generally repeat the same genre. In both Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, for instance, we encounter a play within a play. Similarly, in the *Arabian Nights*, we find stories enfolded within the larger frame story. The move from literature to music in *Disgrace* is of a different order and entails a rupture whose consequences we must consider. Furthermore, since Coetzee supplies only the thinnest narrative descriptions of its music, the opera remains oddly mute. Much like Lucy’s narrative of rape, we can neither access the score, nor hear its music. Through its very inaccessibility, the opera powerfully illustrates the ethical imperative presented by the other.

In one of the most thought-provoking essays on Coetzee’s work to emerge in the 1990s, Benita Parry (1998, 152) disputes Attridge’s assessment of Coetzee’s fiction “as a continued and strenuous effort in figuring alterity as a force out there disrupting European discourse,” not by entering into dialogue but by “interrupting or disturbing the discursive patterns in which we are at home.” Parry takes Coetzee to task for assigning a narrative muteness to women and black South Africans. Among the many examples of silenced subjects across Coetzee’s early novels are the barbarian girl in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, Michael K. in *The Life and Times of Michael K*, and Friday in *Foe*. The silencing of these subjects is extremely problematic, Parry argues, because it intimates the author’s “narrative disinclination to orchestrate a polyphonic score, the silenced remaining instead incommensurable, unknowable, unable to make themselves heard in the sealed linguistic code exercised by the narrating self, and thus incapable of disturbing the dominant discourse.”

Parry’s critique speaks to *Disgrace* as well. Set in post-apartheid South Africa, *Disgrace* stages multiple reversals of power. On one hand, through Lurie, we witness the pathetic decline of a white South African male. On the other, the black neighbor Petrus acquires land, builds a house, and by the end of the novel, comes to stand as Lucy’s protector and even spouse,
incorporating her by contractual arrangement into his household. Yet while a good portion of the novel is devoted to Petrus—to his rise as a landowner and influential force in the region, and also to an analysis of his speech—many other subjects remain speechless. Pollox, the disturbed child who participates in the assault, has no voice. In the scene near the end of the novel where Lurie finally faces him down, the boy inarticulately shrieks, “Ya ya ya ya,” and barely manages to heave out the words, “I will kill you” (Coetzee, 1999, 207). Lucy never recounts her experience of rape; her inscrutable, opaque silence bars our access to what constitutes the center of violence in the novel. Lurie’s emphasis on the problem of finding Teresa’s voice only calls attention to the way the novel itself elides these other voices, and to the broader problem of literary representation. Durrant (2004, 27) rightly suggests that there is an important link between silence and ethics in South African literature. He reads Coetzee’s fiction as staging the inability to identify with the other. While other major South African novelists including Nadine Gordimer operate under a “liberal humanist assumption that the novelistic act of empathy can transcend difference,” Coetzee cautions us that “to transcend the other’s alterity is to efface that alterity […] the act of empathy is to imagine the other as the same.”

The fact that Lurie “gives up” the opera holds particular significance. As several critics have noted, acts of “giving up” occur throughout the novel. Lurie not only leaves off the opera project, but also “gives up” his favorite dog in the kennel and allows it to be put to sleep, although he has come to love its limp and to rely on its soulful accompaniment to his banjo playing. He gives up seduction as well. As Sanders argues in a magnificent critique of the novel, the author deliberately avoids using the perfective tense throughout the text in order to deny any sense of completion or resolution. In all of these instances, the act of giving up implies not only failure and abandonment, but also sacrifice and renunciation. This is critical in a novel bent on reevaluating what constitutes grace in a secular universe, and what it might take to achieve it. The question of grace and redemption can be seen in relation to South Africa’s transition, as a response to the way the post-apartheid National Unity Government chose to address the legacy of apartheid through a process of Truth and Reconciliation. The novel calls into question the institutional practice of granting forgiveness and absolution, by asking whether it is enough to confess in order to restore justice, or whether some larger self-sacrifice is called for, something that would give evidence of real atonement and transformation. Lurie works at the opera over the course of months, only to “give it
up,” which emphasizes the importance of the process and the journey, rather than the end product or destination. In this sense, grace—like disgrace—is not a place one can arrive at, but a process without term.

**Music in Coetzee’s Earlier Writings**

Before delving into a more detailed reading of music in *Disgrace*, it is important to consider how Coetzee uses music in key passages in earlier works to provoke reflection on universality and difference. The first such passage occurs in *Age of Iron* (1990), a novel written just before the end of apartheid. Mrs Curren, a retired scholar of classical literature, is dying of cancer and has notified no one, not even her daughter in America. A tramp by the name of Mr Vercueil has taken residence in her driveway, and after an unsuccessful attempt to evict him, she comes to accept and even depend on his presence. In the scene in question, Mrs Curren plays the piano, keenly aware that Vercueil is listening at the window:

I played some of the old pieces: preludes from the Well-Tempered Clavier, Chopin preludes, Brahms waltzes. [...] Then at last I went back to Bach, and played clumsily, over and over again, the first fugue from Book One. The sound was muddy, the lines blurred, but every now and again, for a few minutes, the real thing emerged, the real music, the music that does not die, confident, serene. I was playing for myself. But at some point a board creaked or a shadow passed across the curtain and I knew he was outside listening.

So I played Bach for him, as well as I could. When the last bar was played, I closed the music and sat with my hands in my lap contemplating the oval portrait with its heavy jowls, its sleek smile, its puffy eyes. Pure spirit, I thought, yet in how unlikely a temple! Where does that spirit find itself now? In the echoes of my fumbling performance receding into the ether? In my heart, where the music still dances? Has it made its way into the heart too of the man in the sagging trousers eavesdropping at the window? Have our two hearts, our organs of love, been tied for this brief while by a cord of sound? (Coetzee, 1990, 24)

Music functions here as a connective tissue, creating “a cord of sound” that crosses space and time to link Mrs Curren, her uninvited guest, and Bach.
The text draws poetically on the euphonic resonance between cord, chord, and the Latin cor, or heart. The ability of music to abolish borders and establish a connection between such incongruous subjects stands in powerful contrast to the political and racial borders in apartheid South Africa. While sanctions and visa requirements make travel impossible, music offers an outlet for escape, transgression, and ultimately survival. The text echoes an earlier passage, where Mrs Curren reflects on her approaching death as a kind of emancipation from the authority of the state: “the one border they cannot close, I thought: the border upward, between the Republic of South Africa and the empire of the sky. Where I am due to travel. Where no passport is called for” (Coetzee, 1990, 23).

The communion that Bach’s music seems to bring about between Curren and Vercueil, however, is tenuous. Although they experience the music side by side, neither has access to the other’s experience, nor do they necessarily hear music the same way. Because of her illness, Curren seeks solace in the idea that Bach’s music is universal and immortal. She needs to believe in the idea of “music that does not die, confident, serene.” The presence of the other listener, the tramp, makes her uneasy about the veracity of her own experience of the music. Her faith in the immortality and universality of the classic begins to waver. The passage underscores this through its interrogative tone, “Has it made its way into the heart too of the man in the sagging trousers eavesdropping at the window? Have our two hearts, our organs of love, been tied for this brief while by a cord of sound?” (Coetzee, 1990, 24). Coetzee’s repeated insistence on the “real thing,” “the real music” and “pure spirit” further undermines the notion of authenticity, by calling attention to how every musical experience is impure, because it is inevitably mediated by education and socioeconomic class. The passage thus stages a reevaluation of what we consider “classics.”

In a lecture on T. S. Eliot, delivered the same year as the Age of Iron, Coetzee again uses music to question the basis of the classic. The lecture is striking due to its tone of autobiographical intimacy. Coetzee (2001, 8–9) recounts how, sitting in the garden at age fifteen, he heard a recording of Bach’s Well-Tempered Clavier emanating from the neighbor’s house. The music transfixed him, leaving him breathless. “[E]verything changed. A moment of revelation which I will not call Eliotic—that would insult the moments of revelation celebrated in Eliot’s poetry—but of the greatest significance in my life nonetheless: for the first time I was undergoing the impact of the classic.” In revisiting this formative experience of music, Coetzee
attempts to understand the mechanism of his enchantment. What exactly had moved him: the inherent qualities of Bach’s music, or rather, what the music stood for? In other words, was his reaction involuntary, or at some level, was he already in the process of affiliating himself to European high culture in order to leave behind his own social position in South Africa, and to forge a path to becoming an internationally celebrated author? The two alternatives are entangled to the point where he cannot readily answer his own question.

Coetzee further inflects the notions of canon and classic by exposing how classics are always “constructed.” To this end, he evokes the changing reception of Bach’s music. Bach did not initially have universal appeal; instead, appreciation of Bach was confined to small circles of connoisseurs and scholars until the mid-nineteenth century when Felix Mendelssohn led a popular revival of Bach. As Coetzee reminds us, this revival was itself highly problematic, because it was mediated by highly stylized Romantic performance practices. The process by which Bach was incorporated into the canon thus illustrates how “all canons rest on exclusion; the voice they give to some can be heard only by virtue of the silence they impose on others. But it is not just a silencing by exclusion, it is a silencing by inclusion as well: any voice we can hear is by that very fact purged of its uniqueness and alterity” (Attridge, 1996, 181). At the very crux of the lecture, Coetzee (2001, 16) defines the classic as that which survives in the face of criticism. Thus, “the interrogation of the classic, no matter how hostile, is part of the history of the classic, inevitable and even to be welcomed. Criticism, and indeed criticism of the most skeptical kind, may be what the classic uses to define itself and ensure its survival.”

The emphasis Coetzee places on music in his fiction and critical essays is intriguing for a writer who claims to have had no musical education and little childhood exposure to music. The author’s longstanding interest in Beckett in part explains why music functions as such a privileged trope in his work, as Beckett’s fiction and theater are intensely musical. In his doctoral thesis, “The English Fiction of Samuel Beckett: An Essay in Stylistic Analysis,” Coetzee reads Watt as a novel that aspires to the condition of music, in which words, emptied of content, constitute a “lulling rhythm” (1969, 163). Yet music is hardly a “lulling rhythm” in Disgrace, but an otherness that constantly unsettles the narrative.

The role music plays in Age of Iron prefigures Disgrace. The word “disgrace” itself recurs numerous times throughout Age of Iron, further linking these two works. In Age of Iron, Mrs Curren decries the collective shame produced by
apartheid, “the disgrace of the life one lives under them: to open a newspaper, to switch on the television, like kneeling and being urinated on. Under them: under their meaty bellies, their full bladders” (Coetzee, 1990, 9). She goes so far as to call South Africa “a pit of disgrace”: “Why should I be expected to rise above my times? Is it my doing that my times have been so shameful? Why should it be left to me, old and sick and full of pain, to lift myself unaided out of this pit of disgrace? I want to rage against the men who have created these times...” (Coetzee, 1990, 116–17). By contrast, Disgrace moves from the register of collective guilt that characterized the apartheid era to questions of individual responsibility. Lurie’s apology to Mr Isaacs (the father of Melanie Isaacs, the student with whom he had a brief affair) in Disgrace deliberately echoes Age of Iron, but it is an individual, not the nation, who has fallen: “I am sunk into a state of disgrace from which it will not be easy to lift myself” (Coetzee, 1999, 173).

While both Disgrace and Age of Iron place music in relation to shame and marginalization, elsewhere in Coetzee’s literary production, music is a source of national pride, albeit one that can prove destructive. The narrator of Diary of a Bad Year (2008), for instance, contrasts Sibelius’s Fifth Symphony to the institution of torture at Guantanamo as two extremes of human achievement: “What would it have been like, I wondered, to be a Finn in the audience at the first performance of [Sibelius’s Fifth Symphony] in Helsinki nearly a century ago... [O]ne would have felt proud, proud that one of us could put together such sounds, proud that out of nothing we human beings can make such stuff. Contrast that with one’s feelings of shame that we, our people, have made Guantanamo. Musical creation on one hand, a machine for inflicting pain and humiliation on the other: the best and the worst that human beings are capable of” (Coetzee, 2008, 45). The juxtaposition of Sibelius and Guantanamo as high and low points of human achievement is particularly provocative. The argument is often made that Nazi crimes against humanity are all the more appalling because they took place in a nation that had produced such pinnacles of aesthetic and intellectual achievement: Goëthe, Schilling, Beethoven, and so on. Geoffrey Hartman (1994, 135–39) makes the case that the Nazis used the arts to consolidate a narrative of national superiority, “to gild aggressive and transgressive ambitions.” By extension, the impressive cultural production of South Africa under apartheid stands in contrast to the violence that was simultaneously being perpetrated against the majority; many South African authors deliberately sought to withhold “aesthetic pleasures” from their work, by embracing a hard-edged realism as
did Nadine Gordimer or André Brink, or by producing challenging, barren, experimental texts, the route taken by Breyten Breytenbach and Coetzee.

Yet Coetzee portrays the declining status of classical music and poetry in postcolonial Africa as symptomatic, not just of a turn from Western culture to embrace African heritage, but of the rise of global capitalism and mass consumerism. Coetzee notes a growing hostility directed toward anything that cannot be rationalized, justified, and commercialized on a mass scale. The intimate nature of the chamber opera Lurie sets out to write implicitly challenges this value system. Similarly, the narrator of *Diary of a Bad Year*, a South African writer in exile in Australia like Coetzee himself, grimly observes that “the mass is the norm and the solitary the aberration” (Coetzee, 2008, 170). Writing, composing music, and reading are important modes of resistance, precisely because of their marginality and irreducibility.

**Incongruous Comedy**

While Coetzee’s projection of opera into “the desolate yard of Africa” (Coetzee, 1999, 214) constitutes a highly original narrative gesture, it also veers towards the absurd and the comic. Set in a nineteenth-century Italian palazzo, the opera immediately is completely out of place and out of sync with the times. As we have noted, Lurie has no prior experience as a composer, and his subject matter has little to do with contemporary South Africa. The opera’s incongruity in the landscape recalls musicologist Richard Leppert’s (2007, 112) broader view of opera itself as “now largely strange and estranged,” although he goes on to assert that “this strangeness constitutes its saving grace in late modernity.” Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker (2012, 15) identify strangeness as a fundamental characteristic of opera, as the genre rests on a highly improbable premise: the fact that “most characters sing most of the time.” Opera’s basic lack of verisimilitude has “tended to guarantee that opera libretti almost never deal with the ordinary, while spoken theatre can thrive on it.”

The untimeliness of Lurie’s opera contributes to its comic effect. Edward Said (2006, 6) observes that untimeliness is an essential part of comedy: “Comedy […] seeks its material in untimely behavior, an old man falling in love with a young woman (May in December). […] It is also comedy as a form that brings about the restoration of timeliness through the kommos with which the work usually concludes, the marriage of young lovers.” Both *Disgrace* and the opera within it stage the coupling of old men with young women.
The comic untimeliness of the opera uncannily recalls Adorno’s observation that classical music itself “has become comic [...] because something so completely useless is carried on with all the visible signs of the strain of serious work. By being alien to solid [tüchtig] people, music reveals their alienation from one another, and the consciousness of alienation vents itself in laughter” (Adorno, 2002, 314). When juxtaposed to Bev’s pro bono veterinary work with animals in need, Lucy’s farmwork, and even Melanie’s acting—as the play in which she appears turns out to be a big popular hit, warranting an extended run—Lurie’s work on the opera seems “completely useless,” an eccentric and anachronistic undertaking of dubious social value. Lurie himself is uncomfortable with the opera, recalling Blanchot’s (2003, 196) description of “the artist’s embarrassment at still being something in a world in which he nonetheless sees himself as unjustified.”

And yet, it is precisely this lack of justification that critics have seized on in reading the novel. Sanders (2002b, 365) suggests that Disgrace deliberately calls into question the very notion of value. He sees Lurie as a “figure of silent resistance to the instrumentalization of language and learning implicit in Communications, the subject he now teaches.” Lurie contests the reduction of language to “a communication tool [...] in the interests of global capital,” and insists on engaging in activities with no quantifiable value. He never justifies his desire to compose an opera, nor does he explain to himself what motivates him to attend to the incineration of the cadavers from the animal clinic, as he does faithfully each week after helping to put down unwanted dogs. In this sense, the novel approaches Stanley Fish’s (2008) provocative assertion that “an activity that cannot be justified is an activity that refuses to regard itself as instrumental to some larger good.” The closest Lurie comes to explaining his commitment to the dogs is that it upholds his “idea of the world as a
place where one doesn’t beat corpses into a convenient shape for processing” (Coetzee, 1999, 146). The opera similarly upholds the idea of the world as a place where not everything can be quantified and rationalized. The text refuses justification for either activity, and thus, as Attridge (2004, 188) has demonstrated, the acts of accompanying dead dogs to the incinerator and composing an opera come to be intimately interrelated, although seemingly at opposite ends of a spectrum: “Both manifest a dedication to the singularity that exceeds systems and computations: the singularity of every living—and dead—being, the singularity of the truly inventive work of art.”

The opera itself has two rather singular attributes: it includes dead characters, and possesses animal-like qualities. Because Lurie has displaced the temporal setting of the narrative to focus on a middle-aged Teresa, Byron and his daughter Allegra are dead. Both nonetheless play important roles as ghostly, post mortem voices. This is a strange choice for an author whose fiction places particular emphasis on the body. Even in his critical essays, Coetzee (1992, 23) privileges the body, and claims that “Beckett’s later short fictions have never really held my attention. They are, quite literally, disembodied. […] The late pieces speak in post-mortem voices. I am not there yet. I am still interested in how the voice moves the body, moves in the body.” Yet Lurie writes two disembodied voices into his opera: those of Byron and his little daughter Allegra. Byron’s voice wafts up “from somewhere, from the caverns of the underworld, […] wavering and disembodied, the voice of a ghost” (Coetzee, 1999, 183). Allegra’s haunting voice comes unsolicited into Lurie’s imagination:

[T]here emerges from the dark another voice, one he has not heard before, has not counted on hearing. From the words he knows it belongs to Byron’s daughter Allegra; but from where inside him does it come? Why have you left me? Come and fetch me! calls Allegra. So hot, so hot, so hot! she complains in a rhythm of her own that cuts insistently across the voices of the lovers. To the call of the inconvenient five-year-old there comes no answer. Unlovely, unloved, neglected by her famous father, she has been passed from hand to hand and finally given to the nuns to look after. So hot, so hot! she whines from the bed in the convent where she is dying of la mal’aria. (186)

Her feverish cries recall Freud’s account of the dream of the burning child, and the nightmares Lurie has after his own daughter’s rape in which she
calls out to him and he is unable to help her (Coetzee, 1999, 103). Allegra’s voice refuses to be silenced, and thus functions as a call to responsibility. The punctuation of mal’aria, furthermore, invites us to read on two levels: it evokes not only the child’s illness, but also an aria gone wrong, playing on Lurie’s evident lack of skill as a composer.

The presence of these dead characters lends the opera an Orphic dimension, but with an important twist: Teresa, not the poet, takes on the role of Orpheus. Although she once longed for the everlasting fame her liaison with an important poet seemed to promise, she now attempts to retrieve her beloved from the underworld through the forceful passion of song. It is not through Byron that Teresa will live on, but on the contrary, Byron who “lives through Teresa.” The opera thus reverses the gendered structure of the Orpheus myth. No longer merely the object of masculine desire, Teresa becomes the opera’s chief subject on whom the masculine subject depends. This reversal is significant, given the problematic representation of women across operatic history. At earlier points in the narrative, Lurie alludes to operas such as Madame Butterfly and Rigoletto, which stage the symbolic demise of women. After the attack, his own opera takes a radically different direction, more in line with the feminist music criticism that Abbate (1991), Mary Ann Smart (2000), Catherine Clément (1988), and others have produced over the last two decades, to expose and contest opera’s tendency to silence, destroy and contain the feminine voice.

The other aspect of Lurie’s opera that demands attention is its pronounced animal-like qualities. Although descriptions of the opera are sparse, they invariably include references to cold-blooded creatures like serpents, crabs, reptiles, and fish, to animal parts such as tails and scales, and to instruments used to control or capture animals such as lines and reins. For instance, Teresa and Byron’s lines coil “wordlessly around and past each other like serpents”; “the trio of instrumentalists play the crablike motif” (Coetzee, 1999, 185); “the voice [...] strains to soar away from the ludicrous instrument but is continually reined back, like a fish on a line” (187); “a lone clarinet answers, tails off, falls silent” (182). Another key passage evokes a “[m]elody without climax; the whisper of reptile scales on marble staircases; and, throbbing in the background, the baritone of the humiliated husband” (121). The animal-like attributes of the opera are inseparable from Coetzee’s ongoing efforts as a public intellectual to defend the claims of all life, animal or human. Attwell argues that Coetzee extends the notion of ethical responsibility further than other thinkers because of the positions he takes on
animal rights. Lurie even contemplates the addition of a dog to the opera, wondering whether animals can make music. Can an animal occupy a subject position, he asks, or must it, like the elephants in *Aïda*, remain merely a prop or an object? Is the ability to make music a quality specific only to human beings? Why then does the stray dog accompany his music-making sessions so assiduously, and howl alongside him? Does his primitive banjo plucking have a musical value that exceeds the dog’s howl?

To return to the question of subjectivity, Lurie goes to great pains to understand the feminine position in the wake of his daughter’s rape. He puts considerable effort into imagining and empathizing with Teresa and reworks the whole opera in an attempt to develop her point of view. This suggests that in Lurie’s phallocentric thinking, the “other” is feminine. This is reinforced by his problematic assumption that he can occupy the place of another man with no great difficulty by virtue of their common gender. The opacity of the African characters Petrus and Pollux in the text powerfully undermines this belief. On the whole, Lurie’s desire to imagine himself into the place of others raises the question: what does it mean to “be” the man, to “be” Lucy, to “be” Teresa? Beyond constructing a convincing narrative, can anyone really occupy another’s place? These questions recall Gary Tomlinson’s (1999, 112) broader understanding of operatic song as built on the principles of “mediumship and possession visited upon the singer, whose voice is not hers but some other, more universal voice that seizes, inhabits, and sings through her. And it is possession of the listeners, too, whose individualities are besieged and ultimately dissolved by the great sweep of primordial vocal will.” While fiction does not involve the dimension of stage performance that Tomlinson evokes, these issues are fundamental to the work of making and reading fiction and point to fiction’s limits. As Coetzee suggests in an essay on Faulkner, “Fictional Beings,” the whole enterprise of writing fiction is always predicated on an attempt to enter other subjectivities, but even the best writing produces “verbal imitation” or ventriloquism:

Although it may be argued that stories give access to no one’s mind but the storyteller’s, the observable fact is that most stories present themselves as being about other people [...] and that most listeners gladly and eagerly give themselves over to the fiction (if fiction it be) that stories are not just about their tellers. [Faulkner] knows that he is not really entering the minds of the four Compson children, merely writing down verbal imitations of their thoughts. Nevertheless it is
convenient to think that the Compson’s are “real” and that somehow, magically, he is inhabiting each of them for a while. (Coetzee, 2003b, 133–34)

Another term for this movement towards the other is empathy.

Music and Empathy

In an exemplary passage at the very opening of the novel, Lurie explicitly alludes to Rousseau, bringing to the fore the relation of music to questions of empathy and authenticity. Lurie complains that, although an expert on poetry, he has been transferred to the department of Communications, as part of a wave of post-apartheid institutional changes that have subsumed the Humanities into more practical, vocational programs. He rejects the instrumental view of language endorsed by the Communications department.

He finds its first premise preposterous: “Human society has created language in order that we may communicate thoughts, feelings, and intentions to each other.” His own opinion, which he does not air, is that the origins of speech lie in song, and the origins of song in the need to fill out with sound the overlarge and rather empty human soul. (Coetzee, 1999, 3)

Lurie directly quotes Rousseau (1990, 114), who famously posited the origins of language in song. The passage makes superb use of language: the entire second sentence has an extremely vocalic quality and resonates with the “o” sound, emphasizing language’s ties to music. The juxtaposition of “speech” and “lie,” and the suggestive dual valence of lie, concisely perform the critique of language that is sustained throughout the novel: that language is insincere, inadequate, empty. Moreover, the use of the verb “air” conspires with the image of sound filling out the vacant cavity of the soul, a post-religious image if ever there was one, to convey sound in terms of spatiality and insubstantiality, and to suggest the frivolous inflation of a balloon. Even as he ridicules the department’s understanding of language as a product of human society to facilitate intersubjective communication, Lurie also undermines the communicative function of music, foreshadowing, of course, the fate of his own opera to remain a solitary project, unfinished and unshared.
In Rousseau’s account of the genealogy of language, the expressive—and social—function of the voice is critical. In the *Discours sur l’origine et les fondements de l’inégalité*, Rousseau argues that language marks the distance man has come from the state of nature, but its simplest component, the voice, provides an important link to the origin of society. He insists on the vocal cry as the original human expression: spontaneous, universal, and transparent. The cry is vital to establishing the possibility of pity, on which society itself is predicated. As the cry immediately penetrates the other, it incites the movement of imagination that transports us outside ourselves, allowing us to imagine ourselves in the position of the one suffering (Rousseau, 1990, 92). Pity is the “source” of all human virtues: it precedes conventional laws, and it constitutes the social bond that allows man to identify with other sentient beings. For Rousseau, vocal music is more expressive than spoken language because it retains traces of this original transparency and affectivity, and reinforces the social bond by establishing a relation of intersubjectivity between speaker and listener.

In *Disgrace*, music accordingly provides an expressive alternative—or supplement—to a degenerate language. The English language is portrayed consistently as “dead,” “unfit” (Coetzee, 1999, 117), and contaminated:

> The language he [Petrus] draws on with such aplomb is, if he only knew it, tired, friable, eaten from the inside as if by termites. Only the monosyllables can still be relied on, and not even all of them. What is to be done? Nothing that he, the one-time teacher of communications, can see. Nothing short of starting all over again with the ABC. By the time the big words come back reconstructed, purified, fit to be trusted once more, he will be long dead. (Coetzee, 1999, 129)32

The indifference of Lurie’s students to poetry underscores the crisis of the English language.33 The verses that speak to him “in a flash” fail to move his students. By contrast, music connotes breath and life: “Byron, alone on the stage, draws a breath to sing” (Coetzee, 1999: 162). Teresa “has immortal longings and sings her longings. She will not be dead” (209). The novel sustains a dichotomy between language and music, whereby language represents stiff, arthritic articulation while music evokes promise, passion, and spontaneity.34 Ironically, of course, despite the Orphic associations invested in it, the music in the novel is ultimately mute and sterile—and certainly not a solid base on which to found intersubjective relations in contemporary Africa.
African languages escape this schema and retain life. Lurie observes a griot performing at the neighbor’s housewarming party, and marvels at how the griot “is speaking, orating in rounded periods that rise and fall. He has no idea what the man is saying, but every now and then there is a pause and a murmur of agreement from his audience, among whom, young and old, a mood of quiet satisfaction seems to reign.” Though the narrator calls attention to the griot’s adornment in imperial medals, suggesting his privileged relation to colonial power structures and problematizing his authenticity, the griot’s performance holds the attention of a diverse audience—Lurie’s opera would never command that kind of popular response, even had he the resources or inclination to complete it. Lurie reads the confluence of young and old around the griot as evidence of his relevance across generations; by contrast, he concludes that “what [is called] ‘classical’ music is simply no longer cultural currency” (Coetzee, 2008, 129).

Lurie’s abrupt turn to opera recalls Rousseau’s efforts to write opera. Largely self-taught in music, Rousseau passed himself off as a music teacher and copyist of musical manuscripts to make a living, until he built up the audacity to write his own operas. As I have argued, the opera in *Disgrace* is, at some level, a parodic gesture, in that it positions David Lurie as a belated Rousseau, a man at odds with the world, whose personal ethics provoke uproar, but who continues nonetheless to seek a lyric correspondence with nature—as Rousseau does in the *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*—and to redeem himself through confession.

**Lyricism and Failure**

*Disgrace* portrays the devaluation of music and lyric poetry as evidence of the passing of an era and the triumph of rationality and consumer culture. Throughout the novel, the lyric appears in an array of different guises, as “a flash” (Coetzee, 1999, 12), a fire, a capacity for song (171), and an impulse (214). Lyrical language aspires to the intensity, spontaneity, and emotional vibrancy of song. In a study of opera and mimesis, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe (1994, 9) defines lyricism as the “most spontaneous, germinal seed of all literature, its purest modality.” He goes on to define music, through Wagner, as the “one language that is equally intelligible to all […] a sovereign language, which, resolving ideas into feelings, offers a universal organ of the most private aspect of the artist’s intuition: an organ with a limitless capacity […] Music
sublates the mind which is enslaved to language—in and through feeling.” Lacoue-Labarthe’s highly romanticized claims are problematic as they ascribe a universality, immortality, and immediacy to Western music and poetry. Though Lurie himself voices similar beliefs, the novel as a whole works to undermine and complicate such ideas.

Lurie regards poetic language and music as transcendent and alive, in contrast to prose which he regards as dry and cold. He “is tired of criticism, of prose measured by the yard. What he wants to write is music” (Coetzee, 1999, 4). In music, however, Lurie is willing to take the sorts of creative liberties in writing the opera that an academic scholar would never dream of in scholarly work: “I’ll borrow the music, for the most part. I have no qualms about borrowing” (66). “There will be time to search through the masters—through Gluck, for instance—lifting melodies, perhaps—who knows?—lifting ideas too” (182). He later abandons the idea of using “purloined songs” (183) in favor of writing his own music, but the work fails to take shape despite his efforts. At the end of the novel, Lurie concedes defeat and leaves the opera unfinished:

_Byron in Italy_ is going nowhere. There is no action, no development, just a long, halting cantilena hurled by Teresa into the empty air, punctuated now and then with groans and sighs from Byron offstage. [...] The lyric impulse in him may not be dead, but after decades of starvation it can crawl forth from its cave only pinched, stunted, deformed. He has not the musical resources, the resources of energy, to raise _Byron in Italy_ off the monotonous track on which it has been running since the start. It has become the kind of work a sleepwalker might write. (214)

Lurie’s failure as a composer and lyrical subject anticipates one of Coetzee’s later characters, Paul Rayment, the protagonist of _Slow Man_. When fictional novelist Elizabeth Costello encounters Rayment, she dismisses him as too plodding, too lacking in passion to inspire her art. Too mired in the real, he does not have what it would take truly to “take off” as a character. Lurie similarly plods along. He uses Shakespeare’s sonnets and Mozart’s Clarinet Quintet to seduce Melanie, but the borrowed lyrics no longer work: “The cadence that served so well to oil the serpent’s words now only estranges” (Coetzee, 1999, 16). Later, in his awkward apology to Mr Isaacs, Lurie confesses: “I lack the lyrical. I manage love too well. Even when I burn I don’t sing, if you understand me. For which I am sorry” (171). He evokes similar
terms to sum up his life at the end of the novel: “Not a bad man but not good either. Not cold but not hot, even at his hottest. Not by the measure of Teresa; or even by the measure of Byron. Lacking in fire—will that be the verdict on him?” (195).

In fact, a pattern of self-conscious “lyrical failure” runs throughout Coetzee’s work. The author presents his own literary production in such terms: “I think of my own prose as rather hard and dry; but there remains in me a tug toward sensual elaboration—toward the late Romantic symphony and away from the two-part invention” (Coetzee, 1992, 208). Instead of the full, nineteenth-century symphony with its lush textures of brass, winds, strings—Wagner, Mahler, Brahms—Coetzee sees his work as coming closer to the stripped-down dialogue between instruments that, interestingly, defines the opera in Disgrace. In fact, Disgrace as a whole resembles a complex two-part invention. The text puts into play a sustained counterpoint between the opera and Lurie’s life. The violence of Lucy’s rape provides a counterpoint to the more muted violence of Lurie’s relations with women. Byron’s historical status as a glorious nineteenth-century adventurer and seducer is placed in comic parallel to Lurie’s self-image as a declining “Casanova,” a belated Rousseau, in post-apartheid South Africa. Through such relentless juxtapositions, the novel resists the lyrical and incessantly produces its own critique.

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Opera plays an ambivalent role in Disgrace. On one level, the opera can be read as the protagonist’s unwillingness to participate in the new South Africa. The opera allows Lurie to retreat into a fictional world where he can manipulate other subjectivities like marionettes, and supplement his stilted prose with music. And yet, the process of working on the composition transforms him. His efforts to extend his sympathies, stretch his imagination, and mine hitherto unused resources, have a humbling and de-centering impact on his life.

In his subsequent novel, Elizabeth Costello, Coetzee argues that the work of art is profoundly transformative for whoever engages in it. But as for how such a transformation operates, and whether always for the better, these are questions that both novels leave unanswered. Coetzee seems quite literally to be reworking issues posed by Blanchot in L’espace littéraire (1955, 108–9), where to André Gide’s claim that writing “modifies the course of our life,” Blanchot adds: “Writing changes us. We do not write according to what we
are; we are according to what we write. But where does what is written come from? Again from us? From a possibility within ourselves that uncovers and affirms itself through the work of literature alone?”

At the same time, Coetzee works against the image of music as spontaneous plenitude and full presence, by exposing the effort, imitation, and technique that go into its making. While nonetheless fascinated by the powerful sensual and emotional response commanded by Romantic music and lyric poetry, Coetzee shows these forms to be exhausted and implicated in a system of values that have traditionally dispossessed and objectified indigenous subjects, women, and others. Old forms cannot be resurrected. As the narrator states in *Diary of a Bad Year*, “the animating principles of that music are dead and cannot be revived. One cannot compose a nineteenth-century symphony that will not be an instant museum piece” (Coetzee, 2008, 134). And what then of the novel? What forms and principles retain sense and vitality in literature?

Coetzee’s novels themselves have become increasingly ironic and self-reflexive, explicitly staging the problems of their own writing and experimenting with new forms. The foray into opera in *Disgrace* represents precisely such experimentation, but even as Coetzee explores the boundaries of the novel, he parodies the previous experiments of his literary precursors. For instance, in the “Aha!” moment in *Disgrace* where Lurie, finally making progress on the opera and marveling at how melodies arrive unsolicited into his head, remarks, “So this is how art works,” Coetzee clearly satirizes similar moments in Sartre’s *La nausée* and Proust’s *A la recherche du temps perdu*. In both texts, narrators suddenly stumble on what they see as the essential key to a musical masterpiece, whether the formal principle that unifies Wagner’s music—and by extension, Balzac’s *Comédie humaine*—or the immortal, stirring quality of the ragtime tune “Some of These Days.” They then resolve to reproduce that very aspect in their own future writing.

In Coetzee’s work, however, musical composition is not simply a mirror image for writing, but a different kind of writing that disrupts the text and compels us to think about difference. If during the late nineteenth century, Wagner sought to unite music and lyric poetry in order to take opera to the summit of artistic expression, this totalizing vision of opera would be exhausted and discredited in World War II. In the aftermath of colonialism, the novel has emerged as the privileged genre where difference can be preserved, and where—as we have seen in *Disgrace*—music and literature can commingle without dissolving into one another. Without a score and with only limited narrative descriptions, the opera remains inaccessible,
illustrating how other narratives are similarly withheld from the novel. Moreover, the relentless diminishment of the opera from a lush, symphonic piece, to a minimalist chamber ensemble, and finally to nothingness, seems to perform the haunting teleology Blanchot envisions for literature itself, as “going toward itself, toward its essence, which is its disappearance” (Blanchot, 1959, 195). But in keeping with his conviction that criticism is what enables the classic to survive, Coetzee’s critical interrogation of opera and lyrical expression prolongs their presence and marks their singular importance.

As Adorno (2002, 674) argued in the context of contemporary music, art “must want to reach people. For even in its most inaccessible form, it is a social entity and is threatened with irrelevance as soon as that thread to the listener is broken off.” While deeply engaged in the questions of writing, agency, and authorship, Disgrace maintains precisely such a connection to the public by inviting readings on multiple levels. It is also a novel about race in South Africa, a reflection on rape and its aftermath, a meditation on the trauma of witnessing—or rather, of not witnessing, and a comment on the power structures and value systems in place in post-apartheid South Africa. Following the thread of music throughout the novel allows us to consider what lies outside the literary text, what it deliberately withholds, and thus to rethink the relationship between ethics and aesthetics.