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THINKING ETHICS AT THE INTERFACE: J.M COETZEE & THE QUESTION OF THE
ANIMAL IN *DISGRACE*

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Abstract

Coetzee's work has always demonstrated interest on the 'animal question' as an issue to be explored in his fictions. Although his fictional space has often had its tangle with the issue directly or indirectly, in work like *Disgrace* Coetzee turns to a fuller exposition with of animal question by taking into consideration the idea of animal ethics and justice. By focusing on the trajectory of ethics at play in the text, Coetzee pursues an idea of animal ethics that breaks with the principle of Practical ethics proposed by Animal Rights philosopher Peter Singer. Having remarkable similarities with the idea of sympathetic and liberal humanism, Coetzee's idea of animal ethics ultimately appears to be one that moves in the opposite direction to romantic tradition. His idea of interspecies relationship, symbolised by David Lurie's unique relationship with the dogs, explores the limit of sympathy proposing instated an ethics of defamiliarization based as it is on the idea of stupidity.

Keywords: liberal humanism, sympathetic imagination, paradox, stupidity.

The question of the 'animal' has always been close to J.M. Coetzee's own intellectual concern as a writer of fiction. His interest in the human-animal relationship is evident from his sustained interest in the topic whether manifested as metaphors for treating his wider social concern of racism, sexism or politics of nationalism of his immediate African context (as in *Disgrace*), or treated as topic in itself (as in *The Lives of the Animals*). His interest in animals as a writer of fiction is not that of a hard-core animal rights activist but of someone reluctant to identify his love for animals with any overly political agenda. As he confesses himself in one of his interviews:

Strictly speaking, my interest is not in legal rights for animals but in a change of heart towards animals. The most important of all rights is the right to life, and I cannot foresee a day when domesticated animals will be granted that right in law. Suppose you concede that the animal rights movement can never succeed in this primary goal. In that case, it seems that the best we can achieve is to show to as many people as we can what the spiritual and psychic cost is of continuing to treat animals as we do, and thus perhaps to change their hearts. (Animals, Humans, Cruelty and Literature, Satya, May2004).

It is indeed challenging to arrive at a clear perspective as to what ethical stance he holds with

regard to animals. Whatever may be his position, it is clear he has had his reservations about identifying himself as an animal ethicist resolutely given to the cause of animal well-being. He is a firm believer that the animal rights movement may hold the perfect political promise, it will eventually fail to live up to its own promise. Coetzee's idea of animal welfare is manufactured by a constant belief in his ideal of 'sympathetic imagination'- a point of view which is more 'literary' or artistic than overtly political. For Coetzee such a belief is more potent to cause a change in people's attitude towards animals than animal rights activism could ever do.

Of course, the tradition of sympathetic imagination goes as far back in history as we are ready to imagine. This tradition of thought goes back to Adam Smith's treatise *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*(1759). Smith championed the human faculty of imagination as a tool that can transcend the limitation of the human body and establish communion with other human beings by virtue of such power. As he explains, "By the imagination we place ourselves in his situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him, and thence form some idea of his sensation" (5). This tradition ultimately gets entrenched in the works of English Romantic poets like William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and others. In their works, the Romantics placed a heavy premium on synthetic power of human imagination, which Coleridge felt, can affect a reconciliation between disparate entities and beings.

Animal rights activism or philosophy, on the other hand, is not entirely different from sympathetic imagination. If one follows the work of Peter Singer and Paola Cavalieri especially their Great Ape Project, one may also feel how both Singer and Cavalieri frame a practical ethics on the grounds of species similarity. Singer considers apes capable of performing some fundamental human ability like learning the sign language and teach the same to their own species members. Such ability for Singer is a piece of evidence enough that both humans and great apes belong to the same

"community of equals" and have more similarities than differences between them. Additionally, because these creatures are similar to human beings, they also deserve rights similar to those of their human counterpart.

But how far Coetzee's own point of animal rights anticipate such practical ethics? Is he basically extending the Singerian version animal rights? Or trying depart from it? The article attempts to explore the issue by examining Coetzee's *Disgrace*, a text which directly speaks to the issues of animal rights and justice. In *Disgrace* the questions of animal rights and justice can be examined from the point of view of its protagonist David Lurie, a failed academic, a devious womanizer and a self-seeking man who hardly gets involved in anything in which he is not personally interested. Having lost his job at the University after his physical relationship with one his students are exposed, David comes to live with his daughter Lucy at Salem. It is here while working at a local animal shelter run by Bev Shaw that David started to undergo change of perspective towards animals at large. This transformation of David Lurie from a reckless man to a dog-lover prepares us for a discussion of nature of ethics at play in the novel. But my contention is David's gradual coming to terms with animal betrays an animal consideration which completely transforms him from within. Even towards the end he basically remains the person he is from the beginning. Neither does attitude towards the animal undergo any radical shift. His views on animals surprising remains the same. He is never very much inspired by animal welfare as he once comments:

I'm sorry, my child, I just find it hard to whip up interest in the subject. It's admirable, what you do, what she does, but to me, animal-welfare people are a bit like Christians of a certain kind. Everyone is so cheerful and well-intentioned that after a while you itch to go off and do some raping and pillaging. Or to kick a cat" (Coetzee, 73)

But what one should do well to remember that David on professional front has been associated with literature, a domain abounds in sympathy. David has been a teacher of Romantic poetry, a

"disciple" of Wordsworth in particular (46), whose humanism, liberalism, and egoism are all bound up with a complacent faith in the ethics of the sympathetic imagination. But the problem with Coetzee's idea of 'Sympathetic Imagination' and the subjectivity that is borne out of such ideal is somewhat different than what we get in the Romantic tradition. Moving from Adam Smith to English Romantic Poets of 19th century to finally the works of Martha Nussbaum in recent times, we can see how the discourse of human sympathy is founded upon the ethically operative subject. The affective response of the self in the face of the other's suffering, in the sympathetic model, bears witness to a fundamental ethical relation in a way that can potentially reconfigure our ethico-political sensibilities, even producing a commitment to the other's inclusion within the political community. Feeling has the power to reveal "the common," to reveal something shared with this other with whom we feel. In the work of Nussbaum and Hartman, it is specifically literature that has the power to "cultivate" such sympathetic feeling, to make us, in Nussbaum's terms, borrowed from classical thought, "world citizens" (52). Literature's true vocation is to make us cosmopolitan subjects that understand others more or less different from ourselves by perceiving what we have in common, specified at different moments in Nussbaum's *Cultivating Humanity* as "vulnerability" and "humanity." This particular idea apparently finds relevance in Coetzee's protagonist who sympathetic ideals can very well be seen to correspond with the humanitarian and political ideals of Practical ethics upheld by Peter Singer. Singer, no doubt, does not take his eyes off from human animal differences. He never intended to ignore the specificities of species identity. However, these differences can not entirely seal off the possibility of interspecies exchange. For Peter Singer, this anticipation of mutual ability to understand one another is the starting point of ethics for the animals. The moment we begin to see similarity between species, we are overcome with the feeling of sympathy that can now establish communion without overlooking differences.

What we get in *Disgrace* is not exactly a Singerian version of animal ethics, neither entirely a romantic version but something which can be called a 'stupid' imagination. Here we see a fundamental problem with the sympathetic imagination: it has to promote feeling and yet guard against its unpredictable impact and distribution. Hartman explores this problem more explicitly than Nussbaum by developing the idea of a "sympathy paradox," whereby the imperative to sympathize with the others is doomed from the beginning. The overwhelming idea is that however we may sympathise with others, such sympathy will never fully disclose such others at any point of time. Just because we can sympathy does not ensure our knowledge about the other. On the contrary, it works the other way round. The less we know about others, the more likely it is that sympathy will succeed. An awareness as such can lead to a bizarre realization about the very faculty of sympathy: sympathy works at best when we are stupid. Stupidity can be an ethical move per excellence since it is the common connect between species. Coetzee's text demonstrates how stupidity can actually trigger an ethical moment between David Lurie and his dogs.

David after his arrival to his daughter's farm, has undergone a change of perspective towards life. He has seen his daughter getting brutally raped by the blacks in the neighbourhood. His confidence in himself, in his grand Byronic ideals all start to slip away as he experiences his ego and knowledge fall apart. Reduced to his body, he starts to see similarity between himself and the stray dogs he attends to. There is one dog which becomes particularly fond of David. He too finally responds and builds an extraordinarily singular relationship with the dog. The novel gives us a hint of this special relation:

Sometimes while he is reading or writing, he releases it from the pen and lets it frisk, in its grotesque way, around the yard, or snooze at his feet. It is not 'his' in any sense; he has been careful not to give it a name (though Bev Shaw refers to it as *Drierpoot*); nevertheless he is sensible of a generous affection streaming out toward him from the dog. Arbitrarily, unconditionally, he has been

adopted; the dog would die for him, he knows (Coetzee,215).

Finally, when the dog dies, David enters the dog but while driving back he experiences in him a strange stupid emotion. He suddenly stops the car as tears start to overflow. For a man who is never known for sympathetic ability, the moment marks a serious turn. Lurie had never considered himself particularly concerned with the plight of animals, being by nature, he thinks, neither cruel nor kind. His flowing tears and shaking hands bemuse him, running against his own conception of the world and his place in it. As he says to Lucy at another point in the novel, animals and humans are of a different order of creation: "by all means let us be kind to them. But let us not lose perspective" (74). Kindness toward animals should be seen as simple generosity, Lurie argues; and yet this model of emotionally distanced generosity, of sovereign benevolence, is not what we see here. Lurie is "gripped" by what happens in the theatre and looks on in horror as the workmen beat the corpses into shape in order to shove them into the incinerator. Lurie does not know why he does what he does: he responds to a bewildering ethical call, devoting himself not only to the care of dogs that belong to a "different" order of creation, in his view, but to dead dogs, to dogs "unable, utterly unable, to take care of themselves, once even Bev Shaw has washed her hands of them." A self-confessed "selfish" man, whose egoism we see throughout the novel, becomes a "dog undertaker" simply "because there is no one else stupid enough to do it. That is what he is becoming: stupid, daft, wrongheaded" (146). Lurie's modest "devotion," far from being sustained by the power of his sympathetic imagination, finds its beginning and, strangely, its ongoing condition of possibility in his stupidity, as he follows, or begins to follow, the path of an unlearning that is punctuated by experiences of affective exposure or sensorial collapse, including simply falling asleep.

Many of Coetzee's commentators have considered his work in the light of Levinasian ethics, perhaps most notably among them Derek Attridge and Michael Marais. It does seem that Coetzee's protagonists are habitually struck by something

other, something that might seem to announce an ethical call akin to that declared by the Levinasian face. It is the ability of the self to be completely under the thrall of the other that begins an ultimate ethics. This ethics once gained is not Peter Singer's practical ethics since the ethical force of Singer's philosophy is precisely the moment when we locate the human 'sameness' in the animal other. Animals are given their due honour in so far as how successfully they are able to 'mimic' or imitate human actions. In contrast to utilitarian ideal of Singer's animal ethics, Coetzee presents us with animal ethics based on sympathetic stupidity. It is only by becoming stupid, David can begin his true relationship with dogs. Stupidity here lays down the possibility of a true interspecies relationship at a more personal level. The novel reminds us of his stupid gesture of playing the musical instrumental to a gang of dogs as if they were his audience. He also imagines the possibility of including the dogs as characters in his opera he is planning to write for a long time. Finally, it is his stupid gesture of interring and paying homage to the dead dogs to "save their honour" that truly shows his ultimate transformation as a dog-lover. Such acts are far away from the politically active steps undertaken by an animal activist but indeed more inspiring and emotionally far-reaching.

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