

“Misplaced Men: Aging and Change in Coetzee’s *Disgrace* and McCarthy’s *No Country for Old Men*”

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Abstract

“That is no country for old men” is the famous first line of Yeats’s “Sailing to Byzantium,” which reflects upon aging, art, and immortality. Yeats suggests in his poem that the aged ought to move from the sensual, physical world of their youth to a world of intellect and timeless beauty. We employ this poem and that line to explore the aging male protagonists in two recent novels: Cormac McCarthy’s *No Country For Old Men*, and J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*. We suggest that though both of the novel’s protagonists have aspirations to ‘sail to Byzantium’, various factors ranging from their characters to the problematic realities of contemporary southwest America and South Africa make such a wholesale, successful journey impossible even though some progress is made.

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Introduction

At first blush, it may seem strange to begin a discussion of J. M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace* and Cormac McCarthy’s *No Country for Old Men* by looking at Yeats’s poem “Sailing to Byzantium.” There are, however, at least three reasons for exploring the connection between the poem, these two novelists, and these two novels. First, and most obviously, there is the use of the first line from Yeats’s poem in both works -- in the title of McCarthy’s book, and in a paraphrase of it late in *Disgrace* -- which invites the exploration. Second, as William Deresiewicz has remarked in his review of *No Country For Old Men*, “Among his contemporaries, McCarthy comes closest in sensibility to J.M. Coetzee, whose own ascetic refusal, equally sulphurous in its rejection of modernity, bespeaks the bleakness of the South African veld” (38). Finally, and most importantly, thinking about the Yeats poem in the

context of the two novels, the poem seems to underscore the novels' concerns, whatever the degree of the poem's direct influence on the novels may be and however each novel turns to the poem. We, therefore, begin with a brief comment about Yeats so as to provide a basis for our discussion of the two novels.¹

As Yeats's poem opens, the speaker tells us that he has left his homeland and is now living in Byzantium. The emigration, we quickly learn, was driven by the speaker's estrangement from society in his homeland. In his words, he is "an aged man," who is excluded from the "sensual music" that now dominates society with its devotion to sexuality, the reproductive urge and, indeed, the sheer physicality of the place he has left, a country in which "fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long / Whatever is begotten, born, and dies" (4-5). And because of that sensuality, his society has abandoned "Monuments of unageing intellect" (8). Contrary to that world, Byzantium is a place in which art is pre-eminent. Even though it may no longer be as it once was, the historical Byzantium resonates powerfully within the speaker's imagination because it signifies the possibility of transcending mortality through the individual's creative imagination and the power art has to embody the infinite. Although "desire" seems to be consuming him (21), it is not the desire that surrounded him in his native land. Rather, the speaker's desire is to escape the physical altogether, as in the Romantic urge, say the Keats of the Odes. He pleads with the figures in the mosaics on the walls in Byzantium to "gather me / Into the artifice of eternity. . . ." (23-4) and vows to become a self-creating artefact, dedicated to art: "Once out of nature I shall never take / My bodily form from any natural thing, / But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make" (25-7) and, thus, to creating the infinite. He will, therefore, "sing / To lords and ladies of Byzantium / Of what is past, or passing, or to come" (30-3).

Although Sheriff Bell's life in McCarthy's novel is intensely physical, this is due to his chosen profession rather than, say, a deep-seated character trait. And while Bell is unrelentingly, perhaps oppressively, too conservative for some readers, he comes to share with the poem's speaker disgust with what appears to be the all-consuming self-absorption of his society. McCarthy is a writer who resists publicity and making public statements about his work. However, the world that he depicts in *No Country for Old Men* suggests that he is not pleased with how society has abandoned its traditional values. Neither is his sheriff, for while society has changed, Bell's values have

remained constant. Nor can he understand what has become of his world anymore than Yeats's speaker does. But rather than continuing to work within the new order of things, he has come to a decision that it is time to retire, for he is no longer a young and malleable man, capable of adapting to the new ways of his society, even if his beliefs were to allow for that. Like the speaker in Yeats's poem, Bell sees himself as having reached a stage in life in which he is no longer willing to adopt a different set of values. In his own mind, then, he has withdrawn from that society into a smaller, more comfortable world of his own making:

These old people I talk to, if you could of told them that there would be people on the streets of our Texas towns with green hair and bones in their noses speakin a language they couldnt even understand, well they just flat out wouldn't of believed you. . . . Part of it was I always thought I could at least someway put things right and I guess I just don't feel that way no more. . . . I'm bein asked to stand for something that I don't have the same belief in it I once did. (295-6)

Like Yeats's speaker, Coetzee's protagonist, David Lurie, is engaged in art by trying to write an opera about Byron and his lover Teresa, *Byron in Italy*. But the connection to Yeats's speaker is mostly ironic, since David's art is a failure, at least in traditional terms. We shall say more about this below. For the moment, however, suffice to say that throughout almost the entire course of novel, David's perspective is turned inward, towards self-aggrandizement rather than on anything beyond himself, such as the beauty of art as it reaches to embody that which is permanent, or Truth as Keats has it.

Where the speaker in Yeats seeks to escape nature to achieve direct experience of the infinite, David has no such ambition. His desires, aesthetic and otherwise, find their voice in David's immersion in that which is natural, finite, and physical. There is, therefore, little, if any, difference between how he uses women for sexual gratification and the impetus for creating art. Believing that his refusal to succumb to society's practices and conventions lifts him above the small-minded pedestrianism at the core of a society that alienates him, David deludes himself by identifying with Byron and his heroic figures.

We would not want to be heard suggesting that Byron was without self-indulgence. Nonetheless, we would argue, his struggles against social

constraints were motivated by a complex mixture of a desire to fulfil both his powerful physicality and his aspirations for a more just society that finds expression most especially in the Promethean defiance that characterizes some of his most notable poetry and plays. For Byron, politics, morality and poetry are often inseparable. For David, artistic creativity is motivated, in his words, by a desire “to be returned triumphant to society as the author of an eccentric little chamber opera” (214). What David does, in fact, share with Byron, ironically, is the link between how they live and what they write. If he seems to be drawn to immortality in a way that resembles Byron, unlike the poet he is incapable of acting or thinking beyond the self and, thus, of understanding post-apartheid South Africa. His opera, therefore, becomes an escape but without the perspective of something beyond the self and society as it is towards which he can reach. It is saved from this fate only partially and very late in its writing (and in the novel) as David turns away from writing himself in the form of Byron, and attempts to write about someone truly different than him, Byron’s lover Teresa. But, we will argue, the opera still fails to achieve the sort of transcendence the Romantics sought: its achievement, small though it is, is rather closer to the ground, although that may be what both David and South Africa need.

We shall argue as well that the self-absorbed David also learns to empathize with others through his work euthanizing dogs and taking care of their bodies afterwards during their cremation process. Once again, his steps are small and a long way from the luminous Byzantium. Still, it is a change that gives one some hope for him and indeed for us as we struggle in coming to grips with aging in a recalcitrant, cold, modern world.

A Sheriff Past His Time?

Though Sheriff Bell says, “*I’m not the man of an older time they say I am. I wish I was. I’m a man of this time*” (279), he in fact is not as insightful as his comment would indicate. His desires and his values are no longer in tune with contemporary society. That his assertion has any validity is only because his work as a sheriff entails his having to deal with the world as he finds it. Bell’s age has a great deal to do with his decision, underpinning the other factor that the Sheriff assigns to his decision: “*It aint just bein older . . . it is more like what you are willin to become. And I think a man would have to put his soul at hazard. And I wont do that*” (4). McCarthy frames his novel

with two sections of an on-going monologue delivered by Bell that periodically appears throughout the novel before each of the successive chapters that narrate the story. The framing monologue, then, is a recurring presence that provides us with a directive to read the story in the context of what Bell is saying. Bell is, therefore, put in a position where he must pursue and arrest Chigurh whom Bell describes as “*a true and living prophet of destruction*” (4). But Bell resigns before he completes his chase because, he admits, “*I dont want to confront him*” (4). Doubtless, this speaks to Bell’s Christian belief in the transcendence that occurs after death. As such he is reminiscent of Yeats’s speaker, though without the Romantic desire that drives him to Byzantium. Nonetheless, like the speaker who seeks transcendence from the world into the permanence of art, Bell’s withdrawal is a result of his desire for permanence in values that can resist contemporary life. His concern for his soul, then, is the consequence of having no basis for reassurance in society as it is now.

The dominance of violence that, early in the novel, indicates Bell’s increasing separation from his society and that in the extreme accounts for Chigurh’s rampage is visible from the novel’s first page where Bell expresses his guilt at sending a nineteen year old to the gas chamber for killing a young girl. The violence is also a major symptom of how society has become transformed in such a way as to have alienated Bell. Ironically, though, Chigurh and Bell have both rejected society, thus making them in some sense two sides of the same coin. The amoral Chigurh believes that he is a force of sheer will who can live without any social constraints; Bell holds to a conservative world view in which family and community ought to be the engines that drive both the individual and society and in which good and evil are constantly at war and in which evil is now in the ascendance:

I think if you were Satan and you were settin around tryin to think up something that would just bring the human race to its knees what you would probably come up with is narcotics. . . . [S]atan explains a lot of things that otherwise dont have no explanation. Or not to me they dont. (217)

Like Bell, Chigurh claims that he has rejected society. He says to Wells, who has been hired to kill him: “You think I’m like you. That it’s just greed. But I’m not like you. I live a simple life” (177). However, Chigurh has abandoned good and evil altogether and, so, is indifferent to the gratuitousness of the murders he commits, some of which have no basis in

anything other than his having “promised” Moss he would, as in the murder of Carla Jean. In place of considerations of good and evil, because for him they are irrelevant, he bases decisions about whom to kill or spare on whatever has been set in motion by past acts that cannot be undone, often determined for him by a flip of a coin, thus allowing him to claim he is acting as an instrumental means to fulfilling the will of metaphysical forces that are beyond his control. In that, he embodies the disintegration of the order that, in a modern society, is held in place by a society’s institutions, not the least important of which is its law enforcement. But the world that McCarthy depicts and deplores is not a modernist society. In McCarthy’s borderland, order has collapsed as forces of chaos have supplanted both individual and collective efforts to resist it. The will to order that characterizes modern society, sometimes to the benefit of its members but all too often to the detriment of many, has been overtaken by an invisible will to power² of which Chigurh is the agency.

On the other hand, clinging to a morality that is no longer relevant and frustrated by what society has become, Bell now regards himself as a failure: “*Part of it was I always thought I could at least someway put things right and I guess I dont feel that way no more*” (296). He has come to the view that the universe seems to be governed by a dark telos that includes the Manichean structure Bell advances as an explanation for what has happened to his society. And given his assertion that evil is now in the ascendancy, he is faced with the reality that the traditional moral categories that previously committed people to good have if not entirely collapsed, at least become so weakened by contemporary life that there is a danger that the evil in which he is immersed will soon entirely overcome the good if it hasn’t already done so. The root of that evil, he believes, is a dangerous individualism that, in the extreme, allows greed and violence to dominate.

The greed and violence seem to Bell to be such violations of social norms because they are at odds with the modernist or humanist assumptions about good and evil at the heart of the Judeo-Christian underpinnings of modern society. In a conversation he once had with a lawyer, Bell recalls that the lawyer asserted the precedence of the law over considerations of morality. In response, Bell’s thoughts turned to Mammon. Though Bell could not clarify for the lawyer exactly who Mammon is, he said he’s “*goin to look it up. I got a feelin I ought to know who it is*” (298).³

If, however, we consider the violence as a now integral, albeit unwelcome, aspect of contemporary society that disrupts and threatens the social order to which Bell clings, similar in kind, if hyper-extreme in degree to the things Bell complains about, then we can grasp the opposition between Bell and Chigurh as a force of individual will that cannot co-exist with Bell in society.

The Sheriff's is the modernist world that no longer exists. His expectations, therefore, cannot be met, nor is he able to adapt to the postmodern world that is now so firmly entrenched that it is irreversible. It would seem, then, that McCarthy wants us to think about the manifestations of greed and acquisitiveness and their cousin selfishness as the perversions of an earlier tradition that underlie the social chaos that has taken hold and in opposition to which Bell now feels powerless. David Cremean argues that when Bell claims he is not the man of an earlier time, quoted above, we ought to regard that statement as indicative of:

the changes that his hero's journey has wrought in him. He has grown uncertain, all but abandoned his truisms, his proclamations, his certainties, and seemingly found consolation in uncertainty itself: "*It [the total of the events of the story . . .] has done brought me to a place in my life I would not of thought I'd come to*" (4); "I don't know a damn thing" (213); "*And this [the drugs and violence of the border region] aint goin away. And that's about the only thing I do know*" (217). (Cremean 26-7)

Cremean's argument turns on his reading the novel, and in particular Bell, from within the context of Joseph Campbell's discussion of the hero. But Bell is not heroic, nor, as we have suggested above, is he as insightful as he might be. Rather, given his own account of his behaviour during the War and his belief that drugs are the devil's instrument, it seems more reasonable to take him at his word when he says that he does not want to have to face Chigurh. His decision to resign points to what John Vanderheide identifies as "the renunciation of the immanent for the sake of attaining the transcendent, the renunciation of the body for the sake of the soul." (Vanderheide 30)

In addition, because Bell is aging he cannot conceive of how he can adapt and continue to operate as an agent of the social order when that order has disappeared. He now exemplifies the condition in which Yeats's aged man

finds himself, one who similarly feels alienated and inconsequential (9). As Bell leaves the courthouse for the last time, the narrator tells us, he felt more than just sadness: “he knew what it was. It was defeat” (306). In the face of that, Bell has decided to leave the community for a more peaceful existence. Although there is no possibility of transcendence in the natural world, his love for his wife Loretta will continue to centre him and provide him with the peace he seeks, an example of which the narrator describes in the discussion Bell and his wife have towards the end of the novel:

We’ll be alright. I think I’m goin to like havin you home for dinner. I like being home any time. I remember when Daddy retired Mama told him: I said for better or worse but I didnt say nothing about lunch. Bell smiled. I’ll bet she wishes he could come home now. I’ll bet she does too. I’ll bet I do, for that matter. (301)

Of course, what Bell and Loretta are talking about is grounded in a modernist society the economic system of which is *laissez-faire* capitalism that very often has been implicitly and uncritically reproduced in popular culture. The excesses of the system, however, reveal the decadent decline into which the system has begun to fall, most notably perhaps in the greed that has all but overtaken whatever benefit some might see in a capitalist system. Two of the genres that speak to the benefits of that system are the thriller and the western. But, as Robert Jarrett correctly claims (36), McCarthy deconstructs the narrative and metaphysical assumptions of the thriller and, we would add, the western, and for similar reasons; both genres most often enact a metaphysics in that which society regards as the good triumphing over evil no longer pertains, much to the Sheriff’s disgust, and, perhaps, McCarthy’s as well. Bell, therefore, becomes alienated, abandons his job, and “transforms from hero to witness” (Jarrett 42). It seems, then, that McCarthy, consistent with his post-modernist view of society, finds a good versus evil, hero versus villain plot inadequate as a means of examining a society in decline.

Transcendence, Hope, and Despair

The Sheriff’s monologue closes the novel. In it he thinks about a water trough behind the courthouse he has just left. Though it is not as beautiful as the mosaics in Byzantium, it does speak to Bell of similar qualities, for it

signifies transcendence and an individual commitment to something other than self-involvement:

I don't know how long it has been there. A hundred years two hundred. You could see the chisel marks in the stone. It was hewed out of a solid rock . . . And I got to thinkin about the man that done that. . . . And I have to say that the only thing I can think is that there was some sort of promise in his heart. . . . I would like to be able to make that kind of promise. I think that's what I would like most of all. (308)

Bell's thoughts then turn to his father and to a dream he had after his father died. Following directly from his ruminations about the water trough, the dream, too, speaks of the importance of tradition and permanence: "*it was like we was both back in older times* (309). In it, he and his father are riding through the mountains on a cold and snowy night. His father is carrying a horn with fire in it and rides on ahead of Bell which assured Bell that all would be alright when he caught up to his father. The fire is rich with interpretive possibilities ranging from the protection of tradition, to knowledge or insight, to purification or simply to warmth and security. What it does not justify, however, is David Creamean's claim that by the end of the novel the monologue illuminates a "progression that echoes obliquely a kind of *telos*, one that again connotes hope, possibility, and transcendence, taking place in a dream-vision of his father" (19). Since he's retreated from society, Bell cannot offer society anything, least of all hope. Creamean's argument rests on Bell having become the "possessor of that wisdom and the message the hero in full brings back to his or her corner of the world" (25). But Creamean's reading is far too optimistic. The end of Bell's dream vision bears out our claim. Just as Bell concludes that "*whenever I got there he [his father] would be there*" he awakens, leaving us with the final sentence in the novel: "*And then I woke up*" (309). Rather than asserting the lasting influence the dream will have on Bell and his rebirth as a heroic messenger for society, the awakening shatters the dream and thrusts Bell back into the reality of a world with which he can no longer cope. Just as there is no doubt that Bell longs for the traditional values signified by the dream-vision, we know that what centres Bell is his marriage, "*I reckon I thought that because I was older and the man that she would learn from me and in many respects she has. But I know where the debt lies*" (303). Nowhere in the narrative is there an indication that Bell has any interest in carrying his commitment to his marriage that marriage and the now bygone values it signifies. If he cannot help bring about an alternative

to what the society has become, anymore than Yeats's speaker can, he can create a separate peace, thereby enacting another version of the turn to transcendence that the poem depicts. Regardless of whether "Bell does not shrink from the brutal realities of the world" as Stephen Frye claims, (19) or whether he retreats from the confrontation with Chigurh as we have suggested, Frye is correct when he argues that Bell "considers himself lucky, and that fortune he attributes to a love that is undeserved and a commitment that is foundational"(19). That love is also a means of finding something that is if not transcendence into infinitude as Yeats's speaker seems to achieve, nonetheless places him in the lineage of the Romantics as Yeats himself was, at least in "Byzantium" and some of his other poems. It also provides a link between Bell and David Lurie because of Lurie's incipient capacity for sympathy.

It is interesting to speculate on what this might mean politically. A number of reviewers of *No Country for Old Men* were disappointed at the conservatism the novel, through Bell, seemed to endorse.⁴ And not just conservatism, but a banal and insipid variant of it: e.g., as Bell puts it, "It starts when you begin to overlook bad manners. Any time you quit hearin' Sir and Mam, the end is pretty much in sight" (304). Ironically, however, in Bell's turn away from society and to the lost communal values he thinks, at this time, are irretrievable, he abandons the conservative communitarian position he has endorsed, if only obliquely, in favour of a position much like Ettinger's, the old Boer farmer in *Disgrace*, who sets up a guarded fence around his family and property in a futile effort to keep the modern world out.

Whatever the final answer to that issue is, we can say with certainty that Bell, like the traveller in "Sailing to Byzantium," is alienated from his society and seeks some way to retreat from it. As we shall see, David, the protagonist of *Disgrace*, feels similarly alienated from his society in post-apartheid South Africa. And like Bell, David will retreat from society. But, oddly, in his retreat, David begins to learn something that Bell has always had: the ability to sympathize with others, and indeed to love them. But whereas Bell uses this sympathy and love for his wife to remove himself from society at large, David shows signs that his burgeoning sympathies may finally open society to him. Not to Byzantium, certainly, but in a society that has been as beleaguered as South Africa, hoping for transcendence, or for complete reconciliation is not just unlikely but

perhaps even counterproductive. Rather, perhaps the best that can be achieved in contemporary South Africa is for older members of the current generation, like David, to realize that they themselves need to change, and this is what, we argue, David accomplishes, meagre though that accomplishment is.

Post-apartheid South Africa

Disgrace is the only Coetzee novel set in post-apartheid South Africa. As such, it is “fated to be read as a political portrait.” (Mars-Jones, par. 9). However, given Coetzee’s disdain for fiction based on what he has called “the procedures of history” (qtd. in Gorra, par.2), *Disgrace* deals with the contemporary political situation in South Africa only obliquely. Yet, as David Atwell says in his review of *Disgrace*, what Coetzee calls “post-ness” runs through the novel (qtd. in Atwell, 865).⁵ One of the myriad ways in which this is exemplified in the novel is the attempt by the protagonist, Professor David Lurie, to teach his students the perfective tense or aspect that is used to refer to actions that have been recently completed:

Two weeks ago he was in a classroom explaining to the bored youth of the country the distinction between *drink* and *drink up*, *burned* and *burnt*. The perfective, signifying an action carried through to its conclusion. How far away it all seems! I live, I have lived, I lived. (71)

The apartheid period in South Africa is now finished, but can it ever truly end, i.e., attain a state of completion? And if it can, how will this be accomplished, and for whom? In particular, can a middle aged white man like David who, whatever his political inclinations might have been during the apartheid period, benefited from it and will now have to suffer some fall in the new regime, come to such a state of completion and grace?⁶ David’s particular fall from grace emanates from an affair with one of his students which leads to the loss of his job and which, in turn, precipitates his move from Cape Town to a small landholding in the eastern Cape where he can live with his daughter. But his disgrace is more complicated than this and raises the question, on a personal level, whether any of us can truly age gracefully. On a political level, the novel asks whether South Africa can do so. We shall argue that the novel suggests that to whatever extent it is possible in the new South Africa, a radical shift from a European based

liberal conception of the self to one that is more community based and relational is required. And this, in turn, will necessitate that citizens shift from a focus on an atomized self to one concentrated on a self within a web of relationships with others, as for example, Bell does in *No Country for Old Men*, although ironically, since the circle of his relationships gets much smaller when he decides to retire and retreat from society.

This particular process of communal interaction requires that we truly come to understand and in fact to be ‘the other’. Since David’s literary expertise is in the field of nineteenth-century British poetry, it is worth noting that the Romantics and Victorians such as Browning understood this process in terms of sympathy and, ultimately, of love.⁷ As we shall argue, ironically, it is David’s deficiency in both capacities during most of the novel that leads not only to his disgrace but all of his life’s failures. However, we shall also argue that David ultimately does display, in however small a degree, an ability to sympathize with and to love both his daughter and the dogs he euthanizes at the novel’s very end. This will involve what David refers to as “*lösung*,” which he thinks of as a kind of sublimation of the self.

The ‘Trial’

Although *Disgrace* is set in a turbulent political time and situation, significantly, it contains only one truly public event -- the hearing investigating David’s actions with his young student, Melanie Isaacs. That Coetzee intends to draw a link between this hearing and the Truth and Reconciliation Committee (TRC) is fairly clear even if the conclusions we are meant to draw from these sets of hearings are not. Under the direction of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the TRC was set up “to establish the truth in relation to past events as well as the motives for and circumstances in which gross violations of human rights occurred, and to make the findings known in order to prevent a repetition of such acts in the future.” (qtd. in Durant 430). This makes it quite distinct from the Nuremberg trials, which looked only toward the past and had the intent of achieving retributive justice against those who committed atrocities against human dignity. That is, the goal there was punishment, which, significantly, is exactly what David will wish for later in the novel with respect to the men who raped his daughter. As he puts it: “I want those men to be caught and brought before the law and punished. Am I wrong to want justice?” (119).

In contrast, the TRC hoped to use the past only as a means to move beyond it – to complete it, as it were. Indeed, the TRC could not itself even impose any sanctions against individuals (although it could recommend such sanctions). It could, however, grant amnesty to those it thought were truly repentant. The committee established to examine the allegation against David operates in the same way. David is adamantly opposed to the committee's telos and, in addition, thinks it smacks of political correctness. There is a certain amount of truth to this. The committee does come replete with a student observer from the "Coalition Against Discrimination" (CAD) (48), and there are also protests by "Women Against Rape" (WAR) amidst what are by now banal discussions of the evils of "mixing power relations with sexual relations" (53) – all of which are now firmly a part of contemporary politics. But David's complaints go further than that focusing on the committee's 'extra-legalistic' mandate, so to speak. As he says at the beginning of the hearing when appraised of the charges against him: I am "sure the members of the committee have better things to do with their time than rehash an old story over which there will be no dispute. I plead guilty to both charges. Pass sentence, and let us get on with our lives" (48).

Indeed, David becomes belligerent during the course of the hearings when the committee refuses simply to accept his guilty plea and "get on with their lives." Members of the committee clearly want him to show remorse and to apologize for his actions; in short, as one committee member puts it, not just "pleading guilty to a charge [but] admitting you were wrong," (54) in the moral sense of that term. But, in an interesting parallel to PW Botha who, in 1997, refused to appear before the TRC saying that he had "nothing to apologize for. I will never ask for amnesty. Not now, not tomorrow, not after tomorrow," (par. 6) ⁸ David refuses to admit any such thing saying that their demand goes "beyond the scope of the law" (55). This becomes all the more significant when, after Lucy is raped, David pushes her to keep after the officers of the law though she refuses. David is locked into a legalistic frame of reference, rather like the lawyer to whom Bell speaks in *No Country*. But the law and morality, as McCarthy notes in the incident, are not necessarily coincident.

Clash of culture and personality

The clash here between David and the committee cuts deep and crosses many paths – from ideology and culture to the personal. Despite living his entire life in South Africa, David is a child of Europe. We see this in many ways in the novel, perhaps most clearly in his tendency to frame things in European terms and in various European languages, typically taken from literature. Hence, to list just a few of many possible examples: he refers to his once a week meetings with the prostitute, Soraya, as “an oasis of *luxure et volupté*” (1);⁹ he uses a line from a Shakespearean sonnet to woo his student, Melanie (16);¹⁰ and he utters a line from Vergil’s *Aeneid* to refer to Byron’s last voyage to Greece (162).¹¹ Indeed, David himself makes the point that while he doesn’t understand a word of Sotho or Xhosa (75), he can speak many European languages: “but Italian and French will not save him here in darkest Africa” (95). In fact, as David begins to acquire some consciousness of his problem, he begins to realize that European languages like English “are an unfit medium for the truth of South Africa. Stretches of English code whole sentences long have thickened, lost their articulation, their articulateness, their articulatedness” (117).

The language he 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.” (129)

Included in David’s European heritage is his tendency to view the self in isolation from others. Indeed, we can view liberalism as an ideology set up to protect individuals from society as a whole. As stated by John Stuart Mill, the most important spokesman for classic liberalism, “Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign.” (69).¹² The old Boer farmer, Ettinger, represents this view concretely (if excessively) by erecting a literal fortress around his farm, which he defends with firearms. On the other hand, despite what’s been done to her, Lucy is committed to openness in the new South Africa. Rather than enclosing her farm with a fence, she leaves it open to the Black family living next to her and so breaks down the barriers between the Blacks and Whites, or seems to want to. Perhaps hers is as naïve a gesture as is Ettinger’s belief that the two worlds will remain separated as they were under apartheid. Of course, liberalism

does not accept that all actions are legitimate: those that 'harm' others (in the requisite sense) are open to public scrutiny and indeed to public prosecution including punishment through the state mechanism of the law. But the novel implies repeatedly that the state and its laws have very little effectiveness in contemporary South Africa, as in the Texas of McCarthy's novel. One of the white characters puts it to David as follows: "You people had it easier. I mean, whatever the rights and wrongs of the situation, at least you knew where you were.... Now people just pick and choose which laws they want to obey. It's anarchy. How can you bring up children when there's anarchy all around?" (9).

This view appears to be one shared by many whites in South Africa¹³ and perhaps by some Blacks too. Of course, the law during the apartheid period was far from neutral and operated, consciously and by design, in favor of Whites against Blacks and Coloureds. Hence, breaking laws, especially against property, may not seem to many contemporary South Africans as morally wrong: As David puts it shortly after the robbery and rape:

A risk to own anything: a car, a pair of shoes, a packet of cigarettes. Not enough to go around, not enough cars, shoes, cigarettes. Too many people, too few things. What there is must go into circulation, so that everyone can have a chance to be happy for a day. That is the theory; hold to the theory and to the comfort of theory. Not human evil, just a vast circulatory system, to whose workings pity and terror are irrelevant. (98)¹⁴

Lucy extends this idea to rape as well, thereby collapsing completely the liberal idea of a separation between private and public spheres and pointing to the naiveté of Ettinger's wall:

'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 was a purely private matter. In another time, in another place it might be held to be a public matter. But in this place, at this time, it is not. It is my business, mine alone.'

'This place being what?'

'This place being South Africa' (112).

At this point in the novel, however, David still believes in the sanctity of the law and the separation of private from public lives. He is willing to accept punishment for his public misbehaviour against Melanie: what he refuses to allow, however, is the committee to enter into what he thinks of as his private mental life through, e.g., psychological counseling. "No," David says at one point in the meeting, "I have not sought counseling nor do I intend to seek it. I am a grown man. I am not receptive to being counseled. I am beyond the reach of counseling" (49).

Misguided Romanticism

While we can feel some degree of sympathy for David here in his resistance to our age's tendency to see all our problems as psychological in nature, his own account and justification for his behaviour is misguided as well and stands in need of revision.

David rests his case on his having become "a servant of Eros" (52), and of "the rights of desire" (89). In thinking this way, David attempts to align himself with the Romantic tradition on which he is an expert, and in particular with the notion of a Romantic hero. Clearly, he sees an affinity between himself and Byron, both of whom he views as beings who choose their own, dangerous paths outside the norms of society (32-33). The position itself is of course problematic, as David must see when three black men rape his daughter, an action also out of step with societal norms and, typically, subject to legal sanction. Of course, David might argue that his actions point toward something transcendent whereas theirs were purely base. But he can't really sustain that position since, as he recognizes, his actions with Melanie were "[n]ot rape, not quite that, but undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core" (25).

David, in fact, has difficulty sustaining sexual relationships with women who are on an equal footing with him. That is why he preys upon young women such as Melanie, with her "little breasts," (17) and "hips... as slim as a twelve-year-old's" (19). Indeed, there is even an incestuous component to their relationship: he puts her in his daughter's room and, when consoling her, "almost he says, 'Tell Daddy what is wrong'" (26). This same deficiency also helps to explain why David looks upon his "relationship" with the prostitute, Soraya, as having "solved the matter of sex rather well"

(1) for him and why he has come to accept that “ninety minutes a week of a woman’s time are enough to make him happy, who used to think he needed a wife, a home, a marriage” (5). Hence, David’s Romantic defense of his actions as being caught in the thrall of Eros and “the rights of desire” (89) are either disingenuous or self-deceptive (a character flaw mentioned explicitly by his ex wife) (188). For, while one could read David’s actions in Byronic terms, as he likes to do, his behaviour, and in particular his sexual “deviance” is not driven by a desire to unshackle himself from societal norms.

Rather, it is based on his fear of getting old and of becoming a sexual non-entity, and this is about as stereotypical as it gets for middle aged men. As he puts it, one day he realized that his sexual attractiveness “had ended. Without warning, his powers fled. Glances that would once have responded to his slid over, past, through him. Overnight he became a ghost. If he wanted a woman he had to learn to pursue her; often, in one way or another, to buy her” (7). Indeed, even buying a woman isn’t completely sufficient to quell David’s fears since, he thinks, even prostitutes “tell stories, and ... they laugh” about their older customers. “[B]ut they shudder too, as one shudders at a cockroach in a washbasin in the middle of the night. Soon, daintily, maliciously, he will be shuddered over. It is a fate he cannot escape” (8). This leads David to think that “[h]e ought to give up, retire from the game. At what age, he wonders, did Origen castrate himself? Not the most graceful of solutions, but then ageing is not a graceful business. A clearing of the decks, at least, so that one can turn one’s mind to the proper business of the old: preparing to die” (9).

That may seem overly dramatic for a 52 year-old man rather than an 82 year-old one. But if one is, and always has been, like David, a (self-confessed) “womanizer,” (7) then the devolution of one’s sex life can be seen as central to one’s identity. Hence, rather than give up his sex life, “he existed in an anxious flurry of promiscuity. He had affairs with the wives of colleagues; he picked up tourists in bars on the waterfront or at the Club Italia; he slept with whores” (7). In essence, David has learned to compartmentalize his life in order not to fully engage his self in any **one** [OK] part. We can thus describe him as emotionally and developmentally stunted: indeed, he says that even sex – that most intimate of human activities – is not intimate or passionate for him. Rather, he says, his sex life is like “the copulation of snakes: lengthy, absorbed, but rather abstract, rather dry, even at its hottest (3).

David's abstractness is commented on repeatedly throughout the novel, especially in connection with how to respond to Lucy's rape. Upset that she is unwilling to go to the police and charge her attackers with rape, David thinks she may be operating from some misguided sense of guilt or shame, to which she responds: "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" (112). As Bev Shaw says, Lucy is more "adaptable" and "lives closer to the ground" than David (210). That is why she can accept the proposal of 'marriage' from Petrus in return for his protection. It is also why she will have her baby – a product of her rape – and come to love it, because, for her, the baby, ultimately, is just that – a new, separate, and concrete life of its own – and not a symbol of something else.

We can look at this abstractness in political terms within the context of the history of South Africa. . David abstracts in order to compartmentalize his life. His abstractness also allows to think that Soraya has a genuine affection for him, and, as he puts it, that she was even lucky to have found him (2). For David, South Africa has always been a place where others have seen to his needs and desires without his conscious knowledge of what that has truly done to them, and without his concrete realization of what their lives were like. It is just this abstractness, along with a lack of emotional commitment and sympathy that allowed for and indeed bolstered the apartheid regime. No one who truly empathized with non-white South Africans or who failed to think that the satisfaction of their own desires legitimated almost anything, could have supported, if only passively, the apartheid regime for more than 50 years. In that, David's abstractness is part of a colonial paradigm where white colonizers and non-white 'natives' are completely separated as different kinds of being. Even David's choices of sexual partners in the novel display that attitude. By choosing the "exotic," that is to say Coloured Soraya, and the indistinctly raced Melanie,¹⁵ there is a sense in which David is screwing the races that white Europeans have always 'screwed' in Africa. While we do not pursue this post-colonial reading of *Disgrace*, it is consistent, we believe, with our reading of David as suffering from a lack of sympathy.

David begins to realize what his problem is only very late in the novel. For example, in his apology to Melanie Isaac's father: "It could have turned out

differently, I believe, despite our ages. But there was something I failed to supply, something – he hunts for the word – ‘lyrical. I lack the lyrical. I manage love too well. Even when I burn I don’t sing’” (171). Another way of putting this is to say that he lacks emotional commitment, which is of course ironic given that the Romantic project aimed to give precedence to emotion and feeling over reason. At heart, then, though David wishes he were the Byronic hero who is “mad, bad, and dangerous to know,” as Lady Caroline Lamb said of Byron (Douglass, “Caro”) (and to which Lucy refers as well) (77), in reality his affair with Melanie was rather a “last leap of the flame of sense before it goes out” (27), a way to be “no longer a fifty-year-old divorcé” (52). And this, as we have said, is the epitome of a middle-aged man in crisis, not of a Romantic hero operating according to his own rules outside of societal concern.

The Possibility of Change

Can David change? He certainly says repeatedly that he cannot. When he speaks of his relationship with Soraya at the beginning of the novel, he says that “His temperament is not going to change, he is too old for that. His temperament is fixed, set. The skull, followed by the temperament: the two hardest parts of the body” (2). Towards its end, he tells Melanie’s father that “after a certain age one is too old to learn lessons. One can only be punished and punished (172)¹⁶. In the penultimate chapter, when he confesses to Lucy that “he is too old to heed, too old to change. Lucy may be able to bend to the tempest; he cannot, not with honour” (209). And, finally, in the last chapter, after Lucy has suggested that she will be try to be a good mother and a good person and suggests he try the same: “I suspect it’s too late for me. I’m just an old lag serving out my sentence” (216).

We would suggest, however, that David does show *some* capacity for change within the novel, even if that change proves ultimately to be insufficient for the purposes of contemporary South Africa. These changes become visible when examining the two “projects” David works on after he loses his job at the university – his opera, *Byron In Italy*, and his work with Bev Shaw at the Animal Welfare Society.

David’s opera goes through a complete metamorphosis in the novel. He envisioned it originally as “a chamber play about love and death, with a passionate young woman and a once passionate but now less than

passionate older man" (180) replete with "soaring arias" and music borrowed from European masters. But, since his move to Lucy's farm, that "project failed to engage him to the core" because it did "not come from the heart" (181). Part of the reason for that surely is that his hope in writing the opera was always ego driven -- to have "returned triumphant to society as the author of an eccentric little chamber opera" (214).

Connected with that, however, is his fledgling concern for 'the other'. Referring to his opera, David says that he has been able to "find words for Byron," because (correctly or not) he sees himself in Byron. However, to that point, he has been unable to do the same for Byron's mistress, Teresa, who has been completely foreign and, hence, opaque to him. Indeed, David takes this one step further: "he can, if he concentrates, if he loses himself, be there, be the men [who raped Lucy]... The question is, does he have it within him to be the woman" (160)? The first step in coming to sympathize with Teresa is his realization that there are some things, like the rape of his daughter and the very personalized hatred by men toward women even (or perhaps especially) in the act of sexual intercourse, that he just doesn't understand (157). Acknowledging his ignorance, and concomitantly recognizing that he is not always the major player in the drama of others' lives, is the beginning of his attempt to learn. He, therefore, radically revises the opera to focus on a middle aged Teresa with a view, in part, to understanding her pain: "*Come to me, mio Byron,*" she cries: *come to me, love me!*" only to have him reject her over and over: "*Leave me, leave me, leave me be!*" (185).

The opera is, however, ultimately a failure. As David realizes, "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" (214). Indeed, one could argue that it has not simply been transformed from an erotic or elegiac piece to a comic one, as David proclaims (184), its seriously curtailed tragic shape, the feebleness of Byron's voice, and the central part to be played by the banjo and the additional part added for a dog all indicate that Coetzee means for us to see it as a mock opera. Surely this must give us pause in proclaiming that the opera shows significant movement and change in David's character. And yet, David has at least given up the idea that the opera will allow him to return to Cape Town society, and that is at least indicative of a change, small as it is. In that, then, David's new opera is, at most, an instance of the

ABCs of a new language that will acquire full signifiatory power and significance only in a future South Africa.

“In a country where dogs are bred to snarl at the mere smell of a black man,” (110), animal rights can be a particularly sensitive topic, yet in *The Lives of Animals* (1999) and *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), Coetzee has written about it extensively since he published *Disgrace*. His theme is a radical kind of egalitarianism between humans and animals, a view at exact odds from the one David espouses early in the novel. When asked whether he likes animals, David responds by saying: “I eat them, so I suppose I must like them, some parts of them” (81). This glib, sarcastic response is founded on two beliefs: first, that animal lovers – like the politically correct people who objected to his affair with Melanie – have an air of moral superiority: “animal-welfare people,” he says, “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 kick a cat” (73). Second, in a passage eerily reminiscent of the rationale for apartheid, David says that “we are a different order of creation from the animals. Not higher, necessarily, just different” (74). We are different, he thinks, because we have souls and other animals do not.

Reassessing this view requires that David lose himself. “He remembers Bev Shaw nuzzling the old billy-goat with the ravaged testicles, stroking him, comforting him, entering into his life. How does she get it right, this communion with the animals? Some trick he does not have. One has to be a certain kind of person, perhaps, with fewer complications” (126). He begins to acquire it, however, by becoming completely enveloped in their lives, and perhaps more importantly, in their deaths. The Animal Welfare League, where he volunteers, has been mostly reduced, in light of funding cuts, to euthanizing animals, especially dogs, because there are simply far too many of them. Eventually, in a reversal of fortune, David becomes the “dog man,” a job typically reserved for Blacks, and ensures that the dogs are not mistreated in the course of their extermination and cremation.

In doing this job, David comes to realize that whatever redemption he can achieve from his disgrace will come, as Lucy expresses it, at ground level. “‘With nothing. Not with nothing but. With nothing. No cards, no weapons, no property, no rights, no dignity.’ ‘Like a dog,’” he says, to which she replies, “‘Yes, like a dog’” (205). Once again, this process requires that he lose himself, a process that he refers to as “*lösung*,” i.e., a type of

“sublimation, as alcohol is sublimed from water, leaving no residue, no aftertaste” (142). This concept is, interestingly, connected to the Romantic notion of imagination, which is a genuinely creative power where, e.g., two things can merge into new unified whole.¹⁷ Indeed, this is more clearly connected to the definition typically given to “*lösung*” as a kind of solvent (rather than a “sublimation” *per se*) that merges separate elements into a new, unified one. *Lösung*, then, can be thought of as a process by which two separate individuals merge into one.

Interestingly, the last scene in the novel describes David and Bev Shaw engaging “in one of their sessions of *Lösung*,” which is in fact a euthanasia session for animals “whose term has come” (218). Presumably, this means that David has managed – or is at least beginning – to see himself as connected with someone or something outside of himself. Indeed, he goes even farther than this: “He and Bev do not speak. He has learned by now, from her, to concentrate all his attention on the animal they are killing, giving it what he no longer has difficulty in calling by its proper name: love” (219). Ironically, then, David ultimately starts to become a true Romantic by euthanizing dogs, and not by (allegedly) falling under the thrall of Eros and seducing young students.

Sublimation is, of course, most closely connected to Freud and his belief that sublimating our sexual drive can lead to many positive outcomes, including the creation of art. To return for a moment to Yeats’s poem, the man sailing to Byzantium has come to realize that leaving behind the world of the young with its immersion in our senses, need not be considered a loss as one enters the transcendent world of art to re-create the self. David clearly has not traveled as far as that as his revised opera, his foray into art, demonstrates. Just thirty pages from the end of the novel, David still considers the possibility that his affair with Melanie is not yet over. It is at this point that “he sighs. The young in one another’s arms, heedless, engrossed in the sensual music. No country this, for old men. He seems to be spending a lot of time sighing: Regret, a regrettable note on which to go out” (190). That is, at this (late) point, David still desires his youth and the transient world of sense and sexual desire. Hence, he decides to attend a performance of *Sunset at the Globe Salon* to see Melanie and to hope for a special sign from her. He is, however, rudely awakened from his reverie by Melanie’s boyfriend who tells him to “stay with your own kind” (194), which, in terms of our argument, entails leaving the young alone and

moving on from selfish sexual desires – to sublimate those desires into something that allows him to get past himself and into a communication with others. As we have argued, he begins to do this by sympathizing with Byron's rejected lover and by comforting dogs during and just after their last living moments. In doing so, David is able to begin to overcome his disgrace and to begin the difficult task of aging gracefully.

Concluding Remarks

Clearly, then, Yeats's 'Sailing to Byzantium' provides insight into *No Country For Old Men* and *Disgrace*. The poem's treatment of aging, of dissatisfaction with the world surrounding the aging man, and the attempt to find an alternative to that world, are all explored in the two novels as well as in the poem, albeit with quite different results. Whereas the traveler in Yeats's poem is able to achieve transcendence of this world in timeless works of art, neither Sheriff Bell nor Professor David Lurie are capable of achieving such heights. Bell ultimately has to retreat into the insular world of his family in order to escape the violence of the contemporary world, and David has to suffer a great fall and relinquish any aspiration to create lasting works of art. Yet both men achieve some measure of consolation -- Bell's in the love of his family, and David's in his burgeoning capacity for sympathetic engagement.

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Notes

1 Other Yeats poems that have been mentioned in relationship to the novel include "The Second Coming" and "The Lake Isle of Innisfree." See Terrell Tebbets, "Sanctuary Redux: Faulkner's Logical Pattern of Evil in McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men*," *Philological Review* 32.1 (Spring 2006) 79.

2 Robert Jarrett uses this phrase when he discusses *No Country* as a deconstruction of the gothic. See Robert Jarrett, "Genre, Voice and Ethos: McCarthy's Perverse 'Thriller'." *The Cormac McCarthy Journal* 5 (2005): 36.

3 In *Paradise Lost*, though not in the Bible, Mammon is a fallen angel who, before the expulsion from Heaven, wandered around with his eyes always on the ground in awe of the golden floor of Heaven. In the poem, Mammon is also responsible for teaching humans to tear into the earth to look for "treasures better hid" (1. 688).

4 E.g., Michiko Kakutani's review in *The New York Times*, July 18, 2005 and William Deresiewicz, "It's a Man's Man's World," *The Nation*, September 12, 2005, 38-41

5 In saying this, Coetzee has been particularly interested to separate himself from the writing of contemporary South African novelist (and fellow Nobel prize winner) Nadine Gordimer. ~~Given that,~~ We can see that Coetzee's remark remains true even given his recent foray into political fiction writing in *Diary of a Bad Year* since that novel is far from the realism offered by Gordimer and, hence, not an example of "the procedures of history."

6 We are not speaking of "grace" in a theological sense. By using the term, we mean simply to signify a state where one's dignity is retained.

7 See, for example, Wordsworth's "The Old Cumberland" and "Resolution and Independence" and his comment in "Tintern Abbey" that heightened imagination leads to the sympathetic relationship with others and ultimately society's development, that "little, nameless unremembered, acts / Of kindness and of love" (34-5) develop from what he calls his "purer mind" (29). Browning's aesthetic inextricably links art and morality, regardless of the prevailing social standards. His painter poems, for example, clearly demonstrate that relationship. Browning celebrates Fra Lippo Lippi's art because it is grounded in his sympathetic response to those with whom he interacts. Andrea del Sarto's art, on the other hand, cannot achieve the quality of Raphael's despite its flawless technique because del Sarto's imagination is too limited by greed and, thus, he cannot engage sympathetically with others.

8 "PW Botha The 'Great Crocodile,'" BBC News, Oct. 30, 1998. Retrieved Feb. 2, 2009 http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/special_report/1998/10/98/truth_and_reconciliation/202299.stm.

9 A reference to Charles Baudelaire's "L'invitation au voyage," in his collection *Fleurs de Mal*.

10 Shakespeare, Sonnet 1: "From fairest creatures we desire increase... that thereby beauty's rose might never die."

11 "*Sunt lacrimae rerum, et mentem mortalia tangunt*" ("These are tears for events and mortal things touch the soul.")

12 J.S. Mill, (1859/1974). *On Liberty*. Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin. 69.

13 Consider, e.g., the claim by one white woman at a rally in Constantia, the wealthy suburb of Cape Town: "Apartheid was immoral but now we are a society without morals." Smith, "Apartheid's Old Party Faces Doom" *The Independent* (par. 10), May 27, 1999. Retrieved from the internet on Feb. 24, 2009 at <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/apartheids-old-party-faces-doom-1096175.html>.

14 Also see, e.g., 137-138 regarding Petrus' claims about insurance.

15 She is referred to as the "dark one" in the novel (164) and as her character in *Sunset at the Globe Salon*, she speaks Kaaps, the dialect of the Western cape and especially of Cape Town, spoken by the majority of Blacks there. This leaves her race far from settled but Coetzee certainly leaves open the possibility that Melanie is Black.

16 His line is followed, though, by his wondering, "But perhaps this is not true, not always. I wait to see" before going on to say that he is living in disgrace day to day.

17 See, e.g., Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, .W. Shawcross, ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1907, VI. 1, Ch. 13. and William Wordsworth, "Preface" to *Poems* (1815). Reprinted in John Spencer Hill, ed., *The Romantic Imagination: Casebook*. (London and Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1977), 59.