

Giving Him Up: The Ethics of Renunciation in J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*

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Abstract: Critics of J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* have long read its ending through the vocabularies of shame, grace, and redemption. This article argues that the novel systematically dismantles the social preconditions of redemption itself. On Lucy Lurie's farm—a space that answers closely to Giorgio Agamben's "state of exception"—both of redemption's ordinary channels fail: the university hearing's demand for performative confession collapses because no authority remains capable of granting absolution, and Lucy's refusal of legal recourse confirms that the law's protection has been withdrawn. What remains for the degraded subject? Drawing on Georges Bataille's economy of expenditure and Frances Restuccia's reading of the "unsavable", the article names the ethical stance that emerges from this impasse an ethics of renunciation: a clear-eyed acknowledgment that redemption is impossible, joined to a re-anchoring of one's relation to the vulnerability of the other. David Lurie's ritualized labour at the animal clinic, and his final gesture of "giving up" the crippled dog, enact this ethic—not as despair or quietism, but as the only honest form of ethical life available to bare life.

Keywords: Renunciation, *Disgrace*, State of exception, Bare life.

1. Introduction

Disgrace ends with an act of relinquishment so quiet that its strangeness is easy to miss. David Lurie, who has spent the novel losing—his professorship, his reputation, his daughter's trust, his last footholds in the world of forms—carries a crippled young dog from the kennels to Bev Shaw's surgery, where the animal will be euthanized. He could postpone the death; a week has been granted before, and another week would cost no one anything. Instead, he declines the reprieve. "Bearing him in his arms like a lamb" (Coetzee 2000), he gives the dog up. The gesture closes the novel without closing its question: what, exactly, has Lurie done?

Criticism has answered, by and large, in the vocabulary of redemption—whether to affirm redemption or to deny it. Sue Kossew reads the novel as an anatomy of the politics of shame and redemption (Kossew 2003). Derek Attridge asks whether Lurie's work at the animal clinic and his odd chamber opera might open onto a "state of grace" (Attridge 2000). Mike Marais locates the ethical burden of the novel in the imagination's labour toward the other (Marais 2006). Chris Danta reads the ending through Kafka's sacrificial animal, with Lurie becoming "like a dog ... like a lamb" (Danta 2007), while Marianne DeKoven traces the novel's "going to the dogs" as a posthumanist opening (DeKoven 2009). Even those who refuse the redemptive reading remain inside its terms: the debate has been whether redemption is achieved, ironized, or withheld.

This article begins from a prior question. Redemption is not a private sentiment; it is a social machine with working parts. It requires an authority empowered to pardon, a community able to receive the penitent, and a law able to protect the wronged and to name the wrong. Before asking whether *Disgrace* grants its characters redemption, we should ask what the novel has done to the machine itself. My claim is that the novel takes the machine apart.

The setting in which it does so answers closely to what Giorgio Agamben calls the state of exception: "the suspension

of the juridical order itself" (Agamben 2005), a condition that is "neither external nor internal to the juridical order" but rather occupies a zone where inside and outside blur into each other (Agamben 2005). Lucy Lurie's farm in the Eastern Cape is such a zone. The law persists in form—the police arrive, statements are taken—while its force has been withdrawn from the space and from the lives exposed within it. Inside this suspended order, the inhibitory mechanisms of civilization fail, and what Agamben calls the subject's passage from *bios* to *zoē*, from a politically qualified form of life to bare life, is set in motion. Bare life, in Agamben's well-known formulation, is life that "may be killed but not sacrificed" (Agamben 1998): excluded from legal protection and from ritual meaning alike.

The reading offered here is interactionist in premise. The degradation of life in *Disgrace* is not the work of political power alone, nor of biological impulse alone, but of their convergence: the state of exception supplies the field in which civilized inhibition collapses; the instincts of aggression and desire—Konrad Lorenz's primitive aggression, Georges Bataille's economy of transgressive desire—supply the drive; and transgression, the breaking of taboos, supplies the path along which that drive is released. The assailants' violence on the farm and Lurie's desire for his student Melanie are, in this sense, symmetrical events: the one degrades others, the other degrades the self, and both are paid for in the currency of bare life. I do not reconstruct that model here in full; what concerns this article is its consequence. Once the state of exception has suspended the law, dissolved the community, and stripped the subject of social identity, the preconditions of redemption are gone and the question of ethics has to be posed again, from the beginning, on bare ground.

What stance remains to the degraded subject? The answer the novel gives, I argue, is best named an *ethics of renunciation*: a sober acknowledgment that redemption is impossible, joined to a re-anchoring of one's relation to the vulnerability of the other, within the realm of what cannot be saved. Two existing accounts border on this claim and must be distinguished from it. Bozena Kucala has described a "giving-up of the struggle

for life” in Coetzee’s fiction (Kucala 2013), but her giving-up names a surrender of the will to live; renunciation, as I develop it here, is not surrender but discipline—a structured, repeatable practice. Frances Restuccia, in an Agambenian reading of the novel’s ending, reads Lurie’s final gesture as a messianic paradox: salvation that concerns “something unsavable” (Restuccia 2019). Her insight is indispensable to what follows, but it remains at the level of the gesture. I want to show that the gesture is the endpoint of a practice—repetitive, habituated, livable—which, extending Lorenz’s ethological vocabulary beyond its original domain, I call a *new ritualization*.

The argument proceeds in three steps. Section 1 shows that what the novel presents as “cheap redemption”—the penitential model of confession, remorse, reform, and communal re-acceptance—fails structurally inside the state of exception, and that the juridical channel of redress fails with it. Section 2 assembles the concept of renunciation from Bataille’s economy of expenditure and Restuccia’s reading of the unsavable, and distinguishes it from despair, quietism, and the Levinasian ethics of the Other. Section 3 tracks renunciation as practice: Lurie’s labour at the animal clinic, the dog’s three-phase trajectory as a yardstick of biopolitical pressure, and the final scene in which the ethic is completed by the act of giving up. A brief conclusion considers what renunciation can and cannot offer to ethical thought in a post-conflict world.

2. The Structural Failure of Cheap Redemption

2.1 Confession Without an Absolver

The university hearing that convenes after Melanie Isaacs’s complaint is usually read as a test of David Lurie’s sincerity: will he confess, and will the confession be true? But the scene is more consequential than that framing suggests. What the committee demands of Lurie is a complete model of redemption in miniature—public admission of wrongdoing, expression of remorse, acceptance of reform, and then re-acceptance by the community. Call this model *cheap redemption*: cheap not because it is insincere, but because it presupposes that the social machinery of pardon is intact and reproducible on demand. Its premises are two: an authority capable of granting absolution, and a community capable of receiving the absolved. The hearing matters because it demonstrates, with procedural clarity, that both premises have collapsed.

Lurie pleads guilty to every charge brought against him. What he refuses is the performative supplement: the statement of repentance, the therapeutic vocabulary, the enacted humility that would allow the institution to convert his admission into a legible ritual of restoration. “Repentance belongs to another world, to another universe of discourse”, he tells the committee (Coetzee 2000). The remark is usually taken as arrogance or evasion. It is more accurately read as a structural diagnosis. Confession is a speech act with felicity conditions: it works only where there exists a shared symbolic order within which admission, remorse, and pardon mean something. Lurie’s point is that this order no longer exists and that he and his judges no longer inhabit the same universe of

discourse. When he does offer the committee his truth that an account of himself as “a servant of Eros” (Coetzee 2000), they cannot process it, not because it is false, but because it cannot be entered into their ledger, the hearing thus stages the failure of cheap redemption from both sides: the penitent will not perform, and the institution could not absolve even if he did.

It is worth pausing over the act for which confession was demanded, because its structure anticipates the degradation that confession was supposed to reverse. The narrator’s account of the pivotal scene with Melanie is famously evasive: “Not rape, not quite that, but undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core” (Coetzee 2000). The self-defensive negation, as Greta Olson observes, itself registers Lurie’s sensitivity to the violence that his vocabulary of passion conceals; and the animal imagery that follows—Melanie, on his bed, “like a rabbit when the jaws of the fox close on its neck.” (Coetzee 2000)—completes the exposure. Rabbit, fox, mole: all prey. Lurie’s erotic narrative, wrapped in Romantic discourse, reduces the other to quarry in the very act of celebrating her (Olson 2014). The point for the present argument is that no hearing could process this. What Lurie did was not a breach of professional etiquette that an apology might repair; it was an act of the same genus as the violence later visited on his daughter—the reduction of another life to usable matter. Confession can repair a transgression of rules; it cannot repair a transgression of the boundary between the human and the animal, because that transgression has already repositioned the transgressor. In animalizing Melanie, Lurie confirmed the animal origin of his own desire and began his descent from the world of forms. The penitential ritual arrives too late, and addresses too little.

The consequence is expulsion, and expulsion initiates the stripping of identity that the rest of the novel completes. From professor to accused, from accused to outcast: Lurie’s social existence cascades downward. When he returns to the university months later to collect his belongings, the name-tag on his office door has already been replaced by “DR S. OTTO” (Coetzee 2000) as though he had never been there. He has become, in the narrator’s phrase, “a figure from the margins of history” (Coetzee 2000). The detail is small and total. Redemption presupposes a subject with a position to which he might be restored; the university’s administrative erasure of Lurie demonstrates that there is no such position left. The first channel of redemption, the penitential one, is not merely refused. It is shown to be empty.

2.2 The Farm as State of Exception

If the hearing shows the penitential channel failing at the level of institution, the farm shows the juridical channel failing at the level of space. Lucy’s smallholding lies in a remote district of the Eastern Cape, “at the end of a winding dirt track some miles outside the town” (Coetzee 2000), far from the city, far from the courts, at the periphery of state power. When Lurie first arrives and worries about his daughter living alone, Lucy answers: “There are the dogs. Dogs still mean something. The more dogs, the more deterrence” (Coetzee 2000). In the absence of law, dogs have become the early-warning system; the security once supplied by civil authority has devolved onto animal instinct. Her neighbour Petrus is blunter: “the police are not going to save you, not any

more, you can be sure” (Coetzee 2000). The law is not merely absent; its absence is common knowledge.

The aftermath of the attack confirms the diagnosis. Lurie is locked in the lavatory; the telephone is smashed; and when the police finally do arrive, they are courteous and perfunctory, mechanically recording Lucy’s fabricated account of a robbery while saying nothing about the crime that was actually committed (Coetzee 2000). The legal form persists—the statement is taken, the file presumably opened—while the force of law has been withdrawn. This is precisely Agamben’s structure: the state of exception as “a zone of indistinction” in which the juridical order survives as a shell while its operative power is suspended (Agamben 2005).

It is important, particularly in the South African context, that this suspension not be misread as an abstraction floating free of history. The exception on Lucy’s farm is historically overdetermined. Apartheid was not merely a system of segregation but, as William Beinart has documented, a comprehensive taxonomy of the human that assigned black South Africans to a condition of radical rightlessness approaching what Agamben theorizes as bare life (Beinart 2001); and the Comaroffs have shown how the “burgeoning violence endured by segregated black communities under apartheid” has, since the late 1980s, “spilled over into once tranquil, tightly policed, ‘white’ cities and suburbs” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2004). The attack on the farm belongs to this history. My argument does not reduce it to biology; it asks a different question. Whatever its historical genealogy, the withdrawal of legal protection from this space forecloses the juridical channel of redress—and it is that foreclosure, not the violence itself, that defines the ethical situation of the novel’s second half.

2.3 Lucy’s Refusal: The Second Channel Closes

Lucy’s response to the attack bewilders her father. She will not report the rape, will not name the perpetrators, will not furnish Lurie with any detailed account of what happened. Pressed, she answers:

The reason is that, as far as I am concerned, what happened to me is 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. (Coetzee 2000)

The sentence “in another time, in another place it might be held to be a public matter” is the novel’s most exact statement of the state of exception. Rape is a crime only where a law exists that is willing to call it one; on the farm, “at this time,” the designation has lapsed. Lucy’s choice looks, at first glance, like a free renunciation of her rights. It is better understood as a forced compromise—an accommodation to a structural condition in which no real alternative exists. When she tells Lurie that she must learn to live “like a dog” (Coetzee 2000)—giving up property, rights, and the expectation of protection in exchange for a precarious foothold—she names, with terrible precision, the price of survival inside the exception.

With Lucy’s refusal, the second channel of redemption closes. The penitential channel failed at the hearing because no

authority remained to receive confession; the juridical channel fails here because no law remains to receive complaint. Between them, the two scenes mark out the ethical terrain of the novel: a world in which neither saying sorry nor seeking justice is any longer an available act.

2.4 The Generation of Bare Life

What fills this evacuated terrain is bare life. Agamben distinguishes between *zoē*, “the simple fact of living common to all living beings,” and *bios*, “the form or way of living proper to an individual or a group” (Agamben 1998); and he locates the originary gesture of sovereign power in the production of life stripped of political qualification as *homo sacer*, the life that “may be killed but not sacrificed” (Agamben 1998). The figure carries a double exclusion: exposed to violence that anyone may inflict without sanction, and barred from the sacrificial rituals that would give death meaning.

Disgrace generates bare life in three registers, and it is worth aligning them, because the alignment defines what renunciation will later have to work with. At the lowest register stand the dogs. The assailants shoot Lucy’s six dogs systematically, though the animals, locked in their kennels, posed no real obstacle; afterwards Lurie digs a hole near the farm boundary. “One by one he tumbles the dogs into the hole, then fills it in” (Coetzee 2000). No funeral, no mourning, no ritual endows their deaths with meaning. The dogs may be killed but cannot be sacrificed, for sacrifice presupposes a symbolic order into which their deaths could be offered; they are simply biological matter, disposed of. At the middle register stands Lucy, who has renounced the law’s protection and accepted survival “like a dog.” At the top stands Lurie, whose identity the hearing has administratively erased. The three converge on a single condition: lives that no longer enjoy legal protection, no longer possess a political identity, and whose deaths would carry no ritual significance whatsoever.

This convergence completes the argument of the section. Redemption requires a penitent with a position to be restored to, an authority empowered to restore him, and a law under which wrongs can be named. In the world of the farm, all three are gone. The question of ethics must therefore be reposed, and its terms change. It is no longer “How can I be forgiven?” It is: “How am I to live when I cannot be forgiven?”

3. Defining Renunciation

3.1 The Refusal of Self-Deception

Lucy puts the question of reform to her father directly, and Lurie’s answer is the ethical pivot of the novel: “I am not prepared to be reformed. I want to go on being myself” (Coetzee 2000). The line reads as obstinacy, and critics have often taken it that way. But consider what “reform” presupposes: a better state of the self, attainable through confession and punishment, and a path back to the community that would certify the improvement. Inside the state of exception, neither the better state nor the path back exists. To accept the narrative of reform would therefore be to accept a fiction and Lurie’s refusal, whatever else it is, is a refusal of

fiction. Renunciation begins here, in the refusal of self-deception. It does not deny what was done; Lurie never retracts his guilty plea. It denies only that what was done can be undone by ritual, or that the degraded subject can be traded back into the world of forms by performing contrition.

This refusal relocates the ethical question. The subject who stops asking “How can I be forgiven?” is free to ask a harder one: “How am I to live when I cannot be forgiven?” The first question looks outward, toward an authority that will settle accounts; the second looks inward and downward, toward the ground on which a life without absolution might still be conducted. Renunciation names the stance that answers the second question.

3.2 Expenditure: Giving Up the Future

The first theoretical resource for that stance is Bataille’s economy of expenditure. Against the productive logic of accumulation, Bataille posits a principle of unconditional expenditure—consumption aimed not at production but at loss, visible in luxury, sacrifice, and all “nonproductive” discharge (Bataille 1991). His crucial insight for our purposes concerns the future. As Bataille argues, once the subject begins to consider the future, it departs from its own domain and subordinates itself to things within the sphere of reality (Bataille 1991). Investment in the future, including investment in one’s own eventual redemption, removes the subject from the only domain that is actually his. Conversely: once anxiety about the future is eliminated, this useless expenditure becomes what pleases me. If I consume in this way, without restraint, then I reveal to my fellow beings my innermost essence (Bataille 1991).

Renunciation is, in this precise sense, an expenditure: it expends the redemptive future itself. The subject gives up, in advance and without reserve, the hope that present suffering is an instalment toward future restoration. This is what distinguishes renunciation from patience. Patience waits; renunciation stops waiting. And it is what gives renunciation its unexpected intimacy with Bataille’s “innermost essence”: the subject who no longer calculates his return has nothing left to perform, and what remains when performance ends is the bare capacity to be affected by the suffering of others.

3.3 The Unsavable: Redemption Redefined

The second resource is Frances Restuccia’s Agambenian reading of the novel’s ending. Restuccia observes that Lurie does not keep the crippled dog—does not accept the offered week of reprieve—but “deliberately surrenders him, curiously refusing to ‘save’ him,” and thus gives literary form to “yet another Agambenian philosophical paradox: that salvation concerns ‘that lost and forgotten as such—that is, something unsavable’” (Restuccia 2019). Agamben’s paradox inverts the ordinary logic of rescue. If salvation concerns the unsavable as such, then to “save” the dog—to postpone its death, to find it a home—would be to miss the dog entirely, to convert it into an object of the saviour’s redemptive economy. Genuine salvation would consist, instead, in acknowledging the creature as lost, and meeting it there. Restuccia observes that, for Agamben, there is “nothing in creation” that is “not ultimately destined to be lost” (Restuccia 2019).

This is the conceptual core of renunciation. It does not abolish the vocabulary of salvation; it redefines salvation as accompaniment of the lost as lost. The shift is small in formulation and enormous in consequence. Every redemptive narrative known to the novel’s world—Christian, therapeutic, juridical, political—promises that loss can be recuperated: the wrong confessed and forgiven, the victim compensated, the land redistributed, the nation healed. Renunciation declines the promise, not because recuperation is undesirable, but because the machinery of recuperation no longer exists, and pretending otherwise is the one dishonesty left to avoid.

3.4 The Concept Assembled, and Three Distinctions

Renunciation can now be defined by three commitments. First, acknowledgment: the clear-eyed recognition, grounded in the analysis of Section 1, that redemption’s social preconditions have collapsed and will not be restored by individual effort. Second, refusal: the rejection of redemptive self-deception in all its forms—performative confession, the narrative of reform, the postponement of reckoning into an indefinitely deferred future. Third, re-anchoring: the relocation of ethical life from the axis of salvation to the axis of vulnerability—an empathetic relation to the other grounded not in moral superiority but in shared bareness.

Three distinctions protect the concept from misreading. Renunciation is not despair: despair is passive and renunciation, as the next section shows, labours. It is not quietism: it does not withdraw from the world but enters into the most unrewarding of its tasks. And it is not the “giving up of the struggle for life” that Kucala describes in Coetzee’s fiction (Kucala 2013). Kucala’s giving up names a surrender of the will—a subject letting go of life itself. Renunciation is the opposite movement: a subject who, having let go of everything else, takes up the one practice that remains. Finally, renunciation should be distinguished from the Levinasian ethics of the Other that has often been brought to Coetzee’s work. Levinasian obligation is asymmetrical and grounded in transcendence—the face that commands from a height. Renunciation knows no height. Its empathy passes between beings who share a condition: Lurie and the dog are, in the strict Agambenian sense, the same kind of life. The ethic that emerges is therefore not obligation imposed from above, but solidarity recognized at eye level, or as the novel insistently literalizes it, at ground level, in the surgery, beside the cages, at the incinerator.

One further rival account must be confronted, because it draws on the same textual evidence. Derek Attridge, in the most influential reading of the novel’s close, proposes that Lurie’s work at the clinic and his strange opera open onto a “state of grace” (Attridge 2000)—a possibility of goodness or beauty irreducible to the political. The evidence is indeed the same: the dogs, the labour, the final gesture. What divides the readings is the vocabulary thought adequate to it. Grace is the theological twin of redemption: it names an unmerited gift descending from above, and to invoke it is to keep one foot inside the economy this article has argued the novel dismantles. Renunciation explains the same evidence at lower cost. Lurie’s care for the dogs requires no descent of the unmerited; it is fully accounted for by the logic of expenditure and shared vulnerability by a subject who, having stopped

investing in his own restoration, becomes available to the suffering nearest at hand. Where Attridge hears in the ending a muted note of transcendence, the reading offered here hears something more exacting: not grace arriving, but a human being learning to remain after grace has gone. The difference is not merely terminological. If the ending offers grace, the novel's critique of redemption stands qualified; if it offers renunciation, the critique stands whole—and the ending's consolation, such as it is, is one the characters have made rather than received.

4. Renunciation in Practice: The Clinic and the Dog

4.1 New Ritualization: Labour on the Ruins of Ritual

Lurie's first posture at the animal welfare clinic is intellectual detachment. Asked whether he likes animals, he deflects: "I eat them, so I suppose I must like them, some parts of them" (Coetzee 2000). The cynicism is armour as the discomfort of a man of words deposited among cages and syringes. What breaks the armour is not argument but exposure. As he is drawn into the clinic's work, "his whole being is gripped by what happens in the theatre" (Coetzee 2000). He becomes convinced that the dogs awaiting euthanasia know what is coming: "Despite the silence and the painlessness of the procedure ... the dogs in the yard smell what is going on inside. They flatten their ears, they droop their tails, as if they too feel the disgrace of dying" (Coetzee 2000). The sentence's pivot deserves attention: Lurie is not describing his own feelings but the dogs'. The shift from "a person who eats animals" to a person who feels the deaths of animals is a shift of subject-position, and it is accomplished not by moral reasoning but by a pre-rational, bodily resonance—empathy as the novel understands it.

The work he takes on is the work no one wants. At the incinerator where the euthanized dogs are burned, the workmen use their shovels "to break the rigid limbs" of the corpses and make them easier to process (Coetzee 2000). Lurie takes over the task himself: "he himself loads them, one at a time, on to the feeder trolley, cranks the mechanism that hauls the trolley through the steel gate into the flames" (Coetzee 2000). He does it because he regards the breaking of the limbs as "dishonour" (Coetzee 2000), and then, in one of the novel's most searching interior monologues, he interrogates that very motive:

Why has he taken on this job? To lighten the burden on Bev Shaw? For that it would be enough to drop off the bags at the dump and drive away. For the sake of the dogs? But the dogs are dead; and what do dogs know of honour and dishonour anyway? (Coetzee 2000)

His answer—for himself—is the monologue's point. The labour is not amends, since the dead cannot be repaid; it is not investment, since there is no redemption in which it might mature; it wins him no social recognition, and he does not even claim that the dogs benefit. It is purposiveness without purpose, expenditure in Bataille's strict sense, energy discharged without return. And it is precisely this structure that makes the labour the behavioural form of renunciation.

Lorenz gives us the vocabulary for what Lurie is doing. Ritualization, in his ethological account, channels aggression into harmless, patterned outlets; its most significant outcome is what Lorenz describes as "a new and completely autonomous instinct" (Lorenz 2002). Lurie's clinic work extends the concept beyond its original domain: where Lorenz's rituals are inherited, species-specific patterns, Lurie's is willed—a ritual constructed by a human subject on the ruins of the ritual order that the state of exception destroyed. Call it a *new ritualization*. The aggressive and despairing energies that the exception released in him—his rage at the assailants, his shame, his helplessness over his daughter—are neither turned outward as violence nor inward as self-destruction; they are re-channelled into care for the dying. The pattern has the rhythmic, repetitive quality Lorenz attributes to ritual: feeding, cleaning, assisting, disposing, day after day. Behind the clinic Lurie makes "a nest of sorts, with a table and an old armchair from the Shaws and a beach umbrella to keep off the worst of the sun" (Coetzee 2000); "the clinic, more than the boarding-house, becomes his home" (Coetzee 2000). The nest is not a home in the social sense—it is a ritualized space, and in it Lurie is no longer professor, outcast, or even father, but simply, in the local idiom, the dog-man. That this degradation of identity feels, in the texture of the prose, like relief is the final confirmation: he no longer has any role to perform, only a sequence of actions to complete. Renunciation has found its daily practice.

The contrast with Lurie's other project at the farm clarifies what the clinic labour is not. His opera on Byron's last lover—the work in which he initially invests his hopes of artistic recovery—dwindles as the clinic work grows; he abandons the one as he is absorbed by the other. The opera is the aesthetic form of the redemption narrative: a backward-looking attempt to convert loss into form, experience into art, disgrace into a work that might justify it. Attridge hears even in its strange music a possibility of grace (Attridge 2000). But the novel's own economy is telling: it is the project with a future, a product, and an imagined audience that fails, while the labour with none of these endures. Renunciation does not abolish making; it abolishes making-as-investment. What remains is doing.

4.2 The Dog as Yardstick

Across the novel, the dog functions as a yardstick against which the pressure of the exception can be read—and against which, therefore, the progress of renunciation can be measured. The yardstick registers three phases.

In the first phase, before the attack, the dog is a boundary. Lucy's dogs form a protective perimeter—"the more dogs, the more deterrence" (Coetzee 2000)—and belong to a domestic economy that still presumes a minimum of order: they are named companions, integrated into relations of protection and care. Biopolitical pressure, in yardstick terms, is latent. In the second phase, during and after the attack, the dog becomes disposable matter. The six dogs are shot in their kennels; the corpses are tumbled into a hole without ritual. This is the purest instance of *homo sacer* the novel offers—killed without sanction, mourned without ceremony—and it marks the pressure at its peak: the boundary between a life worthy of grief and a life that can be discarded without remainder has

been destroyed.

The third phase is the clinic, where the dog becomes a site of ethical investment. The corpses that Lurie loads “one at a time” into the flames are the same kind of matter as the corpses in the hole behind the farm—but a human subject, himself already degraded to bare life, now performs over them an act that is neither obedience to law nor petition for redemption. The yardstick registers something new: pressure is no longer merely endured; it is metabolized into an ethical posture. And with the crippled young dog who adopts Lurie, the yardstick registers the posture’s reward—not salvation, but a bond. “He is sensible of a generous affection streaming out toward him from the dog,” the narrator writes; “the dog would die for him, he knows” (Coetzee 2000). The bond is deliberately non-reciprocal in structure: the dog would die for Lurie, and Lurie is the one who will kill the dog. Its ground is not exchange but shared vulnerability—two bare lives recognizing one another. Ritualization, Lorenz remarks, “forms a bond between individuals” (Lorenz 2002); in the clinic, the bond built is between man and dog, which is to say between two occupants of the same degraded condition.

4.3 Giving Him Up

The final scene completes the ethic, and it is worth being precise about what it completes. Lurie could keep the dog. A week of reprieve has been granted before; the clinic’s economy of postponement would stretch to another. To accept it, however, would be to re-enter the economy of salvation at the smallest possible scale: investment, postponement, hope—the slow conversion of accompaniment into rescue. To abandon the dog earlier would have been the opposite error: disposal, the incinerator logic of the workmen’s shovels. Between rescue and disposal lies the act the novel chooses. “Bearing him in his arms like a lamb” (Coetzee 2000), Lurie carries the dog to the surgery and gives him up.

Restuccia’s account of the gesture remains the most exact we have. Lurie “deliberately surrenders him, curiously refuses to ‘save’ him,” and thus gives literary form to “yet another Agambenian philosophical paradox: that salvation concerns ‘that lost and forgotten as such—that is, something unsavable’” (Restuccia 2019). The refusal to save is not indifference; it is the most exacting form of care the novel’s world permits. By declining to convert the dog into an object of rescue, Lurie declines to make himself a saviour—and in doing so, as Restuccia notes, his gesture “deflates the sovereign power that made the decision to exclude it” (Restuccia 2019). Sovereign power, on Agamben’s account, constitutes itself precisely by deciding which lives may be excluded, used, and killed. The man who accompanies an excluded life to its end—who treats a death that is neither punishment nor sacrifice as worthy of witness—refuses to play that game on either side. He is neither sovereign nor saviour; he is a companion. For Agamben, as Restuccia notes, the ultimate figure of human and divine action appears where creation and salvation coincide in the unsavable (Restuccia 2019). In the surgery at the end of *Disgrace*, that coincidence takes the humblest possible form: a man holding a dog.

One complication must be faced before we close, because it defines the limit of the ethic. Lurie’s renunciation is chosen;

Lucy’s is forced. He gives up the dog in a gesture of willed relinquishment; she gives up the law’s protection, her claim to justice, and ultimately her sole ownership of the land because the exception leaves her no alternative. The novel holds these two renunciations side by side and does not pretend they are equal. An ethics of renunciation is honest, therefore, only when it knows the difference—only when it acknowledges that for some subjects renunciation is a discipline freely embraced on the far side of loss, while for others it is the price exacted for survival itself. This asymmetry does not invalidate the ethic; it locates it. Renunciation is not a universal prescription but a description of the ground on which, in the world of the novel, ethical life becomes possible at all—and the ground is not level.

5. Conclusion

This article has argued that *Disgrace* is best read not as a narrative about whether redemption is possible, but as a systematic dismantling of redemption’s social machinery. The hearing demonstrates that no authority remains capable of receiving confession; the farm demonstrates that no law remains capable of receiving complaint; and the triple degradation of Lurie, Lucy, and the dogs demonstrates that no subject remains positioned to be restored. On the ground thus cleared, the novel conducts a second, quieter experiment: it asks what ethical life looks like when it can no longer be a narrative of return. The answer it arrives at is what I have called an ethics of renunciation—the acknowledgment that redemption is impossible, the refusal of redemptive self-deception, and the re-anchoring of the relation to the other in shared vulnerability—enacted as a daily practice of unrewarded care and completed in the act of giving up the one creature that loves you.

The claim is deliberately austere, and its austerity should not be mistaken for defeat. Renunciation labours: it feeds, cleans, assists, disposes, accompanies. What it refuses is not ethical life but the conversion of ethical life into an investment. In this it speaks directly to the condition for which Coetzee’s fiction has become our most exacting literary instrument—the post-conflict condition in which the civilizational contract has collapsed and cannot be ceremonially restored, in which, as Agamben warns, “we are all virtually *homines sacri*” (Agamben 1998). Nor is the logic confined to this novel: the imperial frontier of *Waiting for the Barbarians* offers a macrocosmic version of the same suspended order, within which the Magistrate’s degradation and his care for the barbarian girl rehearse an earlier draft of the same ethic (Marcus 2017). The coherence across Coetzee’s work suggests that renunciation is not an interpretation imposed on *Disgrace* but a preoccupation the fiction itself has been refining for decades.

Two limits deserve explicit statement. First, renunciation answers the question of how to live; it does not answer the question of justice. The assailants are not punished, the land question is not resolved, and nothing in the ethic sketched here repairs that—and the novel, to its credit, does not pretend otherwise. Renunciation is a floor, not a ceiling: the minimum of ethical life available when every higher structure has been withdrawn, not a substitute for the structures themselves. Second, as the asymmetry between Lucy’s forced

renunciation and Lurie's chosen one makes plain, the stance risks becoming a privilege of those with something left to give up. Whether an ethic born of degradation can be generalized without erasing that difference is a question this article must leave open.

What remains, at the end, is the novel's bleak honesty. *Disgrace* offers no redeemed characters, no restored community, no future in which present losses mature into meaning. It offers, instead, a man in a bare compound behind a clinic, loading the dead into the flames one at a time, and then holding a dog—"like a lamb"—while it dies. That image is the whole of the ethic: not salvation, but the refusal to abandon the unsavable; not grace, but the discipline of remaining after grace has gone. In the ruins of redemption, renunciation keeps a meager dwelling open.

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by Research and Practice on Senior High School English Teacher Education Based on Academic Quality Monitoring (Yue Jiao Gao Han [2023] No. 29), Research and Practice Project on New Normal Education Construction Promoting High-Quality Development of Basic Education; Research on the Adaptability of English Teachers in Western Guangdong to the New Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education (2023GXJK382), Guangdong Provincial Education Science Planning Project; Research on the Thresholds in Alice Munro's Works (ZW2021016), Humanities and Social Sciences Talent Program of Lingnan Normal University.

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