

Statics of Despair (?)

(Communication orale dans le cadre de la Summer School « Dynamics of Despair » du 22 au 26 septembre 2025, à la Villa Vigoni, sise à Menaggio (IT)).

Context and presentation of the novel

General presentation and Summary (based on the *Encyclopedia Britannica*'s article)

(We have selected a lot of excerpts in our “thoughts”, and just wanted, with this summary, to bring you some names and characters of the novel in the mind)

Disgrace, is a novel written by South African author John Maxwell Coetzee and published in 1999. It was his second work to win the Booker Prize. *Disgrace* is set in South Africa after the end of apartheid (we will speak of this specific context afterwards), a time in which social and political structures that had once seemed immutable have crumbled, and many among the once-dominant white population are forced to make difficult adjustments. The protagonist is David Lurie, a 52-year-old twice-divorced white professor of communications and Romantic literature at the university in Cape Town, who is also a womanizer. After he coerces one of his students (Melanie Isaacs) into sex, she leaves school and makes a complaint against him. At the resultant disciplinary hearing, he admits to his actions but cannot bring himself to meaningfully apologize and so is required to give up his job, plunging him into an unknown future.

Lurie takes refuge with his daughter, Lucy, on her small farm in the Eastern Cape. Lucy boards dogs and sells flowers at a farmer's market, and Lurie meets and later begins working with both Lucy's Black African neighbor and co-proprietor, Petrus, and her white friend Bev, who runs an animal shelter. One day, three Black African men break into Lucy's house and lock Lurie into a bathroom. They shoot and kill all the dogs, rape Lucy, and set Lurie on fire.

Lurie is appalled by his daughter's refusal to include the rape in her report to the police or to leave the farm. When they attend a party at Petrus's home to celebrate Petrus's purchase of land from Lucy, they see one of the attackers at the party, but Lucy refuses any confrontation. The attacker proves to be a relative of Petrus named Pollux. Eventually, Lurie returns to Cape Town but finds that his home there has been ransacked. When he later returns to Lucy's farm, he learns that the rape has left her pregnant but she refuses an abortion, and she agrees to marriage with Petrus. Lurie returns to working at the animal

shelter and continues to work on an opera that he knows he will never complete. He at last recognizes (not so sure) his daughter's right to live her own life as she sees fit.

Contextualization (based on Joan Wallach Scott's chapter of his book *The Judgement of History*, called "The Limits of Forgiveness, p. 23–50).

As mentioned above, the novel was published in 1999, three years after the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was established in South Africa. "The period between 1989-90 – the lifting of the ban on the African National Congress (ANC) and the release of Nelson Mandela – and Mandela's election as president in 1994 was the most violent in the history of apartheid. The agents of apartheid remained in place at all levels of government and did not relinquish power easily. In South Africa, the coloniser remained in place with no intention of leaving, having relinquished political domination but not military or economic power. The state structure was in place, an institutional achievement that needed to be reformed, but not overthrown. Yet its organs of justice were so corrupted that they could not be used to render judgment. There was no possibility of bringing the apartheid leaders to trial, no possibility of punishment, even if, in the eyes of the world, their actions constituted crimes against humanity. The defeat of apartheid was clearly a progressive historic accomplishment, but how to enact a judgment of history in these circumstances? That was the challenge the Truth and Reconciliation Commission faced. The exposure of truth would set the terms not for retribution (as at Nuremberg), but for reconciliation; forgiveness in the light of the truth revealed was seized upon as the alternative to punishment. It would redeem the nation and ensure that South Africa's future was in step with the progress of history. The TRC was established to ensure the memory of apartheid—the things that had happened must not be forgotten. Yet its call to victims to forgive what they had suffered implied the need to forget. If forgiveness did imply forgetting, some argued, they would be experiencing a double loss: first, the death in struggle of their family or comrades and, now, the loss of that death to history. The TRC's metaphor of the bridge described a one-way route, like a linear vision of history itself, from past (the apartheid state) to future (a new South African nation). Once it was crossed, those traversing it would arrive at the promised land. Amnesty—the forgiveness of individual criminal action in individual cases—was the mechanism by which the "historic bridge" to democracy would be constructed. In South Africa, the bridge enabled the TRC to assume that the idealized nation it imagined would come about as a result of its efforts; but it also minimized the weakness of forgiveness as bridge-building material. For example, the TRC did recognize an imperative of redistribution, but redistribution could only come from voluntary actions. The means of achieving "a meaningful human rights culture" was ultimately a matter of individual responsibility at the moral and material levels: "It is up to each individual to respond by committing ourselves to concrete ways of easing the burden of the oppressed and empowering the poor to play their rightful part as citizens of South Africa." Conclusion by JW Scott : "In the moral play staged by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the

punishment inflicted on individuals at Nuremberg becomes the redemption (and therefore reconciliation) of individual souls, both victims and corrupted”. No mention of any “structure” or “structural change” here, as you see...

Contexte et présentation du roman

Présentation générale et résumé (basé sur l'article de l'*Encyclopedia Britannica*)

(Nous avons sélectionné de nombreux extraits dans nos « pensées », et voulions simplement, avec ce résumé, vous présenter quelques noms et personnages du roman dans l'esprit)

Disgrace, est un roman écrit par l'auteur sud-africain John Maxwell Coetzee et publié en 1999. Il s'agit de son deuxième ouvrage à avoir remporté le Booker Prize. *Disgrace* se déroule en Afrique du Sud après la fin de l'apartheid (nous parlerons de ce contexte spécifique plus tard), à une époque où les structures sociales et politiques qui semblaient immuables se sont effondrées et où de nombreux membres de la population blanche, autrefois dominante, sont contraints de procéder à des ajustements difficiles. Le protagoniste est David Lurie, un professeur blanc de 52 ans, deux fois divorcé, qui enseigne la communication et la littérature romantique à l'université du Cap et qui est également un coureur de jupons. Après qu'il a contraint l'une de ses étudiantes (Melanie Isaacs) à avoir des relations sexuelles, celle-ci quitte l'école et porte plainte contre lui. Lors de l'audience disciplinaire qui s'ensuit, il admet ses actes mais ne peut se résoudre à présenter des excuses significatives. Il est donc contraint d'abandonner son poste, ce qui le plonge dans un avenir inconnu.

Lurie se réfugie avec sa fille, Lucy, dans sa petite ferme du Cap-Oriental. Lucy s'occupe de chiens et vend des fleurs sur un marché fermier. Lurie rencontre Petrus, le voisin et copropriétaire noir-africain de Lucy, et Bev, son amie blanche qui dirige un refuge pour animaux, et commence à travailler avec eux. Un jour, trois hommes noirs africains s'introduisent dans la maison de Lucy et enferment Lurie dans une salle de bain. Ils tirent sur tous les chiens et les tuent, violent Lucy et mettent le feu à Lurie.

Lurie est consterné par le refus de sa fille d'inclure le viol dans son rapport à la police ou de quitter la ferme. Lorsqu'ils assistent à une fête chez Petrus pour célébrer l'achat par ce dernier des terres de Lucy, ils voient l'un des agresseurs à la fête, mais Lucy refuse toute confrontation. L'agresseur s'avère être un parent de Petrus nommé Pollux. Finalement, Lurie retourne au Cap mais découvre que sa maison a été saccagée. Lorsqu'il retourne à la ferme de Lucy, il apprend que le viol l'a laissée enceinte, mais qu'elle refuse l'avortement et accepte de se marier avec Petrus. Lurie reprend son travail au refuge pour animaux et continue à travailler sur un opéra qu'il sait ne jamais pouvoir achever. Il reconnaît enfin (ce n'est pas si sûr) le droit de sa fille à vivre sa vie comme elle l'entend.

Contextualisation (basée sur le chapitre de Joan Wallach Scott, dans son livre *The Judgement of History*, intitulé "The Limits of Forgiveness, p. 23-50).

Comme indiqué plus haut, le roman a été publié en 1999, trois ans après la création de la *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (TRC) en Afrique du Sud. "La période entre 1989-90 - la levée de l'interdiction du Congrès national africain (ANC) et la libération de Nelson Mandela - et l'élection de Mandela à la présidence en 1994 a été la plus violente de l'histoire de l'apartheid. Les agents de l'apartheid sont restés en place à tous les niveaux du gouvernement et n'ont pas cédé le pouvoir facilement. En Afrique du Sud, le colonisateur est resté en place sans intention de partir, ayant renoncé à sa domination politique mais pas à son pouvoir militaire ou économique. La structure de l'État était en place, une réalisation institutionnelle qui devait être réformée, mais pas renversée. Cependant, ses organes de justice étaient tellement corrompus qu'ils ne pouvaient pas être utilisés pour rendre des jugements. Il n'y avait aucune possibilité de juger les dirigeants de l'apartheid, aucune possibilité de les punir, même si, aux yeux du monde, leurs actions constituaient des crimes contre l'humanité. La défaite de l'apartheid était clairement un accomplissement historique progressif, mais comment porter un jugement sur l'histoire dans ces circonstances ? C'est le défi qu'a dû relever la *Truth and Reconciliation Commission*. La révélation de la vérité devait poser les conditions non pas d'un châtiment (comme à Nuremberg), mais d'une réconciliation ; le pardon à la lumière de la vérité révélée était considéré comme l'alternative à la punition. Le pardon à la lumière de la vérité révélée est considéré comme l'alternative à la punition. Il rachètera la nation et garantira que l'avenir de l'Afrique du Sud soit en phase avec le progrès de l'histoire. La *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* a été créée pour garantir la mémoire de l'apartheid - les événements survenus ne doivent pas être oubliés. Pourtant, l'appel lancé aux victimes pour qu'elles pardonnent ce qu'elles ont subi implique la nécessité d'oublier. Si le pardon impliquait l'oubli, certains ont fait valoir que les victimes subiraient une double perte : d'abord, la mort de leur famille ou de leurs camarades au cours de la lutte et, maintenant, la perte de cette mort dans l'histoire. La métaphore du pont utilisée par la *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* décrivait une voie à sens unique, comme une vision linéaire de l'histoire elle-même, du passé (l'État de l'apartheid) au futur (une nouvelle nation sud-africaine). Une fois le pont franchi, ceux qui l'empruntaient arrivaient à la terre promise. L'amnistie - le pardon d'actes criminels individuels dans des cas individuels - était le mécanisme par lequel le « pont historique » vers la démocratie serait construit. En Afrique du Sud, le pont a permis à la TRC de supposer que la nation idéalisée qu'elle imaginait serait le résultat de ses efforts ; mais il a également minimisé la faiblesse du pardon en tant que matériau de construction du pont. Par exemple, la TRC a reconnu un impératif de redistribution, mais la redistribution ne pouvait résulter que d'actions volontaires. Les moyens de parvenir à « un véritable respect des droits de l'homme » sont les suivants : par exemple, la TRC a reconnu un impératif de redistribution, mais la redistribution ne peut résulter que d'actions volontaires. Le moyen de parvenir à « une culture des droits de l'homme digne de ce nom » est en fin de compte une question de responsabilité individuelle aux niveaux moral et matériel : "Il appartient à chacun de réagir en s'engageant à trouver des moyens concrets d'alléger le fardeau des opprimés et de

permettre aux pauvres de jouer le rôle qui leur revient en tant que citoyens de l'Afrique du Sud. Conclusion de JW Scott : « Dans la pièce morale mise en scène par la *Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, la punition infligée à des individus à Nuremberg devient la rédemption (et donc la réconciliation) d'âmes individuelles, à la fois victimes et corrompues ». Aucune mention de « structure » ou de « changement structurel » ici, comme vous le voyez...

Thoughts on the novel

Statics of Despair

Because my doctoral research focuses on the « affects » of certain texts (their power to affect, that is), I like to start with them to explain what I call the « Statics of Despair » in the novel *Disgrace*. Despair is an affect in Spinoza's sense, who defines it as « the sadness born of the image of a future or past thing whose outcome we fear without doubting it » (Spinoza, *L'Éthique*, Paris, Ivrea, 1993, p. 161). In Spinoza's work (I admit that I am stretching his thinking a little here), it seems to me that his division into « joyful passions » and « sad passions » overdetermines the expression of these affects : we could therefore say, contrary to Spinoza in a way, that despair (and its derivatives, pain and melancholy) can be experienced sadly or joyfully. To put it another way, and in a way that is of direct interest to us, despair can have static or.. dynamic effects (inciting action, in short). In my opinion, the « hero » of the novel, David Lurie, is an excellent representative of this *static* aspect.

Enzo Traverso highlighted these two poles of melancholy in Walter Benjamin: the first, static, called « acedia », consists of clear resignation, withdrawal, a state of mind oriented toward acquiescence, laziness, and submission (its expressions are generally cynicism, fatalism, and uncritical apoliticism); the second, dynamic, was presented by Traverso as follows: « Melancholy could be seen as a process opening up multiple possibilities, including recovery and empowerment, a process in which the subject experiences a withdrawal necessary for his or her survival » (*Mélancolie de gauche*, Paris, La Découverte, 2016, p. 59 – I've read the french version, sorry). A politicized, even atrabilious melancholy, in a way. I would therefore like to present some characteristic features of this stasis of despair discernible in David Lurie.

“Pensées” sur le roman

Statique du désespoir

Parce que mes recherches doctorales portent sur les « affects » de certains textes (leur puissance d'affecter, dis-je), il me plaît de partir de ceux-là pour exposer ce que j'appelle les « Statics of Despair » du roman *Disgrace*. Le désespoir étant un affect au sens de Spinoza, qui le définit comme « la tristesse née de l'image d'une chose future ou passée dont nous craignons l'issue sans en douter » (Spinoza, *L'Éthique*, Paris, Ivrea, 1993, p.

161). Chez Spinoza justement (je reconnais qu'ici je le tire un peu hors de sa pensée), il me semble que l'on pourrait imaginer que sa bipartition « passions joyeuses » et « passions tristes » surdétermine l'expression de ces affects : nous pourrions donc dire, contre Spinoza d'une certaine manière, que le désespoir (et ses dérivés que sont la douleur ou la mélancolie) peut être vécu tristement ou joyeusement. Pour le dire encore autrement, et d'une manière qui nous intéresse directement, le désespoir peut avoir des effets statiques ou ... dynamiques (inciter à l'action, en somme). Selon moi, le « héros » du roman, David Lurie, est un excellent représentatif de cette *statique*.

Enzo Traverso a mis en exergue chez Walter Benjamin ces deux pôles de la mélancolie : le premier, statique justement, appelé « acédie », consiste en une claire résignation, un repli, un état d'esprit orienté vers l'acquiescement, la paresse et la soumission (ses expressions sont généralement le cynisme, le fatalisme et l'apolitisme acritique) ; le second, dynamique, était présenté par Traverso ainsi : « La mélancolie pourrait être vue comme un processus ouvrant sur des possibilités multiples, y compris le rétablissement et la capacité d'action (*empowerment*), un processus dans lequel le sujet fait l'expérience d'un retrait nécessaire à sa survie » (*Mélancolie de gauche*, Paris, La Découverte, 2016, p. 59). Une mélancolie politisée voire atrabilaire, en quelque sorte. Je voudrais donc présenter certains traits caractéristiques de cette stase du désespoir discernables chez David Lurie.

Houellebecquian romanticism

Traverso, once again, pointed out Benjamin's criticism of the novels of German writer Erich Kästner (particularly his *Vers l'abîme*, title in french, published in 1931), which were intended to be satirical and denounce the spinelessness and disaster of an era while clearly revelling in it : petty bourgeois depression, impotence, constipation, flatulence rather than subversion (Benjamin's words). This immediately brought to my mind the novels of French writer Michel Houellebecq (especially *Les particules élémentaires*, 1998, and *Plateforme*, 2001). But it also allowed me to draw a parallel between the « hero » of *Disgrace* (a novel dating from 1999, let us remember) and Houellebecq's « heroes » : white men, university or school environment in the process of disintegration, petty bourgeois individualism, and « regressive » sex as the only consolatory praxis. The following excerpt (my edition is the 2000 Vintage English edition), which presents his Western-style depressed happiness in **sexuality**, is revealing:

« It surprises him that **ninety minutes a week of a woman's company** are enough to make him happy, who used to think he needed a wife, a home, a marriage. His needs turn out to be quite light, after all, light and fleeting, like those of a butterfly. **No emotion**, or none but the deepest, the most unguessed-at: **a ground bass of contentedness**, like the hum of traffic that lulls the city-dweller to sleep, or like the silence of the night to countryfolk. He thinks of Emma Bovary, coming home sated, glazen-eyed, from an afternoon of reckless fucking. So this is bliss!, says Emma, marvelling at herself in the mirror. So this is the bliss the poets speak of! Well, if poor ghostly

Emma were ever to find her way to Cape Town, he would bring her along one Thursday afternoon to show her what bliss can be: **a moderate bliss, a moderated bliss.** » (p. 5–6).

« Romanticism » is another important characteristic of Houellebecq, evident in his novels (and already noted elsewhere: Aurélien Bellanger, *Houellebecq écrivain romantique*, 2010). In the case of *Disgrace*, it is also obvious. The following excerpt is a good example of this pseudo-critical idealistic romanticism (especially given that David Lurie's university course is on Romantic poets such as Wordsworth and Byron, who are mentioned frequently in the novel, along with Victor Hugo for example). I say « pseudo-critical » because, of course, this state of affairs (as opposed to the linguistic utilitarianism of communication ideology) can only lead David Lurie to resignation and submission to institutional constraints:

« About his own job he says little, not wanting to bore her. He earns his livings at the Cape Technical University, formerly Cape Town University College. Once professor of modern languages, he has been, since Classics and Modern Languages were closed down as part of the great rationalization, adjunct of professor of communications. Like all **rationalized personnel**, he is allowed to offer one special-field course a year, irrespective of enrolment, because that is good for morale. This year he is offering a course in the Romantic poets. For the rest he teaches Communications 101, “Communication Skills”, and Communications 201, “Advanced Communication Skills”.

Although he devotes hours of each day to his new discipline, he finds its first premise, as enunciated in the **Communications II handbook**, preposterous : “Human society has created language in order that we may communicate our thoughts, feelings and intentions to each other” His own opinion, which he does not air, is that **the origins of speech lie in song**, and the origins of song in the need to fill out with sound the overlarge and rather empty human soul. **Nevertheless he fulfils to the letter his obligations toward them, their parents, and the state.** » (p. 3–4).

This idealistic romanticism is also evident in his ambiguous relationship with the famous and aforementioned character of Emma Bovary : at once tender (Emma Bovary is romantic, raised on Walter Scott) and utterly contemptuous (here we see the reactionary nihilist Flaubert). This totally misogynistic (and self-hating) reference to Emma Bovary will reappear later when describing Bev Shaw, his daughter Lucy's friend who runs a dog shelter:

« She is lying under the blanket with only her head sticking out. Even in the dimness there is nothing charming in the sight. Slipping off his underpants, he gets in beside her, runs his hands down her body. **She has no breasts to speak of. Sturdy, almost waistless, like a squat little tub.** She grasps his hand, passes him something. A contraceptive. **All thought out beforehand, from beginning to end.** Of their congress he can at least say that he does his duty. Without passion but without distaste either. So that in the end Bev Shaw can feel pleased with herself. All she intended has been accomplished. He, David Lurie, has been succoured, as a man is succoured by a woman; her friend Lucy Lurie has been helped with a difficult visit. Let me not forget this day, he

tells himself, lying beside her when they are spent. **After the sweet young flesh of Melanie Isaacs, this is what I have come to.** This is what I will have to get used to, this and even less than this. 'It's late,' says Bev Shaw. 'I must be going.' He pushes the blanket aside and gets up, making no effort to hide himself. **Let her gaze her fill on her Romeo, he thinks, on his bowed shoulders and skinny shanks.** It is indeed late. On the horizon lies a last crimson glow; the moon looms overhead; smoke hangs in the air; across a strip of waste land, from the first rows of shacks, comes a hubbub of voices. At the door Bev presses herself against him a last time, rests her head on his chest. He lets her do it, as he has let her do everything she has felt a need to do. **His thoughts go to Emma Bovary strutting before the mirror after her first big afternoon. I have a lover! I have a lover! sings Emma to herself.** **Well, let poor Bev Shaw go home and do some singing too.** And let him stop calling her poor Bev Shaw. If she is poor, he is bankrupt. » (p. 149–150)

Romantisme houellebecquien

Traverso, encore lui, signalait les critiques que Benjamin adressait aux romans de l'écrivain allemand Erich Kästner (notamment à son *Vers l'abîme*, titre français, publié en 1931), qui se voulaient satiriques et dénonciateurs de la veulerie et du désastre d'une époque tout en s'y complaisant nettement : dépressivité petite-bourgeoise, impuissance, constipation, flatulence plutôt que subversion (ce sont les termes de Benjamin). Cela m'a fait immédiatement penser aux romans de l'écrivain français Michel Houellebecq (surtout *Les particules élémentaires*, 1998 et *Plateforme*, 2001). Mais cela m'a également permis de rapprocher le « héros » de *Disgrâce* (roman qui date de 1999, rappelons-le) des « héros » houellebecquiens : homme blanc, milieu universitaire ou scolaire en voie de délitement, individualisme petit-bourgeois et sexe « régressif » comme seule *praxis* consolatoire. L'extrait suivant (mon édition est l'édition anglaise Vintage de 2000), qui présente son bonheur occidental-déprimé dans la **sexualité** est révélateur :

« It surprises him that **ninety minutes a week of a woman's company** are enough to make him happy, who used to think he needed a wife, a home, a marriage. His needs turn out to be quite light, after all, light and fleeting, like those of a butterfly. No emotion, or none but the deepest, the most unguessed-at: a ground bass of contentedness, like the hum of traffic that lulls the city-dweller to sleep, or like the silence of the night to countryfolk. He thinks of Emma Bovary, coming home sated, glazen-eyed, from an afternoon of reckless fucking. So this is bliss!, says Emma, marvelling at herself in the mirror. So this is the bliss the poets speak of! Well, if poor ghostly Emma were ever to find her way to Cape Town, he would bring her along one Thursday afternoon to show her what bliss can be: a moderate bliss, a moderated bliss. » (p. 5–6).

Le « romantisme » est une autre caractéristique importante de Houellebecq, sensible dans ses romans (et déjà remarquée par ailleurs : Aurélien Bellanger, *Houellebecq écrivain romantique*, 2010). Dans le cas de *Disgrâce* c'est également évident. L'extrait suivant est un bon exemple de ce romantisme idéaliste pseudo-critique (sachant en plus que le cours que David Lurie donne à l'université est sur les poètes romantiques comme Wordsworth ou Byron, qui sont très souvent mentionnés dans le roman, ainsi que Victor Hugo). Je dis « pseudo-critique » puisque bien entendu cet état de fait (opposé à l'utilitarisme linguistique de l'idéologie de la communication) ne peut donner lieu chez David Lurie qu'à une résignation et à une soumission aux contraintes institutionnelles :

« About his own job he says little, not wanting to bore her. He earns his livings at the Cape Technical University, formerly Cape Town University College. Once professor of modern languages, he has been, since Classics and Modern Languages were closed down as part of the great rationalization, adjunct of professor of communications. Like all **rationalized personnel**, he is allowed to offer one special-field course a year, irrespective of enrolment, because that is good for morale. This year he is offering a course in the Romantic poets. For the rest he teaches Communications II, "Communication Skills", and Communications 201, "Advanced Communication Skills".

Although he devotes hours of each day to his new discipline, he finds its first premise, as enunciated in the Communications II handbook, preposterous: "Human society has created language in order that we may communicate our thoughts, feelings and intentions to each other" His own opinion, which he does not air, is that the origins of speech lie in song, and the origins of song in the need to fill out with sound the overlarge and rather empty human soul. Nevertheless he fulfils to the letter his obligations toward them, their parents, and the state. » (p. 3–4).

Ce romantisme idéaliste se présente également dans ses rapports ambigus avec la figure célèbre et déjà mentionnée d'Emma Bovary : à la fois relation de tendresse (Emma Bovary est romantique, biberonnée à Walter Scott) et total mépris (c'est le Flaubert nihiliste réactionnaire qui apparaît là). Cette mention totalement misogyne (accompagnée de haine de soi) d'Emma Bovary reviendra plus tard quand il s'agira de décrire Bev Shaw, l'amie de sa fille Lucy qui s'occupe d'un refuge pour chiens :

« She is lying under the blanket with only her head sticking out. Even in the dimness there is nothing charming in the sight. Slipping off his underpants, he gets in beside her, runs his hands down her body. She has no breasts to speak of. Sturdy, almost waistless, like a squat little tub. She grasps his hand, passes him something. A contraceptive. All thought out beforehand, from beginning to end. Of their congress he can at least say that he does his duty. Without passion but without distaste either. So that in the end Bev Shaw can feel pleased with herself. All she intended has been accomplished. He, David Lurie, has been succoured, as a man is succoured by a woman; her friend Lucy Lurie has been helped with a difficult visit. Let me not forget this day, he tells himself, lying beside her when they are spent. After the sweet young flesh of Melanie Isaacs, this is what I have come to. This is what I will have to get used to, this and even less than this. 'It's late,' says Bev Shaw. 'I must be going.' He pushes the blanket aside and gets up, making no effort to hide himself. Let her gaze her fill on her Romeo, he thinks, on his bowed shoulders and skinny shanks. It is indeed late. On the horizon lies a last crimson glow; the moon looms overhead; smoke hangs in the air; across a strip of waste land, from the first rows of shacks, comes a hubbub of voices. At the door Bev presses herself against him a last time, rests her head on his chest. He lets her do it, as he has let her do everything she has felt a need to do. His thoughts go to Emma Bovary strutting before the mirror after her first big afternoon. I have a lover! I have a lover! sings Emma to herself. Well, let poor Bev Shaw go home and do some singing too. And let him stop calling her poor Bev Shaw. If she is poor, he is bankrupt. » (p. 149–150)

Aesthetic decadentism

I will be a little briefer now. Another characteristic feature of David Lurie's desperate-static « structure of feelings » (the concept comes from Raymond Williams, a Welsh marxist literary theorist), which I have already touched on somewhat, and which could also be linked to Houellebecq's romanticism, concerns a position that I call «

decadentist », defined both by lamentation and by refuge in Art (an ideal, pure, and consoling place in opposition to sordid reality). The following excerpt perfectly expresses this lament:

« He re-enters Cape Town on the N2. He has been away less than three months, yet in that time the shanty settlements have crossed the highway and spread east of the airport. The stream of cars has to slow down while a child with a stick herds a stray cow off the road. Inexorably, he thinks, the country is coming to the city. Soon there will be cattle again on Rondebosch Common; soon history will have come full circle. » (p. 175)

His aestheticism (meaning, I repeat, his retreat into an artistic « ivory tower » devoted entirely to Beauty) is expressed on numerous occasions (he recites verses by Dante, composes Latin verses, works on his Byronic opera, etc.) and particularly in this excerpt, which expresses both this (Teresa is the name of the heroine of his Byronic opera, incidentally, and the symbol of his redemption by Art) and his refusal to *change* :

« *Du musst dein Leben ändern!* : you must change your life. Well, he is too old to heed, too old to change. Lucy may be able to bend to the tempest ; he cannot, not with honour. That is why he must listen to Teresa. Teresa may be the last one left who can save him. Teresa is past honour. She pushes out her breasts to the sun ; she plays the banjo in front of the servants and does not care if they smirk. She has immortal longings, and sings her longings. She will not be dead. » (p. 209)

Décadentisme esthète

Plus brièvement maintenant. Un autre trait caractéristique de la « structure de sentiment » désespérée-statique de David Lurie, que j'ai déjà quelque peu abordé, et qui pourrait d'ailleurs se rattacher au romantisme houellebecquien, concerne une position que j'appelle « décadentiste » et qui se définit à la fois par la déploration et par le refuge dans l'Art (lieu idéal, pur et consolatoire en opposition avec la sordide réalité). L'extrait suivant exprime parfaitement cette déploration :

« He re-enters Cape Town on the N2. He has been away less than three months, yet in that time the shanty settlements have crossed the highway and spread east of the airport. The stream of cars has to slow down while a child with a stick herds a stray cow off the road. Inexorably, he thinks, the country is coming to the city. Soon there will be cattle again on Rondebosch Common; soon history will have come full circle. » (p. 175)

Son esthétisme (à entendre donc comme le refuge dans une « tour d'ivoire » artistique, toute occupée de Beauté) s'exprime à de nombreuses reprises (il récite des vers de Dante, crée des vers latins, travaille à son opéra byronien, etc.) et notamment dans cet extrait qui exprime à la fois cela (Teresa est le nom de l'héroïne de son opéra byronien, justement) et son refus du changement :

« *Du musst dein Leben ändern!*: you must change your life. Well, he is too old to heed, too old to change. Lucy may be able to bend to the tempest; he cannot, not with honour. That is why he must

listen to Teresa. Teresa may be the last one left who can save him. Teresa is past honour. She pushes out her breasts to the sun; she plays the banjo in front of the servants and does not care if they smirk. She has immortal longings, and sings her longings. She will not be dead. » (p. 209)

Ideology of Desire

I call « ideology of desire » the vision of the world according to which desire is not only always right (in principle, and without determining its content) but also always has *the right to be satisfied*. David Lurie expresses this ideology both by « naturalising » (in this case, even animalising) the right of Desire, without ever questioning its origin or the conditions under which it is realised (this is related to the following point : the fact that David Lurie is white and occupies a position of power in a society that has remained structurally white since apartheid obviously favours his claim to « the rights of desire »). It should also be noted that *desire* in David Lurie is a synecdoche for *sexual desire*. The following excerpt is a dialogue between him and his daughter Lucy, which also marks another typical David Lurie trait (male victimisation, even masculinist victimisation):

« 'My case rests on **the rights of desire**,' he says. 'On the god who makes even the small birds quiver.' He sees himself in the girl's flat, in her bedroom, with the rain pouring down outside and the heater in the corner giving off a smell of paraffin, kneeling over her, peeling off her clothes, while her arms flop like the arms of a dead person. **I was a servant of Eros** : that is what he wants to say, but does he have the effrontery? It was a god who acted through me. What vanity! Yet not a lie, not entirely. In the whole wretched business there was something generous that was doing its best to flower. If only he had known the time would be so short! He tries again, more slowly. 'When you were small, when we were still living in Kenilworth, the people next door had a dog, a golden retriever. I don't know whether you remember.' 'Dimly.' 'It was a male. **Whenever there was a bitch in the vicinity it would get excited and unmanageable**, and with Pavlovian regularity the owners would beat it. This went on until the poor dog didn't know what to do. At the smell of a bitch it would chase around the garden with its ears flat and its tail between its legs, whining, trying to hide.' He pauses. 'I don't see the point,' says Lucy. And indeed, what is the point? 'There was something so ignoble in the spectacle that I despaired. One can punish a dog, it seems to me, for an offence like chewing a slipper. A dog will accept the justice of that: a beating for a chewing. But desire is another story. **No animal will accept the justice of being punished for following its instincts**.' 'So males must be allowed to follow their instincts unchecked? Is that the moral?' 'No, that is not the moral. What was ignoble about the Kenilworth spectacle was that **the poor dog had begun to hate its own nature**. It no longer needed to be beaten. **It was ready to punish itself**. At that point it would have been better to shoot it.' 'Or to have it fixed.' 'Perhaps. But at the deepest level I think it might have preferred being shot. It might have preferred that to the options it was offered: **on the one hand, to deny its nature, on the other, to spend the rest of its days padding about the living-room, sighing and sniffing the cat and getting portly**.' » (p. 89–90)

Idéologie du désir

J'appelle « idéologie du désir » la vision du monde selon laquelle le désir a non seulement toujours raison (par principe, et sans détermination de son contenu) mais aussi toujours le droit d'être assouvi. David Lurie exprime cette idéologie, à la fois en « naturalisant » (ici en l'animalisant, même) le droit du désir, sans se demander jamais son origine ni les conditions de réalisation de celui-ci (c'est en lien avec le point suivant : que David Lurie soit blanc et occupe une place de pouvoir dans une société restée structurellement blanche après l'apartheid favorise évidemment sa prétention à des « droits du désir »). Il faut également noter que le désir chez David Lurie est une synecdoque pour désigner le désir sexuel. L'extrait suivant est un dialogue entre lui et sa fille Lucy, qui marque également un autre trait typique chez David Lurie (la victimisation masculine) :

« 'My case rests on the rights of desire,' he says. 'On the god who makes even the small birds quiver.' He sees himself in the girl's flat, in her bedroom, with the rain pouring down outside and the heater in the corner giving off a smell of paraffin, kneeling over her, peeling off her clothes, while her arms flop like the arms of a dead person. I was a servant of Eros: that is what he wants to say, but does he have the effrontery? It was a god who acted through me. What vanity! Yet not a lie, not entirely. In the whole wretched business there was something generous that was doing its best to flower. If only he had known the time would be so short! He tries again, more slowly. 'When you were small, when we were still living in Kenilworth, the people next door had a dog, a golden retriever. I don't know whether you remember.' 'Dimly.' 'It was a male. Whenever there was a bitch in the vicinity it would get excited and unmanageable, and with Pavlovian regularity the owners would beat it. This went on until the poor dog didn't know what to do. At the smell of a bitch it would chase around the garden with its ears flat and its tail between its legs, whining, trying to hide.' He pauses. 'I don't see the point,' says Lucy. And indeed, what is the point? 'There was something so ignoble in the spectacle that I despaired. One can punish a dog, it seems to me, for an offence like chewing a slipper. A dog will accept the justice of that: a beating for a chewing. But desire is another story. No animal will accept the justice of being punished for following its instincts.' 'So males must be allowed to follow their instincts unchecked? Is that the moral?' 'No, that is not the moral. What was ignoble about the Kenilworth spectacle was that the poor dog had begun to hate its own nature. It no longer needed to be beaten. It was ready to punish itself. At that point it would have been better to shoot it.' 'Or to have it fixed.' 'Perhaps. But at the deepest level I think it might have preferred being shot. It might have preferred that to the options it was offered: on the one hand, to deny its nature, on the other, to spend the rest of its days padding about the living-room, sighing and sniffing the cat and getting portly.' » (p. 89–90)

White suprematism and the Colonial imaginary

As I mentioned earlier, what underlies (and structures) David Lurie's worldview, almost always unconsciously, is white superiority and a colonial imaginary. The latter resurfaces from time to time in David Lurie's reported speech. Here are a few examples:

« The house, which is large, dark, and, even at midday, chilly, dates from the time of large families, of guests by the wagonful. Six years ago Lucy moved in as a member of a commune, a tribe of young people who peddled leather goods and sunbaked pottery in Grahamstown and, in between stands of mealies, grew dagga. When the commune broke up, the rump moving on to New Bethesda, Lucy stayed behind on the smallholding with her friend Helen. She had fallen in love with the place, she said; she wanted to farm it properly. He helped her buy it. Now here she is, flowered dress, bare feet and all, in a house full of the smell of baking, no longer a child playing at farming but a solid countrywoman, a **boervrou**. » (p. 60)

The last term, in Afrikaans, is obviously revealing (« farmgirl » in English) of this unconscious that rises up on the occasion of certain words, the sediment of which of course expresses a vision of the world that is still active in the present. In the following excerpt, it's the word « boy » that stands out (because it is kind of « taboo » in the post-apartheid era – Ettinger is another white farmer of the neighbourhood):

« 'A detective will come and take fingerprints,' they say as they leave. 'Try not to touch things. If you remember anything else they took, give us a call at the station.' Barely have they departed when the telephone repairmen arrive, then old Ettinger. Of the absent Petrus, Ettinger remarks darkly, 'Not one of them you can trust.' He will send a **boy**, he says, to fix the kombi. » (p. 109)

Finally, this last excerpt shows how, in a critical situation, you can come up with a much franker response : here it's the black boy – « boy » is used ambiguously here, not as in the previous excerpt – who is corrected, literally, while being called a « savage » :

« Never has he felt such elemental rage. He would like to give **the boy** what he deserves: a sound thrashing. Phrases that all his life he has avoided seem suddenly just and right: **Teach him a lesson, Show him his place**. So this is what it is like, he thinks! This is what it is like to be a **savage!** » (p. 206)

Suprématisme blanc et Imaginaire colonial

Comme je l'évoquais justement, ce qui sous-tend (et structure), presque toujours inconsciemment, la vision du monde *dauidlurienne* est la supériorité blanche et un imaginaire colonial. Ce dernier refait surface de temps à autre dans le discours rapporté de David Lurie. En voici quelques exemples :

« The house, which is large, dark, and, even at midday, chilly, dates from the time of large families, of guests by the wagonful. Six years ago Lucy moved in as a member of a commune, a tribe of young people who peddled leather goods and sunbaked pottery in Grahamstown and, in between stands of mealies, grew dagga. When the commune broke up, the rump moving on to New Bethesda, Lucy stayed behind on the smallholding with her friend Helen. She had fallen in love with the place, she said; she wanted to farm it properly. He helped her buy it. Now here she is, flowered dress, bare feet and all, in a house full of the smell of baking, no longer a child playing at farming but a solid countrywoman, a boervrou. » (p. 60)

Le dernier terme, de l'afrikaans, est évidemment révélateur (« farmgirl » in english) de cet inconscient qui remonte à l'occasion de certains mots dont le sédimenté exprime bien

sûr une vision du monde toujours active dans le présent. Dans l'extrait suivant c'est le terme »boy « qui est remarquable (car il est tabou, après l'apartheid) :

« 'A detective will come and take fingerprints,' they say as they leave. 'Try not to touch things. If you remember anything else they took, give us a call at the station.' Barely have they departed when the telephone repairmen arrive, then old Ettinger. Of the absent Petrus, Ettinger remarks darkly, 'Not one of them you can trust.' He will send a boy, he says, to fix the kombi. » (p. 109)

Enfin, ce dernier extrait pour montrer, dans une situation critique, comment remonte de manière bien plus franche : ici c'est le boy – « boy » est utilisé de manière ambiguë – noir que l'on corrige, littéralement, tout en le traitant de « sauvage » :

« Never has he felt such elemental rage. He would like to give the boy what he deserves: a sound thrashing. Phrases that all his life he has avoided seem suddenly just and right: Teach him a lesson, Show him his place. So this is what it is like, he thinks! This is what it is like to be a savage! » (p. 206)

Provisional conclusion and *alternative route*

As we have just seen, the various features of David Lurie's « structure of feelings » all contribute to *stasis*. This static situation of despair is therefore absolutely contrary to what Ta-Nehisi Coates, quoted extensively and commented on by Joan Wallach Scott, was able to express: « From this perspective, we can see a larger purpose to the moral outrage in the calls for reparations. In this literature, moral outrage is a means of achieving the psychic disposition that is a condition of possibility for **political mobilization**. The **self-hatred** that is clinically associated with **melancholia** and that Coates addresses at several points in his book is **turned outward to the structural conditions that created it**. » (*On the Judgment of History*, p. 74).

We can also see how different, and at any rate less static, the « solution » to Lucy Lurie's despair is: an infinite interbreeding that is reminiscent of what Richard White has called the « middle ground » and which can be quickly characterised as follows: « While [the concept of “middle ground”] does indeed refer to a historical space – the Great Lakes region, which the missionaries and coureurs de bois of New France referred to as the “Pays d'en-haut” and which was inhabited by numerous Amerindian groups, mainly Algonquian-speaking (Outaouais, Miamis, Ojibwas, Poutéouatamis, Renards, etc.) - it designates more fundamentally the “middle ground”. More fundamentally, it refers to **a dynamic process by which people from different cultures - in this case, Europeans and Amerindians - establish a system of mutual understanding and accommodation**. » (Gilles Avard, « Compte-rendu de Richard White, *Le Middle Ground* » dans *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* 2010/1, p. 204). Of course, this process can only be established if neither of the parties involved is in a position to establish its hegemony over the other. This limit is absolutely central in the South African case, and is also underlined by Wallach Scott, since the key institutions of the State were always in the hands of the

oppressors, even after 1996 and the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission*. But in her very renunciation of her land (a kind of *restitution*) and her « submission » to Petrus, Lucy Lurie renounces her prerogatives as a white woman and, in a way, pays a « debt ». I'm not saying that this is a perfect (or even « good ») way of doing things, but it's certainly different from that of her father David.

Conclusion provisoire et route alternative

On vient de le voir, les différents traits de la « structure de sentiment » de David Lurie concourent tous à la stase. Cette situation statique du désespoir est absolument contraire donc à ce que Ta-Nehisi Coates, citée abondamment et commentée par Joan Wallch Scott, a pu exprimer : « From this perspective, we can see a larger purpose to the moral outrage in the calls for reparations. In this literature, moral outrage is a means of achieving the psychic disposition that is a condition of possibility for **political mobilization**. The **self-hatred** that is clinically associated with **melancholia** and that Coates addresses at several points in his book is **turned outward to the structural conditions that created it**. » (*On the Judgment of History*, p. 74).

On voit bien aussi combien est différente, et en tout cas moins statique, la « solution » au désespoir de Lucy Lurie : un métissage infini qui n'est pas sans rappeler ce que Richard a appelé le « middle-ground » et que l'on peut rapidement caractériser ainsi : « [Si le concept de « middle ground »] renvoie bien à un espace historique – celui de la région des Grands Lacs, que les missionnaires et les coureurs de bois de la Nouvelle-France désignaient sous le terme de « Pays d'en-haut » et que peuplaient de nombreux groupes amérindiens, de langue algonquienne principalement (Outaouais, Miamis, Ojibwas, Poutéouatamis, Renards, etc.) –, il désigne plus fondamentalement un **processus dynamique par lequel des personnes de cultures distinctes – ici, des Européens et des Amérindiens – établissent un système de compréhension et d'accommodation mutuelles**. » (Gilles Avard, « Compte-rendu de Richard White, *Le Middle Ground* » dans *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* 2010/1, p. 204). Ce processus bien entendu ne peut s'établir que si aucune des parties en présence n'est en mesure d'établir son hégémonie sur l'autre. Cette limite est bien entendu centrale dans le cas sud-africain et se trouve d'ailleurs soulignée par Wallach Scott, puisque les institutions clés de l'État étaient toujours aux mains des oppresseurs. Mais dans son renoncement même à ses terres (une sorte de restitution) et sa « soumission » à Petrus, Lucy Lurie renonce à ses prérogatives de blanche et, d'une certaine manière, paie une « dette ». Je ne veux pas dire que cette manière est parfaite, mais on voit en tout cas qu'elle est différente de celle de son père David.