Stavrogin's Crime and Punishment Revisited: Dostoevskian Intertexts in J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999)

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Received: July 29, 2017.
Accepted: November 3, 2017.

ABSTRACT
F.M. Dostoevsky has often been acknowledged as one of the major influences on contemporary South African-born novelist J.M. Coetzee. Nevertheless, his 1999 Booker Prize-winning Disgrace has not been given a reading in consistently Dostoevskian terms. Therefore, the present paper focuses on the implicit intertextual links connecting Disgrace to Devils (1872) and Crime and Punishment (1866). I will argue that Coetzee's central character, David Lurie is a present-day rewriting of both Dostoevskian Stavrogin and Raskolnikov. As to the first of these, I read Lurie's engagement with the Romantic figure of Byron as a critique of the Romantic aspects of Stavrogin's character in Devils. Second, I will argue that while Lurie and his crime largely evoke Stavrogin, his fate is also a 'corrective' rewriting of Raskolnikov's: apart from the obvious thematic similarities, Coetzee's novel is also clearly reminiscent of both Dostoevskian characters' respective narratives in its central scenes of confession. Coetzee, however, seems to most ambiguously revise the Dostoevskian motif of 'rewarding' both Raskolnikov and Stavrogin with epiphanic visions, just like Stavrogin's potential liberation from guilt in suicide. Lurie has to live on with the consequences of crimes committed and suffered, turning for most equivocal relief to Romantic art again in the closing scenes of the novel. All in all, the exploration of both intertextual references contributes to an understanding of Disgrace as an ambiguous comment on depriving evil of its Romantic aspects in a continuing polemic with Dostoevsky.
Keywords: intertextuality, confessional dialogue, epiphany, subversion.

It is a well-known fact that South African-born contemporary writer J.M. Coetzee (1940-) has drawn inspiration from Dostoevsky's works in manifold ways (Boehmer, Iddiols & Eaglestone, 2009: 3). As far as the Nobel Prize awardee's (2003) novels are concerned, this influence is most obviously present in *The Master of Petersburg* (Coetzee, 1994), which is a consistent rewriting of *Devils* (Dostoevsky, 1872/1958) with numerous echoes of other Dostoevskian texts[81]. As for his critical writings, his seminal essay "Confession and Double Thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoevsky" (Coetzee, 1985) – clearly influenced by Bakhtin's reading of Dostoevsky and his concept of the polyphonic novel – examines the "eternal endlessness" of secular confession[82] and marks out the focus of Coetzee's interest in Dostoevsky. As if continuing that train of thought, Coetzee ascribes a central position in the changing intellectual and ethical panorama of the late 19th century to the Russian artist in a later interview published in *Doubling the Point*: "The outrage felt by many of Freud's first readers – that he was subverting their moral world – was therefore misplaced. This is, I trust, a Dostoevskian point" (1992: 244). In the light of these, the present article discusses the role of implicit Dostoevskian intertexts (cf. Genette, 1992: 81-85) in Coetzee's last novel (up to date) set in South Africa, Booker Prize-winning *Disgrace* (1999a). In my view, the exploration of intertextual references to *Devils* and *Crime and Punishment* contributes to an understanding of late modernist/postmodern *Disgrace* as an ambiguous comment on

[81] See in detail in (Reichmann, 2016).

[82] Coetzee, 1985: 225–231, cf. (Bakhtin, 1984: 230–235).

depriving evil of its sublime, Romantic aspects in representation, in a continuing, open-ended polemic with Dostoevsky[83].

Disgrace clearly evokes *Devils* and *Crime and Punishment* even at plot level: its protagonist, David Lurie, commits a sin reminiscent of Stavrogin's – the sexual abuse of a child(like) victim – to be (self-)punished by (voluntary) exile. The events of the novel, which are related in the present tense, by a third-person narrative voice remaining close to Lurie's consciousness and point of view throughout the text, take place in 1997-98, in a chaotic South Africa barely over the long years of apartheid (1994 was the year of the first free elections). Fifty-two-year-old Lurie holds a professorship in Cape Town, where he teaches Romantic literature and composes music as a hobby – also drawing inspiration from the Romantic period and prominently focusing on Byron's figure. He loses that teaching position when after their liaison his – probably coloured – student, Melanie Isaacs files charges of sexual harassment against him. Indeed, the representation of their sexual encounters – to be discussed later – suggests Melanie's involuntary submission to Lurie's desires, just like his mental comment: "Not rape, not quite that" (Coetzee, 1999a: 25). Although no law suit follows, the university takes disciplinary action against Lurie, which results in his losing his job. Consequently, he decides to visit his lesbian daughter, Lucy, at her farm near the God-forsaken small town of Salem – in other words, to go into voluntary exile in a manner reminiscent of Raskolnikov, though it is never voiced explicitly in the text. Lurie passes his time by doing voluntary work at the Salem animal refuge, which equals assisting in putting down animals beyond cure and help due to the lack of financial resources. This, actually, also suggests looking at his stay at Salem as a mild form of self-chosen criminal punishment: doing all kinds of social care jobs without remuneration is a typical form of punishment for various forms of misdemeanour in the United States, for example.

Coetzee, however, adds a major twist to the Dostoevskian scenario here: as opposed to Raskolnikov's narrative culminating in his exile in Siberia, the Coetzean plot rather begins than ends at this point. The stalemate of Lurie's situation is broken by an event both tragic and utterly ironic, since it turns Lurie into the indirect victim of a crime very similar to his own: Coetzee seems to introduce the law of talion and Lucy is gang-raped by three coloured man in her own house, while Lurie himself is locked up in the toilet to be later beaten up and burnt on the head. Still under the impact of the events, half-recovered from his wounds, he returns to Cape Town to rework his opera in progress on Byron and later to visit Melanie's parents and ask for their forgiveness. Then, concerned about Lucy, he returns to Salem, to find her pregnant from one of the rapists and unwilling to face an abortion. Instead, she is planning on marrying Petrus, her coloured neighbour-manager of the farm out of some misconceived historical guilt – or so Lurie thinks. Indeed, Petrus is not only old enough to be Lucy's father, not only (multiply) married and just expecting a baby with his latest wife, but is also kin to one of the rapists, and – to top it all – has been coveting Lucy's land for long. Lucy's own interest in this business transaction which is to be marriage in name only lies in gaining protection from further attacks through being a coloured man's wife. Unable to accept that argument and thus to stay under the same roof with his daughter, Lurie retires

[83] Although no critical consensus has been reached on Coetzee's classification as late modernist or postmodernist, for instance Katalin Kroó demonstrates a typically postmodernist aspect of his novels, the systematic subversion of binary opposites, precisely through her reading of Dostoevskian allusions in The Master of Petersburg (Kpoo, 2016).

to the animal refuge at least to stay close to her and wait. This is where the novel ends, with a scene of a – this time apparently eternal – standstill: it leaves Lurie working on his opera, waiting in a clear awareness of the pointlessness of doing so and re-defining himself as "a dog psychopomp, a harijan" (Coetzee, 1999a: 146). Lurie, who in this conclusion seems to accept eponymous dis-grace – both shame and the lack of God's grace – not only as his own well-deserved punishment but also as the general human condition, stands in stark contrast with Raskolnikov, who is graced with a moment of insight in exile, as a closure to his narrative (Dostoevsky, 1866/2000: 460–462).

Apart from the superficial similarity of the crimes they commit, David Lurie's character also shows other, close parallels with Stavrogin's. Since Coetzee's reception rather mentions than interprets them (Kossew, 2003: 156–9; Marais, 2009: 168), they seem to call for further critical attention. The general context of these parallels is best summed up in Franklyn A. Hyde's (2010) insight: he points out that "as in Dostoevsky's works, the inappropriate relationship between an aging male character and a young woman" is a frequent motif in Coetzee's novels (218). At various points, *Disgrace* concretises this vague similarity through textual parallels with the rape narrative of *Devils*, on the one hand, and by alluding to Stavrogin's emblematic textual attributes, on the other. Thus, the representation of Melanie and her sexual involvement with Lurie evokes a child, and thus raping a child in general – Matryosha's fate in *Devils* in particular. The girl, who is younger than Lurie's own daughter, literally could be his own child – as his ex-wife's vicious remark brings it home to readers, if nothing else: she says that Lurie is "too old to be meddling with other people's children" (Coetzee, 1999a: 45). Indeed, Melanie appears in Lurie's consciousness both as an irresistible object of desire and as a child. He envisions her as a twelve-year-old (Coetzee, 1999a: 19), and calls her a child mentally: "*A child*! he thinks: *No more than a child! What am I doing?* Yet his heart lurches with desire" (Coetzee, 1999a: 20).

The parallel between Melanie and Matryosha is further emphasised by connecting the girl's sexual experience with references to death with a clearly Dostoevskian touch. In *Disgrace* the motif of the girl's suicide (attempt) only appears as vicious gossip, though (Coetzee, 1999a: 45). More explicit is this Dostoevskian echo in Melanie's representation during the sexual intercourse, in the fact that she reminds even Lurie of a dead body: "her arms flop like the arms of a dead person" (Coetzee, 1999a: 89). This association is highlighted by the parallel stories of Melanie and Lucy: *Disgrace*, built on mirroring off each other the two girls' respective plot lines, contextualises Melanie's experience as rape through its parallels with Lucy's explicit sexual abuse and thereby also suggests that the two plotlines mutually interpret each other. And Lucy, when describing her own experience, seems able to grasp its essence only with the tropes of a knife and killing by knifing. Thus she does nothing else but evokes a central symbolic motif of Matryosha's narrative: Stavrogin's penknife, which becomes a trope of his (sexual) violence though providing an excuse for Matryosha's beating and humiliation, and which later features in the girl's frenzied vision exactly as such a trope (cf. Dostoevsky, 1872/1958: 461-465):

> When you have sex with someone strange – when you trap her, hold her down, get her under you, put all your weight on her – isn't it a bit like killing? Pushing the knife in; exiting afterwards, leaving the body covered in blood – doesn't it feel like murder, getting away with murder? (Coetzee, 1999a: 158)

Understandably, Lucy can think of herself as a rape victim only as dead: "I am a dead person and I do not know yet what will bring me back to life" (Coetzee, 1999a: 161). At these points the text suggests that in *Disgrace* – just like in *Devils* – rape and murder are interchangeable tropes of the absolute and unforgivable failure to recognise the other as the other.

This attitude in Lurie's case, just like in Stavrogin's (Мелетинский, 2001: 15–26), seems to be connected with the Romantic tradition, more particularly with a fascination with the self-centred and transgressive Byronic hero. It is not only Lurie's above mentioned obsession with Byron that is relevant here. Equally if not more significant is Lurie's repetition of Stavrogin's emblematic Biblical quote which sums up the metaphysical homelessness of such heroes: "not cold but not hot" (Coetzee, 1999a: 195)[84]. There is a sense of sublime attached to that rebellion and actually various readers have pointed out elements of potential greatness in Stavrogin's character, which also gain faint echoes in Lurie. To mention only two of the most relevant readings, Léna Szilárd (2001) emphasises the reminiscences of the fairy-tale hero who defeats the mythical dragon, and later the Biblical symbolism of ascent and light attached to Stavrogin's figure (36), while Katalin Kroó (Кроо, 2005) focuses on his yearning to pronounce a new, artistic "creative word" (227–61). Just like Stavrogin's character, Lurie's self-image is to be understood in the context of the Faustian hero (cf. Хайнади, 1998: 162-177), as is evidenced in his volume on that topic (Coetzee, 1999a: 4). Furthermore, his class on Byron's *Lara* (Coetzee, 1999a: 32–34) draws attention to the fact that similarly to Lucifer, a prime model for both the Faustian and the Byronic hero (Kilgour, 1995: 31-45), he bears a name that echoes the Latin word for light. Again, this similarity is contextualised by Romantic poetry here, and suggests a Romantic-demonic self-definition and metaphysical rebellion, also well-known from Stavrogin's narrative. Thus, unsurprisingly, a key metaphor of Stavrogin's identity, that of the snake, also appears as Lurie's self-chosen totem animal (Coetzee, 1999a: 2). When Lurie refers to himself as "clerk in a post-religious age" (Coetzee, 1999a: 4), he also poses himself as a man of higher, metaphysical aspirations and a positive counterpoint to men of a profane 20th century. Recalling both Byron's and Stavrogin's irresistible sexual appeal, middle-aged Lurie still sees himself as a "womanizer" (Coetzee, 1999a: 7) and a "servant of Eros" (Coetzee, 1999a: 52). In fact, he uses the latter metaphor to legitimise his treatment of Melanie. The opera on Byron – that is, practically on himself - he is working on, which originally focuses on desire and passion (Coetzee, 1999a: 87), is also part and parcel of this discourse of the transgressive and desiring Romantic hero.

However, Coetzee's polemical attitude to Dostoevskian representations of evil – as prominently embodied in Stavrogin – can be best grasped in *Disgrace* by examining this particular aspect of the novel: the way its allegedly Byronic protagonist is deprived of all potentially sublime attributes. In Lurie's case whatever motifs of Stavrogin's potential greatness might be evoked, in the light of the disappointing "reality" of the novel's fictive world, they appear to be results of self-deception, misreading and an unreliable narration rooted in Lurie's lack of insight. *Disgrace* introduces Lurie from the start as a man trying not to face the harsh reality of his own ageing, though it is apparent both in his professional and private life: his creative powers are dwindling, his teaching is pointless and, as a divorcee

[84] Cf. "So because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth" (Dostoevsky, 1872/1958, 458).

on the verge of proper old age, he is forced to buy the sexual services of a professional. This other, rather disillusioning image of Lurie, which is largely reminiscent of an actual caricature of the Romantic artist, Stepan Trofimovich, and which can be read as an elaboration of Stavrogin's own belittling comment – "Everything seems always so trivial and stale" (Dostoevsky, 1872/1958, 754) – is also constructed with the help of numerous highly significant intertextual references. Two mention only a few, the free indirect speech of "He is mildly smitten with her. It is no great matter" (Coetzee, 1999a: 11) clearly suggests that Lurie can also see himself in T.S. Eliot's ostentatiously bathetic, ageing modernist hero, J. Alfred Prufrock[85]. Alternatively, he also recalls the ageing speaker of W.B. Yeats's symbolist-inspired "Sailing to Byzantium," though remarkably not the lines which suggest – Romantically – the eternity of artistic creation as saving grace in the face of mortality: "The young in one another's arms, heedless, engrossed in the sensual music. No country, this, for old men" (Coetzee, 1999a: 190)[86]. Since the narration, usually for Coetzee, remains very close to the protagonist's consciousness, these allusions suggest that Lurie is aware of his "real" situation, though he becomes capable of facing its consequences only by the end of the novel. One testimony of his changed self-image is nothing but his altering the entire concept of his opera on Byron: he refocuses it on Theresa, one of the poet's lovers, and on her hopeless yearning for Byron and his love many long years after the poet's death (Coetzee, 1999a: 184).

This change suggests character development – indeed, interprets Lurie's narrative as a kind of belated *Bildung.* Yet reading the key moments of that alleged change together with the scenes they evoke from both *Devils* and *Crime and Punishment* highlights the very ambiguous and limited development and the very bleak insight Coetzee allows Lurie, his own bathetic version of the transgressive Romantic hero, especially in comparison with Raskolnikov. Let me suggest that *Disgrace* evokes Dostoevskian moments of insight in those two novels, just as it does the two Dostoevskian protagonists' respective, thematically related confessional dialogues, which either precede (Raskolnikov) or follow (Stavrogin) those epiphanies. However, in *Disgrace* on the one hand "eternal endlessness" seems to loom large even behind the apparently most honest – because wordless – confession due to Lurie's "double thoughts," to refer back to the Doestoevskian title of Coetzee's own essay on that topic. And on the other hand, inevitably ironic and subversive repetitions deprive epiphanic moments of their "truth value." Consequently, as Mike Marais (2009) points out, "*Disgrace* undermines, even as it installs, the possibility of [...] development" (162–163).

Instrumental to that effect is a sequence of three confessional dialogues which – as even that number suggests – involves manifold allusions to Raskolnikov's narrative. That said, let me emphasise that Lurie's first, forced confession in the course of the disciplinary action against him at his university – he pleads guilty without any sign of repentance whatsoever – evokes the tone of Stavrogin's written statement. As Tikhon highlights about that confession,

[85] Significantly, Lurie seems to recall here one of those emphatic lines in which Prufrock defines himself ironically, self-critically as anything but a (Biblical) hero – note the allusion to St. John the Baptist: "Though I have seen my head (grown slightly bald) brought in upon a platter, I am no prophet—and here's no great matter" (Eliot, 1920/2011).

[86] Cf. "That is no country for old men. The young / In one another's arms, [...] Caught in that sensual music" (Yeats, 1933/2017).

it is "but the arrogant challenge of the guilty party to the judge" (Dostoevsky, 1872/1958: 475). Similarly, the board members assessing Lurie's behaviour comment that "all [… they] get is subtle mockery" (Coetzee, 1999a: 50)[87]. Lurie's second confession – this time to Lucy – though superficially very different in its tone, on closer scrutiny still smacks of his arrogant and total failure to recognise the other as the other, as a subject and a human being, even if that other happens to be his otherwise beloved own daughter. That is, apropos of his daughter's horrible experience, he seems to be unable to focus on anybody else but himself, on his own failure to become a hero: "'And I did nothing. I did not save you.' That is his own confession. She gives an impatient little flick of the hand." (Coetzee, 1999a: 157). Lucy's dismissive gesture reads much more as a critique of Lurie's self-centredness than his lack of heroism.

The third relevant scene – in fact, a sequence of scenes in its own right – apparently shows great progress in this respect. However, Lurie's confession and apologies to Melanie's family are clearly subverted by his mental notes on them, which reflect on his recognition of double thoughts behind them (cf. Kossew, 2003, 158–9). The apology he words to Mr Isaacs suggests honest repentance and gives a very significant reading of the novel's central concept, disgrace, and Lurie's exile in a Dostoevskian vein:

> 'In my own terms, I am being punished for what happened between myself and your daughter. I am sunk into a state of disgrace […]. It is not a punishment I have refused. […] I am […] trying to accept disgrace as my state of being. Is this enough for God, […] that I live in disgrace without term?' (Coetzee, 1999a: 172)

Nevertheless, Lurie's thoughts apropos of this apology suggest his ironic aloofness, as if he were assessing his own performance in a kind of theatrical show reminiscent of his behaviour in front of the university board: "*Wonderful* is not right. Better would be *exemplary*" (Coetzee, 1999a: 171). In that sense, their dialogue also evokes Stavrogin and Tikhon's – with Stavrogin as a confessant who keeps backtracking and reflecting on his own behaviour. Likewise, the potential honesty of Lurie's silent gesture of apology, which is reminiscent of Raskolnikov's bowing to the ground before Sonya and human suffering, is also overshadowed by Lurie's thoughts. Apart from suggesting Lurie's distanced self-reflection in the above manner, they all but repeat at the level of thought and intention the very desire and crime for which he is asking an apology:

> With careful ceremony he gets to his knees [in front of Mrs Issacs and her younger daughter, tellingly called Desiré] and touches his forehead to the floor. Is that enough? he thinks. Will that do? If not, what more? […] He meets the mother's eyes, then the daughter's, and again the current leaps, the current of desire. (Coetzee, 1999a: 173)

As mentioned above, Lurie's epiphanic experiences also undermine each other and throw a shadow of doubt over the "honesty" of any change he might undergo in terms of recognising and respecting the other as the other. He feels one of these on the way home: thinking of the pitiable death the dogs suffer at the refuge he has to stop driving, and "[t]ears flow down his face that he cannot stop; his hands shake" (Coetzee, 1999a: 143). Although these tears,

[87] Cf. "That is no country for old men. The young / In one another's arms, [...] Caught in that sensual music" (Yeats, 1933/2017).

similarly to Stavrogin's and Raskolnikov's at such crucial moments (Dostoevsky, 1872/1958, 472; Dostoevsky, 1866/2000, 561), suggest a deeply felt and truly disturbing experience and potentially compassion for the suffering of the other, the pair of this scene sends Lurie – and readers – back to the starting point. In a bitter caricature of a moment of grace, Lurie thinks of all the women he has had sexual experience with and feels that "by each of them he was enriched […]. Like a flower blooming in his breast, his heart floods with thankfulness" (Coetzee, 1999a: 191–192). Lurie's unconscious cynicism is apparent here: in yet another failure to recognise the other as a subject and looking at the other only as instrumental to his own pleasure, his thoughts suggest that, morbidly, Melanie's symbolic rape was just another on the list of experiences "enriching" him. Though this scene chronologically precedes the second epiphany, it is close enough to it for readers to have a vivid memory of Lurie's cynical self-centredness and to cast a shadow of doubt over the "final" nature of his "change." In fact, the very existence of two, in a sense almost diametrically opposed, epiphanies is enough to do that.

Thus, closer attention to these two Dostoevskian intertexts in Coetzee's *Disgrace* highlights the South African writer's ambiguous attitude to the trajectory that both Stavrogin's and Raskolnikov's respective narratives outline – though the former in a rather limited sense, and the latter as a hope that might be fulfilled in the future. Still, both lead from utter and unforgivable sin – an utter failure to recognise the other which is embodied in rape and murder – to moments of grace, epiphany, and at least a temporary attempt at total reformation and change. It is these unambiguous moments of insight and grace that Coetzee denies his protagonist, in accordance with his critical standpoint voiced elsewhere regarding the artistic representation of evil. In his often-quoted "Into the Dark Chamber" he meditates on how it is possible to represent the torturer – one embodiment of evil in his world – without either turning them into sublime demonic figures, Romantic, Byronic heroes, if you like, or into easily dismissible caricatures: "How is the writer to represent the torturer? […] to make the torturer neither a figure of satanic evil, nor an actor in a black comedy" (Coetzee, 1992: 364). It is elements of the former in central Dostoevskian characters that Coetzee's bathetic representation of Lurie both bring into relief and provide a critique of – the latter prominently by evoking the ambiguities inherent in Dostoevskian confessional dialogue and introducing such into epiphanic scenes. Thus he denies even potential greatness to late-19th- and 20th-century re-imaginings of the demonic, Romantic metaphysical rebel – and questions the possibility of their redemption. Characteristically of Coetzee, though, the ambiguous ending of *Disgrace* reopens the dialogue with Dostoevsky rather than ultimately dismissing the possibility of a moment of grace even in the life of an ironically conceived "great sinner": the novel leaves Lurie in eternal waiting for "a single authentic note of immortal longing" in his opera, in his work of art, at least. Waiting, even though „[a]s for recognizing it … he will not hear the note himself, when it comes, if it comes" (Coetzee, 1999a: 214).

Acknowledgements

The author's research was supported by the grant EFOP-3.6.1-16-2016-00001 ("Complex improvement of research capacities and services at Eszterházy Károly University").

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