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David Lurie and the ‘Disease of Romanticism’: The Transnational and Transcultural Afterlives of Goethe and Kleist in J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*

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My paper studies J.M. Coetzee’s Disgrace (1999) to understand the transnational, transcultural mutations of two key figures of German Romanticism: Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Heinrich von Kleist. Coetzee’s novels are reflections and reproductions of his extensive reading of politics and literature; these texts grant the lives and works of old masters a renewal, a re-introspection, and most importantly, a resurrection into contemporaneity. Set in post-apartheid South Africa, Disgrace operates as a site of racial and sexual contentions. Through the character of David Lurie, Coetzee initiates a dialogue between the ‘visions’ of the former colonizer and the ‘revisions’ of the newly emancipated colonized. While the scholarship on the Romantic element in Disgrace (Beard 2007; Easton 2007; Hawkins 2009; and Cass 2013) is predominantly centred on the afterlife of British Romanticism, more particularly, on the roles Byron and Wordsworth play in shaping plot and action, I attempt to read the novel in the light of Coetzee’s critical prose to understand how he draws upon the German Romantic tradition. If Wordsworth and Byron are evoked to characterize the outer, more conspicuous texture of the novel, then the inner, hidden threads that stitch the form and content together are borrowed from Goethe and Kleist. I argue that Coetzee’s romantic sensibility is as much German as British. These two traditions are brought together in Disgrace to re-enact four major leitmotifs of Romantic literature—desire, transgression, punishment, and finally, salvation—in a transformed political dispensation.

Introduction

J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*, published in 1999, four years before the author won the Nobel Prize in literature, narrates the trajectory and predicament of David Lurie, a middle-aged Romantic professor at a technical university in post-apartheid Cape Town, who faces expulsion for having an improper affair with one of his students of colour, Melanie. As much as the novel has been subject to enquiries from post-colonial and feminist perspectives, scholars have often been intrigued by the overwhelming presence of Romanticism in the text, in the form of subplots, direct allusions and oblique references. Lurie considers the British Romantic poet William Wordsworth to be one of his masters and allows a Byronic sensibility to make meaning of his life and actions. He named his daughter Lucy after Wordsworth’s poetic persona

of the same name. The three books that he authored were on Boito and the Faust legend, a vision of Eros, and Wordsworth respectively. The novel captures Lurie at a point when he contemplates writing a chamber opera on Byron's stay in Italy and his affair with Countess Teresa Guiccioli.

Critical opinions on the conspicuity of Romantic themes and motifs in *Disgrace* have ranged from being celebratory to condemning. Gary Hawkins wonders if the novel is a post-apartheid, post-modern, and post-structural critique of Romanticism, or a Romantic critique of the post-Romantic world (148). Jeffrey Cass opines that the action of *Disgrace* highlights “literally and figuratively the incineration of Romanticism” (36). Kai Easton, in her critique, draws several parallels between Byron's life in exile and Lurie's pointing out how both operated “without a plan” and “narrative direction” (2007 122). The feminist critic Margot Beard argues that Lurie failed to understand Romanticism to the extent that he misused his romantic masters, Wordsworth and Byron, to carry out and even justify, his despicably predatorial behaviour (62). However, many of these studies on *Disgrace* have considered the more visible presence of the afterlife of the British Romantic movement. Hardly any attention has been paid to how Coetzee worked with his German ‘masters’ in the novel. This paper demonstrates that an analysis of *Disgrace* is incomplete without keeping in mind the influence Jonathan Wolfgang von Goethe and Heinrich von Kleist cast on its form and content. I attempt to study *Disgrace* in the light of Coetzee's reading of seminal German Romantic texts to argue that Coetzee's romantic sensibility is as much German as it is British. These two distinct literary traditions often come together in *Disgrace* and overlap in a way that the legacies of Goethe and Kleist interact with that of Byron to conduct a revaluation of pan-European Romanticism in post-apartheid South Africa. Coetzee executes this by re-enacting four major leitmotifs of Romantic literature—desire, transgression, punishment, and finally, salvation—across the narrative arc of the chief protagonist Lurie in a transformed political dispensation.

Reading Goethe and Writing *Disgrace*: Coetzee's Intertextual Dimensions

J.M. Coetzee obtained his PhD in English, Germanic languages, and linguistics from the University of Texas at Austin in 1968. Patricia Sutcliffe notes that his tenure as a graduate student gave him an opportunity to “deeply engage with Goethe's drama and [he] likely would have encountered the premises of Romantic and structuralist/generativist linguistics” (174). The fruits of this liaison are evident; apart from writing novels, Coetzee, as a keen reader, made his mark in literary criticism. Several volumes contain his essays on other writers and their works. His subject matters range across ages, spaces, and languages; from Defoe to Flaubert,

from Hölderlin to Rilke, and from Kafka to contemporary South African writers. In *Late Essays*, he devotes two articles on Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther*, and Kleist's *Michael Kohlhaas* and *The Marquise of O-* respectively. It is interesting to scrutinise how his analysis of these two stalwarts of the great German Romantic tradition could be used as a lens to look at his own work. Commenting on the significance of Coetzee's non-fictional ventures, the critic Derek Attridge writes in the introduction to another volume of his essays, *Inner Workings*:

There are two obvious incentives for turning from the fiction to the critical prose: in the hope that these more direct compositions will throw light on the often oblique novels, and in the belief that a writer, who in his imaginative works can penetrate to the heart of so many pressing concerns, is bound to have much to offer when writing, so to speak, with the left hand. In particular, there is always an interest in seeing how an author at the forefront of his profession engages with his peers, commenting not as a critic from the outside but as one who works with the same raw materials (ix).

My intervention in *Disgrace* is premised on an interest in how Coetzee negotiates the same 'raw materials' that Goethe and Kleist dealt with. Such a task is even more tempting because of Coetzee's solemn admission in a recent podcast that, despite using English, his novels "are not rooted in the English language" (Kim 87).

In his article on *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, Coetzee is primarily curious about the relationship between Goethe and his Werther. While there has been a popular opinion claiming Werther to be the dramatic persona of Goethe himself, Coetzee is intrigued by how the author separates himself from his character despite glaring similarities:

The distance Goethe seems to be putting between himself and a hero whose story was in important respects his own [...] He had to maintain an ironic distance between himself as the author and Werther as the character; but for most readers the irony was too subtle (51-52).

He emphasises that the crucial difference between them is that Goethe, unlike Werther, "would call on his art to diagnose the malaise that afflicted him" (51). A similar observation could be made about Coetzee and his misguided protagonist, Lurie. Coetzee was of the same age group as Lurie while writing the novel. Like Lurie, he taught at a university in Cape Town, suffered from a marriage that was terminated more than a decade before the start of the novel, and was survived by a daughter who lived away from him, as his son died in an accident in 1989. Kai

Easton points out that soon after the ‘scandal’ that erupted upon the publication of *Disgrace* for its problematic treatment of race and gender issues, he too, like Lurie, fled from Cape Town (2006 191). Easton believes that Coetzee had sensed the imminent unfavourable reception while writing the novel and tried to ensure that the text stands as a defense of itself (195). A personal anecdote could be cited here to foreground Goethe’s influence on Coetzee vis-à-vis the difference between the author and their character. The proceedings of the South African Human Rights Commission hearings are mirrored in David Lurie’s trial entailing the accusation of sexual misconduct. However, unlike Lurie, Coetzee did not sin with one of his students; nor was he on the receiving end of a physical attack by the sons of the soil. Like Goethe, he used literature to explore his romantic fantasies and ruminate on the consequences these might have.

In a discussion on the conflict between Romantic imagination and the real world, Rudiger Safranski makes a pertinent observation:

The tension between politics and the Romantic impulse belongs to the larger tension between what can be imagined and what can be lived. The attempt to resolve this tension into a unity that is free of contradictions can lead to the impoverishment or to the devastation of life (269-70).

At the beginning of the novel, David Lurie encounters a similar situation. His life was impoverished; both physically and intellectually. He did not enjoy teaching a class of ignorant “post-Christian, posthistorical, postliterate” (32) students who did not share his love for Romantic literature. In the first few pages, Coetzee takes special care to mention that Lurie’s erstwhile department at formerly Cape Town University College, *Classic and Modern Languages*, closed down, as a part of the great rationalisation. He had to sustain his livelihood by mostly teaching rudimentary courses on communication skills and occasionally a special field course at the new Cape Town Technical University that replaced it (3-5). After his affair with the sex worker, Soraya, came to an end and Lurie found himself bored and smothered by the banal and the mundane; his desire for what is undesirable by all moral and ethical standards could be read as a misguided, yet Romantic, attempt to rebel against the new order that inundated him. He sought to re-enact what his master, Byron, did. It was not that he was not aware of the fact that he was committing a crime. In the hearing that proceeded with Melanie Isaac’s complaint, Lurie unequivocally confessed his guilt. He said: “I plead guilty to both charges. Pass sentence, and let us get on with our lives” (48). When asked for a confession, he pleaded: “I was not myself. I was no longer a fifty-year-old divorcee at a loose end. I became

a servant of Eros” (52). However, later in the novel, he contemplated in retrospect if his actions were at all the interventions of the classical deity of desire:

My case rests on the rights of desire,' he says. 'On the god who makes even the small birds quiver. [...] *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 (89).

One could trace such a disposition back to tenets of Romanticism that he preached in his class. Shortly after sinning, Lurie quoted extensively from Byron's poem *Lara* in a lecture to contextualize the 'crime' of Lucifer, an 'erring', "a being who chooses his own path, who lives dangerously, even creating danger for himself" (32). He did not act out of principle but out of the impulses of a 'mad heart' (33). Soon after, he invited his students to not "condemn" but "understand and sympathize" with this "thing" or "a monster" that was not a part of the moral codes that govern a normative society (33-34). But Lurie also mentioned that there were limits to sympathy and it would not be possible to love such a 'thing': "He will be condemned to solitude" (34). It would not be wrong to assume that he knew the consequences of his affair with Melanie. Even when he was offered the means of reconciliation to keep his job, he adamantly declined and brought exile upon himself that banished him to solitude in the rural terrains of Salem, far from the life and lights of Cape Town (53). It could thus be argued that Lurie consciously brought upon his devastation by trying to combat the impoverishment of his life. As much as he was aware of his sin, he thought that his act was in accordance with what his 'masters', Don Juan, or Lucifer, did. Like Byron, who fled to Italy once his incestuous affair with Augusta Leigh was exposed, he left for Salem to spend a few days with his lesbian daughter. Lurie was held accountable and had to suffer the consequences of his actions.

Speaking on the detrimental effects of the recurring penchant for the immoral in Romantic literature, Rudiger Safranski remarked: "Goethe in his old age said the Romantic was diseased. But even he could not do without it" (xiv). For David Lurie, Romanticism became more of an ailment that deranged his life. However, it could never leave his sensibility. This is evident in how several traits of Goethe's characterisation of the anti-hero, Faust, are discernible in Lurie. Patricia Sutcliffe, in her essay, *Saying In Right In Disgrace: David Lurie, Faust, And The Romantic Conception Of Language*, brings to our notice a long list of similarities between Coetzee's Lurie and Goethe's Faust by closely and comparatively analysing the texts to point out resemblances in plot, characterisation, motifs, and symbols. Faust and Lurie were both university professors bored with their lives, who behaved selfishly

and caused harm to others around them. By referring to several instances in the text underscoring the poignant semblance between Faust and Lurie's trajectories, Sutcliffe argues that *Disgrace* is "a postmodern retelling of the Faust legend". She goes on further to argue that Lurie's speech and dialogues are entrenched in Romantic conceptions of language (175-181). Therefore, although Byron's shadow on Lurie might appear more conspicuous, *Faust*, one of Lurie's central academic interests that he wrote a book on, equally determines his actions. As Sutcliffe points out, *Disgrace*, in its discursive capacity as a novel, does not simply draw upon the linguistic texture of *Faust*, but, more importantly, fuses the "inexhaustible mockery of Mefistofele" with the "lofty, romantic aspirations of Faust" in one character, David Lurie (175). Ergo, at the heart of Coetzee's project, lies the determination to explore what might happen to a misguided romantic in a post-Romantic setting. By narrating Lurie's fall from Grace, he emphasised the consequences of desiring the prohibited in the politically transformed milieu of post-apartheid South Africa. Lurie was not a poet, as he confessed during the hearing; unlike Coetzee, he could not call upon art to seek transcendence. Pertinent here is Gary Hawkins's observation:

Coetzee's critique of Romanticism throughout *Disgrace* is clear; there is no place for mere dreamers in our current world. Nor can we allow the hope of pending lyric perfections to blunt our perception of atrocities (168-69).

Kleist the storyteller and Coetzee's mode of narration

Coetzee's tryst with Heinrich Von Kleist dates to his fourth novel, *The Life & Times of Michael K*, published in 1983. It was an interpretive translation, a retelling of Kleist's 1808 text *Michael Kohlhaas: From an Old Fragment* (a complete, revised version came out in 1810). Set in the backdrop of Napoleon's conquest of Prussia in 1806, Kleist's eponymous protagonist led a paramilitary revolt against the French colonial occupation. Consequently, Coetzee's Michael K lived in an apartheid state that contained the possibility of similar armed dissidence. Apart from Kleist, Coetzee evoked several texts by Franz Kafka, *The Castle* and *The Trial*, in particular, to conjure the nightmarish reality of civic unrest and state repression in South Africa in those times. The propensity to draw upon the form, content, and style of a rich oeuvre of texts performs a wide array of operations in Coetzee's fiction. Not only is this an attempt to underscore how conflicts of the past often assume different shapes and spill over to the present, but, more importantly, a demonstration of how a multitude of canonical literary traditions are carried over across spatial and temporal boundaries where they are subjected to critique, interrogation, and, in certain cases, reproduction. In a comparative analysis of *Michael*

Kohlhaas and *Michael K*, Benjamin Lewis Robinson makes an observation that is crucial in not simply understanding the impact of Kleist in *Disgrace*, but, more pressingly, the overwhelming influence of multiple literary traditions of the past in Coetzee's writing:

Michael Kohlhaas presented a literary and political "passion+ urgency" that Coetzee felt the times called for but that his own writing lacked. Kleist's guerrilla novella was meant to lend Coetzee's protagonist the resources to generate his own means of political expression by assuming the posture of a "citizen of the world" (an interpretive translation of one of Kohlhaas's declarations), beyond the law of nations as well as the norms of historical and literary representation" (427).

While Kleist's *Kohlhaas* offers the plot of *Michael K*, as we shall soon see, *Disgrace* is indebted to the 1808 novella *The Marquise of O-* in the fashioning and presentation of a few crucial moments in the narrative.

If Goethe taught Coetzee to maintain an "ironic distance between the author and the character" along with offering him the opportunity to recreate the legend of Faust, then Kleist is influential in imparting to him the technique of narration. In the context of commenting on Kleist's fiction, Coetzee is particularly impressed by his art of storytelling. He states: "A story by Kleist reads like a taut synopsis of an action that has recently taken place under the storyteller's gaze. The final effect is of intense immediacy" (2008 87). A few pages later, he elaborates: As a general rule, the narration is carried out by a more or less invisible or buried narrator whose interpretation of the action he relays is not necessarily to be taken as final (90).

Striking parallels could be drawn between Kleist and Coetzee's modes of writing. *Disgrace*, like several other novels of Coetzee, employs an omniscient omnipresent narrator whose gaze is cast not just on the actions of the protagonist but also on what is going on inside his mind. Therefore, although the narrator borrows the perspective of the protagonist and presents his case with utmost empathy, the narration opens itself to multiple interpretations. It would be relevant to quote a crucial passage from the novel and analyse how Coetzee's style operates:

He wishes he could sleep. But he is cold, and not sleepy at all. He gets up, drapes a jacket over his shoulders, returns to bed. He is reading Byron's letters of 1820. Fat, middle-aged at thirty-two, Byron is living with the Guicciolis in Ravenna: with Teresa, his complacent, short-legged mistress, and her suave, malevolent husband. Summer heat, late-afternoon tea, provincial gossip, yawns barely hidden. 'The

women sit in a circle and the men play dreary Faro,' writes Byron. In adultery, all the tedium of marriage rediscovered. 'I have always looked to thirty as the barrier to any real or fierce delight in the passions.'

He sighs again. How brief the summer, before the autumn and then the winter!

He reads on past midnight, yet even so cannot get to sleep (87).

In terms of narration, I interpret this as one of the most significant passages of the novel. The author seems to survey Lurie in utmost detail. He is perfectly aware of the meanderings of his disturbed mind. Byron's letters, a text within the text, jump up from the pages and seize the protagonist. Embedded with multiple layers of meaning, the letters become a reflection of Lurie's own disposition; they mirror his helplessness at ageing, as much as they share his regret of the transience of time. Although it might appear that Coetzee builds a case in favour of Lurie, though not in the manner Vladimir Nabokov did for the sinful Professor Humbert in *Lolita* by employing first-person narration, it is difficult to arrive at only one interpretation. Coetzee's protagonists, in this case, Lurie, take hold of the narrator's voice. Without any intervention or imposition, the author performs the crucial task of mediating their thoughts and ruminations faithfully to the reader. In this process, the author's voice is enmeshed in the protagonist's voice; the authorial presence is declared in absence. The author and their character subtly overlap as the narrator adroitly construes an intersection between different figures from different points in time. Byron speaks to Lurie as much as he does to Coetzee. The lines between fiction and real life are at once blurred and reinforced. The incandescent prose renders these creatures alive; they become objects of scrutiny observed from the outside yet demanding a degree of proximity to extricate the details. The readers, thus, are allowed to deconstruct Lurie as per their will. This is evident in the efflorescence of a wide array of critical responses to the novel. Dominic Head's reading of *Disgrace* affirms my observation:

Any reader of Coetzee soon becomes familiar with the significance of resistance in his work – whether this suggests the individual's resistance of pre-given social patterns, or the resistance of the novels and the characters within them, when an attempt is made to interpret them, or reduce them to recognizable patterns of meaning (78).

Kleist's influence on *Disgrace* becomes more visible once we turn to one of the major events in the plot. In his study of Kleist's celebrated story, *The Marquise of O-*, Coetzee is struck by how the violation of the Marquise at the hands of the Russian commander, Count F, occurs

outside the gaze of the narrator. Although Count F's confession helps the reader make sense of the mysterious pregnancy, with which the story boldly begins, the reader is left in darkness when the pivotal section of the plot unfolds. He writes:

Holes begin to appear in this retelling of the story as soon as we ask: Did the count really rape the marquisee? Furthermore, what does 'really' mean when whatever did or did not happen occurred offstage, during a clearly demarcated gap in the narration; and when one of the putative participants claims not to know what did or did not happen because she was unconscious; and when the other has an extraneous motive for asserting that it did happen? Yet further complications arise when we ask: Is it possible not to know whether one has had sexual intercourse? (92).

Coetzee seems to have replicated the same technique in *Disgrace*. In Chapter 11, Lurie and Lucy are attacked in their farmhouse by a group of local men. Lurie is locked up in the toilet when Lucy is suggestively gang raped. He could hear sounds of the struggle though not adequately enough to have full knowledge of what transpired. Subsequently, Lucy decides to remain silent about the details of the assault. Neither does she lodge a formal complaint, nor does she reveal the name of the man who impregnated her thereby retaining the ambiguity of the event. On the other hand, she takes this opportunity to exert her autonomy; she decides to go against her father, marry her encroaching black neighbour Petrus, whose nephew constituted one of the attackers, to seek his protection, and continue to live in the unsafe thresholds of Salem, which, ironically, means peace, in Hebrew.

The two incidents of sexual violence act as foils to each other. The local attackers, spatially, temporally, and intellectually distanced from the tenets of European Enlightenment and Romanticism continue to be as they were. In contrast, David Lurie, privileged and educated, uses leisure in his exile to think through his past actions and seek redemption. It would be useful to look at how Lurie undergoes an internal catharsis that makes him conclude how antiquated Byron's values are in his time:

He remembers, as a child, poring over the word *rape* in newspaper reports, trying to puzzle out what exactly it meant, wondering what the letter *p*, usually so gentle, was doing in the middle of a word held in such horror that no one would utter it aloud. In an art-book in the library there was a painting called *The Rape of the Sabine Women*: men on horseback in skimpy Roman armour, women in gauze veils flinging their arms in the air and wailing. What had all this attitudinizing to do with

what he suspected rape to be: the man lying on top of the woman and pushing himself into her?

He thinks of Byron. Among the legions of countesses and kitchen-maids Byron pushed himself into there were no doubt those who called it rape. But none surely had cause to fear that the session would end with her throat being slit. From where he stands, from where Lucy stands, Byron looks very old-fashioned indeed (159-60).

Like the Count who embraces accountability in Kleist's story, Lurie drives over to the Isaacs to apologise without requesting them to take back their complaint. Noteworthy here is his apology: "I lack the lyrical. I manage love too well. Even when I burn, I don't sing, if you understand me. For which I am sorry. I am sorry for what I took your daughter through" (171). Lurie finally realizes and repents his crime. He comes to terms with the fact that he lacks the 'lyrical', that Byron might have possessed; he cannot sing even when he burns. As much as this is a renunciation of the Romantic ideals that previously drove Lurie, the sensibility foregrounds the other side of Romanticism that Lurie would soon turn to, as in imagining the plights of others and treating them with compassion. He learns to embrace a life more compassionate than that of a lothario and devotes his time to the service of terminally ill dogs. As they are guided to a painless death in Bev Shaw's clinic, Lurie assists in the incineration of their corpses as humanely as possible.

It would be useful to remember the final chapter of the novel here. While working on the opera on Byron's affair with Teresa in Italy, Lurie feels that does not feel the same affinity towards Byron anymore. Instead, his focus is shifted to Teresa's plight; he tries to imagine and reproduce the desolation and yearning that Teresa might have felt for Byron in her lonely ageing years. Lurie denounces the grandiose of the musical instruments used in an opera and picks up a banjo to play the music he just composed. He knows that his art leaves far to be desired; yet, it is at this moment, when he seeks neither posterity nor immediate fame but feels at one with nature and its inhabitants. One of the dogs, waiting for its imminent death at Bev Shaw's clinic, that has got close to him, joins him in his endeavour:

The dog is fascinated by the sound of the banjo. When he strums the strings, the dog sits up, cocks its head, listens. When he hums Teresa's line, and the humming begins to swell with feeling (it is as though his larynx thickens: he can feel the hammer of blood in his throat), the dog smacks its lips and seems on the point of singing too, or howling (215).

But Lurie cannot hold on to his four-legged companion. At the end of the novel, he has to give it up. He learns to privilege the painful existence of that ailing dog over his grief and does what he should to ameliorate it. Just as Count F in *Marquise of O-* managed to reconcile with the Marquise after much remorse and penance, Lurie comes to terms with his new life through such cathartic amendments.

Conclusion

After a thorough analysis of Coetzee's 2003 novel, *Elizabeth Costello*, vis-à-vis how it draws upon the German modernist Franz Kafka's 1917 short story, *A Report to the Academy*, David D. Kim invites our attention to how Coetzee "experiments with a feminist postcolonial perspective on redressing the violence committed against women and animals" by reading and rewriting German literature from the outside. Such a design transgresses "a Eurocentric set of relations" as it "opens the door for a multilingual, intercultural, and transnational combination of literature and history" (103). In a style akin to *Elizabeth Costello* or *Life & Times of Michael K*, *Disgrace* is at once a reflection and reproduction of Coetzee's extensive engagements with politics and literature. Granting the lives of old masters and the characters that they created a renewal, a resurrection into contemporaneity, it brings together the often parallel, yet distinct, streams of British and German Romantic imagination. If Coetzee draws heavily on the afterlife of Wordsworth and Byron to characterise the outer, more conspicuous texture of the novel, then the inner, hidden threads that stitch the form with the content are borrowed from Goethe and Kleist. As a noteworthy addendum to the afterlife of both the British and German Romantic movements, Coetzee illustrates how the quintessential Byronic anti-hero, a deluded and flawed mortal reminiscent of Faust as well, turns out to be at the turn of the millennium and how important it is to put the tenets of Romantic sensibility under trial in these altered circumstances to align them with social justice. Lurie's final turn towards investing his life in the cause of animals as well as his endorsement of the political dispensation of South Africa spared him from the horrors that awaited Faust. Life redeems him more than literature or divinity; the kind of everyday life with all its joys and sorrows that enthralled Wordsworth or Novalis. Romanticism, therefore, is not incinerated in *Disgrace* but renewed in synchronization with a new social order.

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