

book review

A Dog's Life?

By Fakrul Alam

THE dust-jacket cover of *Disgrace*, J.M. Coetzee's seventh novel (London: Secker & Warburg, 1999), is as vivid about the stark realities of life as you can expect a book cover to be. What we see in it is an emaciated dog, its tail down, next to some tin drums littering a dusty road that loses itself in an unkempt landscape. The cover is also as appropriate an entry to a work as you could expect the cover of a novel to be: *Disgrace* is the vivid, compelling story of a man who has wasted his life and

In *Disgrace*, as in his other fiction, Coetzee shows that he has a moral vision that puts him on a par with the great masters of literature. He demonstrates once again in the novel that he is a consummate storyteller, subtle and sensitive, exercising perfect control over the craft of fiction. *Disgrace* also confirms Bernard Levin's verdict on his earlier work in which he had hailed Coetzee as "an artist of weight and depth that put him in a category beyond ordinary comparison." No wonder *Disgrace* has earned J M Coetzee his second Booker, a distinction unparalleled in the history of that splendid prize!

of Michael K (1983), that Coetzee became recognized as one of the outstanding novelists of the second half of the twentieth century. In this beautiful and sensitive work set in a South Africa riven by Civil War, the titular character abandons his job and life in Cape Town and decides to take his mother back to her country home. She dies on the way, and he is soon imprisoned by one of the warring armies, but in confinement, this physically unattractive gardener with a hare lip shows a resilience of spirit that is inspirational. Coetzee's reputation as one of the leading English-language novelists of our time grew with his fifth work, *Foe* (1986), an amazing postmodern rewriting of the story of Robinson Crusoe, told from the perspective of Sue Barton, a woman castaway in Crusoe's island and sharing it with him and Friday. Although the only one of Coetzee's major tales not set in South Africa, *Foe* continues to demonstrate the novelist's concern with colonial and postcolonial encounters and the struggle to wrest meaning out of such encounters.

Unlike *Foe*, set in turn-of-eighteenth century London and Crusoe's island, *Disgrace* is rooted in present-day post-apartheid South Africa. Its protagonist is David Lurie, a twice-divorced fiftyish professor of English at the Technical University of Cape Town (Coetzee himself is close to sixty but by training a linguist and now a Professor of General Literature at the University of Cape Town). Lurie is prone to dangerous liaisons, sometimes even paying for his sexual escapades with exotic younger women. In a chain of events that is not uncommon in academia, he has an affair with one of his students. He is indiscreet in choosing someone who is about the age of a daughter he has from his first marriage as a sexual partner. Moreover, he blithely ignores her jealous boyfriend. His moral resolve weak-

ening, Lurie compromises his official position and tampers with class records in order to favor her. Exposed by her boyfriend, and arraigned by her indignant father, Lurie is summoned before a committee of inquiry instituted by the university administration and is charged with sexual misconduct, of harassment and victimization of a student, and abuse of his authority. As the story breaks, and public disgrace stares at him everywhere he goes in Cape Town, Lurie decides to acknowledge his guilt. He also abandons his academic career and leaves the city. However, he will not repent publicly and shows no remorse. For him, recanting would be too dramatic and too much like self-criticism; all he would like to do is get the affair behind him.

The first fifty pages or so of *Disgrace* is then a not uncommon story of a middle age man who has disgraced himself and ruined his career because of sexual impulses he cannot control, although Coetzee tells the story with extraordinary economy and precision. But the remainder of the novel could have happened only in present day South Africa. For when Lurie decides to settle for a while in a farm owned by Lucie, his daughter from his first marriage, he is confronted with the violence of contemporary South Africa. In the countryside, he is exposed fully to the traumas created by the dissolution of a once powerful state that has maimed human relationships and scarred people on both sides of the color divide, seemingly beyond repair, in its attempt to uphold apartheid as a way of life.

Lurie chooses to stay in the farm but has no specific reasons for doing so. He genuinely cares for Lucy and has helped her buy the farm and feels he can spend some time with her. Vaguely, he plans to help her look after the dogs that she manages for other people for a living. Also vaguely, he pursues his pet

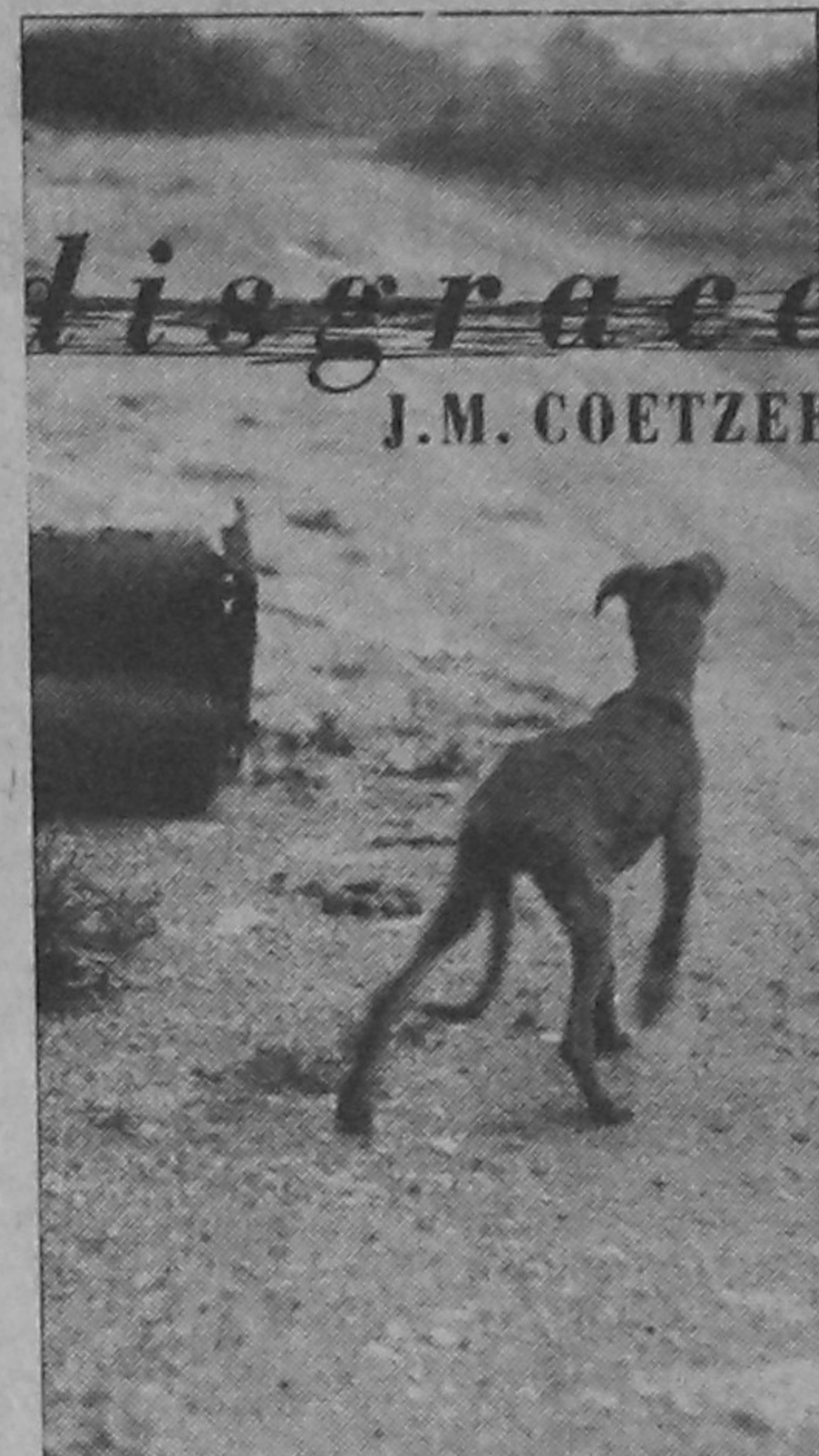
project: writing an opera about the love life of Byron and his mistress Teresa. And from time to time he helps a woman called Bev Shaw run a clinic for sick animals on a voluntary basis. Of one thing he is sure though: he is not "going to feel guilty or fear retribution." Incurable, he has another affair with Bev Shaw; defiant, he does not have the slightest idea that his patriarchal ideology might be unwelcome to Lucy.

But the countryside around the farm is in an anarchic condition and soon she is raped and he is signed by a trio of marauding black youths intent on violence and arson. Shaken, he now sees that the life he and his generation had been accustomed to was over and that the aimless and newly unleashed hatred of people who had been shackled for ages was targeting him and his kind.

Lurie's reaction to the attack on the farm and the violation of his daughter is to go back to Cape Town and to take Lucie along with him. She, however, refuses to leave. Also, she will not press charges, although at least one of the rapists is identifiable and lives close by.

Lurie becomes increasingly frustrated by his inability to persuade Lucie that she is in danger and that her only option was to leave her farm and even South Africa for the moment — she apparently is ready to "pay" a price for staying on. He also gets more and more upset with the work he does at the Animal Clinic. Here he has to help Bev Shaw decide on whether a dog needs to be disposed off by a lethal injection because its time has come. In addition, he must help get rid of the dead animal once it has been put to sleep. Finally, his Byron project is getting nowhere.

At one point Lurie decides he has had enough and heads back to Cape Town. En route, he visits the family of the girl student he had seduced earlier and apologizes to her parents, but does not want them to plead on his behalf so that



he could be reinstated. When he comes to Cape Town, he finds that his flat has been vandalized. But he is in many ways unmoved by events. Once more, he attempts to indulge his taste for illicit affairs but, goes nowhere.

Lonely and adrift, he heads back to the farm, only to be shocked by the discovery that Lucie is not only pregnant because of the rape but also unwilling to have an abortion. She will not even be intimidated by the offer of marriage from her black assistant Petrus. Petrus is already married but thinks that she will accept his offer as a way of protecting herself from other assailants in the

future and will give away her title to the farms as dowry.

At the end, *Disgrace* returns us to the image of the defeated dog reproduced in the dust cover of the book. Lucie accepts Petrus's offer; she will retain her house and not allow Petrus to enter it without her permission, but is ready to give up her right to the land and accept the offer of protection/marriage. To her, Lurie's refusal to accept present realities has become a problem; she would rather have him leave than let her father force things into an ugly confrontation between her and her black neighbors. She is even ready to love the child she will have from her violent encounter with the trio.

And Lurie? Is he like the dogs he handles, seemingly living only for the moment when someone else will decide whether their time to leave the world has come or not? Will he abandon South Africa or stay on, accepting the new, violent South Africa as his lot? Is he finally ready to accept the human condition? While it will not be right to reveal the ending of *Disgrace*, it must be said that the novel ends satisfyingly, and that its protagonist and its readers are the wiser for the experience that Coetzee makes them share.

At one juncture of his life, Lurie thinks of the opening lines of Yeats's beautiful poem, "Sailing to Byzantium": "That is no country for old men. The young/In one another's arms, birds in the trees/— Those dying generations—at their song". As I came to the end of *Disgrace*, I thought of another poem by Yeats where the marvellous Irish poet writes: "Now that my ladder's gone, I must lie down where all the ladders start, /In the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart". In *Disgrace*, as in his other fiction, Coetzee shows that he has a moral vision that puts him on a par with the great masters of literature. He demonstrates once again in the novel that he is a consummate storyteller, subtle and sensitive, exercising perfect control over the craft of fiction. *Disgrace* also confirms Bernard Levin's verdict on his earlier work in which he had hailed Coetzee as "an artist of weight and depth that put him in a category beyond ordinary comparison."

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music

Dangling Notes on Handel

by Salahuddin Akbar

OVER the past few years the composer to whom I've been constant as the northern star is Handel. Hardly a week passed by without my listening to him. Many years ago when I continued playing guitar and was a neophyte lover of classical music my conviction of a quotable quote (supplied, during my learning days, by my friend and guitar mentor Mahmud Reza Khan who is now posted in our London High Commission) — "The perfection of music is mathematical and the inspiration is divine" was confirmed. No wonder the quote was passed to him by his Canadian guitar trainer who wrote down in Muhammad's guitar book.

The more I listen to Handel's Water Music Suite and Fireworks — my another conviction in Leonardo da Vinci also gets stronger — "Knowledge of a thing engenders love of it; the more exact the knowledge, the more fervent the love." Listening to such works of classical music for me sure a transcendental experience — a celestial ascending through a seraphic sound.

And I couldn't help mentioning his Water Music Suite through the protagonist of one of my short stories in 1994. To my sheer surprise and ecstasy 3 years later when Arundhati Roy published *The God of Small Things* — I found the same mention of Handel's Water Music Suite in her novel. When this coincidence was pointed out few of my friends would make quip — "At least you're 3 years ahead of the Booker winner.....!" A good comfort that brings me good cheer! Like Water Music or the Royal Fireworks Music to set the right mood for times of good cheer.

Well, ever since the Baroque Age, festival times have meant Handel. Even his Messiah stands prominently for Christians. And Water Music Suite and Fireworks — the two great outdoor Baroque suits are an indispensable part of the festive mood in music. My continued interest in Handel further adds to my sense of completeness with

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the fact that with revival of interest in Baroque age in 20th century, the passion for these two suits continue to grow intense and are known to have become the most frequently recorded music in the catalogue. And my own experience tells me so!

First I brought a pre-recorded tape called Handel's Greatest Hits played noted conductors like Eugene Ormandy/Philadelphia Orchestra, Sir Adrian Boult, London Philharmonic Orchestra, Charles Groves, Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, Mormon Tabernacle Choir, Ignor Kipnis. It contained Water Music Suite#1 in F Suite#2 in D-Air, Hornpipe, Bourée, Overture, Adagio e Staccato, Allegro, Andante, A tempo diminuito, Manuette, Coro, Loure, Bourée including Music for Royal Fireworks in D and part from Messiah. I felt passionate about his music and so greatly I was moved that trying to play his Hornpipe, air..... became my favourite pass time. But after hard trying several years I don't seem able to attain yet the perfection of playing his less than 2 minute Hornpipe either!

Last year a senior colleague of mine in the Ministry Mr Mostafa Kamal took me by a fire-water surprise. From his good collection of classical the one CD he chose for me first — was Handel's Water Music Suite. Played by Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra. Since then we've become fast friends as the common taste in music binds people together. Both of us are indebted to Handel for our friendship. The surprise was surpassed by another Swiss surprise from the land of heaven (some call it Swargarajyal) — Geneva. My friend and Civil Service batchmate Ms Ismat Jahan (I also have women friends) who is now serving as Counselor in Bangladesh Mission there sent

me a CD of Handel saying that despite her knowing I had cassettes on Handel but a CD would be fine for me to Handel's Philharmonic Orchestra (Conductor: Oliver Dohnanyi) played Handel's Wassermusik Suite No 1 and Feuerwerksmusik — Suite, Concerto Grosso op. 6 No 6 in G minor. But I find Philadelphia Orchestra by far most appealing of them all — especially Water Music Suite. Anyway it doesn't mean I have to be mean in showering my thanks to my both CD lender friends!

One of my all time most favourite music directors is our Bengali Salil Chowdhury. Late Chowdhury was himself an accomplished pianist and flutist. He was known to be influenced by Handel. The touch of flute in his music demonstrates it well. His great his Shoonoo Koono Ek Din..... Mon harlo Haral Mon Haralo Shel Din sung by Hemanta is a blend of synthesis of Handel and Indian melody. Especially the flute portion of the song instantly reminds of the Water Music. Even if some one who doesn't know Handel at all if he happens to be listening to Handel's Water Music Suite will first think of Salil Chowdhury. The flute part of Hornpipe in air in Water Music Suite #1 in F in Handel will instantly reminds him of Salil He is likely to mistake it as Salil's work. Well, incidentally the meaning of the Bengali name Salil is water!

When the Water Music was composed, Handel had just arrived in England, young and exuberant in search of a career. When the Royal Fireworks music was composed, he was then at the zenith of his fame regarded as England's greatest composer. In between much flowed down the Thames like the strains of Water Music in 1717.

Since his childhood Handel was a wanderer. Although he was born in Saxony of Germany he travelled and settled in England. On being naturalised in England he adopted the English spelling of his name from his full name Georg Friedrich Handel, or Handel. In the face of parental discouragement, Handel became proficient on Harpsichord and organ; at twelve appointed organist in Halle, and six years later went to Hamburg as violinist in the opera house orchestra. Before going to England he was for a while in Hanover where elector George wanted the young composer to adorn his court. But Handel ran away to England. That made George quite angry. And surprisingly a few years later the Elector of Hanover became king of England assuming the title George II. The situation for Handel could be well-imagined!

Handel was then a court composer, and thought he would be sacked if something special was not produced. He found that the King was fond of travelling down the Thames in his royal barge. He decided one such journey he would greet the king with some music. As the royal party moved down the river, they were treated to the sound of magnificent horns, trumpets and oboes and of course strings by musicians travelling in boats. There were two suites, one composed in D and other in F. Both sides have lovely passages with light-hearted trills from horns and the overall effect of sound sustained brilliance. Indeed the whole thing was a showpiece with repeated calls on the trumpets, horns responses culminating in bold brass duets. In fact the grand Baroque age has very few pieces to compare with the Water Music in its repertoire and Handel's orchestration was

ideally suited to open air.

Amplifiers, speakers, microphones dominate any festival times today. But having nothing like that Handel made sure his music was not heard only by the king but all the others in the party and contemporary reports suggest that the king and his party enjoyed the music very much and the evening was rounded off by a choice supper at Chelsea. The king returned home in the early hours of the morning much pleased with his court composer. Thus he justified his being appointed court musician by Queen Anne in 1713.

Handel was already firmly established as the composer-laureate of Britain. When he wrote Royal Fireworks, George the Second of Britain, the last king of England to go to the battle returned home victorious. A celebration was arranged to include a great outdoor firework display. Handel was given the task to write a suite, which the king specified, should only include wind instruments mainly trumpets and horns. According to Charles Frederick who was in charge of Majesty's Fireworks, the music was meant to be without fiddles. But although Handel scored this fantastic music for 24 oboes, bassoons, nine trumpets, nine horns and three pairs of timpani. He also included the forbidden fiddles. Like today's celebrations a grand pandal was built by famous Italian architect Servandoni and like today's celebrations too the pandal caught fire causing a traffic jam on London Bridge for more than three hours, one of the first ever recorded traffic jams in London.

Handel's music was played by a huge band placed under the central arch of the grand pandal. The original idea was a Baroque pandal 'son et lumiere' on the

subject of peace but things did not go quite as planned. Unfortunately Servandoni's structure caught fire. But Handel's music was a grand success. The Fireworks music itself in fact is a grand symphony for wind instruments and strings. The driving rhythm concentrates on military brilliance. Handel's music is a complex texture with trumpets, oboes and ringing hours brought together in a flamboyant festive celebration. There are sections called peace when the music becomes solemn and a section called Rejoicing which is a boisterous allegro played by trumpets, woodwind and strings with answer cheers from the drums.

Water and fire — fire and water. The two elements most needed in a festival. Handel's genius has used them to ignite the world of music with festive brilliance.

Handel was prolific in most musical forms of his day. In addition to numerous other compositions like sonatas, concerti grossi, cantatas, anthems, harpsichord pieces, orchestral works, including water Music and Fireworks, he wrote forty operas and seventeen oratorios that won him great success. But in spite of his unrivaled reputation in England, he later reached a stage of near-bankruptcy after losing heavily on elaborate staging of his operas in London. Then Messiah, his first oratorio written in 1941 within twenty-four days and first performed in Dublin, helped to turn poverty into riches. On his death he left a large fortune. In his later days he lost his eyesight and became blind and died at the age of 74 (Unlike Mozart most of the great composers died late) in 1759 in London and was buried in Westminster Abbey.

All said, for me — whenever I listen to Handel I get the kind of feeling that makes me echo Mon Haralo Haralo Mon Haralo..... being carried away in a faraway field of enchantment.

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