Like A Dog: Constitutionalism in J.M. Coetzee’s Disgrace

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Abstract

Coetzee’s Disgrace can be read as an engagement with the post apartheid constitution of South Africa. However, the novel does not focus on a legal text. It draws attention to what could be called an ethics of social being or the psychic life of constitutionalism. Disgrace thus resonates with the broader argument that a constitution is a complex of political, social and psychic economies that are bound up with (and in certain senses prior) to positive law. Any proper elaboration of these themes cannot be made from within the terms of legal discourse itself, at least as presently composed. This paper is therefore an exercise in deconstruction or, an attempt to develop a “language that is foreign to what [a] community can already hear or understand only too well”; a practice that will allow a cultural unconscious to speak through the text of Coetzee’s novel. But this problematic is not simply a question of language. An ethics of social being is also necessary. A culture must be held responsible for the symbolic forms of the secrets that it holds. How can we think about this strange matter? Our first task will be to engage with notions of being and social life that have not generally been deployed in constitutional discourse. We will then see how these terms relate to a psychoanalytic account of constitution at both a political and a personal level. The final section of this paper will be a reading of Disgrace.