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The Rights and Wrongs of Desire: J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* and André Brink's *The Rights of Desire*

Abstract

This article examines the correlations between aspects of J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* and André Brink's *The Rights of Desire*. Apart from sharing the historical context, i.e. post-apartheid South Africa, the novels display certain thematic parallels. The plot in each novel is initiated by the intrusion of passion into the secluded and uneventful life of the protagonist. Both David Lurie and Ruben Olivier succumb to it, with far-reaching and unexpected consequences. Taking as his title the words of Coetzee's protagonist who invokes "the rights of desire" to defend his conduct, Brink also portrays an elderly man facing the process of ageing and having to re-evaluate his actions.

Keywords: J.M. Coetzee, André Brink, South African literature, Plato.

Disgrace and *The Rights of Desire* are significant literary representations of post-apartheid South Africa by two leading South African writers. Published a year after *Disgrace* (1999), *The Rights of Desire* (2000) explicitly alludes to Coetzee's novel by quoting in one of its epigraphs – and its title – the words of David Lurie, the protagonist of *Disgrace*.¹ There are noticeable convergences in each novel's depiction of contemporary South Africa. Both protagonists are personally affected by the profound social and political alterations that accompany the shift in power relations within the country. The declining social status of David Lurie and Ruben Olivier corresponds to the diminishing role of the white community, while the violence and chaos in their lives are correlated with and usually caused directly by the hostilities and anarchy rampant in public life.

This is not to imply, however, that either novel is first and foremost a veiled political commentary. This paper will focus on the protagonists' process of self-examination and their subsequent transformation, initiated by their last experience of erotic passion. Lurie and Olivier face ageing and bodily decline; hence

¹ David Lurie's assertion before the university committee: "My case rests on the rights of desire [...] On the god who makes even the small birds quiver". J.M. Coetzee, *Disgrace*, London: Vintage, 2000, p. 89. Later in the text as *D*.

the affairs they have with much younger women bring not only a sense of temporary rejuvenation but also, by exposing the age gap between the lovers, make the protagonists painfully aware of transience and their own irredeemable exclusion from the domain of youth. Neither affair is likely to succeed, and neither does. Each protagonist is brought up short and forced to look back, examine and re-evaluate his life. In *Disgrace*, Lurie reflects on his attractive lover: “a girl like that would not come unencumbered” (*D* 30). Indeed it may be said with regard to both novels that desire itself does not come unencumbered. Each protagonist comes up against unforeseen complications and consequences which, especially in Coetzee’s novel, go far beyond their private life. In the process of struggling with their passions, the protagonists confront their self-delusions as well as have to cope with the ethical aspect of their conduct.

Although Brink’s novel does not match the complexity of *Disgrace*, it shares with Coetzee’s work a foregrounding of desire as the force which sets events in motion and so initiates the action in the novel. Despite all the significant differences in the later development of their plots, *Disgrace* and *Rights of Desire* initially show their protagonists in strikingly similar situations. David Lurie, at 52, is aware of the first symptoms of ageing, which is plainly manifested in his loss of sexual attractiveness. He pursues a career in teaching, fulfilling his duties well but without any sense of commitment. His academic achievements have been only moderate, and he has neither ambitions nor great expectations of success. The same lack of passion characterises his private life – divorced and living alone, he has little need of company. Weekly visits to a prostitute are his solution to what he calls “the problem of sex.”² Thus, the opening of the novel finds him neither happy nor unhappy, but moderately satisfied with the state of equilibrium he has achieved, and living a life which is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future. At this stage the protagonist is convinced of his imperviousness to change: “His temperament is not going to change, he is too old for that. His temperament is fixed, set” (*D* 2).

Older than David, Ruben Olivier in *Rights of Desire* has had his first death scare but shares with Coetzee’s protagonist an attitude of indifference and a lack of expectation concerning the future. He neither seeks death nor has any determination to go on living. Having prematurely lost his job in a library, he continues to study books, deluding himself with a semblance of academic research, which, however, never materialises into a publication. Despite his family’s appeals to follow them out of South Africa he is prepared to stay in his old house, motivated mainly by his inertia and unwillingness to change. He lives alone, without much need of human company, occasionally finding “ways and means”³ to cope with “the problem of sex.” He describes his existence as “the long twilight that follows happiness and unhappiness, guilt and innocence, with nothing more to hope for,

² Deidre Coleman claims that this is a quotation from Thomas Hardy’s *Jude the Obscure*. In his preface to *Jude* Hardy speaks of the “problem of sex” as “a deadly war waged between flesh and spirit”, D. Coleman, “*The Dog-Man*”: *Race, Sex, Species, and Lineage in Coetzee’s Disgrace*, “*Twentieth-Century Literature*” 2009, no. 55.4, p. 600.

³ A. Brink, *The Rights of Desire*, London 2001, p. 22. later in the text as *RD*.

no new surprise, no sudden moon, a landscape of the mind so monotonous as my childhood plains of Kalahari, and only the intricate treachery of memory to keep one awake at night" (*RD* 3).

The tedium of both lives is disrupted by an erotic impulse, which overpowers the men's unwillingness to change and involves them in developments over which they lose control. However, given the ambiguity of both narratives and their adoption of the protagonists' perspectives, it appears likely that both protagonists in some degree persuade themselves that an external power controls their actions, which at least partially and temporarily exempts them from responsibility and self-judgement.

David Lurie astonishes and perplexes the university committee of inquiry by invoking the god Eros in defiance of their expectations of an apology for his seduction of a student. Rather than defending himself, he casts himself in a role which is both rebellious and conventional:

I was walking through the old college gardens and so, it happened, was the young woman in question, Ms Isaacs. Our paths crossed. Words passed between us, and at that moment something happened which, not being a poet, I will not try to describe. Suffice it to say that Eros entered. After that I was not the same. [...] I became a servant of Eros. (*D* 52)

Lurie's account has obvious roots in the literature he is teaching to his unresponsive students. The glimpses of his classes in the novel illustrate his interest in Romanticism, the Romantics' quest for the sublime, Wordsworthian moments of vision and their transformative power, Byronic heroes' defiance of social and moral norms. To maintain his pose, Lurie tries to reconcile the idea of being a servant of the divine with the idea of self-determination by claiming that he chose to submit to an impulse. Yet this relentless recalcitrance, couched in high-flown rhetoric, seems to be a form of private self-defence, a refusal to accept the unromantic truth – which his ex-wife bluntly points out to him – that his affair with the student was banal, silly and ethically unacceptable. Some of his responses to the committee reveal that he prefers to see himself as a victim of the contemporary strict agenda of political correctness, additionally reinforced by the political situation in his country.

Yet, as Derek Attridge observes, Lurie's stand does not seem to be "a principled challenge to the entire establishment in the name of desire." It would be more appropriate to say that it is "more like a matter of pique, irritation, and hurt pride taking him willy-nilly down a road whose destination is obscure."⁴ Lurie's evocation of the Greek deity as the *spiritus movens* is an evasive act, which precludes any admission of guilt or examination of his conscience. Indeed, his supposed submission to Eros is also strongly contrasted with Lurie's open and scornful rejection of any Christian connotations in the declaration required of him: "Frankly, what you want from me is not a response but a confession" (*D* 51). He later adds: "Before that secular tribunal I pleaded guilty, a secular plea. That plea should suffice. Repentance is neither here nor there. Repentance belongs to another world,

⁴ D. Attridge, *Age of Bronze, State of Grace: Music and Dogs in Coetzee's Disgrace*, "Novel: A Forum on Fiction" 2000, no. 34.1, p. 103.

to another universe of discourse” (*D* 58). Reiterating his position in a conversation with his daughter, Lurie recognises the vanity of his claim that his case “rests on the rights of desire. On the god who makes even the small birds quiver” (*D* 89). Whereas there can be no doubt that his confrontation with the committee was to some extent a one-sided game, Lurie cannot ignore his daughter’s counterarguments and is forced to tone down his claim to divine sanction. His example of a dog’s right to remain true to its nature by following its sexual instincts reveals Lurie’s confusion as to his motivation.

His idea of Eros is primarily derived from Platonic dialogues. However, the concept of Eros, as numerous commentators have pointed out,⁵ is by no means consistent in the *Republic*, the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus*, i.e. the three main dialogues in which Socrates expounds on the attributes of this god. In the *Republic*, Eros is associated with madness and presented as the enemy of reason. In Book Nine, Socrates claims that “a precise definition of a tyrannical man is one who, either by birth or habit or both, combines the characteristics of drunkenness, lust, and madness. [...] Isn’t this the very reason [...] why the passion for sex has for so long been called a tyrant?”⁶ (*R* 394). Socrates’ account of the making of a tyrant associates desire with madness and constitutes “the fiercest criticism of eros [sic] in Plato’s dialogues”⁷:

And when the wicked wizards who want to make him a tyrant despair of keeping their hold on the young man by other means, they contrive to implant a master passion in him to control the idle desires that divide his time between them, like a great winged drone. [...] The other desires buzz around it, loading it with incense and perfume, flowers and wine, and all the pleasures of a dissolute life, on which they feed and fatten it until at last they produce in it the sting of mania. Then the master passion runs wild and takes madness into its service; any opinions or desires with a decent reputation and any feelings of shame still left are killed or thrown out, until all discipline is swept away, and madness usurps its place (*R* 394).

In other dialogues by Plato Eros retains his associations with madness, but madness itself is valorised thanks to its associations with “prophecy, divine and poetic inspiration, even recollection.”⁸ In the *Symposium* Eros is reinterpreted in accordance with the Platonic theory of Ideas. He is supposed to mediate between the world of transient shadows and the world of eternal Ideas, between mortals and gods, and lead the human being to immortality. A mortal being wishes to reach eternity, either physically, by producing offspring, or in the sphere of creative activity.⁹ In fact, Socrates’ account of the influence of Eros implies that “Every

⁵ See, for example, David N. McNeill, “Human Discourse, Eros, and Madness in Plato’s ‘Republic’” (2001) or Charles Kahn, “Plato’s Theory of Desire” (1987).

⁶ Plato, *The Republic*, 2nd ed. rev. Trans. with an introduction by Desmond Lee, Harmondsworth 1975, p. 394. Later in the text as *R*.

⁷ D.N. McNeill, *Human Discourse, Eros, and Madness in Plato’s ‘Republic’*, “The Review of Metaphysics” 2001, no. 55.2, p. 235.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 241.

⁹ Socrates in the *Symposium*: “Those whose creative instinct is physical love have recourse to women, and show their love in this way, believing that by begetting children they can secure for themselves an immortal and blessed memory hereafter for ever; but there are some whose creative desire is

creative human act is motivated by the desire to extend one's mortal existence"¹⁰. In the most famous part of the *Symposium*, Socrates describes the ascent towards the realm of perfect Forms: it originates in the love of one beautiful body but leads the individual to transcend the limits of his existence, towards the eternal possession of the beautiful and the good. Carnal desire is only the first step on the way upwards.¹¹ Socrates concludes his disquisition with a eulogy for love: "I declare that it is the duty of every man to honour love, and I honour and practise the mysteries of love in an especial degree myself, and recommend the same to others, and I praise the power and valour of love to the best of my ability both now and always."¹²

Lurie's bizarre self-identification as a servant of Eros enables him to conveniently combine elements of the divergent Platonic concepts. He considers himself exempt from the norms in the name of which he is being condemned and punished, scornfully and proudly referring to public opinion as "the community of the righteous" (*D* 42), which is possibly reminiscent of the stern guardians in Plato's *Republic*.¹³ He validates what others consider his transgression by assigning to his actions a divine approval. According to his account, his affair with the girl started on a supernatural impulse, leading to his transformation and even a form of transcendence ("I was not the same" [*D* 52]); in his recollections of the girl he appreciates her bodily perfection. His account of the experience bears marks of Platonic ideas.

Yet Lurie's version misrepresents the truth, and clearly has been constructed to substantiate his self-aggrandisement. The story gives no evidence that the relationship with the girl originated on an impulse, in a moment of divine possession; a more commonplace cause is implied: his arrangement with a prostitute having come to an end, Lurie was looking for other solutions to "the problem of sex." Isidore Diala contends that his "drive towards sensuality is an anxious affirmation of life and self-worth."¹⁴ The beginning of his affair shows a commingling of desire, rational calculation and a degree of self-deception, as well as an awareness that this relationship is both unethical and unnatural. Lurie's exhortation to the girl to perpetuate her beauty by reproduction, cloaked in the words of Shakespeare's sonnet and possibly another echo of the *Symposium*, falls flat because the girl fails to recognise the quotation or understand its meaning. Again, this scene demonstrates that, far from acting impulsively, Lurie self-consciously tries out banal

of the soul, and who conceive spiritually, not physically, the progeny which is the nature of the soul to conceive and bring forth." Plato, *The Symposium*, Trans. W. Hamilton. Harmondsworth 1959, p. 90.

¹⁰ R.A. Northover, *Elizabeth Costello as a Socratic Figure*, "English in Africa" 2012, no. 39.1, p. 47.

¹¹ Cf. C. Kahn, *Plato's Theory of Desire*, "The Review of Metaphysics" 1987, no. 41.1, p. 100–101.

¹² Plato, *Symposium*, op. cit., p. 95.

¹³ Isidore Diala thinks that Lurie's performance before the committee alludes to critiques of the procedures of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, which were based on an "arguable equation of religious rhetoric with the legal and the conflation of catharsis with contrition." I. Diala, *Nadine Gordimer, J.M. Coetzee, and Andre Brink: Guilt, Expiation and the Reconciliation Process in Post-Apartheid South Africa*, "Journal of Modern Literature" 2001–2001, no. 25.2, p. 57.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

strategies of seduction and speaks in “[s]mooth words, old as seduction itself” (*D* 16). By offering an insight into his mind the narration reveals his insincerity and deliberate scheming:

“From fairest creatures we desire increase,” he says, “that thereby beauty’s rose might never die.”

Not a good move. Her smile loses its playful, mobile quality. The pentameter, whose cadence once served so well to oil the serpent’s words, now only estranges (*D* 16).

The image of the serpent, with its biblical connotations, hints at a fusion of ancient Greek and Christian discourses, both in Lurie’s mind and in the overall pattern of the narrative. Although Lurie claims that “repentance” and related concepts belong to “another universe of discourse” (*D* 58), the existence of the other universe is implied continuously. In Lurie’s conversation with the chairman of the committee terms derived from that discourse seem unavoidable. Mathabane leaves the ethical aspect of the affair to “[Lurie’s] own conscience,” declaring that the secular tribunal has no wish to enquire into what goes on in his soul (*D* 58). It is possible to see Lurie’s appellations to Eros as a re-enactment of the satanic sin of pride, and interpret the subsequent part of the narrative as a realisation of the predictable consequences of such a sin. Instead of the continual ascent to the permanent possession of beauty and goodness which Socrates depicts in the *Symposium*, the relationship with Melanie marks the beginning of Lurie’s disgrace and radical social descent. From a respectable, self-confident university professor he falls to the level of a dog-man. At the end of the story his plunge appears complete: he is a humble volunteer in an animal clinic, assisting in the euthanasia of unwanted dogs and the disposal of their remains. Estranged from his beloved daughter and unable to accept her decision to have the child that she conceived when she was gang-raped, he feels that he is becoming extinct, and currently his position is no better than that of the unwanted dogs. As was the case during his affair with the student, Lurie’s motivation is not entirely rational or explicable, and he again seems to be in the grip of forces he cannot fully comprehend. He never attempts to ascertain whether the strange compulsion to look after unwanted animals and their corpses constitutes in any sense a match to his earlier erotic impulse.

The same jarring co-existence of different discourses may be observed when Lurie at last apologises to the girl’s family. He adheres to his version of having been struck by a fire, but his present plight is summed up by Melanie’s father in the biblical phrase “how are the mighty fallen” (*D* 167). The staunchly religious Mr Isaacs is inclined to see a Christian divine plan in Lurie’s experience: “the path you are on is one that God has ordained for you” (*D* 174).

Although at the level of events there is no link between Lurie’s treatment of his student and his own daughter’s ordeal, a pattern of crime and punishment insinuates itself, and Lurie, despite his scepticism about metaphysical issues, is the first to admit it in the conversation with Mr Isaacs: “As for God, I am not a believer so I will have to translate what you call God and God’s wishes into my own terms. In my own terms I am being punished for what happened between myself and your daughter” (*D* 172). What he did to Melanie is visited, with a vengeance, on Lucy.

Towards the end of the story Lurie conjures up an image of himself as one of the damned: "An image comes to him from the *Inferno*: the great marsh of Styx, with souls boiling up in it like mushrooms. *Vedi l'anime di color cui vines l'ira*. Souls overcome with anger, gnawing at each other. A punishment fitted to the crime" (*D* 209–210). It appears that, given Lurie's stubborn pride, punishment of the kind that can effect an inward moral transformation could reach him only through his daughter.

Whether this obscure and debatable pattern is completed with a form of redemption remains inconclusive. Responding to his daughter's simple admonition that he should try to be a good person, he claims to be too old to change (*D* 216). This assertion echoes what he thought about himself at the outset of the story, and what eventually proved to be untrue. Now, Lurie performs completely gratuitous acts of charity and has acquired the virtues of humility and compassion. The conclusion of the book intimates a possibility of salvation (in which Lurie does not believe, however) and simultaneously challenges it. Sceptical about the idea of his own salvation, at the end of the novel Lurie has the power to save his favourite dog from death but declines to use this power while, paradoxically, with the dog in his arms he unmistakably embodies the topos of the Good Shepherd. Stressing the difficulty of interpreting this gesture, Gareth Cornwell suggests that "[r]edolent of sacrifice and self-sacrifice, it appears as a religious observance, a ritual prompted by a 'faith' that David Lurie has himself not yet begun to understand"¹⁵). It may be argued that, having started with an erotic desire for a beautiful body, Lurie has achieved or at least approached a different kind of love, although one must be as cautious as the protagonist himself in using this word. His despair, his social decline, his growing isolation are signs of his descent but, "in another universe of discourse", he has made moral progress. Ultimately, it remains irresolvable whether any supernatural being has interfered in his life but it emerges that he has shifted his allegiance from one set of values to another. Accordingly, it might appear that this deity evolved in parallel to Lurie's experience: if the protagonist was originally moved by Eros (who is to him obviously only a mythological creature), then subsequently it is more likely to be the Christian God (in whom he does not believe, either).

The apprehension about personal extinction, the overwhelming sense of chaos and the disintegration of the world around which Lurie experiences at the end of *Disgrace* also affect the protagonist of André Brink's novel from the start of the narrative. His failing health makes the prospect of death unnervingly imminent; in parallel to his body, his house is disintegrating; his wife is dead, one of his sons has left the country and the other is planning to do the same. Like Lurie, he has lost his job prematurely and, again like Lurie who ineffectually dabbles in writing an opera, he tries to collect material for some obscure project for which he has no great inclination: "More and more I was numbed by the futility of it, this everlasting collection of material for articles I'll never write. An end in itself, a dead

¹⁵ G. Cornwell, *Disgraceland: History and the Humanities in Frontier Country*, "English in Africa" 2003, no. 30.2, p. 56.

end” (RD 143). Despite his rational mindset, he is quite convinced that his house is haunted by the ghost of a woman slave who once lived in it. But the protagonist himself lives a ghostly, insubstantial existence in anticipation of death. Since his wife’s death he has had “this strange feeling of being disembodied, of having died myself, of surviving in limbo. Leftover time to kill” (RD 74).

Whereas in *Disgrace* the intrusion of desire into the protagonist’s life brings about substantial changes, a similar incident causes a temporary disruption to Olivier’s dreary existence without eventually significantly altering his situation. From the moment a young woman appeared in his house in reply to his advertisement for a lodger and the protagonist experienced a resurgence of desire, he lives in a state of expectation, deeply unbalanced by the possibility of one last relationship, which remains tantalisingly accessible and yet ultimately is out of his reach: “I thought, when Tessa moved in, she would rejuvenate me. Old goats and nibblesome leaves. Not so” (RD 145). During her first visit, he is taken aback by her blunt question, “What do you do for sex?” (RD 22) and tacitly admits that in this respect his life is deficient, or, to use Lurie’s term, he has not solved “the problem of sex” at all. Although, with his growing infatuation with Tessa, a solution seems to be at hand, the belated and frustrated desire makes him even more aware of the vacuity of his present life. Tessa is “the catalyst that drives the book,”¹⁶ but the protagonist’s time is filled with fruitless waiting. At the end of the novel, with Tessa gone, and abandoned by his housekeeper – the good spirit of his house, the narrator feels even more lonely and disaffected, and intimations of mortality grow stronger.

With hindsight it appears that the effect of Tessa’s presence in his life was the exact opposite of what he had anticipated. Rather than reviving his youth, she involuntarily prepared him to face death. Her disturbing presence, odd conduct, blunt questions cause Olivier to re-examine his past. Throughout the narrative, he struggles with ghosts – literally and metaphorically. Olivier’s housekeeper claims to have regular contact with the ghost of Antje, a seventeenth-century slave girl, who submitted to her white master’s “rights of desire” (RD 41) and paid dearly for it.¹⁷ During Tessa’s stay, Olivier himself encounters the ghost for the first time. At the end of the novel, frantically searching for Tessa’s lost ring, he develops a habit of descending to the basement of his house, which leads him to discover the skeleton of Antje. The reburial is likely to lay the ghost to rest.

Whether Tessa’s arrival had anything to do with Antje’s spectral presence must remain in the domain of supernatural speculation. It is clear, however, that she makes Olivier reconnect mentally with his younger self and recollect those now dead who shaped his life. He is jolted from the version of his past he has comfortably lived with, and forced to admit his guilt, which, as it turns out, consisted

¹⁶ R.J. Davies, *Redefining the Enemy: The Rights of Desire*, André Brink, “The Lancet” 2001, April 21, p. 1300.

¹⁷ This meaning of “the rights of desire” as a reminder of the relations between masters and slaves in the history of South Africa is analysed by Marita Wenzel in her article *Re-writing the “Slave Narrative”*: Rayda Jacobs’s *The Slave Book* and André Brink’s *The Rights of Desire*, “English in Africa” 2004, no. 1.1, p. 91–103.

mainly in his indifference, lack of commitment, and selfish withdrawal. Olivier's self-absorption "is treated [in the novel] as evasion, a flight from community and social responsibility."¹⁸

Despite being non-religious, Olivier has retained a residue of his religious upbringing, which is occasionally revealed in the overtones in his thoughts and words. His casual remark at the beginning of the narrative, "sooner or later one has to pay for one's sins" (*RD* 4), acquires substance as in the course of the story he modifies his self-perception, dispels certain self-delusions and perceives the extent of his fault. The state of his conscience is disclosed when he momentarily passes out in his basement and experiences a sense of being in hell, surrounded by demons who have come to torment him (*RD* 255). A clear realisation of the nature of his offence comes to him at the end, after he and Tessa are assaulted in the countryside and the girl is nearly gang-raped. Unlike Lucy in *Disgrace*, she escapes this ordeal, but it is thanks to other people, not to Olivier. Like Lucy's father, although himself attacked and quite helpless at that time, the narrator blames himself for his failure to save her. Allowing thoughts to "move unhindered through [his] mind," the protagonist has to accept the stark fact that she screamed for help and he did not help. When he is able to open his mind to "the next slow wave of thought," Olivier is inundated by a catalogue of the numerous people in his life whose cries for help he chose to ignore and so inadvertently created the void in which he is spending his last years: "How many other voices have there been shouting for help throughout my life, shouting for me to help? [...] Yet I prefer not to listen, not to respond" (*RD* 299).¹⁹

The pitiful story of Olivier's unfulfilled relationship with Tessa may be regarded as a form of punishment for his futile, meaningless life. If he feels tormented by the ghosts of his past, he is also tormented by Tessa's infuriatingly volatile behaviour. She seems to respond to his desire but keeps her distance from him; meanwhile, he endures the frustration of seeing a series of her lovers under his own roof. His tolerance of her behaviour borders on a madness which brings him only pain and a sense of degradation: "her disappearances, her maddening disregard for my feelings, her invasion and manipulation of my life, her ridiculous, adolescent naïveté, her arrogance, her bitchiness, her untouchability. There was an almost exquisite pain in piling it all up, flagellating myself, lapidating myself, immolating myself" (*RD* 151). This summing up leads Olivier to acknowledge, in contradistinction to the protagonist of *Disgrace*, that one's rights of desire involve the right of the other to refuse; hence, the most that can be claimed of desire is "the right to be frustrated, to be denied" (*RD* 154). Yet this sober realisation does nothing to free him from his obsession. Desire becomes the worst burden of his old age. Accordingly, his supposed "rights of desire" become his ongoing "rites of desire" (*RD*, 154), which survive Tessa's disappearance from his life.

¹⁸ I. Diala, op. cit., p. 61.

¹⁹ Both Ursula A. Barnett and Isidore Diala assert that Olivier's guilt is his refusal to act and to assume responsibility, but both blame him also for his political inaction both in times of apartheid and now, during the formation of the New South Africa. U.A. Barnett, *André Brink*. The Rights of Desire, "World Literature in Review" 2001, no. 75.3/4, p. 106; I. Diala, op. cit., p. 62.

Michael Wood calls *The Rights of Desire* “manifestly an analogue and answer” to *Disgrace*.²⁰ In fact, analogies fade as the plot of Brink’s novel unfolds, or, rather, stumbles along. As Wood puts it, Olivier “lives out to the full, over the course of several months, his right to be frustrated.”²¹ The reader’s anticipation of events is frustrated accordingly. Reviewing *The Rights of Desire*, Ursula A. Barnett comments that the theme of the novel is “inaction.”²²

In *Reading for the Plot* Peter Brooks remarks that at the start of a narrative there must be “desire” – “often in a state of initial arousal, often having reached a state of intensity such that movement must be created, action undertaken, change begun.”²³ Brooks claims that:

Narratives both tell of desire – typically present some story of desire – and arouse and make use of desire as dynamic of signification. Desire is in this view like Freud’s notion of Eros, a force including sexual desire but larger and more polymorphous, which (he writes in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*) seeks to “combine organic substances into even greater unities.”²⁴

Whereas in *Disgrace* the intervention of Eros propels the protagonist to act and gives the book a strong narrative thrust, in *The Rights of Desire* a corresponding intrusion produces very little of such an effect. Nevertheless, inwardly the recluse is lured “out of the cave into the harsh light of reality.”²⁵ In Brink’s novel, as in Coetzee’s, the ageing protagonist is finally coerced into a revision of his self-image and an acknowledgement of his moral fault.

²⁰ M. Wood, *Chains of Love. The Rights of Desire by André Brink*, “New York Times” June 17, 2001, <http://www.nytimes.com/books/01/06/17/reviews/010617.17woodlt.html> (n.p.) [access: 15.12.2013].

²¹ Ibid.

²² U.A. Barnett, op. cit., p. 106.

²³ P. Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*, Cambridge–London 1992, p. 38.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 37.

²⁵ I. Diala, op. cit., p. 63.