



ETHICS AND POLITICS IN TAGORE, COETZEE, and certain scenes of teaching

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67

This essay, and “Righting Wrongs” represent my highest hopes for the humanities. It was two years later that I realized that my convictions had been fed by an artificially preserved “authentic” tribal group in the interest of feudal benevolence. That shock has been matched by the joining of political correctness and corporate funding at the other end. I have kept the outlines of this piece undisturbed because of the internal consistency of that deluded conviction. Read it with bemusement, then, and a suspicion of golden-age culturalisms.

It is practically persuasive that the eruption of the ethical interrupts and postpones the epistemological -- the undertaking to construct the other as object of knowledge, an undertaking never to be given up. Levinas is the generic name associated with such a position. This beautiful passage from *Otherwise than Being* lays it out, although neither interruption nor postponement is mentioned. That connection is made by Derrida.³

Here, then, is Levinas, for whom Kant’s critical perspectivization of the subject and the rigorous limits of pure theoretical reason seem to have been displaced by the

¹This paper is a chapter in my forthcoming book *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (Harvard). This paper was first presented at the Centre for Social Sciences in Kolkata, India. I have not changed the second part significantly in order to give the US reader the sense of how alien ethical discourse might seem on a remote terrain.

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³Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, tr. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas. (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1999), p. 51-53.

structuralist hermeneutics of suspicion. For Levinas, structuralism did not attend to what in Kant was the mechanism that interrupted the constrained and rigorous workings of pure reason: “The interests that Kant discovered in theoretical reason itself, he subordinated to practical reason, become mere reason. It is just these interests that are contested by structuralism, which is perhaps to be defined by the primacy of theoretical reason.”⁴

The relationship between the postponement of the epistemological in Levinas and the subordination of pure reason in Kant is a rich theme, beyond the scope of this essay. Let us return to what Levinas will perceive as a general contemporary hermeneutics of suspicion, related to the primacy of theoretical reason; “The suspicion engendered by psychoanalysis, sociology and politics weigh on human identity such that we never know to whom we are speaking and what we are dealing with when we build our ideas on the basis of the human fact.”⁵ The political calculus thematizes this suspicion into an entire code of strategy defined as varieties of game theory and rational choice; combined with the speciousness of heritage politics. This can be verified across cultural difference, backwards through history, and in today’s global academic discourse. Over against this Levinas posits the ethical with astonishing humility: “but we do not need this knowledge in the relationship in which the other is the one next to me [*le prochain*].”

68 Kant thought that the ethical commonality of being (*gemeines Wesen*—repeatedly mistranslated as “the ethical state”) cannot form the basis of a state. Surprisingly, there is a clear line from the face-to-face of the ethical to the state in Levinas.⁶ It has long been my habit to scavenge and tinker in (ab-use) the field of practical philosophy. I will conserve from Kant the discontinuity between the ethical and the political, from Levinas the discontinuity between the ethical and the epistemological. I will suggest that the discontinuities between the ethical and the epistemological and political fields are tamed in the nestling of logic and rhetoric in fiction.⁷ Whether this can be put to use in teaching today has become doubtful.

Assuming at that earlier stage that fiction could be used to teach living in these postponing double binds, I could move to another bit of prose on that page in Levinas: “for reasons not at all transcendental but purely logical, the object-man must figure at the beginning of all knowing.”

⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being: Or Beyond Essence*, tr. Alphonso Lingis. (Pittsburgh: Duquesne Univ. Press, 1981), p. 58; translation modified.

⁵ *Otherwise*, p. 59; translation modified. There is a footnote in the text to Paul Ricoeur’s *Conflict of Interpretations*, tr. Don Ihde (Evanston: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1974), p. 99. The next quoted passage is from the same page.

⁶ See Derrida, *Adieu*, p. 29—33 for a discussion of this.

⁷ I first learned to notice this from Derrida’s article “White Mythology” whose subtitle is “Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy” (Derrida, *Margins*, p. 209—271).

The figure of the “I” as object: this representation of the holy man in Levinas does not match our colloquial and literal expectations. My general suggestion, that the protocol of fiction gives us a practical simulacrum of the graver discontinuities inhabiting (and operating?) the ethico-epistemic and the ethico-political, can, however, take such a figure on board; to produce this in the social field is impossible today. Yet some of us will of course continue to want to say that fiction offers us an experience of the discontinuities that remain in place “in real life.” That would be a description of fiction as an event—an indeterminate “sharing” between writer and reader, where the effort of reading is to taste the impossible status of being figured as object in the web of the other. Reading, in this special sense, is sacred and will remain sacred, wherever the profane takes us.

In this essay I consider, because I was in that earlier more confident mode, not only fiction as event but also fiction as task. I locate in Rabindranath Tagore (1861- 1941) and J.M. Coetzee (1940-) representations of what may be read as versions of the “I” figured as object and weave the representations together as a warning text for postcolonial political ambitions.⁸ I am obviously using “text” as “web,” coming from Latin *texere* – “to weave.”

In the second part of the essay I move into the field of education as a nation-building calculus. I examine planning as its logic and teaching as its rhetoric—in the strong sense of figuration.

On the cover of the first *Pratichi Education Report*, there is an artwork by Rabindranath Tagore, containing a poem, in English and Bengali, nestled in a tinted sketch, written and painted in Baghdad in 1932.⁹ Here is the poem, in Tagore’s own translation:

The night has ended.
Put out the light of the lamp of thine own narrow corner smudged with smoke.
The great morning which is for all appears in the East.
Let its light reveal us to each other
Who walk on the same path of pilgrimage.

The Bengali is slightly more active: *Nikhiler alo purba akashe jolilo punyodine/ Ekshathe jara cholibe tahara shokolere nik chine*. The universe’s light burns in the eastern sky on this blessed day/ Let those who’ll walk together recognize each other. These lines resonate with what might be the mission statement of the moral entrepreneurship of the international civil society today, which, however laudable, is put together, not by democratic procedure, but largely by self-selection and networking. I am aware of course, of the same forces at work in “democracies.” But the presence of mechanisms of redress—electoral or

⁸This paper was first presented at the Centre for Studies in Sciences in Kolkata, India. In the second lecture of the series, I will offer a reading of Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, as a President Schreber style critique of postcolonial political ambitions.

⁹Pratichi (India) Trust, *The Pratichi Education Report*, intr. Amartya Sen (Delhi: TLM Books, 2002).

constitutional—however remote, produces a faith in electoral education, which is useless if our faith is put entirely in self-selected international helpers.

“*Apoman*,” the poem Tagore wrote more than twenty years before this, after reading Kshitimohan Sen’s translations of Kabir, is much darker.¹⁰ In this poem, Tagore uses the exact phrase “human rights” – *manusher adbhikar* – already at the beginning of the last century. What is to me more striking is that, instead of urging that human rights be immediately restored to the descendants of India’s historical unfortunates, he makes a mysterious prediction, looking toward the historical future: “*apamane hote habe tabader shobar shoman*” – my unfortunate country, you will have to be equal in disgrace to each and every one of those you have disgraced millennially, a disgrace to which Kabir had responded.

How can this enigmatic sentence be understood? The idea of intertextuality, loosely defined, can be used to confront this question.

I will offer an anecdotal account of intertextuality. It will help us coast through Tagore’s India, Coetzee’s South Africa, and the space of a tiny group of *adivasis*.¹¹

In November 2002, Roald Hoffman, a Nobel Laureate chemist, gave a popular mini-lecture with slides in the basement of the Cornelia Street Café in New York. The topic was “Movement in Constrained Spaces,” by which Hoffman meant the incessant microscopic movement that goes on inside the human body to make it function. To prepare for his talk, he had asked a choreographer from neighboring Princeton to choreograph a dance for the space of the stage, which is very small.¹² This is already intertextuality, where one text, Hoffman’s, would make its point by weaving itself with another, the dance. A shot silk, as it were. Again, that venerable sense of text as in textile, and *texere* as weave.

The choreographer managed a pattern of exquisite and minute movements for two dancers, male and female, in that tiny space. And, at the back of the long and narrow bar, two singers, female and male, sang *La ci darem a mano* in full-throated ease. That wonderful aria from Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*, sung with such force and skill, bought our choreographer the deep space of the bar, but also historical space – the space of an opera that has been heard and loved by millions for a few centuries. Yet her dancers gave

¹⁰ Rabindranath Tagore, Poem No. 108, Gitanjali, 20 Ashadh 1317 BE (i.e. approximately 1910). The title ‘Apoman’ would have been acquired at a later stage, as the poems in Gitanjali had no titles. Kshitimohan Sen’s Bengali translations of Kabir were read & discussed by Rabindranath long before he published his own English translations of them. See Rabindranath Tagore, tr. Kabir, Songs of Kabir, tr. from Kshitimohan Sen (New York: Macmillan, 1915).

¹¹ Adivasi is the name used commonly for so-called Indian “tribals,” by general account the inhabitants of India at the time of the arrival of Indo-European speakers in the second millennium B.C.

¹² Diann Sichel, “Mass, Momentum and Energy Transport (Living Space),” Dancers: Josiah Pearsall, Melanie Velo-Simpson, Singers: Wendy Baker, Erik Kroncke.

something to Mozart as well. Full of lyric grace as a love song if heard by itself – a man telling his beloved the exquisite beauty of the place to which they will escape -- *La ci darem* is, in context, a brutal seduction song of the most vicious class-fixed gendering, a gentleman seducing a confused farmgirl only to fuck, and the audience sharing the joke. The two impish and acrobatic dancers on the diminutive stage, wittily partnering, gave the lie to the possibility of any such interpretation.

This is intertextuality, working both ways. Just as the chemist gave the dancer the lie, somewhat, for the movements *he* spoke of made the dance possible, so did the dancers give Mozart the lie by taking away his plot. Yet each gained something as well.

But in this case it did not work completely. Mozart is too elite, too conventional, too old-fashioned, for a radical New York audience. They did not catch the allusion. When the boring literary academic referred to it in a timid question, the choreographer melted in gratitude.

This *is* sometimes the task of the literary academic. To restore reference in order that intertextuality may function; and to create intertextuality as well. In order to do a good job with the Tagore poem, I have to read Kabir carefully. And that will be another session with the fictive simulacrum of the helpless strength of the ethical.

“Helpless strength.” Get it? Not a cash cow. Not something ignorant cost-analysts can ask a corporate university to close down. Not teaching only legalized greed to bring 71 the whole world to crisis. Not helping from above, taking no historical responsibility for those who were disabled cognitively from suddenly using high-end help now.

J. M. Coetzee’s novel *Disgrace* may be put in an intertextual relationship with Tagore’s poem.¹³ In representing *jare tumi niche felo she tomare bandhibe je niche* – the one you fling down will bind you down there -- in rural South Africa, Coetzee offers an illustration of what that enigmatic prediction might mean: “*apamane bote bobe tabader shobar shoman*” -- -- you will have to be equal in disgrace to all of them. Here too, intertextuality works two ways. Where Tagore alters his refrain in the last line: *mrityumajhe hobe tobe chitabhashshe shobar shoman* – you will then be equal to all of them in the ashes of death, thus predicting the death of a nation, Coetzee, writing an unsentimentally gendered narrative, makes his protagonist choose life. (I should add that Tagore’s last stanza is somewhat more programmatic and asks for a call to all).

Here is a plot summary of Coetzee’s novel: David Lurie, a middle aged male professor, sentimental consumer of metropolitan sex-work, seduces a student, and is charged with sexual harassment by the appropriate committee. He refuses to utter the formulas that will get him off. He leaves the university and goes to his possibly lesbian daughter Lucy’s flower farm. The daughter is raped and beaten and he is himself beaten

¹³J.M. Coetzee, *Disgrace* (New York: Viking, 2000).

and badly burnt. The daughter is pregnant and decides to carry the child to term. One of the rapists turns up at the neighboring farm and is apparently a relative of the owner. This farmer Petrus, already married, proposes a concubinage style marriage to Lucy. She accepts. The English Professor starts working for an outfit that puts unwanted dogs to sleep. He has a short liaison with the unattractive married woman who runs the outfit. He writes an operetta in a desultory way. He learns to love dogs and finally learns to give up the dog that he loves to the stipulated death.

These are some of the daughter Lucy's last words in the novel. Her father is ready to send his violated daughter back to her Dutch mother. Holland is the remote metropole for the Afrikaner:

It is as if she has not heard him. "Go back to Petrus," she says. "Propose the following. Say I accept his protection. Say he can put out whatever story he likes about our relationship and I won't contradict him. If he wants me to be known as his third wife, so be it. As his concubine, ditto. But then the child becomes his too. The child becomes part of his family. As for the land, say I will sign the land over to him as long as the house remains mine. I will become a tenant on his land." . . . "How humiliating," *he* says finally. . . . "yes, [she says] I agree, it is humiliating. But perhaps that is a good point to start from again. . . . To start at ground level. With nothing. Not with nothing but. With nothing. No cards, no weapons, no property, no rights, no dignity" (204-205; emphasis mine). *Apamane hote hobe tabader shobar shoman.*

72

In so far as *Disgrace* is a father-daughter story the intertextuality here is with *Lear*. If Lucy ends with nothing, Cordelia in the text of *King Lear* begins with the word "nothing." That word signifies the withholding of speech as an instrument for indicating socially inappropriate affective value. In Cordelia's understanding, to put love in the value-form – let me measure how much – is itself absurd.

Indeed, in the first impact of the word "nothing" in the play, this protest is mimed in the clustering of silences in the short lines among the regular iambic pentameter lines. "*Cor.* Nothing, my lord. [six syllables of silence]/ *Lear.* Nothing? [eight syllables of silence] / *Cor.* Nothing. [eight again]/ *Lear.* Nothing will come of nothing; speak again" (I.i.87-90). The metre picks up and Cordelia speaks.

Now Cordelia shows that she is also a realist and knows that love in the value-form is what makes the world go around. She is made to chide her sisters for not thinking of the love due to their husbands: "Why have my sisters husbands if they say/ They love you all?" (I.i.97-98).

Just as *Disgrace* is also a father-daughter story, so is *King Lear* also a play about dynastic succession in the absence of a son, not an unimportant topic in Jacobean England. It has been abundantly pointed out that the play's turnaround can be measured by the fact that "the presence of Cordelia at the head of a French army . . . marks the final horrific stage in the process by which Lear's division of the kingdom goes on turning the world

upside down.”¹⁴ Thus the love due to fathers bows to the love due to husbands and is then displaced, as it were. It is this story of fathers and husbands, and dynastic succession at the very inception of capitalist colonialism that *Disgrace* de-stabilizes, re-asking the question of the Enlightenment (“let those who will walk together get to know each other by the dawning universal *light*,” says the cover of the *Pratichi Report*) with reference to the public sphere and the classed and gendered subject, when Lucy, “perhaps” a lesbian decides to carry the child of rape to term and agrees to “marry” Petrus, who is not (one of) the biological father(s).

Lucy’s “nothing” is the same word but carries a different meaning from Cordelia’s. It is not the withholding of speech protesting the casting of love in the value-form *and* giving it the wrong value. It is rather the casting aside of the affective value-system attached to reproductive heteronormativity as it is accepted as the currency to measure human dignity. I do not think this is an acceptance of rape, but a refusal to be raped by instrumentalizing reproduction. Coetzee’s Lucy is made to make clear that the “nothing” is not to be itself measured as the absence of “everything” by the old epistemic-affective value form – the system of knowing-loving. It is not “nothing but,” Lucy insists. It is an originary “nothing,” a scary beginning. Who imagines that centuries of malpractice – *shotek shatabdir ashommanbhar* -- can be conveniently undone by diversified committees, such as the one that “tried” David Lurie for rape Enlightenment-style?¹⁵ Literature is not a blueprint for action, but is there a lesson for the feudality of the international civil society here? Even if there were, it would be in the double bind of the literary being just that.

“Unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art,” Lear had said to Edgar’s faked madness, erasing the place of the phallus: “a poor, bare, *forked* animal.” What does it mean, in the detritus of colonialism, for one from the ruling race to call for interpellation as “unaccommodated woman, a poor, bare, forked animal,” and hold negotiating power without sentimentality in that very forkèdness? What if Levinas’s catachrestic holy man is a catachrestic holy woman, quite unlike the maternity that Levinas embarrassingly places in the stomach in the passage from which I quoted? Is it a gendered special case, or can it claim generality, as making visible the difficulty of the postcolonial formula: a new nation. Without the practice of freedom. I repeat, neither *Lear* nor *Disgrace* is a blueprint for unmediated social policy. These are figures, asking for dis-figuration, as figures must. And it is the representation of the “I” as figured object—as woman relinquishing the child as property, as always, and as former colonizer in the ex-colony. This is how critique is operated through fictions, a critique no longer

¹⁴William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1959) Arden Edition, p. 141.

¹⁵For an analysis of this rhetorical question, see Rosalind C. Morris, “The Mute and the Unspeakable: Political Subjectivity, Violent Crime, and ‘the Sexual Thing’ in a South African Mining Community,” in *Law and Disorder in the Postcolony*, eds. Jean and John Comaroff (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2006), p.57- 101.

available in the rational choices of globality, at best – and only at best – manipulated by the hopelessly pre-critical models of the human mind presupposed by behaviorist economics, Barack Obama’s choice of [*** RA-S NAME OF SAMANTHA POWERS’ HUSBAND AND HIS POSITION] as ***.

I emphasize that it is not an equality in death – *mrityumajhe*. It is not the sort of equality that suicide bombing may bring. Suicidal resistance is a message inscribed in the body when no other means will get through. It is both execution and mourning, for both self and other, where you die with me for the same cause, no matter which side you are on, with the implication that there is no dishonor in such shared and innocent death. That is an equality in disgrace brought about by the withholding of response, or a “response” so disingenuously requiring duress as to be no response at all, as from Israel to Palestine.¹⁶

If Lucy is intertextual with *Lear*, Lurie is intertextual with Kafka’s *The Trial*, a novel not about beginning with nothing, but ending like a dog when civil society crumbles.¹⁷ Here is the end of *The Trial*, where Josef K.’s well-organized civil society gives way:

Logic is no doubt unshakable, but it can’t withstand a person who wants to live. Where was the judge he’d never seen? Where was the high court he’d never reached? He raised his hands and spread out all his fingers. But the hands of one man were right at K’s throat, while the other thrust the knife into his heart and turned it there twice. With failing sight K. saw how the men drew near his face, leaning cheek-to-cheek to observe the verdict. “Like a dog!” he said; it seemed as though the shame was to outlive him.

This is how Lurie understands Lucy’s remarks about “nothing but.” Not as a beginning in disgraceful equality but the end of civil society (with the withdrawal of the colonizer?) where only shame is guaranteed continuity. This is a profound misunderstanding. And this brings me to the second point about literature. The literary text gives rhetorical signals to the reader, which lead to activating the readerly imagination. Literature advocates in this special way. These are not the ways of expository prose. Literary reading has to be learned. Metaphor leans on concept and concept on metaphor, logic nestles in rhetoric, but they are not the same and one cannot be effaced in the other. If the social sciences describe the rules of the game, literary reading teaches how to play. One cannot be effaced in the other. This is too neat an opposition, of course. But for the moment, let it suffice as a rule of thumb.

¹⁶ Since 1983, when I delivered “Can the Subaltern Speak?” as a lecture at the Summer Institute at the University of Illinois in Champaign-Urbana, I have been interested in suicide as envoi. Partha Chatterjee reminded me in conversation (October 31, 2003) that the “cause” is metaleptically constructed by the suicide, as the effect of an “effect.” My point is that Lucy is not represented as the “subject” of a “cause.” Her representation may be read as Levinas’s object-human as the figure that subtends all knowing, including the cognition of a cause. About suicide bombing I speculate at greater length in “Terror,” boundary 2 ***.

¹⁷ Franz Kafka, *The Trial*, tr. Breon Mitchell (New York: Schocken Books, 1998). The quoted passage is from page 231.

What rhetorical signal does *Disgrace* give to the canny reader? It comes through the use of focalization, described by Mieke Bal as “the relation between the vision and that which is ‘seen’.”¹⁸ This term is deemed more useful than “point of view” or “perspective” because it emphasizes the fluidity of narrative – the impression of (con)sequence as well as the transactional nature of reading.

Disgrace is relentless in keeping the focalization confined to David Lurie. Indeed, this is the vehicle of the sympathetic portrayal of David Lurie. When Lucy is resolutely denied focalization, the reader is provoked, for he or she does not want to share in Lurie-the-chief-focalizer’s inability to “read” Lucy as patient and agent. No reader is content with acting out the failure of reading. This is the rhetorical signal to the active reader, to counter-focalize. This shuttle between focalization and the making of an alternative narrative as the reader’s running commentary, as it were, used to be designated by the prim phrase “dramatic irony” when I was an undergraduate. You will see immediately how much more effortful and active this counterfocalization is than what that term can indicate. This provocation into counterfocalization is the “political” in political fiction – the transformation of a tendency into a crisis.¹⁹

Thus when Lurie asks, after Lucy’s impassioned speech, “Like a dog?” Lucy simply agrees, “Yes, like a dog.” She does not provide the explanation that the reader who can work the intertextuality will provide. *Lear* and *The Trial* are not esoteric texts. (But then neither was *Don Giovanni* and not teaching the humanities is now encouraged.) We can sense the deep contradiction of a split understanding of postcoloniality here: between the risk of beginning with nothing and the breakdown of civil societies. If not, we can at least see that Lurie literalizes his daughter’s remark and learns to love dogs as the other of being-human, as a source, even, of ethical lessons of a special sort. He is staged as unable to touch either the racial or the gendered other. These may be Lucy’s last words, but the novel continues, focalizing Lurie loving dogs, avoiding bathos only by his obvious race-gender illiteracy, as we counter-focalize the absent Lucy.

Literary reading teaches us to learn from the singular and the unverifiable. It is not that literary reading does not generalize. It is just that those generalizations are not on evidentiary ground. In this area, what is known is proved by *nyavahara*, or setting-to-work. Martin Luther King, in his celebrated speech “Beyond Vietnam,” given on April 4, 1967 in Riverside Church, had tried to imagine the other again and again. In his own words, “[p]erhaps the more difficult but no less necessary task is to speak for those who have been designated as our enemies. . . . Surely we must understand their feelings even if we do not condone their actions.”

¹⁸ Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1985), p. 100.

¹⁹ Karl Marx uses this to describe why the tendency of the rate of profit to fall does not result in increasingly lower profits C 3, p. 365—366 et passim).

Here is a setting to work of what in the secular imagination is the literary impulse: to imagine the other who does not resemble the self. King, being a priest, had put it in terms of liberation theology, in the name of “the one who loved his enemies so fully that he died for them.” For the secular imagination, that transcendental narrative is just that, a narrative, singular and unverifiable. When it is set to work, it enters the arena of the probable: King’s imagination of the Viet Cong. I believe this is why Aristotle said *poiesis* or making-in-fiction was *philosophoteron* – a better instrument of knowledge – than *historia* – because it allowed us to produce the probable rather than account for that which has been possible.

In my words on suicide bombing, I was trying to follow Dr. King’s lead halfway, use the secular imagination as emancipatory instrument. When I was a graduate student, on the eve of the Vietnam War, I lived in the same house as Paul Wolfowitz, the ferocious Deputy Secretary of Defense who was the chief talking head for the war on Iraq. He was a Political Science undergraduate, disciple of Allan Bloom, the conservative political philosopher. As I have watched him on television lately, I have often thought that if he had had serious training in literary reading and/or the imagining of the enemy as human, his position on Iraq would not be so inflexible. This is not a verifiable conviction. But it is in view of such hopes that humanities teaching acts itself out. These hopes are dashed by inanities like the “Next Big Thing.”²⁰

76

To repeat: literature is not verifiable. The only way a reading establishes itself – without guarantees – is by sharing the steps of the reading. That is the experience of the impossible, ethical discontinuity shaken up in a simulacrum. Unless you take a step with me, there will be no interdisciplinarity, only the tedium of turf battles.

In so far as Lucy is a figure that makes visible the rational kernel of the institution of marriage – rape, social security, property, human continuity – we can check her out with Herculine Barbin, the nineteenth-century hermaphrodite who committed suicide but left a memoir, which Foucault edited and made available.

Herculine Barbin was a scholar – a diligent student who became a school mistress. But when she was named a man by doctors she could not access the scholarly position – of writing and speaking to a general public – that Kant secures for the enlightened subject in “What is Enlightenment?”²¹

²⁰ See Patricia Cohen, “The Next Big Thing in English: Knowing They Know That You Know (NYT April [is the date significant?], 2010; and the accompanying series of blogs on Neuro Lit. Crit <http://roomfordebate.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/04/05/can-neuro-lit-crit-save-the-humanities/> . None of the commentators had been present at a meeting arranged by the United Nations on 9/11/2008 with eminent neuroscientists to see if they could provide an ethics for the world. All the participants (except the man working for the Air Force) vehemently insisted that this was not possible. To understand literature or philosophy as such by way of neuroscience is like testing out the roundness of the world by walking across it, or telling the time by the theory of relativity. To respect the experiencing being that lives and dies in spite of impersonal scientific descriptions is becoming less and less possible. The imagination cannot sustain the double bind.

²¹ Immanuel Kant, “An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment,” in *Practical Philosophy*, tr. and ed.

Let us look at Herculine/Abel's cautious elation at the moment of entry into the world of men:

So, it was done [*C'en était donc fait*]. Civil status called me to belong henceforth to that half of the human race that is called the strong sex [*L'état civil m'appelait à faire partie désormais de cette moitié du genre humain, appelé le sexe fort*]. I, who had been raised until the age of twenty-one in religious houses, among shy [*timides*] female companions, was going to leave behind me a past entirely delightful [*tout un passé délicieux*], like Achilles, and enter the lists, armed with my weakness alone and my profound inexperience of men and things!²²

It is this hope – of entering the public sphere as the felicitous subject – that is dashed as the possibility of agency is annulled in suicide (p. 98).

Barbin cannot articulate the relationship between the denial of agency and the incapability to reproduce. Yet, Tiresias-like, he offers a critical account of marriage:

It has been given to me, as a man, the most intimate and deep knowledge of all the aptitudes, all the secrets, of the female character. I read in that heart, as in an open book. I count every beat of it. In a word, I have the secret of its strength and the measure of its weakness; and just for that reason I would make a detestable husband; I also feel that all my joys would be poisoned in marriage and that I would cruelly abuse, perhaps, the immense advantage that would be mine, an advantage that would turn against me (p. 107-119-120; translation modified).

I presented “Can the Subaltern Speak?” as a paper twenty years ago. In that paper I suggested that the subaltern could not “speak” because, in the absence of institutionally validated agency, there was no listening subject. My listening, separated by space and time, was perhaps an ethical impulse. But I am with Kant in thinking that such impulses do not lead to the political. There must be a presumed collectivity of listening and countersigning subjects and agents in the public sphere for the subaltern to “speak.” Herculine Barbin wrote abundantly, presuming a reader repeatedly. And yet she could not speak. Her solution would be the normalization of the multi-sexed subject, a civil and agential rather than subjective solution. There would then be a listening public who could countersign her “speech act.”

In the arrangement of counterfocalization within the validating institution of the novel in English, the second half of *Disgrace* makes the subaltern speak, but does not presume to give “voice,” either to Petrus or Lucy. This is not the novel's failure, but rather a politically fastidious awareness of the limits of its power. By the general dramatically ironic presentation of Lurie, he is shown to “understand” Petrus by the neat reversal of the master-slave dialectic without sublation: “Petrus needs him not for pipefitting or plumbing but to hold things, to pass him tools – to be his *handlanger*, in fact. The role is

Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1996).

²² *Herculine Barbin: Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth-Century French Hermaphrodite* [no tr. given] (New York: Pantheon, 1980), p. 89, translation modified.

not one he objects to. Petrus is a good workman, it is an education to watch him. It is Petrus himself that he is beginning to dislike” (p. 136-137). Once again, the novel and Lurie part company, precisely on the issue of reading, of control. This is a perfectly valid reading, as is the invocation of the end of Kafka’s *The Trial* to describe the difficult birth of the new nation. It is precisely this limited perfect validity of the liberal white ex-colonizer’s understanding that *Disgrace* questions through the invitation to focalize the enigma of Lucy. It is interesting that Petrus’s one-liner on Lucy shows more kinship with the novel’s verdict: ‘She is a forward-looking lady, not backward-looking.’ (p. 136). If we, like Lurie, ignore the enigma of Lucy, the novel, being fully focalized precisely by Lurie, can be made to say every racist thing.²³ Postcoloniality from below can then be reduced to the education of Pollux, the young rapist who is related to Petrus. Counterfocalized, it can be acknowledged as perhaps the first moment in Lucy’s refusal of rape by generalizing it into all heteronormative sexual practice: “When it comes to men and sex, David, nothing surprises me any more. . . . They spur each other on. . . .” “And the third one, the boy?” “He was there to learn” (p. 158-159). The incipient bathos of Lurie’s literalism (“like a dog” means love dogs; forgiveness from Melanie’s parents means prostrating himself on the floor before them [p. 173]; loving dogs means letting one of them into the operetta [p. 215]; even the possibility that the last Christian scene of man giving up dog may slide into a rictus,²⁴ given the overarching narrative context) can be seen, in a reading that ignores the function of Lucy in the narrative, as the novel’s failure, rather than part of its rhetorical web.

²³ For a debate over such readings, see Peter D. McDonald, “*Disgrace* Effects,” and David Attwell, “Race in *Disgrace*,” in *Interventions* 4.3 (2002), p. 321-341.

²⁴ This possibility of an uneasy snigger (as well as the “giving up”) may mark something irreducible, the seeming “abyss” – we think also of the incessant back-and-forth of the abyssal – between the “I” of the “I think” and the presumed self-identity of the animal: “This automotricity as auto-affection and self-relation, before the discursive thematic of a statement or an *ego cogito*, indeed of a *cogito ergo sum*, is the character recognized in the living and in animality in general. But between that self-relationship (that Self, that ipseity) and the I of the “I think” there is, it seems, an abyss” (Derrida, “L’animal que donc je suis [à suivre],” in Marie-Louise Mallet, ed. *L’animal autobiographique*, Paris: Galilée, 1999, p. 300) *** SUPPLY TRANSLATED PASSAGE & REFERENCE BUT HI-LITE FOR ME TO MODIFY IF NEC. It is possible that the dull effort of a cogitative Lurie has an abyssality that must not be forgotten as we attempt to acknowledge the enigmatic historicity of the mixed-race postcolonial child of rape deliberately given up as property for the adopted father, Black Christian, a Petrus upon which rock the future, guaranteeing tenancy for the colonial turned native, is founded. It is not the object-human as a figure with nothing that comes before all else, but the look of the naked animot (a word that the reader must learn from the book by Derrida I am citing; a word [mo] that marks the irreducible heterogeneity of animality). This is Derrida’s critique of the philosophica tradition of the West. I have often felt that the formal logic of Coetzee’s fiction mimes ethical moves in an uncanny way. The (non)relationship between the cogitation of animality and the setting-to-work of gendered postcolonialism in *Disgrace* may be such an uncanny miming. The “dull decrepitude” of the former is where equality in disgrace is impossible, we cannot disgrace the animot. It is the limit of *apamane bote habe tabader shobar shoman*; and to call it a limit is to speak from one side. Since my ethical texts are Kant, Lévinas, Derrida, and my fictions are “Apaman,” *Disgrace*, and the uncoercive rearrangement of desire, I have not considered J. M. Coetzee’s staged speculations about animality and the human in “Lives of Animals” (in Amy Gutmann, ed. *The Lives of Animals*, Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1999).

I want now to come to the second way in which Tagore's refrain can be understood: the failure of democracy.

The Pratichi Trust in India, to whose *Report* I have referred above, is doing astute work because it realizes that, if the largest sector of the electorate misses out on early education, democracy cannot function, for it then allows the worst of the upper sectors to flourish. Democracy sinks to that level and we are all equal in disgrace. When we read statistics on who wins and who loses the elections, the non-specialist located middle-class as well as the rest of the world, if it cares, thinks it shows how the country thinks. No. In the largest and lowest sector of the electorate, there is a considerable supply of affect, good and bad; there is native sharpness and there is acquired cunning. But there is no rational choice. Election does not even pretend to be based on rational platforms. (This applies to the United States as well, in another way. But it would take me too far to develop that here.) Gendering must be understood simply here: female teachers are preferred, though they have less authority; gendering presuppositions must be changed through education, and so on.

There is little I can add to the Trust's magisterial work. After a general caution, that work in this sphere runs the risk of structural atrophy, like diversified committees in *Disgrace*, and therefore must be interrupted by the ethical, I will add a few codicils here and there.

Professor Sen, the founder of the Trust, supports the state in opposing “the artificially generated need for private tuition,” artificial because generated by careless non-teaching in the free primary schools.²⁵ While the state waits to implement this opposition legally, I have been trying to provide collective “private tuition” to supplement the defunct primary schools, to a tiny sector of the most disenfranchised. It is my hope that private tuition in this form can be nationalized and thus lose its definition. I will ask some questions in conclusion, which will make the direction of my thoughts clear. The one-on-one of “private” tuition—at the moment in the service of rote learning that cannot relate to the nurturing of the ethical impulse—is the only way to undo the abdication of the politically planned “public” education. “Private tuition,” therefore, is a relation to transform rather than prohibit. The tutorial system at the other end of the spectrum is proof of this.

I must repeat that I am enthralled by the report and whatever I am adding is in the nature of a supplement from a literary person. The work of the Trust is largely structural. The humanities – training in literary reading in particular – is good at textural change. Each discipline has its own species of “setting to work” – and the texture of the imagination belongs to the teacher of literary reading. All good work is imaginative, of course. But the humanities have little else.

²⁵ *Pratichi Education Report*, p. 10.

There is a tiny exchange on page 69 of the book: “On the day of our visit [to a school in Medinipur], we interviewed four children of Class 4. . . . well, can you tell us something about what was taught? All four children were silent.”

Part of the silence rises from the very class apartheid that bad rural education perpetuates.²⁶ The relationship between the itinerant inspector and the child is, in addition, hardly ethical.

80 Training in literary reading can prepare one to work at these silences. I will submit an example which it would be useless to translate here. It is lesson 5 from *Amader Itibash*, a Class 4 history book, specifically devoted to national liberation, one item in which is the story of Nelson Mandela. Let us overlook the implicit misrepresentation of Gandhi’s role in Mandela’s political victory in the lifting of apartheid, or the suggestive detail that the section on national liberation starts with George Washington. One cannot however overlook, if one is a reader of Bengali, the hopeless ornamentation of the prose, incomprehensible to teacher and student alike at the subaltern level, in the outer reaches of rural West Bengal. The point is not only to ask for “a radically enhanced set of commitments” “from the primary teachers,” as the *Report* stresses. The real disgrace of rural primary education is that even the *good* teacher, with the best will in the world, has been so indoctrinated into rote learning that, even if s/he could understand the lugubrious prose and even if s/he had retained or imbibed enough general knowledge of the world – both doubtful propositions – the technique of emphasizing meaning is not what s/he would understand by teaching. Elsewhere I have emphasized this as the systematic difference in teaching between *baralok* and *chbotolok* – translated by Praticchi as high-born and low-born, brave attempts – *gatar khatano* and *matba khatano* – manual labor and intellectual labor does not quite translate the active sense of *khatano* – setting to work, then, not of the body alone, and of the mind as well – that keeps class apartheid alive. The common sight of a child of the rural poor trying to make the head engage in answer to a textbook question and failing is as vivid a figure of withholding humanity as anything in Tagore or Coetzee. The “silence” is active with pain and resentment.

The solution is not to write new textbooks, the liberal intellectuals’ favorite option. The teachers at this level do not know how to use a book, any book, however progressive. Many of the textbooks, for instance, have a list of pedagogic goals at the top of each lesson. The language of these lists is abstract, starting with the title: *shamortho*, capacity. Some times, for nine or ten lessons in a row, this abstract title is followed by the remark: “see previous lesson.” No primary or non-formal teacher over the last twenty five years has ever noticed this in my presence, and, when informed of the presence of

²⁶I have developed the idea of the role of rural education in maintaining class apartheid in “Righting Wrongs.”

this pedagogic machinery, been able to understand it, let alone implement it. Given the axiomatics of the so-called education within which the teacher has received what goes for training, it is foolish to expect implementation.

There are progressive textbooks that try to combine Bengali and Arithmetic – the famous *Kajer Pata*. This combination causes nothing but confusion in student and teacher alike on this level. And frankly, it serves no specific purpose here. There are also books where some metropolitan liberal or a committee of them tries to engage what they think is a rural audience. I wish I had the time to recount the failure of their imagination case by case. There is no possibility of the emergence of the ethical when the writing subject's sense of superiority is rock solid. The useless coyness of these failed attempts would be amusing if the problem were not so disgraceful. Both Hindu and Muslim poets are included—communalism must be avoided at all costs, of course. The point is lost on these children—though a sort of equality is achieved. All poetry is equally opaque, occasions for memorization without comprehension, learning two-way meanings – what does a mean? b; and what is b? a, of course. The meaning of meaning is itself compromised for these children, these teachers. A new textbook drowns in that compromise.

Two girls, between eleven and fifteen years of age, show me what they are being taught in primary school. It is the piece about South Africa. I ask them some questions. They have absolutely no clue at all what the piece is about, as they don't about any piece in the book, about any piece in any book. To say "they haven't understood this piece" would be to grant too much. The girls are not unintelligent. Indeed, one of them is, I think, strikingly intelligent. They tell me their teachers would go over the material again the next day.

The next day after school, we meet again. Did the teachers explain? "Reading *poriyechhe*," is the answer – an untranslatable Bengali phrase for which there are equivalents in all the major Indian languages, no doubt. They made us read reading would perhaps convey the absurdity? Any piece is a collection of discrete spelling exercises to be read in a high drone with little regard to punctuation. The scandal is that everyone knows this. It is embarrassing to put it in an essay about Tagore and Coetzee. Better to present social scientific surveys in English. This too is a way of disgracing the disenfranchised.

To continue with the narrative. After the girls' answer begins the process of explaining. As I have already mentioned, the experience of a head attempting but failing to set itself to work is killingly painful. Most of us interrupt such silences with noise, speak up and create a version of explanation to break the experience. At that point we think we are teaching although no teaching is taking place. Sometimes we learn to resist this by excruciating self-control that often fails.

In *Foe*, another novel by J. M. Coetzee, there is a moment when a character called Friday (as in *Robinson Crusoe*), an abducted savage with his tongue cut out, resists the

attempt of the white woman to teach him how to write.²⁷ Varieties of such resistance in the ground level rural classroom can be read as the anger of the intelligent child not being able to work his or her head. Such readings are necessarily off the mark. But the literary critic is practiced in learning from the unverifiable.

If the older girl was just frustrated by not grasping at all what I was trying to explain, the younger one, the strikingly intelligent one, faced me with that inexorably closed look, jaws firmly set, that reminds one of Friday, withholding. No response to repeated careful questions going over the same ground over and over again, simplifying the story of Nelson Mandela further at every go. These are students who have no concept or percept of the neighboring districts, of their own state of West Bengal – because, as the *Pratichi Report* points out, they have arrived at Class Four through neglect and no teaching. How will they catch the reference to Africa?

Into the second hour, sitting on the floor in that darkening room, I tried another tack. Forget Africa, try *shoman adbhikar* – equal rights. It was impossible to explain rights in a place with no plumbing, pavement, electricity, stores, without doors and windows. Incidentally, do people really check – rather than interrupt the painful experience of having failed to teach – the long-term residue of so-called legal awareness seminars? What is learnt through repeated brushes with the usual brutality of the rural judiciary is not significantly changed by the conviction that the benevolent among the masters will help them litigate. What is it to develop the subject – the capital I – of human rights, rather than a feudal dispensation of human rights breeding dependency and litigious blackmail and provoking a trail of vendetta in those punishers punished remotely? Let us return to the schoolroom in gathering dusk.

It is commonsense that children have short attention spans. I was so helpless in my inability to explain that I was tyrannizing the girls. At the time it seemed as if we were locked together in an effort to let response emerge and blossom with its own energy. The ethical as task rather than event is effortful. And perhaps an hour and a half into the struggle, I put my hand next to the bright one's purple-black hand to explain apartheid. Next to that rich color this pasty brown hand seemed white. And to explain *shoman adbhikar*, equal rights, Mandela's demand, a desperate formula presented itself to me: *ami ja, tumi ta* – what I, that you. Remember this is a student, not an asylum seeker in the metropole, in whose name many millions of dollars are moved around even as we speak.²⁸ This is just two students, accepting oppression as normality, understanding their designated textbook.

²⁷J.M. Coetzee, *Foe*, (New York: Penguin, 1986).

²⁸Clyde Prestowitz, *Rogue Nation: American Unilateralism and the Failure of Good Intentions*, (New York: Basic Books, 2003) argues that the US wants to make everyone American and there left and right meet. The same, I think, can now be said of Europe. This is too big a topic to develop here. What I urge in the text is the need to imagine a world that is not necessarily looking for help.

Response did emerge. “Yes”-s and “no”-s were now given; even, if I remember right, a few words uttered as answers to questions. In a bit I let them go.

The next morning I asked them to set down what they remembered of the previous day’s lesson. The older one could call up nothing. The younger one, the more intelligent one, produced this: “*ami ja, tumi ta, raja here gachhe*”– what I, that you, the king is defeated. A tremendous achievement in context but, if one thinks of all the children studying under the West Bengal Board, including the best students from the best schools in Kolkata, with whom these girls are competing, this is a negligible result. I have no doubt that even this pitiful residue of the content of the lesson is now long lost and forgotten by the older one. The younger one is dead of encephalitis.

The incident took place about ten years ago. When the two girls were young women in high school, I spoke to them and their teachers. I stressed repeatedly the importance of explaining the text, of explaining repeatedly, of checking to see if the student has understood. A futile exercise. You do not teach how to play a game by talking about it. No one can produce meanings of unknown words. There are no dictionaries, and, more important, no habit of consulting dictionaries.

As I continued with the useless harangue, I said, “as two of you might remember, I spent two hours explaining Nelson Mandela to you some years ago. It is important to explain.” A fleeting smile, no eye contact, passed across the face of the bright one, sitting in the last row. It is unusual for such signals to pass from her class to mine.²⁹

The number of calculative moves to be made and sustained in the political sphere, with the deflecting and overdetermined calculus of the vicissitudes of gendered class-mobility factored in at every step, in order for irony-shared-from-below communication to be sustained at this level, would require immense systemic change. Yet, in the supplementary relationship between the possibility of that fleeting smile, -- a sign of the interruptive emergence of the ethical -- and the daunting labor of the political calculus, we must begin with the end, which must remain the possibility of the ethical. That inconvenient effort is the uncertain ground of every just society. If the political calculus becomes the means *and* the end, justice is ill served and no change sticks. The peculiar thing about gendering is that, in Lucy’s vision of “starting with nothing,” in the reproductive situation shorn of the fetishization of property, in the child given up as body’s product, the ethical moment can perhaps emerge -- at least so the fiction says.³⁰

²⁹ Her name was Shamoli Sabar. She is memorialized in Fig. *** RA-S THE HANDWRITEN DOCUMENT BY THE CHILDREN– of my “Righting Wrongs.” She was one of the signatories of the petition. I offer this essay to her memory.

³⁰ We have to have an idea of how fiction can be made to speak through the transactional heading beyond the limits of the author’s authority, which would expose the frivolousness of a position such as Rajat Ray’s in *Exploring Emotional History: Gender, Mentality, and Literature in the Indian Awakening* (New Delhi: Oxford Univ. Press, 2001), p. 79, 115n28.

I have recounted this narrative to make clear that although on the literary register, the register of the singular and the unverifiable (this story, for example, is unverifiable because you have nothing but my testimony) the suggestive smile, directed by indirection and a shared experience, is a good event; it has no significance in terms of the public sphere, to which education should give access. The discontinuity between the ethical and the political is here instrumentalized—between the rhetoric of pedagogy and the logic of its fruition in the public sphere. For the smile of complicity to pass between the *adivasi* and the caste-Indian, unprovoked, marks an immense advance. But it is neither a beginning nor an end, only an irreducible grounding condition.

When I was attempting to teach in that darkening room, I had no thought but to get through. It so happened that the topic was *shomanadhikar*, equal rights. Writing this for you, on the other hand, I put myself grandiosely in Tagore's poem: *manusher odhikare bonchito korechho jaare, shommukhe danraye rekebe tobu kole dao nai sthan* – those whom you have deprived of human rights, whom you have kept standing face-to-face and yet not taken in your arms . . . So, spending considerable skill and labor, to teach precisely the meaning of *shomanadhikar*, was I perhaps undoing the poet's description of the behavior of the Hindu historical dominant, denying human rights over centuries to the outcastes (today's *dalit*-s) and *adivasi*-s? The point I am laboriously making is that it is not so. Although the literary mode of instruction activates the subject, the capital I, in order to be secured it must enter the political calculus of the public sphere. Private voluntarism such as mine remains a mongrel practice between the literary and the rational, rhetoric and logic.

And so the reader of literature asks the social scientists a question. Is it not possible for the globally beleaguered state to institute civil service positions that will call, on a regular and optional basis, upon interested humanities professionals from the highest ranks to train ground-level teachers, periodically, yet with some continuity, gradually integrating and transforming the existing training structure, thus to deconstruct or sublimate private tuition and slowly make it less possible for “a teacher of [sic] Birbhum village” to say: “How can we carry over the training to our classrooms? *Baro baro katha bala soja* – Talking big is easy.”³¹

Before I had started thinking about the heritage of “disgrace,” I had tried to initiate the production of same-language dictionaries in the major Indian languages, specifically for ground level teachers and students. It came to nothing, because the situation was not imaginable by those whom I had approached, and because the NRI (Non Resident Indian, Indian designation for diasporics) has other kinds of uses. Should the NRI have no role but to help place the state in metropolitan economic bondage? Is it not possible to think of subaltern single-language dictionaries as an important step toward fostering the habit of freedom – the habit of finding a meaning for oneself? Is it not possible to

³¹ *Pratichi Education Report*, p. 68.

think, not of writing new textbooks, but of revising what is now in existence – to make them more user-friendly for the least privileged, even as such teachers and students are texturally engaged? I do not believe the more privileged child would suffer from such a change, though I can foresee a major outcry. It must be repeated, to foster such freedom is simply to work at freedom in the sphere of necessity, otherwise ravaged by the ravages of political economy—no more than “the grounding condition [*Grundbedingung*] for the true realm of freedom,” always around the corner.³²

Shakespeare, Kafka, Tagore, Coetzee, Amartya Sen. Heavy hitters. My questions are banal. I am always energized by that paragraph in the third volume of *Capital* from which I quote above, and where Marx writes, in a high philosophical tone: “the true realm of freedom, the development of human powers as an end in itself begins beyond [the realm of necessity], though it can only flourish with this realm of necessity as its ground.” That sentence is followed by this one: “the reduction of the working day is its grounding condition.” In Marx’s text philosophy must thus displace itself into the everyday struggle. In my argument, literature, in so far as it is in the service of the emergence of the critical must also displace itself thus. Its task is to foster yet another displacement: into a work for the remote possibility of the precarious production of an infrastructure, that can in turn produce a Lucy or her focalizer, figuring forth an equality that takes disgrace in its stride.

No one will take this task seriously any longer. The point is funding.

³²Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3, p. 959.

