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Blanchot's "Reading" and my Reading of *Disgrace*

Kathryn Nicolai

It's summertime and I spend fifty minutes every morning on the Metro North. I take the window seat, even though I know it is less preferable to the common passenger and what my dad would call an "amateur commuter move." But I sit there anyways because it allows me to see the quiet suburban world as the train rushes past towards an uproarious city. The blurred images detach me from the somber suits, earbuds, and coffee mugs surrounding me. I can pretend I am not yet touched by the daily haul to work, by the lack of meaning a cubicle embodies. Today I've brought J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*. A book I ordered for a class titled "Human Rights Literature" that was unexpectedly cancelled. On the cover blares a gold emblem that says the novel won the Nobel prize in literature. It is esteemed, so I take it off my bookshelf and acknowledge it has value in being read. I have no background on the book other than it likely ties in to the subject matter of Human Rights. As the train sputters forward I start to read—a process and experience Maurice Blanchot analyzes in the essay "Reading" in his book *The Space of Literature*.

According to Blanchot, my years of schooling and my English major do not give me any edge over another reader. Blanchot introduces the act of reading stating, "reading requires no gifts at all and shows this appeal to a natural distinction for what it is. No one is gifted, be [s]he author or reader, and whoever feels that [s]he is feels primarily that [s]he is not—feels infinitely ill equipped absent from the power attributed to [her]."¹ It is *Disgrace* that holds the power. My sole meaning is in my embodiment of the reader. I am a passenger of both the Metro North and the words on the page in front of me. It is my ability as a reader not to know, but to feel and experience the trees fly past me in the window I sit next to and the words singing on the page in front of me. It is the experience and the uncertainty that carries me.

Perhaps I am already doing Blanchot a disservice, choosing *Disgrace* for its printed golden emblem, its Nobel prize. I am judging it by its cover, which deems it "good" and "canonical." But the cover and the merit of *Disgrace* cannot embody the experience of reading, as Blanchot states, "reading gives to the book the abrupt existence which the statue 'seems'

to get from the chisel alone... Somehow the book needs the reader to become a statue.”² Statues unfold to us visually—that in its spatial perception we affirm its existence. But a book can only unfold or exist for us as we read, as we graze over the text. But for reading, the experience is different. Books unfold themselves to us as we read. Looking at a statue would be the same as just looking at the front cover of a book such as *Disgrace* and deeming it ‘good’ because of its gold emblem announcing its Nobel prize. Reading allows the text to continue to show itself to us beyond the cover. Not until I am dancing along *Disgrace*’s words can I be engulfed with the experience the novel offers. Critics, such as those who decide the winner of the Nobel prize in literature, determine the good or bad in the book, which attempts to objectify or master it and mark it with or without a badge of merit on the front cover. *Disgrace* would fall in to this canon of good work as a Nobel prize winner bringing people like me to read it for its reputation. This mark of merit on the front cover minimizes *Disgrace* to an esteemed award. Blanchot’s thinking opposes the use of critics. In Blanchot’s writing reading is not about mastery or total comprehension, but the experience of unfolding that occurs when you read.

Although I am encountering the novel with knowledge of its scholarly praise, I have no working knowledge of its author J.M. Coetzee. To know the details about Coetzee’s life or his previous works would have tainted my experience with *Disgrace* further, according to Blanchot. The anonymity of the author is praised by Blanchot when he states, “every reading where consideration of the writer seems to play so great a role is an attack which annihilates [her] in order to give the work back to itself: back to its anonymous presence, to the violent, impersonal affirmation that it is.”³ Without knowing the circumstance of Coetzee I am free of assumptions. I allow my mind not to make judgements about the work or on how Coetzee would be attempting to portray certain storylines that connect to his life and history. I allow my heart to understand and feel solely the words and not the context in which they were written. I am not making specific conclusions based on what the text will mean because Coetzee wrote it, such as knowing that he is a South African writer who has experienced the apartheid and its impact. Instead, I’m pondering the meanings of the words, how it makes me feel and how it confuses me.

Blanchot further discusses the relationship the author has with the reader when he states, “the writer can never read [her] work for the very same reason which gives [her] the illusion that [s]he does. It has to escape from the one who makes it, complete itself by putting [her] at a distance, culminate in this ‘distancing’ which dispossesses [her] conclusively, this distancing which then, precisely, takes the form of the reading (and in which the reading takes form).”⁴ When an author is in the middle of her writing process, they read their own work and try to embody the role of the reader, but they cannot truly imitate the reader because the writer is too personally connected to the work. They know the author as themselves in a way that does not allow them to read without a fogged lens of pride or personal interpretation. It is this “distancing” that Blanchot discusses which allows the work to exist by itself and comes to fruition when read by the reader, not the author.

When I read I am not myself. I am not Kathryn Nicolai riding the Metro North working as an unpaid intern. I am not a twenty-year-old white female from a New York suburb. Instead I am empathetic. I am the characters the novel presents me. I walk in someone else’s shoes. I live a life that I know nothing about and start to have an idea about what this other life could mean as I flip the pages. Blanchot discusses the necessity of depersonalization, stating, “what most threatens reading is this: the reader’s reality, [her] personality, [her] immodesty, [her] stubborn insistence upon remaining [herself] in the face of what [s]he reads—a [wo]man who knows in general how to read.”⁵ If I were me when I read, I would not be able to feel the paralysis of experiencing rape that Lucy feels in *Disgrace*, nor the disconnect that occurs between Lucy and her father David after, nor David’s love and yearning to connect with Lucy despite his inability to comprehend how she might feel.

I could not even get a hint of the experience of these emotions if I were myself. It is only through the embodiment of these characters, not myself and my own thoughts about the world, that I am fully engulfed in the text and its world. It is through this depersonalization that I am altered, taking a piece of these characters with me when I get off the train and walk south towards Union Square. It is through Lucy and David that I understand the MeToo movement in a new way. I empathize with the survivor’s paralysis, the numerous reasons that keep survivors from pressing

charges and speaking out, and a male's inability to comprehend rape and its full effects. I hear David's concern on Lucy's apathy on staying slim and dressing nicely; I am not preaching feminist ideology on the male gaze and the limitation of women. I am listening. I am understanding and feeling as David. I undergo the same transition as David who slowly changes his values on animal rights and enjoys the companionship of animals by the end. Never before had I thought about or understood animal rights in the ways discussed in novel. It is through the empathy of reading that I am changed. I am no longer me when I read and I am different because I have read.

I did not read *Disgrace* for class nor did I write an essay on it trying to interpret its meaning. I did not master it or comprehend it. When I finished it I was confused. Nothing is resolved. The characters still have so much to cope with throughout the rest of their lives. There is a racial context to the novel I cannot seem to pin down. I sit in a puddle of confusion and without the instruction or analysis of a professor, I sit alone pondering what it all means. I close the pages of *Disgrace* from the window seat of the Metro North that allows me to experience and feel the world flashing before my eyes in a new perspective. In the same way, I see and feel life in a new way when I read in the way Blanchot describes. I will return to *Disgrace* not to master it, but to experience it again, allowing it to unfold itself to me in a new way, allowing myself to become someone I do not yet know.

Notes

1. Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, Trans. by Ann Smock. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), 190-1.
2. *Ibid.*, 192-3.
3. *Ibid.*, 192.
4. *Ibid.*, 199.
5. *Ibid.*, 197.

Bibliography

Blanchot, Maurice. *The Space of Literature*. Translated by Ann Smock. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982.