

Critical Essay

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Agree to (Dis) agree: A Shifting Point of View of the Disgraceful Other David Lurie in J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (o.p. 1999)

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Abstract: This essay offers a critical reading of J. M. Coetzee's 库切 novelistic legacy from both *Disgrace* (o.p. 1999) and *Elizabeth Costello* (o.p. 2003). It explores the problematic issues with representations of animals and its inter-“connection” between literature and the larger physical world (Mohamad Ali Hassan Alakhdar, 2019; Alakhdar, 2012; Alakhdar, 2019). On the other hand, it mitigates the public narrative web of social others within anthropocentric and biocentric perspectives (Wagner 2017; Miller 米勒 1988; Watt 1957; Hale 多萝西•J. 黑尔 1989; Hale 多萝西•J. 黑尔 1998; Johnson 2002; Mahfouz-Brown 張仲思 March 5, 2015; Caillois 1942; Zhu 2024; Zola 1960-1967; Lukács 1950; Lukács 1920).

Keywords: J. M. Coetzee 库切 ; Realism; *Elizabeth Costello*; Ethics; Academic libraries; Instructional design; Library instruction; Information literacy; Active learning



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1. Prologue: Curriculum and Pedagogy

Professor Dorothy J. Hale's 多萝西·J. 黑尔教授 undergraduate seminar English 180N: The Novel as the Book of Other People enlightened me with its instrumental pedagogy of novel and ethics in Spring 2016 at University of California, Berkeley 加州大学伯克利分校. While enrolling in the course, then I translated part of my English paper for the course assignments into Chinese, and published the Chinese selections on my professional WeChat blog on May 30, 2016. My translation experience includes an in-person interview of an Editorial Internship for Center for the Art of Translation, Two Lines Press in the room Suite 700 on 582 Market Street in San Francisco in 2015 (Hale 多萝西·J. 黑尔 1989; Hale Summer 1994). The introduction to Two Lines Press also benefits from the mentorship of Dr. Jessica Crewe of COMLIT R1B - English Composition in Connection with the Reading of World Literature (Taubes Autumn 2023; Taubes & Weiner 2022; Hale May 2009; Hale 2009; Galloway & English June 27 2013; Johnson 2001; Rithmire & Chen 2021; Hale Autumn 1988; Xue 2023; He 何剑叶 2008; Rivera 2008; Vanderbilt 2008; Lam [美國] 林凌瀚 August 31 2010; Lam [美國] 林凌瀚 & Porter [美國] 戴利婭·波特 2010; Trilling 特里林 1948), Brown 張仲思 November 11 2019; Brown 張仲思 2025; Davidson 2009; Harding 1985; Harper & Brown 張仲思 2024; Osborne 2014; Osborne 2010; Osborne 2018; Osborne & American Council of Learned Societies 1987; Stewart 1997), and her recommendation letter for my college essays and educational credentials at University of California, Berkeley 加州大学伯克利分校 (Brodhead 1993; Clark & Holquist 1984; Hale 多萝西·J. 黑尔 2009; Dreyfus & Rabinow 1983; Booth 布斯 1988; Kärkkäinen & Joo 2019; Kärkkäinen & Joo 2019 2021; He 何剑叶 2008).

For the English 180N curriculum with Professor Dorothy J. Hale's 多萝西·J. 黑尔教授, the syllabus of ethics and other people incorporated classroom discussions of J. M. Coetzee's 库切 *Elizabeth Costello* (o.p. 2003): "Realism," "The Novel in Africa," "The Lives of Animals: The Philosophers and the Animals"; "The Problem of Evil"; "Eros," *Disgrace* (o.p. 1999), George Eliot's 乔治·艾略特 *Middlemarch* (o.p. 1874), William Faulkner's 威廉·福克纳 *As I Lay Dying* (o.p. 1930), Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance* (o.p. 1852), Virginia Woolf's 弗吉尼亚·

伍尔夫 "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," "Women in Fiction," *The Waves* and Zadie Smith's 扎迪·史密斯 *On Beauty* (o.p. 2005) (Taubes Autumn 2023; Wimsatt 1954; Smith 史密斯 2009; Watt 1957; Spivak 斯皮瓦克 1999; Gérard 1980; Naiman 1998; Brown 張仲思 2024; Gate Jr. 1988; Harper & Brown 張仲思 2024; Brook (加)) 卜正民 2023; Dreyfus & Rabinow 1983; Kristeva 1977; Derrida 1997; Derrida 2002; Derrida 1999; Prince 1982; Hale 多萝西·J. 黑尔 Summer 1994; Trilling 特里林 1948). Hale 多萝西·J. 黑尔 raises the issue of academic debates with the artificial plot of novels, and further produces a social web along with the mobile nature of citationality. Noted by Hale 多萝西·J. 黑尔 in the article "On Beauty as Beautiful?: The Problem of Novelistic Aesthetics by Way of Zadie Smith 扎迪·史密斯," Smith 史密斯 "puts at the center of her novel the debate between two art history professors on the nature of beauty in painting, a move that clearly invites the reader to take sides" (Hale 多萝西·J. 黑尔 2012; Kermode October 6 2005; Loo, Eifler, Smith, Pendse, He, 何剑叶 Sholinbeck, Tanasse, Nelson, Dupuis 2016; Sommer 2007; Taubes Autumn 2023; Smith 2005; Smith 2007; Smith 2009; Wall 2008; He 何剑叶 2008; Rastogi 2022; Clayton 1989; Fayard 2022; Lyons 2021; Trilling 特里林 1948). In addition to Smith's 史密斯 novelistic representations of positionality in *On Beauty* (o.p. 2005), this essay then dramatizes the negotiation among the novel theory over the nineteenth-century, twentieth-century and contemporary literature by J. M. Coetzee 库切 in the twenty-first century.

2. The Web of the Other

In her article "Ethics and Politics in Tagore, Coetzee 库切, and Certain Scenes of Teaching," Gayatri Spivak 斯皮瓦克 argues that J. M. Coetzee's 库切 *Disgrace* (o.p. 1999) uses narrative techniques such as focalization and counterfocalization that invite readers "to taste the impossible status of being figured as the object in the web of the other" (Spivak 斯皮瓦克 2001). I agree with her that shifts between the focalization of David Lurie and a counterfocalization confined to Lucy effectively produce "dramatic irony" and "provocation." (Spivak 斯皮瓦克 2001). However, the theory of alterity that she finds in Martin Luther King's speech is not very persuasive because it contradicts Coetzee's 库切 representation of otherness in both *Disgrace* (o.p.

1999) and *Elizabeth Costello* (o.p. 2003).

Spivak's 斯皮瓦克 interpretation of Martin Luther King reveals her limited understanding of the enemy other, which runs counter to Coetzee's 库切 intention to present a potentiality of fictional otherness's ethical transformation. An analysis of Elizabeth Costello's lecture and a conversation between John Bernard and Susan Moebius discusses Coetzee's 库切 emphasis on shifting point of view and the use of animals to represent the human other. Since Spivak 斯皮瓦克 fails to discuss Coetzee's 库切 two narrative techniques—the shifting point of view and using animal other to present human other, I will reexamine *Disgrace* (o.p. 1999) to show how Coetzee's 库切 use of narrative techniques create sympathy and understanding in a way explained by Elizabeth Costello. This sympathetic perspective on David Lurie further reflects Spivak's 斯皮瓦克 unpersuasive reading of *Disgrace* (o.p. 1999).

Martin Luther King proclaimed in his speech “Beyond Vietnam” that: “the more difficult but no less necessary task is to speak for those who have been designated as our enemies” (King 1974). Spivak 斯皮瓦克 comments that:

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. (Spivak 斯皮瓦克 2001)

Although it can be a literary impulse to “imagine the other who does not resemble the self,” Spivak 斯皮瓦克 considers King's claim to imagine the enemy other as a “political theology” rather than a literary tradition. The same gesture to think from the point of the other loses its literary meaning to understand the deep consciousness of the other in the historical or social environment. Although valuing realism, Spivak 斯皮瓦克 paradoxically devalues historical accounts of “which has been possible” and appreciates fiction as a genre that produces “the probable” (Spivak 斯皮瓦克 2001; Paige 2011; Paige 2020; Paige 1 June 2021; Naiman 1998; Butler 巴特勒 2003; Brown 張仲思 December 9 2023; Brown 張仲思 December 1 2011; Zhu April 9 2025; Zhu August 7 2025; Zhu April 9 2025). A (dis)agreement with Martin Luther King to think of the other for a political purpose leads Spivak 斯皮瓦克 to neglect the significance of a reflection on a new category of otherness—the antagonistic or the evil

other—that King brings up in the novelistic tradition.

3. Word-mirror in *Elizabeth Costello* (o.p. 2003)

Spivak's 斯皮瓦克 refusal to think from the point of view of an enemy other further limits her understanding of the realism and the ethical transformation presented in *Disgrace*. The author J. M. Coetzee 库切 presents an obsolete realism—“word-mirror”—in his other book *Elizabeth Costello* (o.p. 2003), which Spivak 斯皮瓦克 agrees with, through a mediation of an academic discourse on realism by his alter ego—Costello:

We used to believe that when the text said, “On the table stood a glass of water,” there was indeed a table, and a glass of water on it, and we had only to look in the word-mirror of the text to see them. (Coetzee 库切 2003)

Realism in the sense of “word-mirror” invites the reader to perceive the direct and literary meaning of words: on the table stands a glass of water means that there is a table and a glass of water on it. The “word-mirror” is broken when a novel becomes a self and has its alterity. Realism then lies in the self as well as the alterity. Since the novel is a book of other people, the reader can approach the alterity of a novel through a mimetic gesture to understand points of view of others. As Spivak 斯皮瓦克 refuses to think from the point of view of David Lurie—the disgraceful other—in *Disgrace* (o.p. 1999), Spivak 斯皮瓦克 interprets David from what she reads from the words all the time, and invites readers to take up the ethical task of reading David as a villain—a figure directly presented in the novel. On the other hand, Coetzee 库切 creates David from a human point of view and invites readers to learn to “understand and sympathize” him (Coetzee 库切 1999). Similar to Martin Luther King, Coetzee 库切 expects readers to take up the ethical task of imagining the point of view of a disgraceful character—David—and trying to understand his feelings. Thus, Spivak 斯皮瓦克 extends her limited interpretation of King's view to approach David—a disgraceful other, but contradicts Coetzee's 库切 intention to highlight the otherness of an immoral other in *Disgrace* (o.p. 1999).

Coetzee 库切 further reveals the significance of shifting points of view through a conversation between John Bernard and Susan Moebius in *Elizabeth Costello* (o.p. 2003):

‘But my mother has been a man,’ he persists. ‘She has also been a dog. She can think her way into other people, into other existences. I have read her; I know. It is within her powers. Isn’t that what is most important about fiction: that it takes us out of ourselves, into other lives?’ (Coetzee 库切 2003)

The passage emphasizes the significance of shifting points of view from oneself to the other in terms of both writers and readers. In contrast to Spivak’s 斯皮瓦克 insistence of the factuality of words, John Bernard comments on his mother’s investment in writing that writing novels relies on the author’s imagination of the feelings and environment of others; reading novels depends on readers’ investment in taking out of the self and shifting into others’ lives. To embody a shift of points of view, Coetzee 库切 enables Elizabeth Costello to transcend conventional binaries such as man and woman as well as human and animal. Although Coetzee’s 库切 discussion of the value of shifting points of view only accounts for only part of the lecture on realism in *Elizabeth Costello* (o.p. 2003), the notion of shifting points of view becomes a remarkable instrument to understand the disgraceful other and to show the limitation of Spivak’s 斯皮瓦克 point of view if we apply this narrative technique to *Disgrace* (o.p. 1999).

In *Disgrace* (o.p. 1999), at first David Lurie declines to abandon his own perspective to think for the alternative other. He refuses to read Melanie’s statement or defend himself in any sincere form. Although his colleague counsels him to confess his misconduct and apologize for Melanie, David refers to counseling as a “re-education”—a “reformation of the character” (Coetzee 库切 1999; Butler 巴特勒 1990; Butler 巴特勒 2005; Derrida 1997; Derrida 1999; Prince 1999; Spivak 斯皮瓦克 1999; Brown 張仲思 December 1 2011; Brown 張仲思 December 9 2023; Brown 張仲思 2024; Brown 張仲思 December 2018; Kitzinger 2016; Rader 1973; Zhu June 27 2025;). He devalues the practice of confession and disbelieves sympathy by claiming: “One can’t plead guilty to charges of turpitude and expect a flood of sympathy in return” (Coetzee 库切 1999). His stubbornness of sticking to his shameful self exempts himself from the potentiality to think of the victimized other—Melanie—and hence leads him to be resigned from the college. In contrast to his firm rejection to shift his point of view into

Melanie’s, David repeated attempts to understand how Lucy feels after the rape. He worriedly inquires of Lucy: “Then help me. Is it some form of private salvation you are trying to work out? Do you hope you can expiate the crime of the past by suffering in the present?” (Coetzee 库切 1999). David’s willingness to shift his point of view into Lucy’s not only manifests a father’s love and care for his daughter, but also implies an internal change undertaken in this disgraceful self. David’s change manifested through his willingness to shift his point of view validates the sympathetic point of view Coetzee 库切 intends to produce. It is the fluctuation of a character’s personality rather than consistently realistic representation that reflects human ethicality. Even a scandalous other David Lurie has the chance to reform himself in the novel.

4. Ethical Perspective and Animal Other

Besides the shifting point of view, Coetzee 库切 also uses animals to represent the human other in *Elizabeth Costello* (o.p. 2003). In her lecture, Costello comments on Kafka’s story of Red Peter. The story maintains that the ape is not an ape as the text suggests. Maybe it is a human who deludes himself into thinking others as an ape, or maybe a human being presents himself as an ape for rhetorical purposes with heavy irony: “we are just performers speaking out parts” (Coetzee 库切 2003). Therefore, the formation of an animal image relies on a human’s shifting point of view and the description of the animal presents the alternative category—human—in an indirect manner. The projection of the human through the depiction of animals being reciprocally improves the human subject.

Coetzee’s 库切 strategy to present the human other through the lens of an animal is also evident in David Lurie’s attitude towards animals in *Disgrace* (o.p. 1999). In his conversation with Lucy about animal being, David states that:

“As for animals, by all means let us be kind to them. But let us not lose perspective. We are of a different order of creation from the animals. Not higher, necessarily, just different. So if we are going to be kind, let it be out of simple generosity, not because we feel guilty or fear retribution.” (Coetzee 库切 1999)

When he first moves to Lucy’s farm, David consciously sets a distinctive boundary between human and animal, puts human in a superior position and refuses to “lose

perspective” to think of an animal other. Human kindness to animals stems from a commanding gesture of giving out generous sympathy rather than subjective guilt or the fear of retribution. David’s description of animals betrays his personhood of the moment: he remains as the arrogant and selfish man who values his personal desire over everything else, or as the “servant of Eros” as he calls himself. His refusal to shift his point of view embodies his pretentious self-superiority and his so-called kindness and generosity to animals reversely manifests his indifference to animal others.

Spivak 斯皮瓦克 captures David’s disgrace—“a monster”—and points out a focalization of David in *Disgrace*, but she fails to recognize David’s ethical change (Coetzee 库切 1999). Yet Coetzee 库切 depicts David’s ethical transformation through his changed attitude to animals. After working at the dog clinic, David decides to return to Lucy’s farm and works with Bev Shaw to euthanize animals:

He and Bev do not speak. He has learned by now, from her, to concentrate all his attention on the animal they are killing, giving it what he no longer has difficulty in calling by its proper name: love. (Coetzee 库切 1999)

David observes Bev Shaw’s concentration on “the animals they are killing.” He internalizes that concentration as his new ethics and develops his “love” for animals. It is ironic that the practice of depriving dog’s lives teaches David to love and care about animals. Abandoning his self-absorption, David starts to reflect on his former self: “Do I have to change, he thinks? Do I have to become like Bev Shaw?” (Coetzee 库切 1999). He starts to think in the place of the animals—the victim—and thinks of himself into the story of a dog: “He does not understand what is happening to him. Until now he has been more or less indifferent to animals” (Coetzee 库切 1999). He “[accepts] disgrace as [his] state of being” but still aspires for a betterment of himself as he “[lives] it out from day to day” (Coetzee 库切 1999). By shifting his point of view to the disempowered animals, he discards his self-superiority and forces himself to experience the feeling of being euthanized, of being victimized. David’s shifted point of view from a human to a dog produces an empathy between him and animals, and arouses his “love” for animals.

David’s thinking from a dog’s point of view also

resonates with Elizabeth Costello’s ethical perspective, but they show their affection for dogs in different ways. Costello chooses not to kill dogs but attempts to transform the world instead; regarding killing animals as part of a social necessity, David will not change the world, but only kill and love animals at the same time. David’s paradoxical ending signifies a moment of sympathy and understanding suggested by Coetzee 库切. The former “servant of Eros” ends up alone with no children or wives by the side in a farm. He loses his former indifference to animals and learns from Bev Shaw to be immersed into the practice of dealing with animals. David internalizes what he observes from Bev Shaw and reshapes himself as a compassionate person. His gesture to deprive the lives of animals symbolizes an abstraction of losing his soul (the disgraceful one) as if he is being euthanized by Bev Shaw. His redemption and relief come at the price of his moral struggle of killing lives and his broken up family. At this moment, Coetzee 库切 does not expect readers to keep condemning David’s disgrace. He expects readers to identify him as the disempowered other rather than the disgraceful other, and invites readers to take up the ethical task of rendering David’s sympathy and understanding. Thus, Spivak’s 斯皮瓦克 reading of David as a villain all the time fails to recognize David’s internal change and to grasp Coetzee’s 库切 compassionate intention.

5. Ethics and Debates

“Within the Anglo-American tradition, the novel’s ethical value has regularly been linked to its capacity to produce in the reader not just emotion *per se* but social emotions, ones with profound transformative potential” (Hale 多萝西·J. 黑尔 2007). Far removed from Booth’s centrality of the Chicago-School ethical theory (Booth 布斯 1988; Perkins 1989; Horton 1996), Hale’s ethical inquiry 多萝西·J. 黑尔 makes a case to launch new ethical movements and eventually terms the “new ethics” in *The Novel and the New Ethics* (Hale 多萝西·J. 黑尔 2020; Hale 多萝西·J. 黑尔 May 2009; Case 1999; Butler 巴特勒 1990; Brown 張仲思, Statman & Sui 2021; Kristeva 1977;). In her vision, the “novelistic ethics of alterity as a cultural norm” is a “much-needed research project” for elementary-school teaching and secondary schools (Hale 2020).

Over the course, Professor Dorothy J. Hale’s 多萝

西 •J. 黑尔教授 invited Professor Laura Wagner to present her dissertation “Novel Reading: Pedagogies of Form in George Eliot 乔治 •艾略特 and Thomas Mann” (Wagner 2017; Miller 米勒 1988; Fischer 2007; Watt 1957; Hale 多萝西 •J. 黑尔 1989; Hale 多萝西 •J. 黑尔 1998; Johnson 2002; Mahfouz-Brown 張仲思 March 5, 2015; Caillois 1942; Zhu 2024; Zola 1960-1967; Lukács 1950; Lukács 1920) as a guest lecture. Before taking Professor Hale’s course, Professor Francisco Brito first introduced me to the scholarship of Professor Laura Wagner (Brito 2018; Toback January 1 2017; Toback 2022; Vogel 傅高義 1990; Vogel 傅高義 2012; Vogel 傅高義 2013; Owen 宇文所安 May 2003; Brown 張仲思 June 2024; Ronell 2024; Hoyos 2015; Woloch 2003).

Juxtaposition of analyses of passages from *Elizabeth Costello* (o.p. 2003) and *Disgrace* (o.p. 1999) suggests that another two narrative techniques—a shifting point of view and the use of animals to represent the human other—are applicable to interpret *Disgrace* (o.p. 1999). Although Gayatri Spivak’s 斯皮瓦克 analysis of focalization and counterfocalization in *Disgrace* (o.p. 1999) help readers to approach the relationship between David and Lucy, her refusal of “[imagining] the other who does not resemble the self” (Spivak 斯皮瓦克 2001) leads her to fail to touch upon Coetzee’s 库切 humane writing intention behind a disgraceful character like David Lurie. Spivak 斯皮瓦克 misses the ethical task of giving out sympathy and understanding through the shifting point of view, which Coetzee 库切 expects from readers.

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While editing this article in retrospect, I translate author’s names from English to Chinese with reference to Wang Changcai’s 王长才 choice of Chinese characters in his translation of Dorothy J. Hale’s 多萝西 •J. 黑尔 article “Henry James and the Novelistic Aesthetics of Alterity: Othering Maisie 亨利 •詹姆斯与他异性小说美学：他者化梅西.” Professor Wang Changcai 王长才教授 is a Professor in the Department of Chinese Language and Literature 中文系, School of Humanities 人文学院, Xipu campus, Southwest Jiaotong University 西南交通大学, Western Hi-tech Zone, Chengdu 成都, Sichuan 四川, 611756, P. R. China. Part I of Wang’s translation project is sponsored by the Scientific Research Foundation (SRF) for the Returned Overseas Chinese Scholars (ROCS), State Education Ministry (SEM) 教育部留学回国人员科研启动基金项目 [教外司留(2015) 1098] and 四川省社科规划项目 and Standing Committee of Sichuan Provincial People’s Congress for research projects on social sciences 四川省社科规划项目 (SC15B089). Part II of Wang’s translation research project is funded by National Natural Science Foundation of China 国家自然科学基金委员会 (16BZW013).

Availability of Supporting Data

The dataset for FairFace is available at <https://github.com/joojs/fairface> (Kärkkäinen and Joo, 2021).

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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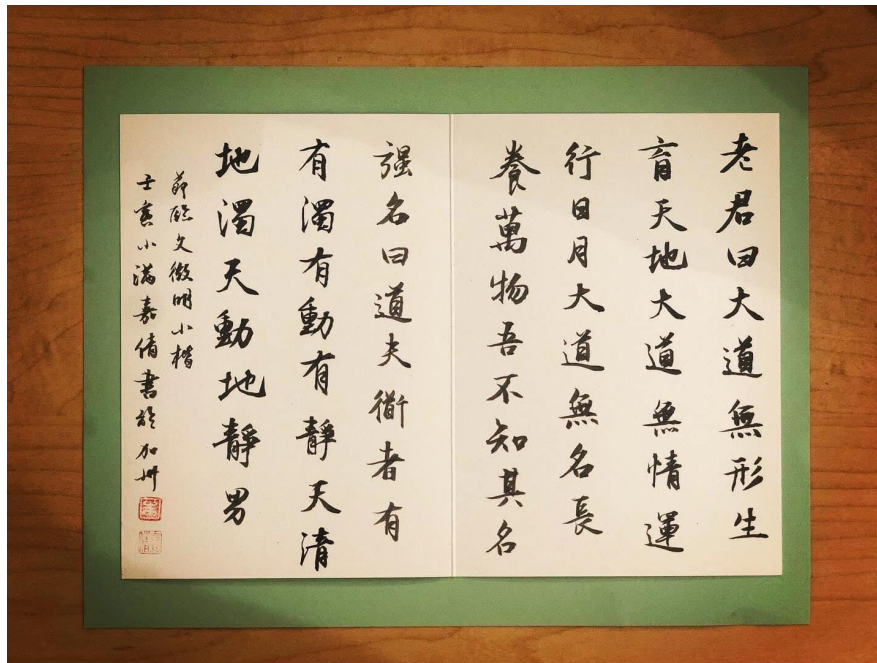
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Appendix A: Ethics and the Art of Calligraphy



My calligraphy artwork of the Chinese Classic *Dao De Jing*, written by 'the Old Master Laozi.'

Title: Fragment of a Manuscript - After Wen Zhengming's 文徵明 *The Scripture of Purity and Stillness* 《太上老君常說清靜經》

Calligrapher: Vivien Jiaqian Zhu 朱嘉倩

Period: Contemporary

Date: May 21, 2022 壬寅•小满 in Lunar Calendar

Culture: China

Medium: Ink on Louis I. Kahn postcards from Yale University Art Gallery; mounted

Classification: Calligraphy

Appendix B: License from The Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge



Thomas Hardy, 1923, by Augustus John, 1879-1961,
[https://fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/explore-our-collection/
highlights/1116](https://fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/explore-our-collection/highlights/1116).

Order Reference Number: 012-24-25

Museum Accession No. 1116

Artist/Maker: Augustus John

Title of Work: Thomas Hardy

Reproduction Size: Full Page

300dpi publication quality TIFF file

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