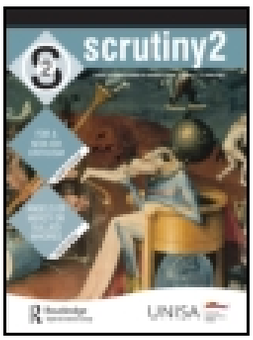

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Truth and reconciliation in JM Coetzee's *Disgrace*

JANE POYNER

In *Disgrace* Lurie's sense of guilt for his exploitative attitude towards women symbolically configures a sense of collective responsibility of oppressors generally – and of the white writer in particular – for a history of abuse

Lizalise idinga lakho

The forgiveness of sins makes a person whole

– *Xhosa hymn*[1]

Set in post-apartheid South Africa, JM Coetzee's Booker Prize-winning novel *Disgrace* (1999a), through the portrayal of the "trial" of its protagonist, Professor David Lurie, represents an allegory of the troubled Truth and Reconciliation Commission within the context of a nation in transition. The problem the new South Africa faces is how blacks and whites can live together, which can, in part, be answered through reconciliation with, rather than recrimination of, the former oppressor. In *Disgrace* Lurie's sense of guilt for his exploitative attitude towards women symbolically configures a sense of collective responsibility of oppressors generally – and of the white writer in particular – for a history of abuse.[2]

Coetzee's *oeuvre*, like the contexts in which it is generally set, reflects a process of change: his politics and literary technique are revealed to be in a condition of flux. Of central concern in both his fiction and his critical works is the paradox faced by white postcolonial writers: namely, while striving to narrativise the lost or silenced (hi)stories of the oppressed (black) Other, they risk assuming the authoritative (and hence, by analogy, colonialist) stance they seek to challenge. (In his novels these writers are frequently "lost in the maze of doubting", their authorial authority subjected to self-interrogation.)[3] Such issues are made complex, some would say undermined, by Coetzee's concern for the production of aesthetic art, realised in his peculiar brand of postmodern postcolonialism. In his fiction, the figure of the white writer is frequently confronted by the dichotomy between committed writing and aestheticism – a debate fundamental to South African critical discourse, and which has most famously been outlined by Albie Sachs's paper "Preparing ourselves for freedom", in which Sachs (1990:19) asks if South Africans "have an artistic and cultural vision that corresponds to [the] current phase in which a new South African nation is emerging".

Coetzee has been charged with being politically evasive: his novels, which refuse clarity in meaning and do not offer closure, have been dismissed as failing overtly to address the oppression instituted by South Africa's egregious regime (now passed). Yet, as Graham Pechey (1998:67) suggests, they effect a peculiar brand of "highly self-conscious postcoloniality" through their narrative mode, and thus, for the white writer, their very evasiveness constitutes a scrupulously defined political position: as (unwilling) representative of the colonial oppressor, Coetzee refuses to assert the (hi)stories of the Other, to impose meaning on them.

Disgrace addresses all of these issues, and is, with regard to his previous works, a novel in which these concerns are reformulated and revised within the context of a post-apartheid age. My essay will read *Disgrace* as an allegory of the Truth Commission within the framework of (secular) confession outlined by Coetzee

(1992:243) in his essay "Confession and double thoughts", which is based on his reading of Rousseau, Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, and is underpinned by the question, "What is truth?", a question which holds resonance within postcolonial discourse generally. To support this analysis I will refer to *White writing* (1988), in which Coetzee offers a theoretical overview of the history of white literature in South Africa, and to his philosophical *The lives of animals* (1999b), where debates raised by issues of animal rights are played out. In the latter text, Coetzee's writing is followed by "Reflections": four critical responses to his work from (real-life) representatives of a range of academic disciplines.

A kind of *bildungsroman*, *Disgrace* traces the (hi)story of its Byronic protagonist Lurie through a personal moral and ethical transition, which in turn reflects upon South Africa's own state of change. Lurie, ironically recalling Byron's own salaciousness, abuses his status as lecturer by seducing Melanie, a young female student, (whom we suppose is black, or "coloured", since Lurie renames her Meláni, meaning "the dark one").[4] His punishment for their affair is reminiscent of the abhorrent Immorality Act of 1949, instituted by the apartheid regime.[5]

Given the opportunity to repent his so-called "crime", he passes through a process of confession, namely: transgression, confession, penitence and absolution (Coetzee 1992:252). Transgression, Coetzee notes, is not a fundamental component of such a transition, and hence, in *Disgrace*, Lurie's supposed culpability for his misdemeanour becomes abstracted from the process of confession in which he is embroiled. Coetzee (1992:249) locates the dilemma facing the confessant – and by association, the white writer – as being the problem of how to end the cycle of self-analysis and self-doubt into which he inevitably falls, which is, as in postmodern fiction, the problem of closure. Of confession Paul de Man (explicating Rousseau, Coetzee 1992:267) writes: "Each new stage in the unveiling suggests a deeper shame, a greater impossibility to reveal, and a greater satisfaction in outwitting this impossibility." Hinging on the twin concepts of "truth" and "sincerity", "truth-telling and self-recognition, deception and self-deception" are problems which will undermine the rehabilitation of the confessant. Absolution, or "reconciliation", as the "indispensable goal of all confession", involves negotiation between, and healing in, both victim and abuser alike, and entails the "liberation from the oppression of the memory" (1992:252).

Lurie is representative of the dislocated post-apartheid white writer. "Adjunct" professor of communications at a third-rate university,[6] he has written three poorly received books, including *Wordsworth and the burden of the past*, which symbolises Lurie's own struggle with accepting responsibility for his life, and analogously represents the burden of guilt experienced by white South African liberals for complicity in their country's brutal history. Lurie (Coetzee 1999a:46, 116) is introduced as a "disgraced disciple of Wordsworth", who now, later in his career, has turned his academic eye towards the life and work of the scabrous Byron, "celebrant of the material world" (Claridge 1992:216). Wordsworth, in contrast, "never overtly prescribed a 'decadent' Romantic aestheticism in his prose writings" (Bourke 1993:40). His poetry, the poet declares in *Poems in two volumes*, sets out "to teach the young and the gracious of any age [to become] more actively and securely virtuous" (Bourke 1993: 41).

Lurie is in the process of imagining his operetta *Byron in Italy* which, ironically paralleling his own life, recounts Byron's flight to Italy to avoid a scandal, and his "last big love-affair", with Teresa (Coetzee 1999a:15). Intruding on a seminar group led by Lurie, Melanie's boyfriend offers a response to the lecturer's request for a definition of the word "erring" from Byron's poem "Lara": "He does what he feels like. He doesn't care if it's good or bad. He just does it" (33). As Lurie points out, the poem alludes to Lucifer,[7] whose name recalls both "Lurie" and "Lucy" (Lurie's daughter),[8] "fallen angels" (32). Byron, the libertine, is counterpointed by Wordsworth, the romantic, with a dichotomy between the two (libertine/romantic, metropolitan/rural) running throughout the text. The opposition envisaged therein

represents Lurie's own angst-ridden psyche, not only his moral self-interrogation, but also his concern for his own literary production. As Lurie is cast into a spiralling cycle of confession, he battles with his creative processes, in what configures a renegotiation of his worthiness as a scholar in parallel with his moral and ethical re-evaluation, and which in turn is comparable to the repositioning of the white writer in the nascent state. Lurie thus becomes the locus of the long-running debate within postcolonial fiction, and more specifically South African cultural production: namely, the aforementioned dichotomy between committed writing and aestheticism. (Much recent cultural materialist criticism of Romanticism also locates the poets' expression of this conflict between art and the politicisation of culture.)[9]

In broad terms, the Romantic tradition is underpinned by a "crisis of authority" (Bourke 1993:47), which, in *Disgrace*, under the tenets of postcolonial theory, is ironically inflected by the Romantic poets' necessarily authoritative position as representatives of the (Western) literary canon. Such poets struggled with the relation between subject and object, or Other (Claridge 1992:241), again, with resonance for postcolonial narratives. Wordsworth, who is frequently read in a reductionist way as a "nature" poet, was especially concerned with projecting the Imagination through his depiction of the pastoral. Like his fellow Romanticists, he strove for "truth" in his poetry, that is, a truthful, or naturalistic representation of the Imagination (Easthope 1993:6). His writing, Richard Bourke (1993:41) has asserted, was politically motivated to instigate "a patrimonial order nurtured by its agrarian base". As a second-generation Romantic poet, Byron – like Lurie, a "man of the city" – was disparaging of Wordsworth's work and felt betrayed by the latter's shift from his previously radical political position to one of reactionary conservatism (Everest 1990:79).

In *White writing,* Coetzee (1988: 171) has located what he calls the "Wordsworthian question": "In what ways have I been moulded by the landscape in which I have lived?", a question which is generally inverted by early European travellers in South Africa, who were able only to conceptualise the African landscape within a European schema (39). In discussion with his students, Lurie locates just such a "Wordsworthian moment", but, he implies, this can be understood only by referring to the Western literary canon, to *"the great archetypes of the imagination we carry within us"* (emphasis added) (23).

Failing to achieve spontaneity – as propounded by Wordsworth – in writing *Byron in Italy*, Lurie strives to "give voice to Teresa", Byron's mistress, to attain subjectivity through her. Indeed, recent feminist critics of the male Romantics have argued that these poets strove for autonomy and innovation through their representations of the (female) Other, for the "aggrandizement of the male literary consciousness" (Claridge 1992:16–17). Ironically, Lurie ultimately finds inspiration for his work by turning to the "comic", (taking up his daughter's toy banjo to compose his operetta), and by immersing himself further in the psyche of the Teresa character.[10]

Disillusioned as a literary critic, disgraced by his "crime" and irreparably marked by the events which have unfolded, Lurie, figurehead of white patriarchy, who comes to identify increasingly with Teresa rather than Byron, reformulates his thinking: he draws the conclusion that *Byron in Italy*, like he himself and whites generally, "is going nowhere" (214). He reimagines his "Byron" text, (the original conception of which failed since it did not "come from the heart" (181)), whilst at the same time revising his own interpretation of the land (Lucy's homestead) within a Wordsworthian schema. On first sight, he has described the farm as "poor land, poor soil ... Exhausted. Good only for goats" (64); now he recognises the scene's Romantic potential, subsequently reassessing his earlier, bleak evaluation to create a wholly Wordsworthian pastoral idyll:

> The wind drops. There is a moment of utter stillness which he would wish prolonged for ever: the gentle sun, the stillness of mid-afternoon, bees busy in a field of flowers; and at the centre of the picture a young woman, *das ewig Weibliche*, lightly pregnant, in a straw sunhat. A scene ready-made for a Sargent or a Bonnard. City boys like him; but even city boys can recognise beauty when they see it, can have their breath taken away. (218)

Lurie's "return" to, or reaffirmation of, a Wordsworthian ethic in his quest for absolution would accommodate Richard Bourke's claim (1993:41) that Wordsworth is a figure who "poetically assuages, reconciles and redeems"; and Stephen Prichett's

sentiment (Bourke 1993:42) that he practises "the healing art". Wordsworth's art was, moreover, informed by Rousseau's *Confessions*, an inflection integrated into Lurie's confesional narrative.

Hauled before the University's disciplinary committee, Lurie is promised that in confessing the "truth" he will be absolved of his misdemeanour, analogous to the amnesty granted to those guilty of human rights abuses by the Truth Commission, a Commission which, in *Country of my skull*, Antjie Krog (1999:262) claims, "concurs with the universal view that the Afrikaner is guilty. We have betrayed civilisation and its values. We have brought shame and disgrace upon our heads". However, Krog's account expresses the self-aggrandising guilt of the Afrikaner liberal: the "apologies" she submits for an inadvertent complicity in the apartheid regime recall the Christian ethic of confession and repentance and offer little in the way of progress towards a unified nation. Similarly, the Truth Commission itself is formulated around a Christian rationale: overseen by its chairperson, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, it is concerned with uncovering the "truth" of South Africa's tragic past rather than with delivering justice, and thus, as a means of making reparations for abuses perpetrated under apartheid, is insubstantial. For instance, resources such as land have not been redistributed under the new Constitution. Despite these criticisms, the Commission has facilitated the revealing of histories that would otherwise have remained locked in the past, and has refused to grant amnesty to those whose crimes were deemed beyond redemption. Krog herself is useful in pointing out that within such bodies there has always been the danger of scapegoating, the scapegoat representing a means of expiating the majority's guilt. She cites (1999:24) the Polish philosopher Mischnik's remark that: "If you look for a scapegoat, and you find one and you make him the devil ... then you yourself become the angel." She writes (1999:16): "If it [the Commission] sees truth as the widest possible compilation of people's perceptions, stories, myths and experiences, it will have chosen to restore memory and foster a new humanity, and perhaps that is justice in its deepest sense." In *Disgrace*, Lurie has been made a scapegoat figure, his daughter suggests (91).

Krog pinpoints the aforementioned need for the distinction to be made between "truth" and "justice" in the quest for reconciliation. She writes: "If [the Commission's] interest in truth is linked only to amnesty and compensation, then it will have chosen not truth, but justice" (16). Lurie, however, refuses to validate the university's version of the truth (reformation reminds him too much of Mao's China, 66), accepting only that justice be done, his challenge being philosophical rather than legal (47).[11] He refuses to submit to public abnegation, deeming the institution's demands to be politically motivated: an apology given under these constraints would be insincere. He explains to Lucy: "They wanted a spectacle ... A TV show, in fact" (66). Rousseau has argued (Coetzee 1992:271) that the spectacle of confession is unworkable, for "brought into the public eye, [confessions] are revealed to be merely desires like everyone else's". Realising that what is demanded of him is an apology "in the spirit of repentance", Lurie contends that such a concept is "beyond the scope of the law", belonging to "another universe of discourse" (1999a:55, 58).[12] A member of the committee charges him with being evasive, (reminiscent of the charge laid against Coetzee by his critics), and of mockery, that he "accepts the charge only in name". The University requires more than a plea of guilty: he must offer an apology that comes from the heart (54). Questions of sincerity, as those expressed here, have been realised in their most abstract form at the Truth Commission hearings, where blacks and whites have even, according to Krog, made applications for amnesty for the failure to resist or take action against apartheid, in effect demanding clemency for their sense of guilt.

Lurie seeks his own, private form of redemption, which is initiated, undesigned, with his escape to the sanctuary of his daughter Lucy's isolated farm on the Eastern Cape. The lesbian Lucy represents the very antithesis of Lurie's ideal woman: plain and dumpy, she ironically resembles Byron's Teresa, with whom Lurie, as he moves towards absolution, comes to

identify. Whilst he is a "man of the city" (6), bringing with him a metropolitan morality, his daughter has rejected such a life, and represents the pastoral. Ultimately, she refuses to call her homestead a farm: "It's just a piece of land where I grow things" (200), thus symbolically refuting white authority over the colonial space. This dialectic between metropolis and country – framed against the Byron/ Wordsworth subtext – inverts the Afrikaner *plaasroman*, or "farm novel", of the turn of the (twentieth) century, which, Coetzee suggests in *White writing* (1988:175), "harks back ... to a lost ideal economic independence, to the ideal of the farm as a 'koninkrykie' (little kingdom), where a man can be his own master". Between 1920 and 1940 the *plaasroman* "almost exclusively" concerned itself with the Afrikaners' "painful transition from farmer to townsman ... [with] a renewal of the peasant order based on the myth of the return to the earth" (1988:63–79). Thus *Disgrace* recalls, whilst it critiques, the anti-pastoral novel, which portrays the degeneration of the white-owned farm, and by association, of colonialist domination. The anti-pastoral is exemplified by novels such as Olive Schreiner's *The story of an African farm* (1883), or Nadine Gordimer's *The conservationist* (1974), which demythologises the white man's relationship to the land through the metaphor of the returning black corpse. Similarly, Coetzee's *Life and times of Michael K* (1983) narrativises the subjugated Other's retrieval of space, whilst in *Foe* (1986), Cruso represents an inversion of the industrious farmer of the *plaasroman*: his terraces serve no purpose other than to define the oppressors' "mastering" of space. They provide (futile) work for Cruso and Friday, what Susan calls "a foolish kind of agriculture" (1987:34).[13]

In *Disgrace*, Lurie, a Romantic scholar, returns to the land, as Lucy has before him: he notes with disdain (217) that she is becoming a peasant, a "throwback" (61), a "*boervrou*" (60), and more positively that "perhaps it was not [her parents] who produced her: perhaps history had the larger share ... History repeating itself, though in a more modest vein. Perhaps history had learned a lesson" (61–62). It is through his confrontation with South Africa's past (both political and literary) that he learns to face the "truth" about himself, finding his own private reconciliation with those involved in his life. With implications for (white) authorial authority, he simultaneously finds inspiration for *Byron in Italy*, reformulating the project to accommodate the woman's voice (Teresa); Byron, as (passed) master, is relegated to the margins of history and of Lurie's work.

The climax of this dissipation of white ownership is realised in the novel through the rape of Lucy by a group of three black men who raid her home, and whom Lurie dryly names as the holy trinity, "three fathers in one" (199). The metaphor of rape – which also recalls a literary "rape of the land" – is highly problematic in a country in which this crime is currently so prevalent, and which is reviled across the political spectrum. Coetzee chooses to write about African hooligans (skollies), the lowest element of black South African society, with whom Petrus – representative of legitimate black society – is in connivance. Black African agency is configured in the act of rape with devastating implications for a nation in which whites have regarded miscegenation with abhorrence and the black man as the natural rapist. Coetzee is, however, explicit in his portrayal of these men as criminals, (though Petrus, in a show of familial and racial solidarity, does choose to protect them). Moreover, on a literary level, this portrayal tacitly accords with the terms of Sachs's proposition that art should be allowed to accommodate the most problematic facets of human existence – such a portrayal perhaps being made possible with the demise of apartheid. What is at stake is how far authorial and narratorial voices are distanced within the text, and who Coetzee's imagined readership is.

Both Lurie and Lucy, expressing the guilt of white liberals generally, rationalise the attack as symbolic reparation for South Africa's past – that, as the daughter of Lurie, representative of patriarchal white authority, her rape constitutes retribution for the abuses perpetrated against the black Other. For Lurie, it signifies "the day of testing", or Judgement Day (94). He suggests that the rape "was history speaking through them ... A history of wrong ... Booty, war reparations; another incident in the great campaign of redistribution" (156–76). Similarly, Lucy wonders if the attack is "the price one has to pay for staying on ... They see themselves as debt collectors, tax collectors" (158). Discovering she is pregnant, she

confounds her father with her decision to keep the child and her agreement to become Petrus's mistress (in what constitutes a shift from white patriarchal authority to black) in return that Petrus protect her from further violation. Suggesting that she is on the "brink of a dangerous error", Lurie warns her: "You wish to humble yourself before history" (160).[14] However, such a redistribution of "capital" in South Africa is a fallacy where whites continue to maintain their position of economic dominion. Lucy refuses to allow her father to report her story to the authorities, for it is "a private matter" (112). Yet Lurie, witnessing the publicising of her story across the district, locates her loss of autonomy over her story, realising that it is "not her story to spread but theirs: they are its owners. How they put her in her place, how they showed her what a woman was for" (115). Lucy, who is "prepared to do anything, make any sacrifice, for the sake of peace" (208), acknowledges that the rape "is humiliating. But perhaps that is a good point to start from again" (204). For her, in this symbolic sense, rape signifies a great leveller of racial injustice.

The violation of Lucy ironically mirrors Lurie's own "abuse" of women, towards whom he admits he assumes a predatory attitude. Comparable to Byron's treatment of women (160), he deems the last occasion of his love-making with Melanie to be "not rape, not quite that" (25). A shift in his philosophy follows his affair with the unattractive Bev Shaw, with whom he works at the Animal Welfare Clinic, which draws him to the morally dubious conclusion that all his experiences with women teach him something.[15] Similarly, caught in a cycle of confession, he condemns himself for doing nothing to stop the attack on his daughter, which includes his admission that he has failed as a father, in what he professes to be "his own confession" (157), one that he has come to of his own volition, offered in a spirit of sincerity.

Rape is a recurring motif in Coetzee's fiction. In *In the heart of the country* (1976), the narrator Magda, for instance, *may* have been raped by her neighbour, a black labourer named Hendrik. Since Magda inhabits a state of paranoia, the "truth" of her allegations remains ambiguous. Elizabeth Lowry (1999:13) suggests that *Disgrace* constitutes a re-evaluation of issues raised by the former text, of how blacks and whites can live alongside each other in the new state. In *Life and times of Michael K* (1983) an unnamed woman has sex with the sexually autistic protagonist in what represents near rape, whilst Friday, in *Foe*, *may* have been castrated.

The body of the Other thus represents a site for the renegotiation of power relations, a metaphor for colonial space. It is also the Other's means of resisting oppression. As Coetzee (1992:248) suggests: "Whatever else, the body is not 'that which is not', and the proof that it *is* is in the pain that it feels ... It is not that one *grants* the authority of the suffering body: the suffering *takes* this authority: that is its power." The "wholly marginalised", (so called by Gayatri Spivak, 1991:157), deprived of a "voice", is able only to challenge oppression through his or her physicality. This is realised literally in the figure of Friday in Coetzee's *Foe*, who is not only illiterate but has had his tongue brutally ripped out. In *Disgrace* such a concept is taken to its extreme through the representation of the body of the dog, who lacks the ability to reason or to speak. As the protagonist in *The lives of animals* (1999b:25) attests: "Animals have only their silence left with which to confront us."

Disgrace repeatedly makes associations between human and animal behaviour, human behaviour being "debased" by comparison with animal behaviour. Lurie's sexual passions are animalistic, predatory; Lucy is treated "like a dog" by the men who rape her (205), and who themselves behave "like dogs in a pack" (159); Petrus, Lucy's black neighbour, sardonically introduces himself to Lurie as the "dog-man" (64), only to reject this position as he gains autonomy within the new South Africa (129), as power is transferred from whites to blacks. The conflict between these two patriarchs, black and white, reaches its height when, following Lucy's rape, Lurie helps Petrus to lay pipes on his land – where "pipes" assume Freudian connotations. Lurie, as emblematic of obsolete coloniser, asks Petrus, "Do you need me here any longer?", to which Petrus

responds, "No, now it is easy, now I must just dig the pipe in" (139).

Caught in a cycle of confession, Lurie's preconceptions of animals are challenged through his contact with dogs. He has initially construed Lucy's and Bev's affection for animals as sentimentalist (73). For him, at this juncture, animals are of a lower order, and, though they should be treated humanely, this should not be motivated by feelings of guilt (74). Lucy's suggestion that he help Bev at the clinic "sounds suspiciously like community service ... like someone trying to make reparation for past misdeeds" (77). However, passing through a stage of penitence, he becomes sympathetic to the cause, finally forming a close bond with the dogs under his care (219).

The notion of finding redemption through the championing of animal welfare, where animal and human suffering are directly compared, is highly problematic,[16] and within a South African context could be construed as inappropriate, and of a "different scale".[17] Coetzee addresses this issue in *The lives of animals*, which comprises two papers he delivered at Princeton University (1997–8). The lectures are a metafictional account of an ageing novelist and academic, Elizabeth Costello – a Coetzee figure, perhaps – giving two honorary lectures at Appleton University, which are on the subject of animal abuse. By thus addressing political discourse through metafiction Coetzee again exposes himself to the charge of evasiveness: the stance Costello outlines may or may not be Coetzee's own. However, such a strategy allows Coetzee to refute an authoritative stance, whilst simultaneously raising questions about the process of writing itself.

Costello draws an analogy between the treatment of factory-farmed animals with the treatment of the Jews in the Nazi concentration camps: "The crime of the Third Reich, says the voice of accusation, was to treat people like animals."[18] However, she makes the devastating claim that in the modern (Western) world, "we are surrounded by an enterprise of degradation, cruelty, and killing which rivals anything that the Third Reich was capable of, indeed dwarfs it" (1999b:21).[19] Thomas O'Hearne, professor of philosophy at Appleton, challenges Costello in a formal debate, asserting that compassion for animals is a Western concept that arose during a period when other philanthropic movements, including the campaign against slavery, were established. The animal rights movement "runs the risk of becoming, like the human rights movement, yet another Western crusade against the practices of the rest of the world, claiming universality for what are simply its own standards" (60). (In *Disgrace*, Lurie is horrified by the proposed slaughter of two sheep at Petrus's party, though this is also a configuration of the city/rural dialectic.) Costello challenges the notion that because animals lack the power to reason, their slaughter is justified,[20] and demands that they be allowed "at least those rights that we accord mentally defective specimens of the species *Homo Sapiens*" (26). Citing Franz Kafka's parable of *Red Peter*, the talking ape, (which has been read as an "allegory for Kafka the Jew performing for Gentiles" (18)), she questions how one measures intelligence and the ability to suffer, and hence, those suitable for slaughter. Anticipating the charge that she is anthropomorphising animal behaviour, she suggests that animals and humans have the common bond of "beings". She argues (33) that there is a sense of community between all species, and that if we can conceptualise death, (which is, after all, outside our experience), we can imagine ourselves as animals. (In *Disgrace*, Lurie wonders if dogs "feel the disgrace of dying" (143).) For Costello, this sense of community lies in what she calls "embodiedness, the sensation of being" (33). Supporting her claims, and arguing that the poet may be more able to comprehend animal existence than the scientist, she refers to her novel, which portrays the life of Marion Bloom, wife of Joyce's Leopold, and argues that if the writer can imagine the lives of his or her characters, is it not possible to imagine animal experience?[21] Hence in *Disgrace*, rather than *conflating* human rights abuses with the maltreatment of animals, Coetzee *compares* their suffering. As the (real-life) philosopher Peter Singer points out in "Reflections" (Coetzee 1999b:86), "a comparison is not necessarily an equation".[22]

I have read *Disgrace* as an allegory for truth and reconciliation in the new South Africa, and as a novel which examines how the white writer positions himself in a post-apartheid age. Like Coetzee's Foe, Lurie is "lost in the maze of doubting": his life spirals

through a passage of confession to which he must eventually find closure, a closure that parallels his struggle with *Byron in Italy*, where the poet is emblematic of the masculinist and colonialist (Western) literary canon. The dialectic between Byron and Wordsworth parallels that which Lurie and Lucy represent: that is, the conflict between metropolis and land, as portrayed in the South African anti-pastoral. Similarly, representations of loss of authorial and colonial authority in this nation in transition are realised here as competing narratives. It is under these constraints that Lurie must find a place whilst resolving his moral angst. To do so, he first attempts to "give voice" to Teresa, (in his reformulated version, Byron is "long dead", effectively marginalised (181)), and second, seeks solace from guilt through his relationships with the women in his life, and with dogs, representative of the "wholly" Other.

Lurie has visited Melanie's father to make his confession in a "spirit of sincerity". He fleetingly wonders if Melanie might also have suffered from the aftermath of their affair. He asks for her father's pardon, and ritualistically kisses the ground at the feet of her mother and sister, symbolically humbling himself before womankind and the (post)colonial Other. The novel closes – but does not offer closure – with Lurie giving up the dog to whom he has become particularly attached, for lethal injection:

> Bearing him in his arms like a lamb, he re-enters the surgery. "I thought you would save him for another week," says Bev Shaw. "Are you giving him up?"
>
> "Yes, I am giving him up." (220)

By relinquishing his care of the lame dog, sacrificing the emotional investment he has made in it, Lurie finds, in one sense, closure for the cycle of confession by which he has become consumed. He has paid penance for his "crime", both through working with the dogs and through this act of "giving up": the moment marks a conclusion to his self-interrogation and self-abnegation. Coetzee remains, however, sceptical about the redemptive potential of the process of confession and absolution. It is at the expense of the life of the dog, (the animal is, after all, offered up "like a lamb to the slaughter"), that Lurie achieves reconciliation with himself, with his literary project and with the new South Africa in which he finds himself. After apartheid, the marginalised other (here, the dog as sacrificial victim) continues to suffer persecution. Lurie himself remains an outcast from society, cast adrift like the solitary, angst-ridden Romantic hero with whom he has associated himself. He has, however, retrained his artistic and, by association, ethical eye to accommodate his new place in society, as representative of the white writer and the disenfranchised coloniser. His re-evaluation of the setting in which he finds himself attests to such a reading: he has become reconciled to the beauty of the ordinary.

This deeply moving final scene reads in stark contrast to the singularly unsentimental and highly cerebral prose in Coetzee's earlier fiction, such as *Waiting for the barbarians* (1980), with its unremitting portrayal of the torture chamber. It marks a transition in Coetzee's writing, a transition that parallels Lurie's reaffirmation of a Wordsworthian ethic over a Byronic one.[23] Lurie's affinity with Romanticism, underpinned by its impulses towards subjectivity, underscores the private nature of truth and reconciliation portrayed in the novel. He has rejected institutionalised "confession" for this highly personalised form of redemption, reflecting Coetzee's suspicion of, and interrogatory stance towards, state control.

As in the metafictional *Foe* and *The master of Petersburg*, the dichotomy between aestheticism and committed writing is foregrounded, here, through the juxtaposition of the Byron/Wordsworth and animal narratives – as mentioned previously, the Romantic poets themselves were concerned with the politicisation of culture. Coetzee finally draws the two subtexts together with Lurie's half-ironic notion of introducing a dog into *Byron in Italy*. After all, the ineffectual academic wonders, "surely, in a work that will never be performed, all things are permitted?" (215). Lurie in part addresses this problem by suggesting that the piece, "might, at a pinch, be construed as a service to mankind" (146). However, symbolically relinquishing

white authorial authority over his text, and by association, over the colonial space, he subsequently realises that, as a "figure from the margins of history ... he is inventing the music (or the music is inventing him) but he is not inventing the history" (167;186).

In "Reflections" the literary theorist Marjorie Garber (Coetzee 1999b:84) asks of *The lives of animals*, "Could it be ... that all along [Coetzee] was really asking, 'what is the value of literature?' " Is this the question that Coetzee asks in *Disgrace*? Or, alternatively, does the novel respond to Coetzee's own question (cited by Sue Kossew, 1996:161), which is indeed inscribed in his *oeuvre*: "Who writes [postcolonial fiction]?" Ultimately, Lurie wonders, "will this be where the dark two [Byron and Teresa but also Lurie and Lucy] are at last brought to life: not in Cape Town but in old Kaffraria?" (1999a:122).[24] History has "come full circle" (175) – Lurie has confronted his past, both literary and political, in the realms of the pastoral, but has Coetzee found truth and reconciliation in his (postcolonial) writing?

Notes

1 Quoted by commissioner Bongani Finca, this hymn opened the first Truth Commission hearing. Antjie Krog (1999:17, 26) has suggested that the sentiment it expresses demonstrates that the notion of reconciliation, or redemption, is not confined to (Western) Christian culture.

2 The notion of confession is similarly addressed in Coetzee's *Age of iron* (1990). Dying of cancer, the novel's ageing protagonist Mrs Curren finds "redemption" through her friendship with the allusive tramp-figure, Verceuil – her "ideal confessor" (Head 1997:130), whose name is akin to "verkul" in Afrikaans meaning "to cheat", or, alternatively, "verskuil", meaning "to hide" or "conceal" (Coetzee 1991:34; Head 1997:140). In the later *Foe* (1986), Susan Barton writes a series of letters to the elusive Foe (Coetzee's Defoe figure). Foe fails to respond to her correspondence, its confessional nature thus being realised. Similarly, in *The master of Petersburg* (1994), a Dostoevsky figure confesses to an abuse of authorial authority, or responsibility, following his rewriting of his son Pavel's diaries. *Foe* and *Age of iron* precede the disbanding of apartheid, and the establishing of the Truth Commission, but address the (postcolonial) notion of collective responsibility for colonial oppression (and likewise, authorial responsibility in evading the writing of political literature). In this post-apartheid era, confession assumes different proportions: within the new democracy it becomes legitimised, written into the country's constitution.

3 Coetzee (1987:135). Coetzee's *oeuvre* repeatedly interrogates such an enigma; *Dusklands* (1974), for instance, parodies and parallels the two separate narratives of Eugene Dawn in "The Vietnam project" and Jacobus Coetzee in "The narrative of Jacobus Coetzee". The metafictional *Foe*, Coetzee's palimpsestic reworking of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, with its female narrator Susan Barton and a marginalised Cruso, challenges what, as progenitor of the realist novel (Head 1997:113), is regarded as emblematic of the Western literary canon. In the similarly intertextual *The master of Petersburg*, Dostoevsky battles with his guilt-stricken conscience for having betrayed his son. His effacement of Pavel's diaries constitutes an act of falsification, reminiscent of the misrepresentation of the Other in colonialist historiography.

4 Coetzee (1999a:18). This renaming, though unspoken, constitutes colonialist misrepresentation, an imposition of meaning of the white man over the subjugated Other – who here is both black and female – and recalls the portrayal of "Soraya" at the beginning of the novel, a prostitute with whom Lurie has become obsessed. She has taken a name which not only fulfils white fantasies of the exoticised Other, but, conversely, one that refuses to yield the "truth" about herself: her real identity remains concealed behind it. In *Life and times of Michael K* the medical officer misrepresents – and misunderstands – the enigmatic Michael K, whilst in *Foe* Susan Barton unsuccessfully attempts to read Friday's silence.

5 Not only will the University "try" him under its Code of Conduct, but Ryan, Melanie's boyfriend, warns Lurie to "stay with [his] own kind" (194).

6 Lurie's former department was disbanded "as part of the great rationalisation" programme (3), evidence of a devaluing of the Arts in general.

7 Byron's poem reads: "He stood a stranger in this breathing world, / An erring spirit from another hurled; / A thing of dark imaginings, that shaped / By choice the perils he by chance escaped" (Coetzee 1999a:32).

8 Lucy has no doubt been named after Wordsworth's "Lucy" poems.

9 Claridge (1992:19). Wordsworth displays, for instance, an "inability to prosecute a sustained reconciliation between aesthetic and political value; to conciliate literary recompense with political resolution" (Bourke 1993:2).

10 "It is not the erotic that is calling to him after all, nor the elegiac, but the comic" (184).

11 Both Lurie and his daughter question the very defining of his affair as an offence. He regards it as a question of the young abhorring the idea of the older generations "in the throes of passion", of reproducing. Here, however, the episode is made complex by racial difference and by issues of patriarchal oppression, as demon-

strated by the presence of a representative of the Coalition Against Discrimination at the "trial" (48).

12 Lurie's ex-wife later challenges his belief in standing by his principles, cynically asserting that "trials are not about principles, they are about how well you put yourself across". She suggests that, as a prototype of the confessant, he is both "a great deceiver and a great self-deceiver" (188).

13 Cruso must wait for the arrival of another castaway to bring seeds to sow (34). At the end of the novel Friday is symbolically reinstated as master of the island, and of his story: Foe and Susan Barton are dead, an unnamed narrator, (perhaps Coetzee), coming upon the barely alive Friday, realises, "this is not a place of words ... This is a place where bodies are their own signs. It is the home of Friday" (157).

14 Confronted by Lurie, Pollux, boy-rapist and relative of Petrus, would appear to be demanding of Lurie (in what would constitute a skewed sense of logic): "By what right are you here?" (132) Such a sentiment refers not only directly to Lurie's situation, but on a symbolic level, to the presence of the coloniser in the (post)colony generally.

15 Coetzee aligns sexual potency with authorship through the juxtaposition of two competing narratives: Lurie's / Byron's relationships with women, and the "Byron" project. Sexual dominance thus becomes analogous to authorial authority – a notion Coetzee addresses throughout his *oeuvre*. In *Foe*, for instance, Susan Barton, coupling with Foe, names herself as his Muse, as both "goddess and begetter" of her story (126). Similarly, in *The master of Petersburg*, the guilt-stricken Dostoevsky becomes fixated with his landlady's daughter. Significantly, in *Disgrace*, as Lurie's sexual prowess wanes so too does he struggle with his creative processes.

16 In "Reflections" on *The lives of animals*, the scholar of religion Wendy Doniger (1999b:93–106) counters such a claim with a summary of Eastern philosophical thinking on the treatment of animals.

17 In the second metafictional lecture given by Coetzee (1999b:64), its protagonist Elizabeth Costello is interrogated in a question-and-answer session by Professor Thomas O'Hearne, who counters her comparison of human and animal suffering with the argument that death for animals cannot be conceptualised on the same scale.

18 With resonance for a South African context, Costello notes that the Nazis "lost their humanity, in our eyes, because of a certain willed ignorance on their part" (20).

19 Such a comparison of oppression is later challenged in the text by Abraham Stern, a (fictional) poet: "If Jews were treated like cattle, it does not follow that cattle are treated like Jews. The inversion insults the memory of the dead" (50).

20 Costello argues that "reason looks to me suspiciously like the being of human thought", indeed, that it is a discourse of the elite (23).

21 Such a "reworking" is reminiscent of Coetzee's *Foe*, both texts effecting a marginalisation of the dominant masculinist voice of the "original" texts.

22 Singer (Coetzee 1999b:86) responds to Coetzee's lectures through his own metafiction, in a (postmodernist) double deflection of interpretation.

23 Wordsworth's later work (Easthope 1993:14) similarly reveals a shift in focus: he "increasingly acknowledges a human recognition of loss and separateness", a transition which bears weight within a confessional narrative such as *Disgrace*.

24 These words recall the Lucifer of Byron's poem "Lara", referred to previously.

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