

Memory, Metaphor and the Post-Apartheid Imagination: J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* and *Boyhood* in Context.*

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Abstract

*When J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* was released in 1999, reactions against the author's projection of the blacks' humanity was heated: some members of the South African Parliament could not hide their disgust over what many perceived as "a racist narrative" attuned to the continued denigration of the African personality by white intellectuals. Coetzee's *Disgrace*, and his semi-autobiographical story, *Boyhood*, are both set severally in farmlands, placing both narratives into what South African literary scholarship would often describe as the Plaasroman tradition or stories of the farm. In these post-apartheid 'novels' of Coetzee, memory and metaphor cohere in fascinating narrations that blend the past and the present in a single narrative of the 'new' nation. Memory, conceived here in the phraseology of Richard Terdiman as "the modality of our relation to the past" becomes a fundamental agent in the construction of narratives of the past and the present. Coetzee is aware of the implications of reportorial narrative modes that lean too heavily on historical accuracy, and opts instead for a narrative form that partly leans on, and partly defies the factual in fictional representation. In these 'novels', the transitional South Africa emerges as reminiscences, as recollections of shared national memories. This essay attempts to explore Coetzee's figurations of issues considered very germane in South Africa's shared memory: the questions of land ownership and the politics of racial representation. This is done against the backdrop of the 1913 Native land Act, with a focus on *Disgrace* and *Boyhood*.*

Keywords: *Postcolonial memory, Metaphor, Post-Apartheid fiction; J.M. Coetzee.*

I.

Coetzee, Scholar and Artist: Introduction

In the post-apartheid novels of J. M. Coetzee (1940-), memory and metaphor cohere in fascinating narrations that blend the past and the present in a single narrative of the ‘new’ nation. In *Disgrace*, for instance, the configuration of what seems a simple story of a disgraced academic emerges quite eloquently as a story of the fall of apartheid’s repressive establishment, and the aftermath of its collapse in defining race relations in the new South Africa. Memory, conceived here in the phraseology of Richard Terdiman as “the modality of our relation to the past” (Terdiman, 1993: 7), becomes a fundamental agent in the construction of narratives of the past and the present. Coetzee is aware of the implications of reportorial narrative modes that lean too heavily on historical accuracy. He, therefore, opts for a narrative form that partly leans on, and partly defies the factual in fictional composition. In *Boyhood* and *Disgrace*, the transitional South Africa emerges as reminiscences, as recollections of shared national memories. The mnemonic assumes a representational immediacy as remembrance, so that experience *is* always *other* than it *was*: inevitably and constitutively *historical*. Coetzee’s success in this project of ‘remembrance’ is built on his deployment of the referential world as a universe of signs” (Terdiman, 70)¹. In other words, Coetzee consistently constricts and expands his deployment of language to *blur* and at the same time *elaborate* on his chosen subjects. In what he calls “the middle voice” (Coetzee, [1984] 1992: 94-95), then, metaphor appears to transcend all boundaries since readers and writers alike can always aspire toward unearthing new meanings in any given fictional narrative.

Boyhood and *Disgrace* present challenges in the discourse of postcolonial narratology, especially when read against the background of Coetzee’s paradigm of ‘writing the middle’. The politics of actantial figuration, silence, names and naming, land ownership, the ethics of repression and counter-violence are some of the disturbing manifestations of these novels of Coetzee after apartheid. One way of arresting a possible misreading, however, is to *follow the narrator/author*. How, for instance, does one ‘judge’ an academic so prone to self-destruction as David Lurie in *Disgrace*? What further antics are to be perceived in the figuration of Lurie’s daughter, Lucy and her long time ‘neighbour’, Petrus? How does the emerging assault on the dignity of an innocent Lucy tell on the politics of land ownership and the politics of land expropriation in the new South Africa? How do we locate the place of the *narrator* in the uneasy narratives of the new nation?

Gerald Prince has suggested that beyond its concern to “trace explicitly the definitional boundaries of narrative, narratology also tries to account for narrative diversity” (Prince, 2005:

374). Drawing support in Monika Flaudernik and Marion Gymnich, Prince is persuaded that, among other things, in reading the postcolonial narrative, certain narrational elements must be explored: “the kinds of languages used by the narrator and by the characters constitute a fruitful area of narratological inquiry” (Prince 374). For Coetzee, these ‘languages’ are implicit in his notion of “writing the middle” (1992: 94). It would seem that, for Coetzee, the process of writing is one that requires a conscious self-abandonment since the writer does not necessarily preside over the logic of thematizing. As he suggests: “It barely needs to be said that a writing is possible in which the reasoning imagination is deceived from beginning to end (or deceives itself), in which the themes it discovers are not the themes the reader will find, or indeed the themes the writer may find on a later rereading. This may be a part of the cunning of the work, as it works its way past the defenses of the hand writing it” (Coetzee, 1993: 289). Thematic construction and elaboration in fictional narratives appear, therefore, as a consequence of a free process of narration that shuns premeditated efforts at arriving at narrative intentionality.

The over-riding concern of his writing — by general consensus — is his untiring determination to examine the relationship that exists between ‘master and slave’, or between ‘the colonizer’ and ‘the colonized’ in the global tussles “with power and torsions of power” (Coetzee 1987[1992]: 98)². This fascination with the paradoxes and complexities that surround the global psychology of domination has appeared consistently not only in a number of his fictional work, but even more infectiously in his essays and speeches³. Writing about South Africa in his 1987 “Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech”, for instance, he had argued: “In a society of masters and slaves, no one is free. The slave is not free, because he is not his own master; the master is not free, because he cannot do without the slave. For centuries South Africa was a society of masters and serfs; now it is a land where the serfs are in open rebellion and the masters are in disarray” (Coetzee 1999:96). Coetzee intended to capture the prevailing socio-political sentiments in South Africa in the last days of official apartheid, and in spite of the symbolical suggestiveness of the quest for liberation, he was prepared to go the extra mile in bringing the pains of apartheid’s repressiveness closer. He quotes from the novel of one of his predecessors, Alan Paton’s *Cry, the beloved Country*: “I have one great fear in my heart”, says one of Paton’s black characters: “that one day when they are turned to loving, we will find we are turned to hating” (Coetzee 1999:97).

But it is not so much Coetzee's interest in the whole business of power and patterns of colonial domination that enthrall — or infuriate — his readers, as it is his modes of aesthetic representation. Many commentators on Coetzee's novels have dwelt on his Euro-modernism and postmodernist inclinations, part of the reasons being 'the fact of his bio-bibliography'. In a number of his essays, Coetzee himself has impugned the modes of narration that have generally made the South African writer a very predictable chronicler. In the essay earlier referred, the 'Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech (1987)' (1992:96-99), Coetzee is disturbed by the soporific production of documentary realism with its manifest politicality in South African writing. He quarrels with the suffocation of readers in a number of the writers' over-deployment of this aesthetic mode in representing the realities that mark South Africa during the 1980s. Drawing support in Nietzsche, he submits: "We have art so that we shall not die of the truth. In South Africa there is now too much truth for art to hold, truth by the bucketful, truth that overwhelms and swamps every act of the imagination" (Coetzee 1992:99). But how must truth be narrated?

It is, perhaps, this singular question of *method*, of modes of aesthetic representation that has come to distinguish J.M. Coetzee in South African writing. His interest is with the enduring narrative, — a national metaphor that is suggestive without being simplistic, and emotive without being banal. He takes the subject of the aesthetic ideal very seriously, and in the essay, 'What is a Classic?' Coetzee's novelistic oeuvre finds its most eloquent defence. For, indeed, he returns to T. S. Eliot in a symbolic quest for "a claiming of identity in which a new and hitherto unsuspected paternity is asserted" (Coetzee 2001:7). Coetzee had grown in a South African society where the white settlers had, until recently, mostly identified themselves on the basis of their European ancestry.

He has made, and continues to make some very profound statements that enable our understanding of global developments in contemporary letters. The classical aesthetic tradition that defies temporal limitations as well as the modernist ethic that allows for linguistic manipulation through the combined formulae of authorial presence and detachment helps in projecting his paradigm of the inter-medial voice. It is partly for this reason that he occasionally returns to the germane issue of the timeless art and the question of historicity and historical understanding:

Historical understanding is understanding of the past as a shaping force upon the present. Insofar as that shaping force is tangibly felt upon our lives, historical understanding is part of the present. Our historical being is part of our present. It is that part of our present — namely the part that belongs to history — that we cannot fully understand, since it requires us to understand ourselves not only as objects of historical forces but as subjects of our historical self-understanding.

(Coetzee, ‘What is a Classic?’, 2001:15).

The ability of a literary work to transcend historical epochs, to live in the eternal register of humankind — indeed, to “define itself by surviving” (Coetzee 2001:19), sums Coetzee’s notion of the classic. Again, in his ‘Nobel Prize Lecture: He and His Man’, he suggests that the classic sense of narrative accomplishment is a function of metaphor — of private and collective memories couched in sublime allegories⁴.

II.

Scholarship on Coetzee:

This paper, devoted to exploring how J.M. Coetzee has articulated an issue considered quite germane to the South African shared memory: matters of land ownership, also looks at the politics of racial representation in two of his post-apartheid narratives. This should be understood within the context of the systematic dispossession that was ‘the Native Land Act’ of 1913, the forceful removals that followed legal apartheid since 1948, and the post-apartheid reprisals. This becomes particularly relevant since Coetzee has consistently focussed on the dilemma of the colonizer and the colonized. He has expressed revulsion against the early white settler writers in South Africa who never recognized the African humanity, but instead got overtly fascinated with the African landscape. In the essay, “Farm Novel and Plaasroman”, for instance, he condemns the myopic representation of the South African landscape by white writers including the most celebrated of them all, Olive Schreiner who, he suggests, “does not take on the task of comprehensively representing a South African sheepfarm”. “Nevertheless”, he continues, “the story that emerges from her pen is slanted, one sided” (Coetzee, 1988: 65). To this end, Coetzee has since carved for himself the image of a colonizer who refuses⁵.

In *Disgrace*, as in *Boyhood*, we witness a crafty interplay between *narrative* and *narration* in the representation of not only life in the new South Africa and the politics of land ownership, but also in the aesthetic representation of the blacks’ humanity. His politics, and figuration of

the principal characters in these novels, it is being suggested, here, can best be understood by loyally following the *narrator*.

Early studies on Coetzee have elaborated on his attitude to history and historicity⁶, on his interest in the politics of writing⁷ and of domination, on his fascination with the subject of language and truth⁸ and on his unusual creation of mentalized spaces⁹ — both temporal and spatial — in his fiction. In ‘The Problem of History in the Fiction of J. M. Coetzee’, for instance, David Attwell has observed that “there is more to historical discourse, obviously, than the construction or projection of a sequential narrative” (Attwell 1990:584).¹⁰ In this reaction to the many charges against Coetzee’s reluctance to embrace the realistic aesthetic mode in line with the general expectations of the African audience and literary intelligentsia during the separatist regime, Attwell’s defence of Coetzee’s narrative stance, particularly with respect to the representation of the historical imagination is seminal in its muscular logic. For, indeed, as he argues, “to decline the politics of historical discourses does not necessarily involve ahistoricism” (Attwell 1990:587). Stephen Watson writes of the ambivalence that defines Coetzee’s attitude to history as one that is both engaging and disavowing at the same time: “On the face of it, Coetzee would seem to be a writer obsessed with history to a degree scarcely matched by any other author in South Africa today”, even though there is evidence that in “his conflation of historical moments, in his metaphysical preoccupations, his modernist leanings, he cannot help striking one as the most ahistorical of writers at the same time” (Watson 1986: 377).

Following this ambiguity is a second question: during the moment of siege¹¹, the many peoples of South Africa and indeed the rest of the continent yearned desperately for a revolutionary ethos in cultural representations. It was a period which, as Attwell has acknowledged: “it is axiomatic in South Africa that the relationships of culture that Coetzee finds to hand, both through personal history and in institutionalised scholarship, are predominantly non-African”. Coetzee, like most whites under the apartheid system, had enjoyed the security of his racial privileges and could afford to ‘withdraw’ from any direct interest in the politically motivated racial crisis that enveloped the nation at the time. While we might excuse Attwell’s observation that Coetzee’s choice has been not to test the waters”(Attwell 602), in the context of the politically charged South Africa at the time, with its Stalinist censorial provisions, the ‘liberalism of the new order’ most certainly calls for other challenges. This is significant since

Coetzee is reputed to have devoted immense energy in attacking the notions of *agency* and the basis for the *canonization* of white South African writing¹².

In both *Boyhood* and *Disgrace*, the present is thoroughly colonized by the past: South Africa has only recently joined the comity of nations following the abolishment of official apartheid, the release of political prisoners from the many South African prisons and, above all, the embrace of a widely-accepted democratic rule and the emergence to power of a new black political leadership. But a number of policies imposed on the black peoples of South Africa about a century ago such as the notorious ‘Native land Act, 1913’ have not really vanished into the thin air. Land ownership is still largely in the hands of the minority white population, just as the privilege provided them by the separatist system has left economic power largely within the white population. In the same way, the advantage gained by the white population in terms of their dominance of the educational structures, especially the tertiary sector has meant that knowledge production is still largely within the domain of the minority. The challenge for the new administration becomes in many ways the challenge for the writer: how does one confront the historical reality of the nation; the injustices of the past, the question of repression and dispossession that constitute the experience of the predominantly black population for several centuries? In trying to represent the present, therefore, the writer is at task to demonstrate an unfailing capacity to remember the past.

Perhaps, more than any other contemporary South African writer, Coetzee has shown immense interest in matters associated with the South African land. In these narratives, the issue of land ownership assumes a symbolic significance that implicates, among others, the morality of “ownership and belonging” as well as the historical memory that inform the policy of repression and dispossession. Tom Lebert, writing about the many ways in which blacks were dispossessed during the apartheid regime in ‘Tinkering at the Edges: Land Reform in South Africa — 1994 to 2001’, puts it succinctly: “The list of legislation to impose (this) dispossession is lengthy and complex, yet served to ensure that indigenous peoples were tied into an emerging economy as labourers and nothing else” (Lebert, 2001:2). To maintain the *status quo* after the collapse of official apartheid, however, the New National Party (NNP), the ‘transformed’ party of the apartheid regime vowed continued support for the new black leadership with the promise that Afrikaner farmers would not be alienated in the new dispensation. The implication is that after ten years of the ANC’s promise of “re/distributing

30% of agricultural land over five years”, only “1% of land had been re/distributed” (Braeckman, 3).

Land ownership and land re/distribution has, therefore, remained a major issue in defining the level of progress made by the leadership of the ANC in democratic South Africa. The government’s official position that “land is an important and sensitive issue to all South Africans” (Wenzel, 2000: 97), and the negligible progress made so far in ensuring equity in its ownership and fruitful use, becomes a mockery to its earlier promise to the majority of the historically disadvantaged population. It is against these prevailing sentiments as well as the general historical conditions that inform imbalance in land ownership that many writers have responded to the socio-economic and cultural significance of ‘land’ following the liberal order. Zakes Mda’s *The Heart of Redness* and *She Plays with the Darkness*, André Bink’s *Imaginations of Sand* and *Devil’s Valley*, K. Sello Duiker’s *The Quiet Violence of Dreams*, Zoë Wicomb’s *David’s Story*, among others, all address the land question in one way or the other. How has J M Coetzee responded to these pressing problems in *Boyhood* and *Disgrace*? Although the two novels are different in terms of genre, the author’s unmistakable evocation of the politics of land ownership and the morality associated with ‘belongingness’ has inspired interest to a return to the more than a century of narratives that present this aspect of South Africa’s memory in what has come to be known as ‘the farm novel’.

III.

The *Plaasroman*: South Africa and the growth of a literary tradition

In more ways than one, South African fiction since the period of conscious establishment of the so-called tribally structured development models through its 1948 final ratification, had presented to its Western readers an African topography lacking in human agencies beyond the Western settlers. And where the African humanity was reluctantly acknowledged, it was done with derision and mischief as Michael Chapman has illustrated with the works of Blackburn and Roy Campbell (Chapman, 2003: 179-187). In fact, as Chapman rightly asserts, the settler writers cultivated a literary culture that sustained the crisis that was to last for nearly a century — “of rural dignity signifying also proletarian dispossession, and proletarian possession signifying at the same time a rupture with tradition” (Chapman, 181). The dominant novelistic genre through which this capitalist gambit was entrenched is the ‘farm novel’, commonly referred to as ‘the *plaasroman* tradition’. Often associated with the white settler communities,

it dates back to some of the earliest writers whose primary concern, evidence show, was to feed the enthusiastic imaginations of the European metropolitan audience whose conditioned perception of the African cosmology and socio-cultural personality was a limbo. The implication is that the blacks' humanity is generally denied agency and volubility and, where they feature, it was only to massage the ego of the "colonising master" in his "civilising mission".

Where Coetzee's imaginative writing might for many remain apparently non-partisan in his narrative experiments, his scholarly works appear, in large measure, to be directly attuned with a concern for the revelation of the intrigues and intricacies deployed by the most visible farm novelists in propagating the exploitative desires of the colonising nations. In *White Writing*, for instance, he argues: "pastoral in South Africa (therefore) has a double tribute to pay. To satisfy the critics of rural retreat, it must portray labour; to satisfy the critics of colonialism, it must portray white labour. What inevitably follows is the occlusion of black labour from the scene: the black man becomes a shadowy presence flitting across the stage now and then to hold a horse or serve a meal" (Coetzee, 1988: 5).

For Coetzee, then, the *plaasroman* is "a literature of empty space", a failed literary form, especially with respect to "the failure of the historical imagination" (Coetzee, 3). For after all, he asks, "Was there no time before the time of the forefathers, and whose was the land then? Do white hands truly pick the fruit, reap the grain, milk the cows, shear the sheep in these bucolic retreats? Who truly creates wealth?" (Coetzee, 11). It is significant that Coetzee names this his early book of essays, *White Writing*, a work which has helped several literary commentators in their hermeneutic engagements with his novels. It is equally important that he clarifies his conception of whiteness which, according to him, does not "imply the existence of a body of writing different in nature from black writing. White writing is white only insofar as it is generated by the concerns of people no longer European, not yet African" (Coetzee, 11).

Such radical rhetoric of empathy might be interrogated with a view to examining the tradition of the farm novel within the context of post-apartheid reprisals. The farm novel is marked by its peculiar fascination with the bucolic. This form is idiosyncratically self-definitive in its near disinterest in the urbane, in its fascination with the rural space, the natural and the natured, in its narration of the ordinary, the farmyard, the daily events of human struggle and the pastoral temper of the human and animal population that inhabit the province. The *plaasroman* is not

an entirely new form in South Africa's literary discourse. The spatial location of many of the post-apartheid novels that embrace this form is, therefore, simply a continuation of a tradition that was built way back in the second and third decades of the 20th century, of which Chapman says: "most of the early fiction finds its locality in the country region" (Chapman 2003:187).

Often associated with some of the earliest Afrikaans writers (and to an impressive level the white English South African writers), the farm novel, as the name suggests, is set within a provincial, pastoral vicinity; it typifies the sensibility and mythological assumptions of the average white family whose sense of heroism in their ancestral adventures and accomplishments are cast in the biblical imagination of a chosen people that finally locate their promised land. In such bloated assumptions and persuasions, every effort is made to develop and sustain a mythology of their psychological superiority over and above the indigenous population who, in most parts, hardly find agency let-alone seen to be voluble in the experiential altercations of the narratives. Writer after writer presents a pastoral universe of a romanticised farmyard that dramatizes the unity and consanguinity of the white family trying very hard to sustain a bond of their nuclear and tribal unity and, in doing so, other economic adventurers — even survivalists — are often written off as morally inconsequential: the Jew, the 'Coloured', and especially the indigenous black Africans get placed in certain cadres of the lower rungs of the social ladder when they appear at all. While Olive Schreiner's *Story of an African Farm* (1882) made this agrarian interest prominent in the earliest South African "national" narrative, Afrikaner writers such as D.F. Malherbe, Jochem Van Bruggen, Johannes Van Melle, Mikro and C.M. Van den Heever got the *plaasroman* properly established as a genre in the South African literary oeuvre of the 1950s and '60s (Chapman, 192).

The farm novel has persisted in an interesting way in post-apartheid South Africa. Where the earliest novels of the farm were naively romantic and embarrassingly targeted toward sustaining a mythology of the racial and intellectual superiority of the white settler, the *plaasroman* in the post-apartheid ambience is more cautious and contemplative about the institutionalised deceptions of the whites: 'Afrikaner and English ancestral heroism; the narrative voices often condemn the divisive legacy that has pitted the white descendants against the resilient and uncontrollably rebellious indigenous population who, it does seem, are determined as always to right the wrongs of the past, avenge the humiliation meted out on their

ancestors, and reclaim their rights and heritages long possessed by the colonizers whom many of the indigenous black population still see as settlers.

It is instructive that Coetzee's *Boyhood* (1997) and *Disgrace* (1999) are significantly set in the farmyard; André Brink's *Imaginings of Sand* (1996), Jo-Anne Richards' *The Innocence of Roast Chicken* (1996) amongst others, are attuned to these forms. Topographical descriptions are usually eminent in novels of the farm. The example of Schreiner's *African Farm* with its bent toward 'realistic' narrative remains a classic instance. As Stephen Gray observes, "Schreiner discovered it, and her successors have followed her. She is the literature's fountainhead, and, one must hasten to add, its limits" (Gray, 1979:152). If the dilemma of the earliest South African writers is located in the task of describing a so-called topographical ambience totally alien to the sensibilities of an adventurer chronicler in the 19th century through the long years of racial separatism, the challenge for the writer in post-apartheid South Africa is apparently less daunting. This becomes very relevant in the critical dissection of Coetzee's *Boyhood* and *Disgrace*, given that authorial interventions in his narratives often times challenge wrongheaded positions implicit in actantial dialogues and dispositions.

IV.

Coetzee's *Boyhood* and *Disgrace*: Reading the post-colony in a liberal order:

Coetzee's *Boyhood*, a narrativized autobiography of the Nobel Laureate is sub-titled 'Scenes from Provincial Life, A Memoir'. The essence of provinciality does not only draw a definitive attention to the psychology of a writer generally perceived as a recluse of no mean dimension, a keen observer of the minutest of details but, more importantly, it also highlights the writer's sentimental attachment to the novelistic tradition of the *plaasroman*. If Coetzee's earlier fiction, particularly *Waiting for the Barbarians*, *Life and Times of Michael K* or even *Foe* for that matter express the novelist's aversion for violence and human enslavement by the privileged, what emerges as his post-apartheid narrative is painfully introspective, often daringly cynical, sometimes humorous, but certainly more readerly fraternal than his earlier fiction. *Boyhood* and *Disgrace* proceed from a reminiscence that seem at once personal, familial, communal, and national. The eloquent presentation of the provincial space, especially Coetzee's narration and memories of the farm as a child in *Boyhood* during the apartheid era, and the reprisal that mark farm ownership in *Disgrace*—arguably Coetzee's finest novel to date — make his 'Scenes from a Provincial Life' an interesting development of the post-

apartheid imagination. While *Boyhood* takes us to the past to enable us remember the process of growth and the gradual development of a rebelling attitude in the life of the narrator, *Disgrace* moves from the present to the past and returns, again, to the present. The evocation of the past in *Disgrace* is for a totally different reason: memory emerges in the first narrative as a disturbing ‘foreign country’ that, nevertheless, is kind to kids whose social status is guaranteed as children of a white middle-class parents, while in the second narrative history is presented as an unforgiving ghost that has come to haunt down both the guilty and the innocent.

In *Boyhood* and *Disgrace*, the farm fiction which, as we have observed, is marked by a tendency to annihilate the indigenous African population and ridiculing of the so-called ‘coloured population’ — where they feature — remains essentially a type. In *Boyhood*, in particular, we find that the narrator is not born into a nuclear family of farmers: his father is an unsuccessful legal practitioner who takes to drinking after several unsavoury experiences that include job-loss and loss of substantial revenue to gambling; he displays from childhood an inexplicable dislike for his father whose life’s experiences subsume a brief encounter with death at the war front during the second world war. The narrator’s father is certainly no farmer and could not have made a successful career in the military since his skill, as hunter was less than satisfactory. His mother, too, is not a farmer: she is a teacher, a lovable and homely ‘mother’ who would devote extra energy to ensure the happiness of her family, and especially her children. She could not even successfully run a mere poultry farm. By inheritance, however, the family acquires a massive expanse of land in Worcester where they return on occasions. The child is, however, perceptive enough to observe the apparent contradictions in his mother’s reasoning, and it is through the oscillations in the narrative that we get an idea of the family’s attitude to land. The narrator tells of the child:

He loves to listen to his mother and his uncles going for the thousandth time over the events of their childhood on the farm. He is never happier than when listening to these stories, to the teasing and the laughter that go with them. His friends do not come from families with stories like these. That is what sets him apart: the two farms behind him, his mother’s farm, his father’s farm, and the stories of those farms. Through the farms he is rooted in the past; through the farms he has substance.

There is a third farm too: Skipperskloof, near Williston. His family has no roots there, it is a farm they have married into. Nevertheless, Skipperskloof is important too. All farms are important. Farms are places of freedom, of life. (*Boyhood*, 22).

With such declaration of a dogmatic consciousness towards the energising and liberating powers of the farm, Coetzee implicitly excavates the painful angle to every South African in matters associated with farm-ownership and, consequently, of land-ownership. If the young narrator, with his inexplicable disdain for the ethnic idiosyncrasies of his Afrikaner community — “these merciless people” (*Boyhood*, 127) — could be so spiritually attuned to the farm, the life of the average Afrikaner whose ancestral lineage is centrally linked to agricultural identity could, for more or less, be entirely devoted to the ‘life of the farm’. The farm, it is safe to proclaim, here, has for long emerged as a defining paradigm of the Afrikaner whose resourcefulness as farmers enabled the establishment of South Africa as a major Agricultural site on the continent. Over the centuries, the Afrikaners’ immeasurable commitment to farm development has partly led to their being labelled as ‘Boers’, a name that readily evokes envy and disdain, depending on what side of the lane the analyst situates himself. To the early colonizing Briton, the Boer represented filth and crudity; while to the indigenous black population, the Boer evokes love and hatred at the same time: hated because like all white colonialists, the Boer connotes the suppression and dispossession of the black ‘native’; but loved because unlike the Briton, the Boer is perceived as being more honest: brutal and crude, yet committed to the development of the environment. Their love for ‘farming’ naturally led to their aggressive acquisition of land to the extent that farming, greed for land, and their nationalist spirit combine as markers of the identity of the Afrikaner in the imagination of their indigenous black African hosts. Unfortunately, the apartheid system had given legitimacy to the avarice of the minority white population, with the Afrikaners as major beneficiaries.

At the dawn of the liberal order, however, the dilemma of the individual becomes, in a way, the dilemma of the nation: how does the *privileged* individual *retain* ownership of the land, the farm and all the memories surrounding its ownership since childhood? How does the *dispossessed* individual *reclaim* the land, his ancestral heritage from a people who had derided his people for centuries? How does such an individual cope with the avarice of the *settlers* who had humiliated and killed his ancestors? How does the new administration *re/distribute* land without offending the white supporters who had, through history, rebelled against the

oppressive dictates of their relatives? How does the government *empower* the historically disadvantaged population without overtly creating an impression of unnecessary favouritism and neo-apartheid?

Again, the narrator's idiom that captures this difficult situation in *Boyhood* is 'belong'. *Does the farm belong* to the individual, or *does the individual belong* to the farm? The narrator clarifies:

The secret and sacred word that binds him to the farm is *belong*. Out in the veld by himself he can breathe the word allowed: *I belong on the farm*. What he really believes but does not utter, what he keeps to himself for fear that the spell will end, is a different form of the word: *I belong to the farm*.

He tells no one because the word is misunderstood so easily into its inverse: *The farm belongs to me*. The farm will never belong to him, he will never be more than a visitor: he accepts that. The thought of actually living on Voelfontein, of calling the great old house his home, of no longer having to ask permission to do what he wants to do, turns him giddy; he thrusts it away. *I belong to the farm*: that is the furthest he is prepared to go, even in his most secret heart. But in his secret heart he knows what the farm in its way knows too: that Voelfontein belongs to no one. The farm is greater than any of them. The farm exists from eternity to eternity. When they are all dead, when even the farmhouse has fallen into ruin like the kraals on the hillside, the farm will still be here.

Once, out in the veld far from the house, he bends down and rubs his palms in the dust as if washing them. It is ritual. He is making up a ritual. He does not know yet what the ritual means, but he is relieved there is no one to see and report him (*Boyhood*, 95-6).

If Coetzee's novelistic oeuvre is ahistorical as perceived in some influential circles, the passion with which he embraces the germane issue of land possession and land ownership in both his scholarly essays and in his imaginative writing gives a knock to this charge. Where the realist mode would probably clarify his intention, Coetzee jettisons the reportorial narrative form in the reading of his fiction for the aesthetic of 'the middle voice'. The implied suggestion that 'the land belongs to no-one' presents the narrator's craft in persuading the reader to follow a narrative skein that goes beyond the superficial: what emerges here is either a deliberate attempt to insult the intelligence of the indigenous African population, or a systematic attempt by the novelist to create a transcendental temporality in which humankind is diminished to an ephemeral being whose vanity is perennially held at the mercy of nature and the environment.

Whether it is at the symbolic metaphorical level or at the approximate point of social representation, land is not only central to the historical evolution of life in contemporary South Africa, it is also the most sensitive issue for a people so desperate to create an integrated post-apartheid social humanity appropriately labelled ‘the rainbow coalition’. It is in the ownership of land that the politics of colonialist dispossession becomes so embarrassingly eloquent that it resonates in the over 360 years of white settlement in the Southern African sub-region. To proclaim that “the land belongs to no-one”, even as a metaphorical construct, sounds too politically indecent even within the poetics of the inter-medial voice.

The sense of “belonging” to which the narrator pretends not to care about readily scorns Sol Plaatje’s *Native Life in South Africa* (1916)—a most important statement that explores the patterns of the dispossession of, and injustice against the black peoples of South Africa in the second decade of the 20th century. The politics of *Boyhood* is to *remember* a moment in the mid-20th century: the moment of the narrator’s growth, and the figuration of the boy-character’s experiences and idiosyncrasies. The bravado of the narrative as the story of an adolescent implicitly locates it as a rite of passage: a transitional stage in the life of the young man whose inability to comprehend why the many human constructs of his society were designed to frustrate, rather than enhance humanity. *Boyhood* becomes not just a narrative of transition, but also one that generates a unique conflict between the narrator’s avowed love for land and his failure to follow the injustice that made it possible for him to own many large expanses of farms. Transitionality, at the level of land ownership and its re/distribution, becomes problematical in what has been described as a conflict between “pastoral promise and the political imperative” (Jennifer Wenzel, 2000: 90-113).

But this raises another interesting question: If the representation of the blacks’ humanity must of necessity be relevant in the realistic appraisal of novels of the farm, what sense of justice has the writer in a post-apartheid, liberated South Africa demonstrated in his creative enterprise? In her *Colonization, Violence and Narration in White South African Writing* (1996), Rosemary Jane Jolly expresses concern about the insatiable fascination by literary scholars and commentators with “the spectacular in matters South African” (Jolly, 1996:155). Her views, premised on the established tradition of literary and cultural scholarship informed by the nation’s history of colonialism, apartheid and systematic repression, draws attention not only to the predictability of the commentaries, but also to the gamut of imaginative literature from this side of the African continent. Violence — whether it be physical or psychological —

has so much defined this social formation that at the era of the “interregnum”, narrative was widely perceived to be utilitarian: narrators who deployed narrative modes that were less assertive in their rejection of political and social decadence infuriated many critics. Given the sense of freedom that marks democratic South Africa, Jolly wonders whether there is wisdom in allowing a novelist like J.M Coetzee “his narrative self-consciousness without regarding it as an unassailable defense on all counts, since even careful defensibility on ethical grounds is no guarantee of ethical effectiveness” (Jolly, 156).

To this end, it need be noted that *Boyhood* is less concerned with developments in the emergent democratic state. But it does follow a rhythm of narrative progression that points to a moment of psychological liberation for the writer as well as the narrator. It is *nostalgia* for, rather than *excitement* about the new social formation that informs the narrative recount of the young man who traverses from city to countryside and all the way round during the early years of official apartheid in South Africa. Whether it is in the narration of his eccentricity in his relationship with his fellow pupils, his avowed childhood dislike of his father and his sometimes inability to understand his mother’s dispositions, the narrator’s memories of ‘childhood’ in *Boyhood* reads like a self-confession that highlights, more than anything else, his fascination with the farm novel, the *plaasroman* tradition in South African literary scholarship. It is, in fact, his mode of imaginatively articulating the land question.

Where *Boyhood* is a narrative of the past, however, *Disgrace* is a narrative of the present: *Boyhood* is the story of a child’s indulgence in a society that protects children of his racial belonging from all the traumas of the elements, even as he rebels against social norms that made little or no sense to him; *Disgrace* on the hand, is unabashedly a narrative of race and racism: it is, in a way, a narrative of white pessimism in the supposed post-apocalyptic South Africa. But if *Disgrace* is an artistic statement on the dilemma of the new South Africa, particularly in matters of farm violence and land ownership, it is, to put it mildly, creatively miserly in its representation of post-apartheid South Africa’s social humanity; and if it is an imaginative response to the cravings of the global literary intelligentsia with the insatiable appetite for “the spectacular in matters South Africa” (Jolly, 155), then it is irreparably opportunistic: it creatively pronounces the visitation of opprobrium on the narrator’s community for the simple reason of the transfer of political power to the *Other* racial group. The very title of the novel, *Disgrace*, as well as the narrator’s choice of a white academic as the symbolic figure of white humiliation in the new South Africa calls for a need to interrogate

the artistic intentionalities of the author. For, indeed, the subject of ‘disgrace’ transcends the social descent of David Lurie from the professorial chair to being a volunteer as a mere help-mate to an illiterate ‘veterinary surgeon’; it transcends the learned professor’s insistence on his rights of desire, his illicit sexual entanglements with prostitutes, with his students and co-workers alike; it also goes beyond the vandalization of his car by the vindictive Ryan, the boyfriend of his erstwhile lover, Melanie Isaacs.

Read against the background of Coetzee’s notion of ‘writing the middle’, however, we encounter a complex display of thematic foci. The interplay between ‘the narration’ and ‘the narrating’ in *Disgrace* presents aspects of Coetzee’s ‘free’ narrative style in which writer and reader alike are urged to seek meaning beyond the mundane. The subject of humiliation that evolves in the realization of the central character, David Lurie, immediately dissipates any suspicion of ornamented racism in the novel. The paradigm of the middle voice which Coetzee clarifies in ‘Notes on Writing’ emerges very significantly as a basic pattern of interpretation since even the imaginative writer is equally invited to *listen*, especially in the deployment of the three narrative voices—‘the active, middle, and the passive’ (Coetzee, 1992:95). Where *Disgrace* presents a peculiar dilemma in postcolonial narratology due to the *narrator’s* representations of blackness, it does seem that Coetzee’s specific fascination is not so much with the figuration of blackness as it is the parodic revaluation of a white privileged elite whose concupiscence is challenged in every possible way by the liberalism of the new order. In this respect, *Disgrace* is apparently more the story of David Lurie than it is the story of his daughter, Lucy, and her ‘neighbours’ in a pastoral village in South Africa’s Eastern Cape province.

Early in the novel, we are informed of David Lurie’s loss of control in his sexual attitude: “He existed in an anxious flurry of promiscuity” (*Disgrace*, 7). Where memory is deployed as metaphor in *Disgrace*, then, the realizations of the principal characters find instances through the logic of the middle voice. Here, authorial interventions are found in several parallel presentations of dialogues and actions. David Lurie’s impudence is counterpoised with his personal humiliation. The many contacts between David Lurie and the entire human and animal population become the signposts through which the subject of ‘disgrace’ is finally thematized at several levels. His many encounters with a diverse class of humankind: David Lurie and Soraya; David Lurie and Soraya’s children; David Lurie and Soraya’s unseen husband; David Lurie and Melanie Isaacs; David Lurie and Melanie Isaacs’ boyfriend, Ryan; David Lurie and Melanie Isaacs’ parents (father and mother); David Lurie and Melanie Isaacs’ sibling, Desiree;

David Lurie and his professional colleagues at the university; David Lurie and the Shaws (Bill and Bev); David Lurie and his previous wives (Eveline and Rosalind); David Lurie and daughter, Lucy; David Lurie and Petrus (as well as with Pollux and his black' thieving accomplices), etc, all point to the less than the admirable conduct of an otherwise brilliant academic whose moral turpitude constitutes the subject of opprobrium in *Disgrace*.

One way of arriving at this complex nexus between memory and metaphor in *Disgrace* as I have noted earlier, then, is by *following the author*. Where memory and amnesia collide at the local space of the liberal order, it is the function of narratorial neutrality that we are able to locate a troubled learned professor leaning on a philosophy of silence in what apparently inspires a sense of moral panic to any average parent. The sustained evocation of the 'encounter' between David Lurie and the principal characters in his ongoing research, Byron and Teresa Guccioli, is a constant reminder that the spiritual agony of this learned professor of applied linguistics is a human dilemma long established in the annals of the noblest of men. Byron had aspired to die a romantic war hero; but David Lurie is no hero. He is, instead, a despicable identity whose arrogance does not allow him the humility to distinguish between survivalism and the grandiose insistence on his so-called rights of desire.

Coetzee's clever transposition of the narrative sites from a highbrow ivory tower to a bucolic environment where Professor Lurie descends to a mere 'unpaid' volunteer "playing right-hand man to a woman who specializes in sterilization and euthanasia" (*Disgrace* 91) to 'unwanted' animals reveals another affirmation of David Lurie's want of moral sanity. A "life lived in promiscuity", it does seem, should anticipate a form of poetic justice, just as a life defined by adultery, whether within the university community or in the animal slaughter-house finally shows the metaphysical barrenness of David Lurie's self-adoration.

At another level, though, it could be claimed that rather than being merely a novel about university life and the humiliation of an academic whose uncontrolled concupiscence results in his descent in the social ladder, Coetzee's *Disgrace* is more of the 'new' *plaasroman*, the new farm novel in South Africa at a moment of democratic non-racialism and black leadership. While *Boyhood* sets the pace for this new form by *remembering* the nation during the period of racial separatism — when the indigenous population were neither *visible* nor *voluble*—, the new novel of the farm attempts to address this angle of the post-apartheid literary imagination.

In both “novels”, the obvious sentimental attachment of the white farmer to the South African land becomes not only highly pronounced, but also eloquently lineal: every child looks forward to inheriting a farm either from the paternal or maternal homesteads.

From the narrative progression, it would seem that Coetzee is determined to eschew the perennially ubiquitous dilemmas of race and socio-economic status: in spite of his privileged position as an academic in a South African University, David Lurie, a professor of Communications Studies and Linguistics, succumbs to the lower pleasure principle by indulging in a professional misconduct: he exploits his position and — wittingly or otherwise — engages in sexual escapades with one of his female students. The encounter backfires as the said-student, Melanie Isaacs, begins to have problems with her boyfriend, Ryan, who vandalizes Lurie’s car. Her parents get to know, and reports the development to the University’s ethics’ committee. David Lurie faces a panel, and after what seems a pre-determined, kangaroo-trial, he loses his job as a university professor. Following this unsavoury experience, he leaves the university town to join his daughter, Lucy, in her farmyard in the countryside. Some criminals attack him, and also rape his daughter. He believes that this is the final statement in his humiliation and insists that the assault on his person as well as the molestation of his daughter were carried out by some African savages who have suddenly gone on rampage since the emergence of the new order. He ends up joining Bill and Bev Shaw as helpmate in animal-care services.

But this simple narrative development also generates a conflict in the nexus between narrative and its hermeneutics in *Disgrace*. Is the novel simply a statement in white pessimism? Is the author’s intention properly realized, or is there a major crisis between artistic intentionality and the accomplished impacts? If racial consciousness and conflict remain irrepressible in the new South Africa, Coetzee’s attitude to its representation is largely uneven: the kangaroo-trial by the university’s ethics’ committee — a trial often equated with the ‘Truth and Reconciliation’ trials of apartheid offenders — does not really reflect any racial bias in its sittings. We only get to know of David Lurie’s racial belonging when his daughter gets raped. The female student, too, Melanie Isaacs, we are told, “is small and thin, with close-cropped black hair, wide, almost Chinese cheekbones, large, dark eyes” (*Disgrace*, 11); we are not sure whether she is white or black. In addition, in spite of his vandalization of Lurie’s car and his personal confrontation with David Lurie at the auditorium, Melanie’s boyfriend, Ryan, does not have any racial

identity: he is simply “tall and wiry; he has a thin goatee and an ear-ring; he wears black leather jacket and black leather trousers. He looks older than most students; he looks like trouble” (*Disgrace* 30); even ‘Soraya, the sex-hospitality ‘worker’ lacks any racial placement except having “long black hair and dark liquid eyes” (*Disgrace* 1). As we look forward to meeting a ‘Mr Isaacs’ through whom we can map the racial identity of Melanie and her cousin, Pauline, we only find the man as “small, thin, stoop-shouldered” (*Disgrace* 37). But when David Lurie is attacked and his daughter raped at the farmyard, the narrator is quick to draw attention to the racial identity of their attackers: they are blacks from the lunatic fringes of darkest Africa.

Whether it is through actantial dialogues or by authorial reticence, the recourse to naming and careful descriptions of space and characters provides basis for the classification of *Disgrace* as an immensely “disturbing work of the post-apartheid era thus far” (Attwell, 2003:12). While mapping the racial identity of the characters might not be the most graceful thing to do here, however, Lucy’s ordeals, her interpretations of her violations as essentially emanating from ‘personal hatred’ and her father’s counsel that such interpretations could never have arisen were her violators white thugs all inspire the need for a hermeneutic decoding drawn from the complex but unpleasant tapestries of racial politics. In any case, for David Lurie, such savagery can only take place at this time in history in darkest Africa or the old Kaffraria¹³ (*Disgrace* 121-122; 158-159). Locating the place of ‘names’ and ‘naming’ becomes quite pivotal in following the narrator in *Disgrace*. Where the authorial fascination with the middle voice paradigm limits our apprehension of the uneasy narrative, the recourse to careful ‘naming’ allows for a critical complexity as well as provide further space for interpretive democracy.

The danger, though, is to perceive *Disgrace* as a simple reportorial narrative since this pattern of reading could portray the ‘author’ more as a cynic to the African predicament than as a sympathetic patriot.¹⁴ *Disgrace*, in this context, could emerge as a novel of anarchy where, for the simple fact of the relocation of political power, the sense of decorum previously enjoyed by white South Africans suddenly disappears. For a writer who has written extensively on the question of agency, particularly on the near absence of the blacks’ humanity in white South African writing, it is curious that Petrus, the most visible black figure in *Disgrace* will be presented as a very complacent figure who knows nothing beyond his displays of physical prowess in the farm. Attacks on white farmers suddenly become an issue that “happens every day, every hour, every minute, in every quarter of the country” (*Disgrace* 98); security for the white person becomes a thing of the past: the police becomes completely irrelevant since “The

best is, you save yourself, because the police are not going to save you, *not any more*, you can be sure” (*Disgrace* 100); when the police are notified on any such attack at all, it is only “for the sake of insurance”, or else “the insurance would not pay out” (*Disgrace* 134).

Yet in spite of the narrator’s strong persuasion that Petrus is not completely innocent in the charge of assault on the Luries — since his brother-in-law, Pollux, was supposedly part of the raiding team — he lacks articulation. Ettinger tells David Lurie: “Not one of them you can trust” (*Disgrace* 109). So, given the lack of trust for the indigenous population “in a country where dogs are bred to snarl at the mere smell of a black man” (*Disgrace* 110), Petrus can neither successfully plead his innocence nor defend his ‘idiot’ brother-in-law. His tongue becomes ‘deformed’ because his stories cannot properly be narrated in English. Listen to the narrator:

Petrus is a man of his generation. Doubtless Petrus has been through a lot, doubtless he has a story to tell. He would not mind hearing Petrus’s story one day. But preferably not reduced to English. More and more he is convinced that English is an unfit medium for the truth of South Africa. Stretches of English code whole sentences long have thickened, lost their articulations, their articulateness, their articulatedness. Like a dinosaur expiring and settling in the mud, the language has stiffened. Pressed into the mould of English, Petrus’s story would come out arthritic, bygone
(*Disgrace* 117).

If ‘English’ cannot express the story of Petrus, and if such experiences could lose their “articulations, articulateness and their articulatedness” when expressed in ‘English’, what language will? Coetzee probably would want us to understand this inability to arise from the lack of western education or, perhaps, the poor quality of education made available to the black population in the past, and which has created immense communication barrier amongst the various racial groups. National dialogue, given this anomaly, is abandoned for some forms of counter-violence. The reprisals that follow the liberalism of the new order, especially as it affects farm owners, are reduced to a culmination of a stifled communication. But this, too, does not really stand since Petrus is quite capable of expressing himself even if in his own variety of the English language. For, indeed, he is a man of his generation. He might be poor, but certainly not stupid. He has “borrowed a tractor”, and barely a few hours, “he has ploughed the whole of his land. All very swift and business-like; all very unlike Africa. In olden times, that is to say ten years ago, it would have taken him days with a hand-plough and oxen” (*Disgrace* 151). Silence is, in the context of South Africa’s post-apartheid non-racialism,

therefore, a statement in itself: a man who has shown so much resilience in the past and who is trying so hard to find his bearing in the newly found freedom must be ready to announce to the world in the face of fresh provocations: “it is finish”— let the by-gone be by-gone (*Disgrace* 201). If he could borrow *western technology* to advance his output, he could equally borrow *western tongue* not only to defend himself, but also to assert his personality to a world that continually expropriates his property and yet mercilessly interrogates his humanity.

Typical of the new farm-novel, the pathos is located not on the seemingly harsh fate of the ‘disgraced’ father, but on the undeserved violation and bleak future of the child. In Lucy’s pains, there is a resonance of Paton’s artistic prophecy of a liberated South Africa where Kumalo had vowed, “One day when the white man has turned to loving, we will find that we have turned to hating”. In trying to come to terms with the reality of her violation, Lucy had wondered: “It was so personal. It was done with such personal hatred. That was what stunned me more than anything. The rest was... expected. But why did they hate me so? I had never set eyes on them”. The narrator does not linger; he does not slur. We do not have to task our imaginations to find answer to Lucy’s worries. We have an enlightened scholar, David Lurie, in the vicinity to educate us on the most profound reason for her rape: “It was history speaking through them. A history of wrong. Think of it that way, if it helps. It may have seemed personal, but it wasn’t. It came down from the ancestors” (*Disgrace* 156).

While many commentators on the farm-related crisis in post-apartheid South Africa barely acknowledge the historical reality of compulsive seizures of the past as determinants, it is an irony of fate that a personal experience of such acts of violence would set in motion David Lurie’s deep thoughts on man’s tendency to change. While the ‘Native Land Act’ was for many not a reasonable excuse to delimit the social and psychological advancement of the deprived, an attack on his daughter’s farmhouse was enough to catalyse his deep sense of the humane. For as the narrator says of him following the attack, “He tells himself that he must be patient, that Lucy is still living in the shadow of the attack, that time needs to pass before she will be herself. But what if he is wrong? What if, after an attack like that, one is never oneself again? What if an attack like that turns one into a different and darker person altogether?” (*Disgrace* 124). Again, it is strange that David Lurie’s solutions to this painful experience would be to suggest an escapist route to his daughter: she must leave for Europe: she should join her mother,

and her other relatives who are excitedly waiting for their ‘disgraced’ relatives from the darkest Africa.

The historical imagination to which readers of Coetzee’s fiction of post-apartheid South Africa might do well to scrutinize for the immense feeling of disenchantment in *Disgrace* is not the immediate historical past of democratic non-racialism in South Africa. It is a historical consciousness that transcends European colonial occupation, and subsumes centuries of the many dispossessions of Africans since the slave trade era through the phase of official segregation during which period Africans were diminished to “dog-men”, “dig-men”, “carrier men” and “water-men” (*Disgrace* 151). While the narrator of *Disgrace* might confine this history to “olden days, that is to say ten years ago”, mythologists and historians of the post-colonialist persuasions need be reminded that in the context of Africa or precisely the sub-region, that history of injustice which marked the genesis of physical and psychological “rape” — even at the level of metaphor, or the aesthetic representation of the blacks’ humanity — did not start in the “olden days” of “ten years ago”: it could, in fact, subsume the settler’s myth of the Adamastor. It would seem, here, that Coetzee’s novelistic impressions of the blacks’ humanity in a democratic South Africa — in spite of his apparent empathy in his many non-fictional essays — inspires a perception that as a novelist, some of his novels, especially *Disgrace*, are not too removed from those of the imaginary ‘Calibans’ carved by his predecessors of the *plaasroman* tradition.

A mimetic decoding of narratives of the ‘new’ South Africa could, however, do some injustice not only to the writer, but also to the text and the reader. Yet, it is more honest to admit that there is no full-proof theoretical model that can intelligibly dissect the post-apartheid imaginary without necessarily invoking the *representational* as *rememoration*. *Disgrace*, to this end, is as much the story of David Lurie as it is by a most profound metaphorical extension a narrative of transitional South Africa. If David Lurie’s catastrophic socio-ethical liquidation sums the tragic end of the privilege previously accorded the white minority elite in apartheid South Africa, there is a sense in which his fall and the dubious invisibility of the black characters toward the end of the novel presents some problems: what seems clear, here, is the possible variant of interpretations that are likely to emerge from readers of different racial groups, as well as scholars of arts versus reality/history dichotomies. It has been noted that following its publication in 1999, some members of the South African parliament reacted angrily to the

author's figuration of blackness. Many of the black readers perceived it as a racist novel for reasons that appear quite obvious to any first-time reading. The questions emanating from this feeling are two folds: First, suppose a black African wrote *Disgrace*, how would the white literary intelligentsia respond to it? Second, is the claim that the novel is racist in its figuration of blackness entirely unfounded? It is questions of this nature that probably made Attwell to rightfully consider *Disgrace* to be "perhaps the most compelling and disturbing work of the post-apartheid era thus far, as indicated earlier in this discussion.

That *Disgrace* would generate quite some ripples within the political and academic circles is an affirmation of the novelist's insistence that the process of thematizing is not as simple as we often presume, since even the writer continues to discover new themes in his/her fiction long after its publication. One way of resolving the hermeneutic impasse, I believe, therefore, is by faithfully following the *narrator* in the process of creating and thematizing. In *Disgrace* and *Boyhood*, then, one remarkable approach is to locate 'the narrative rhythm': the pausal or 'caesural' sites where authorial interventions are carefully carved through narratorial descriptions of actantial discrepancies. We could in *Disgrace*, for instance, return to the beginning of the narrative and *listen* as the cautious, narratorial voice conspiratorially 'whispers' to us about Professor Lurie's immeasurable concupiscence: "He existed in an anxious flurry of promiscuity". (*Disgrace*, 7)

The evocations of the adventures of the English romantic poet, Lord Byron and especially his liaison with Lady Teresa Guiccioli serve as the pivot upon which the personality of David Lurie takes its irremediable sexual escapades. We are aware that he had had numerous liaisons with wives of colleagues. Yet when we first encounter him, he is paying prostitutes to satisfy his urges. He descends on female students, and on married and unmarried women alike. He also has two failed marriages in his profile. When he makes a move on one of his students, Melanie Isaacs, however, we encounter a narratorial retreat, a pausal element in the narrative at what point the narratorial middle voice warns: "That is where he ought to end it. But he does not..." (*Disgrace* 18) We observe here that there is no rape case levelled against David Lurie, not even of the statutory sub-category. After all, Melanie is not totally an innocent victim: she encouraged the old Professor in ways that matter: "She does not resist. All she does is avert herself: even her lips, avert her eyes. She lets him lay her out on the bed and undress her: she even helps him, raising her arms and then her hips (...)" (*Disgrace* 25).

V.

Following the Narrator: Conclusion

In following the *narrator* till the end, then, the personalities of the principal figures of *Boyhood* and *Disgrace* are presented to us, even as the reader is at task to comprehend their eccentricities. The child figure of *Boyhood* is not insensible of his privileges as the scion of a middle class family whose possessions and inheritances ensure his present and future security in an environment where his age mates of the *Other* racial affiliations lack basic needs for their survival. In *Disgrace*, David Lurie is intricately projected as one occupying a position of power, but abuses that office over trivia. The obsession with the erotica becomes the defining identity of an otherwise brilliant academic whose moral sensibility is pitifully compromised by his apparent lack of self-control. Extended metaphorically, David Lurie emerges as the summation of that man-in-power— perhaps the authoritarian apartheid racist, or simply a beneficiary of the old system— who only a few years back, used his position of authority to dominate the very weak in apartheid South Africa. Petrus, on the other hand, is the new man of power who must make the best of the privileges provided him by the liberalism of the new order. Whether he forgives, forgets, or avenges the injustices of the past is only dependent on how much pains he *remembers* and feels. His dismissal as intellectually porous by some mischievous white racist detractors who think he is incapable of articulating his opinions becomes totally inconsequential.

Notes

¹ It is important to stress that Memory as a province of scholarship is very broad. Some of the most eminent theorists of the field such as Maurice Halbwachs, Pierre Nora, Richard Terdiman, Johannes Fabian etc provide some of the modalities deployed in my reading. This does not preclude an awareness of the seminal readings and historiographies provided by iconic scholars like Frances Yates (*The Art of Memory*, 1968). The long range of excavations and mnemonic investigations by Jewish scholars of the Holocaust firmly establish studies in memory as social and cultural histories. Research on the subject such as John R. Gillis (Ed), *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity* (1994), Dan Ben-Amos & Liliane Weissberg (Eds), *Cultural memory and the Construction of Identity* (1999), Mihaela Irimia et al (Eds), *Literature and Cultural Memory* (2017) are relevant, but essentially exegetically attuned more to the decoding of narratives of colonizing nations than they do with colonial modernities and postcolonial memories of Africa. Readers who may be interested in the subject could do well to visit these major thinkers, not excluding the interesting works by Sara Tanderup (2014), Maria Jesús Marnéz-Alfaro et al (2017), Mihaela Irimia et al (2017), among others.

² Available scholarships on Coetzee have looked at his novels from the perspective of his fascination with the postcolonial imagination, especially his representation of the experiences of the colonized. There is also interest in Coetzee's narratives from the point of view of his untiring concern to intellectualise his themes at every level. David Attwell's numerous essays on Coetzee, and his *J.M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing*, Dick Penner's *Countries of the Mind: The Fiction of J.M. Coetzee*, Sue Kossew's *Pen and Power: A Post-Colonial Reading of J. M. Coetzee and André Brink*, and Rosemary Jane Jolly's *Colonization, Violence, and Narration in White South African*

Writing: Andre Brink, Breten Bretenbach, and J. M. Coetzee amongst others, are all agreed in their reading of the postcolony in the early works of Coetzee. In Coetzee's fiction, then, time, art, and ethics all cohere in a writer's liberal approach to finding his thematic focus, thus presenting the postcolonial imagination as an open territory that asserts its presence by extracting vital statements of the past and the present.

³The claims in some quarters that Coetzee is better understood as "the colonizer who refuses" could, of course, be challenged. But Coetzee's efforts are not simply to tell historical truths. After all, as he eloquently submits, 'we have art so that we may not die of truth'. What emerges here, however, is that critics and average readers of his fiction should be allowed to have their interpretations and 'meanings' as suggested by their experience of his novels. It does seem to me that Coetzee's iconoclasm is better read in his essays and brilliant scholarship and, certainly, not in his fiction. In fact, his '1987 Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech' and the more recent 'Nobel Prize lecture: He and His Man' amongst his numerous essays assembled in *Stranger Shores: Essays 1986 – 1999*, *Giving offence: Essays on Censorship*, *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews* tell us more of his artistic philosophy than we read in most of his fictional writings.

⁴ For Coetzee, criticism is fundamental in the construction of the classical; every work of the imagination should be subjected to continual interrogation for its refinement, apprehension and survival. In one of his numerous erudite speeches, 'J. M. Coetzee — Nobel Lecture: He and His Man', he returns to the allegory of 'the colonizer' and 'the colonized', by drawing upon Daniel Defoe's *Robison Crusoe*: "And decoy ducks, or duckoys: What did he, Robinson, know of decoy ducks? Nothing at all, until this man of his began sending in reports". See www.nobel.se/literature/laureates/2003/coetzee-lecture-e.html. Thus with *his* man "sending in reports", in other words, with the colonized 'writing back' to the master, the colonizer is being compelled to listen to the colonized; he (the colonizer) is consequently learning new idioms from the 'slave'. In concluding his lecture, Coetzee, like Achebe, harps on the continuing impediments to dialogue between North and South when he writes of the sojourner's attitude to his man: "But he fears there will be no meeting, not in this life. If he must settle on a likeness for the pair of them, his man and he, he would write that they are like two ships sailing in contrary directions, one west, the other east".

⁵ Stephen Watson has used the phrase in line with the brilliant argument of Albert Memmi in *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (London: Souvenir P, 1974:20). Of course, Watson goes on further to illustrate how Coetzee's first four novels are elaborately attuned to the exploration of the relationship between "master and slave", whether such relationship is from external environments or within the same locality. See Watson, "Colonialism and the Novels of J. M. Coetzee". *Research in African Literatures*, 17.3(1986): 370 – 392.

⁶ The most elaborate of this angle to Coetzee's scholarship is David Attwell's 'The Problem of History in the Fiction of J. M. Coetzee', *Poetics Today* 11:3 (Fall, 1990).

⁷ See also D. Attwell, *J.M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing* (Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press/Cape Town: David Philips (1993). In fact Attwell argues that "The basic narrative of Coetzee's oeuvre is indeed that of colonialism and decolonisation" (1993:4), and tries to establish the nexus between textuality and historicity in the fiction of Coetzee. He speaks of "situational metafiction", — which he defines as "a mode of fiction that draws attention to the historicity of discourses, to the way subjects are positioned within and by them, and, finally, to the interpretive process, with its acts of contestation and appropriation. Of course, all these things have a regional and temporal specificity" (1993:20).

⁸ See, for instance, Attwell's edited, *Doubling the Point*; Sue Kossew's *Pen and Power*; and Rosemary Jane Jolly's *Colonization, Violence, and Narration in White South African Writing*.

⁹ The most obvious of this image of psychological nationalities in Coetzee's scholarship is Dick Penner's *Countries of the Mind: The Fiction of J. M. Coetzee*. (N. Y. & London: Greenwood Press, 1989). Penner draws attention to Coetzee's fascination with a teleological fiction that retains its aesthetic authenticity without relying on the burdens of historical pillars when he observes: "J.M. Coetzee the teller of tales, the illusionist, fabulist, and wordsmith, creates countries of the mind, where the imagination reigns and refuses to be subservient to history's incessant voices. This is not to say that his fictional works do not convey an ethical vision: they do, but their lack of polemics and the ways in which their forms subvert traditional fictional genres disturb some of Coetzee's readers" (20).

¹⁰ Attwell suggests that readers of Coetzee's fiction could do well by noting the basic influences on Coetzee as a novelist. These influences are essentially those of transformational linguistics of Noam Chomsky's persuasion, as well as those of continental structuralism. He concludes: "Coetzee's caution about political association translates into a caution about the notion of community. In the South Africa of the 1970s and 1980s, the only community that a writer like Coetzee could envisage would be a community-to-be-erected. If some of his readers do not sense in Coetzee's fiction the possibility of his sharing, as an authorial presence, in the work of construction or reconstruction that is required by such a prospect, then it is still incumbent on them to follow Coetzee into the break with the filiative colonial structure, to understand the terms of that break, to grasp the historical cogency of the fiction that is produced, and to examine the affiliative connections that follow from it in light of the historical pressures to which they are both a response and a judgment" (Attwell, 1990: 611).

¹¹ Used also in line with André Brink's usage of the term in his *Mapmakers: Writing in a State of Siege*.

¹² The bulk of the essays in Coetzee's *White Writing* frown at the specific cases of imaginative myopia and hyperopia that define the literary output of white settlers of South Africa both in their poetry and fiction in issues of agency, especially of the blacks' humanity. On the *Plaasroman* tradition, for instance, he writes: "The constraints of the genre therefore make silence about the black man the easiest of an uneasy set of options. If the work of hands on a particular patch of earth, digging, ploughing, planting, building, is what inscribes it as the property of its occupiers *by right*, then the hands of black serfs doing the work had better not be seen. Blindness to the colour black is built into South African pastoral. As its central issue the genre prefers to identify the preservation of a (Dutch) peasant rural order, or at least the preservation of the values of that order. In (British) capitalism it identifies the principal enemy of the old ways. Locating the historically significant conflict as between Boer and Briton, it shifts black-white conflict out of sight into a forgotten past or an obscure future" (5-6).

¹³ The name Kaffraria is derived from 'Kaffir', a pejorative appellation suggestive of monkeys. It is one of the many colonial taxonomies of race descriptions designed to make the indigenous peoples lose confidence in themselves as human beings.

¹⁴ It is, of course, safer to describe Coetzee as 'an intellectual patriot' if we accept the image already established of him as 'the colonizer who refuses'. Many black African scholars of South African letters will likely, for long, challenge the designation of 'a sympathetic patriot' to the African predicament.

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