

## CHAPTER THREE

### 3.1 The pastoral solution? A note on the *plaasroman*

The novels to be studied in the following chapters, *Disgrace*, *Agaat*, and *Kings of the Water*, are all variations on the genre of the farm novel or *plaasroman*. Since farms hold communities that have lived together within a particular social and political order, often for generations, the genre lends itself to examining, in microcosm, historical, social, political and economic questions within a country or society. In South Africa, with its vexed history of colonialism, of the 1913 Land Act which dispossessed black farmers of their land – and further prevented blacks from recovering or obtaining land – and of apartheid, land ownership has been a particularly painful concern. The appropriation by Afrikaner nationalism of the connection between the Boer and the land as an almost mystical bond was simultaneously a ploy to represent land ownership as a God-given right, denying the legacy of the Land Act and the effect of subsequent laws. The revolutionary slogan ‘Kill the Boer’, still used at political rallies after the demise of apartheid and criticised as hate speech, may well reflect the simmering resentment among black people about the loss of land.

J.M. Coetzee has been amongst those who have drawn attention to the use of the *plaasroman* genre, and has examined the flourishing of this genre in the Afrikaans literature of the early twentieth century within the context of that time, and particularly of increasing urbanisation and the supplanting of a peasant economy by capitalism. He sees the *plaasroman* in this context as ‘based on the myth of the return to the earth’ (1988:79). In this genre farm life, usually ruled over by a benign patriarch, is idealised, while ties to the soil and honest labour (performed by whites, black labour being excised) are celebrated. Coetzee places Pauline Smith’s *The Beadle* (1926) within this pastoral tradition (the farm in her novel is called *Harmonie*, the valley in the Little Karoo is *Aangenaam* [pleasant]), but for Coetzee the farm in Smith is ‘too little distinguishable from the village’ (1988:63). Indeed, both Smith and Olive Schreiner, as ‘women, as people of English culture, as free thinkers...perhaps stood too far outside the insular patriarchal culture of the Boer farm to write of it with true intimacy’ (63). Coetzee therefore classes their novels as farm novels rather than

*plaasromans*. While Smith conveys the ‘idyll...of African pastoralism’, Coetzee sees Schreiner as anti-idyllic (72), *The Story of an African Farm* (1883) presenting an unflattering ‘microcosm of colonial South Africa’ (65), her farm ‘reigned over by a sterile and slothful woman’ (66) who does not husband the land or care for its people as the pastoral myth requires. ‘Schreiner is anticolonial both in her assertion of the alienness of European culture in Africa and in her attribution of unnaturalness to the life of the farm’ (66). Her anti-pastoral novel is the forerunner to Nadine Gordimer’s *The Conservationist* (1974). (A similar critique is complicated in *Agaat*, in which the farm Grootmoedersdrift is husbanded by generations of women farmers who farm with care and wisdom – but Milla de Wet’s relations with people are far less sound than those with the soil and with livestock, so that the microcosmic critique of neo-colonialism still pertains.<sup>36</sup>)

‘The pastoral solution to the question of how the white man shall live in South Africa is that he should retreat into rural independence,’ writes Coetzee (1988:81). He himself adopts and parodies the *plaasroman* genre in 1977 with *In the Heart of the Country*, and adjusts it in *Life and Times of Michael K* (1983), before examining this same question, how the white man shall live in South Africa, in his 2001 novel *Disgrace*, in a post-colonial, post-apartheid setting. (In this novel Coetzee uses familiar Afrikaans words which connote inequality in a setting of reversed power relations, like *handlanger* [of David Lurie’s assisting a former farm labourer], and *bywoner*, of his daughter, residing on the land now owned by the same man.)

While Coetzee presents a thoughtful analysis of the origin of the *plaasroman* in the 1920s and 1930s, Malvern Van Wyk Smith explores the ways in which it was thoroughly appropriated in the service of Afrikaner nationalism, which flourished in the subsequent decades. He examines a song from his schooldays, ‘*O Boereplaas*’, which encapsulates the myth of the *plaasroman*:

O Boereplaas, geboortegrond,

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<sup>36</sup> Cf. J.M. Coetzee’s comments in his Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech (1987): ‘At the heart of the unfreedom of the hereditary masters of South Africa is a failure of love. To be blunt: their love is not enough today and has not been enough since they arrived on the continent; furthermore, their talk, their excessive talk, about how they love South Africa has consistently been directed toward *the land*, that is, toward what is least likely to respond to love: mountains and deserts, birds, animals and flowers’ (2002:96).

Jou het ek lief bo alles.  
Al swerf ek heel die wêreld rond,  
Waar so gelukkig, so gesond?<sup>37</sup> (Van Wyk Smith, 2001: 17)

Van Wyk Smith points out that the melody was that of Schubert's *Tannenbaum*, and that the song, unbeknownst to the unreflecting schoolchildren, was 'a capsule of all the racially and culturally exclusive myths and doctrines on which Afrikaner nationalism had been nurtured for decades' (2001:17-18) – as were the *plaasromans* set in literature courses. 'Such works,' he writes, thematised the nexus of the "boer" and his "plaas" as a timeless icon of national and numinous identity, not only validating an unquestioned right to the land but expressing also the very soul of the Afrikaner being' (17). He argues that the myths which give the farm and the farm novel potency in many cultures (such as closeness to the soil, fundamental survival) achieved a 'peculiar intensity' in South Africa 'precisely because possession of much of the territory by whites is seen to be controversial if not illegitimate' (17). Ampie Coetzee agrees: the common denominator between history and fiction is, in his opinion, the vexed question of land ownership (2000:2).

The increase in farm murders since democratisation in South Africa has been variously interpreted. With regard to the public reaction to such attacks, Ampie Coetzee quotes Etienne van Heerden's comment: 'Daar's motorkapings en rooftogte – maar min slagtings roer soos 'n moordaanval op 'n plaasopstal' (2000:xii).<sup>38</sup> The farm has retained its power in the popular imagination, especially among Afrikaners (the Afrikaans media cover farm murders with far more prominence, for example, than do the English-language media). Nevertheless, as Van Wyk Smith points out, farmers probably constitute less than 5% of South Africa's white population. His argument that the agitated response to farm murders among Afrikaners, in particular, is disproportionate (more people die in road accidents and of Aids, he argues) is perhaps disingenuous in view of the political and economic climate. Moreover, those who die on the roads or of Aids are not murdered; there is no suggestion of hate crime (though in the latter case there was cause for outrage at what many perceived to be criminal

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<sup>37</sup> Oh Boer farm (a tautology unless Boer stands for Afrikaner), ground of my birth,/ I love you above all./ Even if I should roam throughout the world,/ Where would I be as happy, as healthy?

<sup>38</sup> There are car hijackings and armed robberies, but few murders move one as does a murderous attack on a farm homestead.

negligence). Ampie Coetzee argues that the question whether attacks on farmers are politically motivated, as many whites believe, or merely criminal, as the government insists, is immaterial: those who are directly affected, he writes, believe they are political (2000: xiii). (At present necessary and relevant ethical questions concerning land ownership and restitution are nevertheless obscuring other, equally urgent questions of food security.)

Van Wyk Smith points out the changes that the trope of the *boereplaas* has undergone in recent years, both as a result of attacks on farmers, which have turned the farm into a ‘war zone, a limbo of menace and insecurity’ (19), and through revelations before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission about covert operations planned and executed from a farm, Vlakplaas. ‘The burials at Vlakplaas,’ he writes, ‘have become the buried – but now resurrected – memories, mentalities, crimes of a whole discredited political culture. But they also invite us to ponder more closely the possibility that the trope of the “boereplaas” has always been an ambivalent one, an ideality which always depended for its potency and charm on as much denial as affirmation, on as much suppression as transcendence’ (20). Ironically, the shallow graves at Vlakplaas provide a historical echo to a fictional image of denial and suppression in the farm novel, a series of buried presences, beginning with Schreiner’s imagined ‘buried giant’, as Van Wyk Smith points out (2001:27) – a koppie which is near the centre of the farm and the novel itself. When, in *The Conservationist*, the shallow grave of a black man yields its contents after a rain storm, the ‘black corpse in the garden’ – the ‘dark side’ which is buried in the *plaasroman* – is ‘brought to light’ (Coetzee J.M., 1988: 81) – much as the disinterred bodies of death squad victims would bring to light what had been suppressed during the apartheid years. In Coetzee’s view, Gordimer’s novel ‘lays the ghost’ of the pastoral solution (81). Her novel ends with the description of the reburial by farm workers and anticipates land repossession: ‘They had put him to rest, at last; he had come back<sup>39</sup>. He took possession of this earth, theirs; one of them’ (1974: 267). Van Wyk Smith, similarly, closes with the reminder that ‘the resurrections of Vlakplaas not only confront us with the suppressed truths of the past, but also generate the restitutions required for the nation to redirect its narrative.... If we are the stories we

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<sup>39</sup> This echoes the ANC slogan *Mayibuye* (‘May he come back’).

tell ourselves, we now know that neither we nor the stories can – and must – ever be the same again’ (2001:35).

### **3.2. Bearing the sins? J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*.**

*Disgrace* appeared in 1999, five years after the first democratic elections in South Africa. The first post-apartheid euphoria had not completely waned, and white people especially had reason to be thankful for a peaceful solution, an absence of retribution for the wrongs of the past, the extent of which was being revealed at TRC hearings. Yet *Disgrace* was not a hopeful novel, but appeared to be a deeply pessimistic portrayal of contemporary South Africa: Farred, for instance, sees the South Africa in the novel as a ‘disgraced – and disgraceful – society’ (2002: 343). More importantly, Wicomb (2002: 220), in a clear reference to the TRC process, sees the novel as proclaiming ‘the failure of the project of public memorialising, the naivety and inadequacy of that Christian discourse of remembering, forgiving and healing’. And indeed, the blight of guilt and the shadow of avenging violence, in the absence of either justice or mercy, seem to pervade the novel, leaving critics to seek traces of grace, and to debate the possibility or impossibility of ethical action for the individual subject. For the purpose of this study, I wish to argue, following Gareth Cornwell (2003) and others, that, while grace is indeed to be found in surprising spaces, it is found primarily in incarnational, sacrificial giving.

Much of the complexity of *Disgrace* derives from its limited point of view and unreliable focaliser – that individual through whom ethical action might be expected to be realised – in the figure of David Lurie. McDonald identifies the unease created for many readers: ‘The narrative form, a present tense version of free indirect style, makes it difficult to say, conclusively, that all this is simply a staged depiction of a self-indicting white male. This puts the reader, especially (but not exclusively) the black, gay or woman reader, in the uneasy, even provocative, position of being obliged to see the story through a disturbingly alien gaze without having any sense of the boundary between character and narrator’ (2002: 326). (Confusing the focalising narrator and the author himself has certainly led to much misreading of the novel.) Thus the reader comes to ‘participate’ in Lurie’s seduction and rape of a young female student, Melanie Isaacs – which are described only through his self-deceiving

consciousness – and has only Lurie’s judgment to depend on in evaluating later events. Other significant characters, all women, do not tell their stories, and remain opaque to Lurie, often serving to remind the reader only of gaps in his awareness and understanding: ‘You keep misreading me’ (2000: 112); ‘(Y)ou miss the point entirely’ (112); ‘*You weren’t there. You don’t know what happened*’ (134, 140; author’s emphasis). And, while Lurie does attain a form of grace, it is the women, whom he does not understand, and his daughter especially, who in small but heroic ways make a contribution to the future through taking suffering upon themselves. That they do this in contentious ways, in abominable circumstances, does not diminish the gift.

Much of the outrage elicited by the novel centres on its account of an attack on the farm owned by Lurie’s daughter, Lucy, during which she is gang-raped by the three intruders, while he is beaten and set alight with paraffin. The dogs she is caring for in her kennels are shot in their cages. Lucy, numbed, ‘dead’, refuses to report the rape to the police, though the theft of Lurie’s car and other items is reported for the purpose of claiming insurance.

The novel has two settings: Cape Town, where Prof. David Lurie falls into disgrace, and Salem, in the Eastern Cape, to which he retreats. A village in ‘old Kaffraria’, Salem was part of the colonial frontier for British settlers and is still a ‘border town’ or liminal space, now in the process of decolonisation and forming part of what Graham Pechey has called the ‘terrifyingly unmarked temporal frontier of decolonization’ (2002: 377). Salem calls to mind not only Hawthorne’s judgmental puritanical society, but also the city after which both towns are named: Jerusalem (‘possession of peace’, Salem meaning peace) – a site which has, paradoxically, known more conflict than most, just as Salem in the Eastern Cape has done.

Gareth Cornwell has expounded Salem’s history in a fascinating article, ‘Disgraceland: History and the Humanities in Frontier Country’ (2003), in which he sees Coetzee’s setting as the most logical ‘for a story concerned at its core with entitlement to the land in post-apartheid South Africa’ (43). He points out that, of the nine frontier wars fought in the district between British settlers and Xhosas, ‘the fundamental *casus belli* was the question of land, and the history of the region known to this day as “the Border” (or just “Border”) is a history of strife that is everywhere

inscribed in the landscape’ (2003: 43). Salem itself was established by a small group under the Rev. William Shaw, who named the settlement, quoting Psalm 76: ‘In Salem also His tabernacle and His dwelling place’ (Cornwell, 2003: 44). While the first conflicts passed Salem by, a raid by ‘a large force of some five hundred Xhosas’ made off with the settlers’ cattle during the Sixth Frontier War, and massed on a nearby hillside (44). A possible attack was averted by a man called Richard Gush, ‘a man of Quaker leanings and an avowed pacifist (“possibly the only man in the Eastern Cape who never carried a gun”...)’ (Cornwell, 2003: 45, quoting from a lecture by the historian Winifred Maxwell). Gush rode out to the Xhosas with Barend Woest as his translator and, being received because he was unarmed, was able to negotiate, appeasing them by fetching a gift of bread, tobacco and pen knives.

Cornwell argues that the incident described below – the account of which Guy Butler includes in his “The Life of William Gush” – may have bearing on the novel:

Some years before the war of 1834, some Caffres stole his team of bullocks when he was travelling, and he was so poor that he had not money to replace them. He would not however, lodge any information before the authorities, lest any armed force should be sent after the Caffres, and human blood should be spilled. (45)

In this possible historical precedent for events in *Disgrace*, it seems both the absence of any attempt at retribution and the giving of a gift pave the way for a costly peace which enables the alien settlers, although greatly impoverished and fewer in number (some having left), to remain in the territory alongside the Xhosa people. And, while Cornwell sees Guy Butler’s 1982 play, *Richard Gush of Salem*, as ‘1820-settler mythmaking’ (46), he quotes Butler on the incident which, for him, ‘went right to the heart of contemporary South Africa...the response of the individual conscience to racial and other violence’ (46).

In this light, Cornwell sees Lucy’s choice to remain silent about the offence committed against her, as an ‘intervention’: ‘it seems that we are being invited to read her response as a radical intervention... in the cycle of retributive violence which had (or *has*) for so long defined human relations on the “frontier” – an exemplary

demonstration of the principle of non-violence which for Coetzee is embodied in Christ's Crucifixion:

I understand the Crucifixion as a refusal and an introversion of retributive violence, a refusal so deliberate, so conscious, and so powerful that it overwhelms any interpretation, Freudian, Marxian, or whatever, that we can give to it.' (Cornwell, 46, quoting Coetzee in *Doubling the Point*, 1992: 337)

(The context from which this quotation is taken details Coetzee's extreme aversion to violence. I will return to the ethics of the Cross in relation to the novel.) Cornwell goes on to situate Lucy's intervention in a world that is 'not real', but belongs to what Coetzee has called fiction's 'rival history' (54). Lucy's final scene of almost paradisiacal serenity<sup>40</sup> – though undercut by fierce irony – belongs, equally, 'outside of history': these two scenes 'offer an ideal or mythical solution to a problem that in the real world seems incapable of solution; that is, they offer a *pastoral* solution' (54; author's emphasis).

Does *Disgrace*, together with Michael K – who evades land ownership and tries, in a purely 'conceptual' solution (Coetzee in an interview with Tony Morphet, quoted by Cornwell, 48), to live in the seams, as it were, between the fences – provide that 'pastoral solution to the question of how the white man shall live in South Africa', as Cornwell suggests? Is such sacrifice as Lucy makes, not seeking retribution and giving up her claim to her land, 'the price one has to pay for staying on', as she puts it in the novel (158)? I hope to follow Cornwell in exploring the possibility suggested in the novel of breaking the retributive cycle of violence through 'a refusal and introversion of violence', as Coetzee says of the Cross. Whether this constitutes mercy or sacrifice – or both – is less easy to define.

If Gareth Cornwell provides the key, it is Lucy Graham (2002) who has introduced the notion of sacrifice by drawing attention to the link between the name given to the student seduced by Lurie (the cause of his disgrace), Melanie Isaacs, and Jacques Derrida's discourse on the story of Abraham and his sacrifice of Isaac, his son. Refuting those critics who apply a Levinasian ethics of the (singular, transcendent, human) other to the novel, Graham quotes Derrida's criticism of this singular

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<sup>40</sup> Cf. Graham Pechey's article, 'Coetzee's Purgatorial Africa' (2002:376).



conception of the other, in which he suggests that one ‘cannot respond to the call, the request, the obligation, or even the love of another without sacrificing the other other, the other others’ (Graham, 2002: 4, quoting from Derrida’s *The Gift of Death*, 1995). Derrida uses the ‘monstrous’ choice with which Abraham is confronted to argue that such choices are in fact common, as one cannot be responsible to one other without neglecting the ‘other others’. The question that arises, then, is ‘to whom is responsibility due?’ or ‘whom to give to’ (Graham, 2002: 8) – which is not unlike the lawyer’s question to Jesus about the law of love: ‘Who is my neighbour?’<sup>41</sup> (In the novel *Lucy*, interestingly, chooses to call her former labourer, Petrus, her ‘neighbour’, something Lurie hesitates over before accepting.)

In his essay ‘Whom to Give to (Knowing not to Know)’ (1998), Derrida gives his own, sympathetic reading of Kierkegaard’s ‘Fear and Trembling’, in which the latter examines the Abrahamic story in terms of the paradox of morality it presents:

Abraham’s decision is absolutely responsible because it answers for itself before the absolute other. Paradoxically it is also irresponsible because it is guided neither by reason nor by an ethics justifiable before men or before the law of some universal tribunal. Everything points to the fact that one is unable to be responsible at the same time before the other and before others, before the others of the other. If God is completely other, the figure or name of the wholly other, then every other (one) is every (bit) other. *Tout autre est tout autre*. This formula... implies that God, as the wholly other, is to be found everywhere where there is something of the wholly other... (Derrida, 1998:170)

In the story of Abraham and Isaac, Derrida argues, following Kierkegaard, that Abraham, in order to give to God, the Absolute Other, what God requires, sacrifices another other, his son: it is ‘monstrous, outrageous, barely conceivable: a father is prepared to put to death his beloved son... because the Other, the great Other asks him or orders him without giving the slightest explanation’ (in Graham, 2002:7).

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<sup>41</sup> This question is overturned in Jesus’ answer, which takes the form of the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10: 25-37). The parable, which begins with a traveller on the road between Jerusalem and Jericho, makes the victim the protagonist, not the Samaritan, despite the name attributed to it – by the end of the first sentence the traveller has been stripped and left for dead by a band of robbers. The story therefore invites identification with the victim, and brings to mind Coetzee’s statement in an interview: ‘(I)f all of us imagined violence as violence against ourselves, perhaps we would have peace’ (1992: 337). The question is also overturned by Jesus’ question at the end of the parable, when he asks who ‘proved a neighbour to the man who fell among robbers’.

Abraham must hate that which he loves to fulfil his responsibility to the Absolute Other. Graham cites this in arguing that Lurie's defence of his seduction and, indeed, rape of Melanie – that he was a 'servant of Eros' (Coetzee, 2000: 52) – falls into the same category as Abraham's abnegation of responsibility in behaving unethically towards one beloved for the sake (ostensibly) of the Divine Other (Graham, 2002: 7). (Derrida is more sympathetic to Abraham's choice than is Graham.) What Lucy Graham omits from the ambit of her study is Kierkegaard's – and Derrida's – insistence that, paradoxically, love is still central: 'for it is indeed this love for Isaac that makes his act a sacrifice by its paradoxical contrast to his love for God' (Kierkegaard, quoted by Derrida, 1998:160). This 'gift of death' for the loved object will be found in Lurie's final act in the novel.

Nevertheless, Graham is correct in her understanding of Lurie's initial 'wrong' sacrifice. Lurie seduces Melanie by saying that 'a woman's beauty does not belong to her alone' (Coetzee, 2000: 16), and with the thought, 'Beauty's rose... she does not own herself' (18). Significantly, he also thinks, 'perhaps he does not own himself either' (18). (Lurie's contention that he is 'in the grip of something' suggests possession, which sets him apart from Abraham, who is tested precisely because he exercises choice.) He sacrifices, not himself, but (in his own perception) '*a child... (n)o more than a child*' (20; author's emphasis) to the fire, the 'last leap of flame of sense before it goes out' (27). In his narcissism, warding off old age and death<sup>42</sup>, he rationalises his abuse by drawing on neo-platonic Romantic notions, denying the fact of rape, sacrificing the other to his own ends. This event, the first to alert the reader to the concept of sacrifice, clearly signals an inversion of true sacrifice, and is hence the most unethical act. That Melanie, sleeping in his daughter's bedroom, evokes Lurie's

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<sup>42</sup> Cf. Lurie's thoughts after watching, unseen, as Melanie rehearses a stage performance: 'Yet the old men whose company he seems to be on the point of joining, the tramps and drifters with their stained raincoats and cracked false teeth and hairy earholes – all of them were once upon a time children of God, with straight limbs and clear eyes. Can they be blamed for clinging to the last to their place at the sweet banquet of the senses?' (24) He 'explains' his actions to Melanie's father in terms of fire: '(I)n the olden days people worshipped fire. They thought twice before letting a flame die, a flame-god. It was that kind of flame your daughter kindled in me. Not hot enough to burn me up, but real: real fire'. The perfective form for which Lurie has a predilection, follows, invoking complete destruction, a 'holocaust':

'Burned – burnt – burnt up' (166).

protectiveness and seems almost a daughter to him ('Mistress? Daughter' [27]) exacerbates the offence and sharpens the contrast with the Abrahamic sacrifice.

Derrida, who is at pains throughout his essay to point to the relevance of the Abrahamic story for the three monotheistic religions, yet concludes: 'As for the sacrifice of the son by his father, the son sacrificed by men and finally saved by a God who seemed to have abandoned him or put him to the test, how can we not recognise there the foreshadowing or the analogy of another passion?' (1998:172). Indeed, of Abraham's answer to Isaac's question, 'God will Himself provide a lamb for the burnt offering', Derrida writes, 'He says something... that, *although he doesn't know it yet*, will turn out to be true' (156; author's emphasis). Abraham's words are fulfilled literally in the provision of an animal for the sacrifice, but he unconsciously predicts more than that. God's inexplicable words to him ('Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love... and offer him as a burnt offering' – which, as Derrida points out, means 'holocaust' [Gen 22:2]) – are echoed at the outset of Jesus' ministry: 'This is my beloved Son' (Mt 3:17) and in John 3:16: 'God so loved the world that he gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish...'. It is possible that the troubling story of Abraham and Isaac invites the reader to begin to imagine, if that were possible, the cost of that divine choice between beloved others. Just as Abraham's story foreshadows the supreme sacrifice, Lurie's abuse looks forward to that which will be inflicted upon his daughter. In that event even David Lurie, who by his own acknowledgement, is selfish, will do anything, give his own life, to save his child, just as one imagines Abraham would willingly take the place of his son on the altar. In the story of Abraham, the lamb that God provides is in fact a ram, a substitution, a figure of the Father. When the Lamb of God dies, the sky is black.

A different reading of the story of Abraham and Isaac is given by René Girard, as marking not the beginning, but the end of sacrifice. While child sacrifices were practised by surrounding nations, Girard argues, the children of Abraham were given an object lesson in the suspension of the sacrifice: that child sacrifice was not what God required of them.<sup>43</sup> Girard sees this story as looking forward to the end of

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<sup>43</sup> This reading could be borne out by reference to the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel, who consistently rebuke the Israelites for child sacrifices to Molech: 'And you took your sons and daughters, whom you had borne to me, and these you sacrificed.... Were your harlotries so

religion based on scapegoating (and therefore essentially violent: ‘Violence is the heart and secret soul of the sacred’ [quoted in Kirwan, 2004:41]). In its place will come the Crucified – and here Girard’s views are similar to Coetzee’s. Girard’s interpretation of the crucifixion is that it is not a sacrifice to God, but a life of non-violence taken to its conclusion. ‘To say that Jesus dies, not as a sacrifice, but in order that there may be no more sacrifices, is to recognize in him the Word of God: “I wish for mercy and not sacrifices”’ (Girard, 1999: 184). (Cf. Hebrews 9,10.) This message of the Kingdom of God is not received by a culture premised on violence, which moves to reject it. The ‘logic of violence has the last word’, but the ‘logic of non-violence’ which does not resist it, is superior, according to Girard, because ‘it comprehends the other logic in addition to itself’ (185). When Girard argues that Jesus’ death is not a sacrifice, it is because he sees it as not being required by God. Jesus Himself does ‘give his life for his friends’ (185, quoting from John 15:13 on the greatest love): ‘There is no other cause for his death than the love of one’s neighbor lived to the very end, with an infinitely intelligent grasp of the constraints it imposes’ (185). This giving of oneself for the other or others is the final sacrifice: the end to the practice of scapegoating as sacrifice, and also the end to the cycle of violence. It is what I call sacrificial giving, taking suffering or death upon oneself (introversion) for the sake of another or others.

Though Lucy, in her mid-twenties, would have been born into white privilege and enjoyed its benefits, she is, in Petrus’s words, ‘forward-looking’ (Coetzee, 2000: 136), and seems to be part of the new order. Her father, however, sees her as a ‘settler’ (61) and a ‘boervrou’ (60) – as, apparently, do her attackers, whose hatred shocks her. She might therefore be seen as a relatively innocent victim, the perfect scapegoat for the old culture of violence, which has not been eliminated by democratisation. (Kirwan notes that ‘many of the victims of witch-hunts during the medieval period happened to be single women living on their own’; if they were in any way ‘marginal to begin with’ potential scapegoats were more vulnerable [2004:49], and it is possible, as Lurie speculates, that Lucy’s lesbianism was a factor in the attack.) The apparently personal

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small a matter that you slaughtered my children and delivered them up as an offering by fire to (idols)?’ (Ez 16:20,21). ‘For the sons of Judah have done evil in my sight, says the Lord.... They have built the high place of Topheth... to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire; which I did not command, nor did it come into my mind’ (Jer 7:30, 31). (The place name *Topheth* is probably derived from the Aramaic root *tpt*: ‘it will then mean “fireplace”’ (*The New Bible Dictionary*, 1287).

hatred from young men Lucy has not met before also brings to mind Willa Boesak's concept of 'God's wrathful children' (as discussed in chapter 1): those who take vengeance in the absence of visible justice – retribution or reparation – for the wrongs of the past.

Elleke Boehmer (2006: 136) has pointed out that Lurie and Lucy discuss scapegoating just before the attack occurs. Lurie says:

Scapegoating worked in practice while it still had religious power behind it. You loaded the sins of the city on to the goat's back and drove it out, and the city was cleansed. It worked because everyone knew how to read the ritual, including the gods. Then the gods died, and all of a sudden you had to cleanse the city without divine help. Real actions were demanded instead of symbolism. (2000: 91)

Coetzee portrays scapegoating as a religious ritual with a wider application than that of Judaism (described in Leviticus 16), and Lurie sees it as having lost its potency with the waning of religious belief. Girard, on the other hand, sees the practice as fundamental to that (old) religion that lives on in a violent culture, and the scapegoat as the necessary recipient of such a society's propensity to unite itself by creating a common enemy: demonising, then destroying, a vulnerable candidate. If Willa Boesak is correct in discerning anger in many black people in the post-apartheid period, in the absence of justice, then in the novel an unprovoked attack on an innocent person would certainly qualify as scapegoating. When Lucy compares rape to '(p)ushing the knife in' (158), she evokes the very thing Abraham is stopped, at the last moment, from doing: sacrificing another. The fact that she will go on literally to bear the child conceived in this violence means that she takes upon herself, bears in her body, the outcome of the sins of the past.

David Lurie never understands Lucy's decision to remain silent about her violation, and presents several arguments for taking action – which, at the time of reading, make more sense to the reader than Lucy's unexplained position. When Lucy agrees, moreover, to give up her land to Petrus – who, in Lurie's opinion, may have been behind the attack or at least have turned a blind eye to it – in order to stay on her smallholding, her decision appears senseless to her father. But Lucy fulfils the

teaching of non-retaliation and non-violence which Girard sees as central to Christ's message and death:

You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist one who is evil. But if any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also; and if any one would sue you and take your coat, let him have your cloak as well; and if any one forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.<sup>44</sup> (Mt 5:38– 41)

This teaching ('Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good' [Rom. 12:21]) sees non-retaliation as more than the absence of retribution. While there is no doubt that the offence is evil, it is nevertheless to be absorbed without retaliation, and to be followed by an act of will in which more is given than was taken by force: the other cheek, the cloak, the extra mile. This is tantamount to an enactment of forgiveness – even where forgiveness has not been sought. Significantly, it is the act, not words, that matter. It is an act of will – the heart may be slow to follow. Lucy, having stripped herself of all rights and claims, left with 'nothing', says that this is what she 'must learn to accept' (205), and one assumes that the process will take time. When she does not report the rape, then chooses to give up her title to the land, and to keep the child so violently inflicted upon her, bearing in her body the evil done to her, and resolving to 'be a good mother' (216) – she fulfils the highest ethical ideals.

Ideally, this should bring to an end the cycle of retributive violence, yet even in Coetzee's fictional world this conceptual solution may not succeed: Lucy will stay, but there is no guarantee that Petrus, who is to give his protection in marriage in return for her land (Lucy will be his third wife), will protect her and honour her terms. Her choice to follow this course, rather than that favoured by her father ('They ought to turn the farmhouse into a fortress. Lucy ought to buy a pistol and a two-way radio...' [113]), is nevertheless more hopeful than the doomed stance of her neighbour Ettinger, who is ready to defend his land with violence, in the manner already abandoned as unsustainable by the apartheid government.

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<sup>44</sup> In Jesus' time, a Roman colonial soldier could compel a local resident to carry a burden for him for one mile, as Simon of Cyrene does in the gospel account of the passion.

Leela Gandhi quotes Derrida on '(t)hat strange behaviour where a living being in *quasi-suicidal* fashion, "itself" works to destroy its own protection, to immunize itself *against* its own immunity', and comments: 'Here, then, is the text for that prior concession to the injurability of the self upon which a certain ethics of non-violence founds its manifesto. One... that privileges self-suffering over violence or, to be more precise, is liberated from the reflexes of aggression through preemptive concession to its own "precariousness"' (Gandhi, 2008: 169). Such a predisposition – which Lucy attains through suffering – is very close to Jesus' teaching, which provides a strategy for non-retaliation, an alternative to the 'reflexes of aggression', by absorbing violation and being prepared to open the self to further offence. Giving up mechanisms of self-protection does indeed seem suicidal, but the alternative is violence: 'people fail to understand that they are indebted to violence for the degree of peace that they enjoy' (Girard, Oughourlian and Lefort, 2003 :211).

Elleke Boehmer describes Lucy's – and Lurie's eventual – stance as one of 'abjection'. Her apparently positive articulation of Lucy's 'physical abjection to, and a new responsibility for' a history of violation (a course she sees as 'traditionally feminine') (Boehmer, 2002: 343) nevertheless echoes the criticism made by Alain Badiou of 'near-suicidal' theories of pacifism and non-violence, which he sees as 'an ethics of abjection, too much in love with pain and death' (in Leela Gandhi, 2008: 170). The terms Lucy uses in the novel are 'Subjection. Subjugation' – which, she insists, are '(n)ot slavery' (149). These suggest an elected position – under – rather than a denial of agency, the loss of any position but that of the degraded victim.<sup>45</sup> ('You can govern us as long as we remain the governed,' Mahatma Gandhi wrote.<sup>46</sup>) I therefore disagree with Boehmer's reading of Lucy's position as that of the 'stereotype of the wronged and muted woman'; unlike her father, who, as a subject, 'abjects selfhood', Lucy – according to this reading – has 'abnegation thrust upon her' and remains the object of history (Boehmer, 2002:349). I believe that, while Lucy's

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<sup>45</sup> The roots of *subjection* denote being placed (or thrown) under, of *subjugation*, being under a yoke. The root form of *abjection* denotes being thrown away.

<sup>46</sup> Leela Gandhi quotes Mahatma Gandhi on his concept of 'soul force': 'You can govern us as long as we remain the governed.... The force implied in this way may be described as love-force, soul-force.... This force is indestructible.... The force of arms is powerless when matched against the force of ... the soul' (2008:163).

violation is thrust upon her, she does exercise choice and displays extraordinary grace in its aftermath.

Lurie's own stumbling progress towards grace is also charted through the motif of sacrificial love. At first he is morally blind. Professor of Communications (since the 'great rationalization' [3]) at the Cape Technical University, he is nevertheless still in thrall to his old masters, the Romantics, who, he later admits, 'have not... guided him well' – either that, or he has not 'listened well' (179). He invokes the Romantic sublime<sup>47</sup> in seducing and raping Melanie.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Lucy Graham comments, of the rape of Melanie, that when Lurie 'usurps upon' her, idealising her as Aphrodite, 'there is a critique of this Romantic version of desire, and a warning that veiling the other in sublimity may obscure abuse and may permit one to behave unethically toward another body' (2002:7).

Kimberley Wedeven Segall has examined the concept of the 'sublime' from Longinus onwards, noting that, for the Romantics, '(t)he expanding imaginative capability of the romantic sublime produces an aggrandised sense of self' (2005:42). She argues persuasively that Lurie's initial narcissistic Romanticism makes way, after the attack, for an experience of what she calls the 'traumatic sublime', which 'alters the focus from the protagonist to another character' (42). She traces this change through the altered conception of Lurie's Byronic opera, which now celebrates not the poet but his mourning mistress, now middle-aged – and even his abandoned daughter, who enters the opera unbidden. These two 'ghosts' draw Lurie into the perspective of the suffering victim. His relation to the dogs he helps tend is another barometer of change. While conceding that Lurie is hardly transformed to sainthood, Segall writes that he 'does, by the end, recognize that others experience suffering; it is a shift from narcissism to a nascent awareness of others' (41). She also points out that the words 'sublime' and 'sublimation' – Lurie's forte – share the same root.

<sup>48</sup> Cornwell has argued at some length that in the novel 'the humanities, the Romantic imagination, indeed, Western modernity as a whole, simply have the stuffing knocked out of them' (2003:62). In Africa they are bankrupt, without relevance to Lurie's 'post-Christian, posthistorical, postliterate' students, of no use when he is locked in a lavatory while his daughter is raped ('He speaks Italian, he speaks French, but Italian and French will not save him here in darkest Africa'). Cornwell relates this to Elizabeth Costello's sister's view, of which he writes, 'there seems to me to be considerable authorial sympathy for Blanche's sentiments' (57). A somewhat reductionist understanding of this overtly Christian view (Blanche is a nun), is that the secularisation of the Humanities' original purpose, 'the recovery of the true message of the Bible' (in Cornwell, 56), in the name of reason, has killed them. Costello interprets her sister's view by saying that, 'the humanities are of their nature incapable of satisfying the essential human craving "that is, in the end, a quest for salvation"' (in Cornwell, 57). Blanche will go on to argue that "'a secular vision of salvation" is impossible' (60) (much as an end to secular confession is impossible). Its replacement by reason during the Renaissance, and brought to South Africa by colonialism ('the Europeans came to Africa bearing the gifts of civilization, education and enlightenment' [Cornwell, 71]) provided, in Blanche's words, a 'false ideal' ('You can be as gods.... We will teach you to live for ever' [in Cornwell, 61]). Cornwell relates this discussion to both Lurie's and Lucy's 'redemptions'. The Humanities do not help Lurie outside the university ('The truth is, he has never had much of an eye for rural life, despite all his reading of Wordsworth' [218, cited by Cornwell, 58]), and even the English language is found to be 'an unfit medium for the truth of South Africa' (117, in Cornwell 58). Cornwell argues that Lurie's view of the language, that it needs to become 'reconstructed, purified, fit to be trusted once more', so that it can be used again ('starting all over again with the ABC' [129]), pertains to Lurie himself (59). When he finds himself, in



Though Lurie is blind to the comparison between his rape of Melanie and the later rape of his daughter, the novel connects the two through word and image. His rape of Melanie is almost obscured by her acquiescence when he first seduces her, and her apparently willing participation in their third encounter. But between these occasions Lurie forces himself upon Melanie uninvited after seeing her on stage and re-imagining her as a goddess-figure. ‘Not rape,’ he reflects, ‘not quite that, but undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core. As though she had decided to go slack, die within herself for the duration, like a rabbit when the jaws of a fox close on its neck’ (Coetzee, 2000: 25). Lucy, too, speaks of being ‘dead’ (161) and compares rape to murder (158). But more sinister is the link in a distorted pastoral image, which Wicomb (2002) has pointed out: of the rapists Lurie thinks, ‘It was not the pleasure principle that ran the show but the testicles, sacs bulging with seed aching to perfect itself... seed driven into the woman’ (199). Just before this Lurie considers the abuse he himself is guilty of, feeling that he is punished for ‘broadcasting old seed’ (190), but nevertheless claims virility when he thinks of the ‘force that drives the utmost strangers into each other’s arms.... The seed of generation, driven to perfect itself, driving deep into the woman’s body, driving to bring the future into being. Drive, driven’ (194).

In addition to this problematic understanding of sexuality (particularly male sexuality), the old association of rape with the conquest of the land is not absent either. Critics such as David Attwell have pointed to the association in Coetzee’s oeuvre between the depiction of rape, particularly inter-racial rape, and the portrayal of colonisation (*The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee; Waiting for the Barbarians*).<sup>49</sup> Here the notion of conquest resurfaces in linking the rapes. Lurie, seeing Melanie on a motorcycle passing his car, thinks, ‘*I have been there!*’ (33; author’s emphasis), and, seeing her on stage on his return to Cape Town, is possessively proud of her success: ‘Mine! he would like to say’ (191). (The link between his rape of Melanie and the old

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Salem, ‘losing himself by the day’ (121, Cornwell 59), he is, Cornwell argues, losing his life to find it, a ‘process modelled on Christ’s words for the holy surrender of conversion’ (59).

<sup>49</sup> David Attwell speaks of the novel’s ‘tendency to represent colonial and post-colonial history alike as a cyclic re-enactment of power and appropriation at every level’ (2002:338).

order is made explicit by a member of the panel at Lurie's hearing, who refers to the 'long history of exploitation of which this is part' [53]. Melanie, the 'dark one' [18], is coloured.) Lucy, for her part, believes her rapists thought of her as being 'in their territory' (158). While Melanie's name means 'the dark one', Lucy denotes light; the novel in its depictions of trans-racial rape, evokes and balances the ghosts of 'white peril' and 'black peril'.

Yet Lurie, though he sees the attack on Lucy as a form of retribution for a 'history of wrong', fails to see that he is part of that history, part of the centuries-old pattern of exploitation and abuse, having re-enacted 'the old colonial appropriation' (Wicomb, 2002: 216). Wicomb argues that the new culture being born with decolonisation is not transformed, not translated, that the 'pathologies' of the past endure, and that the 'modalities of the past – sex, race, violence – continue to prevail'. Indeed, she maintains that the gang-rape of Lucy represents an intensification of the old violent culture in the novel, when compared to the earlier rape of Melanie.

Insofar as Lurie's actions make him co-responsible for the 'sins of the fathers' which will be visited upon the next generation, his daughter, he fails to acknowledge his part. Interestingly, the two scenes that seem staged to provide a space for acknowledgement, repentance and apology appear to subvert a conventional understanding of these moments. The first, the disciplinary hearing in which Lurie is accused of harassment of a student, appears to be something of a parody of the TRC process. He is asked to admit wrongdoing and express repentance, in return for rehabilitation and the retention of his position. 'They wanted a spectacle,' he tells Lucy hyperbolically afterwards, 'breast-beating, remorse, tears if possible. A TV show, in fact. I wouldn't oblige' (66). What he tells Manas Mathabane, Professor of Religious Studies and chair of the commission (possibly reflecting the role played by Archbishop Tutu at the TRC), is that '(r)epentance belongs to another world, to another universe of discourse' (58). He sees the hearing as purely legal and secular, part of the new bureaucracy, and refuses the discourse of confession, repentance and atonement. Though he pleads guilty to the charge of harassment, he refuses, disturbingly, even to read the charge against him (an act which excludes Melanie's account from the narrative, akin to other elisions of women's experience), showing his lack of care for the other, whom he has already objectified. ('The story is, she took

sleeping pills,' his ex-wife has heard [45] – but Lurie shows no interest in this.) The more serious charge of rape is not raised. Significantly, though he pleads guilty to the charge levelled against him, Lurie frustrates the panel by not naming, not acknowledging, the wrong he has done: 'Yes, he says he is guilty,' Farodia Rassool says, 'but when we try to get specificity, all of a sudden it is not abuse of a young woman he is confessing to, just an impulse he could not resist, with no mention of the pain he has caused, no mention of the long history of abuse (by empowered white males of disempowered females of colour) of which this is a part' (53). (Later, Lurie himself will be equally frustrated in his efforts to draw the word 'violation' from Petrus, whom he holds responsible for the offence against Lucy.)

It is clear that the trauma of the attack on Lucy and on him changes Lurie, as his love for his daughter draws him into the experience of the victim – though the question whether he can fully identify, whether 'he has it in him to be the woman' (160), is left open in the novel. This, and Lucy's association of him with the men who do such things as rape, may be what leads to a rather bizarre visit to Melanie's home and her family, which occurs suddenly in the novel with no indication of the reasons for Lurie's decision. In this second episode, the discordance between his own secular discourse and Mr Isaacs' Christian understanding of the process is almost comical. Isaacs, true to his Christian ethics, invites Lurie for a meal ('Break bread with us' [167]), so proverbially heaping burning coals on his head. (Mrs Isaacs, who remains silent, appears to be appalled at this turn.) Though Lurie claims to want to say 'what is on (his) heart' (165), he is still not sure what that might be, and again launches into an inappropriate explanation of the 'fire' Melanie struck up in him (166) and his lack of the 'lyrical': 'Even when I burn I don't sing' (171). He does manage to say, 'I am sorry for what I took your daughter through.... I apologise for the grief I have caused you and Mrs Isaacs. I ask for your pardon' (171). Yet Lurie again fails to name the offence and, throughout the visit, lusts after Melanie's even younger sister, appropriately named Desiree, so undermining any sense of remorse he might wish to express – especially when he momentarily envisions a threesome. When Isaacs asks him, 'what are we going to do now that we are sorry?' (172), he decides that he dislikes the man. He questions more than once whether his words and gestures are 'enough': 'Is it enough for God, do you think, that I live in disgrace without term?' (172) he asks Isaacs, who has placed Lurie's guilt and atonement before the eyes of

God. In a staged last gesture, he prostrates himself before the mother and daughter. ‘Is that enough? he thinks. Will that do? If not, what more?’ (173) He seems not to have considered anything beyond an apology. (‘What is the efficacy as well as the adequacy of such sorrow?’ Boehmer [2002:344] asks – going on to examine the true sorrow – even pitifulness – of Lurie’s later self-abjection as ‘dog-man’.) Lurie is clearly out of his depth in trying to meet the family on their terms, and relieved when the visit is over.

It seems from these two scenes that the ‘Christian discourse of remembering, forgiving and healing’, which would include confession – the same discourse to which repentance belongs – is indeed inadequate, as Wicomb has suggested. Perhaps it is more correct to say that any discourse, any verbal process, is incapable of effecting change in this instance. Indeed, would ‘sorrow’ be enough, in the light of the history Lurie and his abuse represent? Coetzee seems to suggest that more is needed, ‘real actions’ (61) perhaps, rather than symbolism. Lucy says, ‘Guilt and salvation are abstractions. I don’t act in terms of abstractions’ (112).

If Boehmer is correct in identifying the evil Lurie has done as ‘the evil of having objectified others through reason as entirely different from ourselves and therefore to be used as we see fit’ (2006: 141) – the same reasoning, it must be noted, behind colonial and apartheid practices – then, she argues, it is not through reason that redemption may be gained. She turns to Attwell’s term, ‘unawareness’ (noting that Attwell, in his interview with Coetzee, ‘experimentally terms this state of unawareness “grace” – a word which ‘shadows a novel called *Disgrace*, yet which Coetzee himself finally disavows’). Lurie’s ‘individualist, self-justifying’ reason is surrendered, she writes, to make way for an ‘almost involuntary, because not self-aware... love’, a ‘self-emptying *respect* for the other’. (2002:345-346; author’s emphasis). Lucy Graham speaks of a ‘felt contact’ with the other leading to care (2002: 10).

Lucy Graham has pointed to the relevance in this context of Coetzee’s essay, ‘Confession and Double Thoughts’ (in Coetzee, 1992). In this essay Coetzee describes confession as ‘one component in a sequence of transgression, confession, penitence, and absolution’ (251) and continues: ‘Absolution means the end of the

episode, the closing of the chapter, liberation from the oppression of the memory. Absolution in this sense is therefore the indispensable goal of all confession, sacramental or secular' (251-252). He argues, as David Attwell points out in their accompanying interview, that, in the absence of grace, 'for which there is no secular equivalent', secular confession cannot bring release (247). The verbal process of secular confession, even with an endless chain of self-analysis, can never reach a point of absolution, and close the chapter.

Coetzee's 'counter' to 'the endless trials of doubt' is a simple one: the body. 'Whatever else,' he argues, 'the body is not "that which is not," and the proof that it is is the pain it feels' (Coetzee, 1992: 248). He concludes:

Not grace, then, but the body. Let me put it baldly: in South Africa it is not possible to deny the authority of suffering and therefore of the body. It is not possible, not for logical reasons, not for ethical reasons... but for political reasons, for reasons of power. And let me again be unambiguous: it is not that one *grants* the authority of the suffering body: the suffering body *takes* this authority: that is its power. To use other words: its power is undeniable. (248)

The authority of the suffering body lies in its undeniable presence (that which is). The emphasis throughout the novel, then, is not on transcendence (as in Levinas), but in immanence, and meaningful action is incarnational. With reference to the views expressed by Coetzee, Lucy Graham argues that Levinas's ethics of responsiveness to 'the frailty of the one who needs you and is counting on you' (Graham, 2002: 6), which Levinas sees in the face of the other, could be more appropriately applied to the body, and particularly the suffering body: a physical presence. The suffering of another has, of itself, a claim upon us, a claim which, Coetzee seems to argue (in an interview during the years of political transition), is given greater authority within a society of unjust power relations and the unjust allocation of resources. Lurie negates this responsibility to the other in relation to Melanie Isaacs, according to Graham, in that he behaves 'unethically toward another body' (2002: 7).

When he is attacked (and, ironically, burnt), being reduced to a suffering body, and Lucy is raped, Lurie, drawn into her suffering, tries to reach out to her, but is rebuffed. Yet he dreams of her as a child, calling out to him to save her – much as the voice of Byron's suffering daughter ('*Why have you forgotten me?*' [186]) will come

to his mind unbidden when he tries to compose an opera about the poet. His failure to protect his daughter troubles him more than his own injuries seem to (157).

Since Lucy does not accept the care he wants to give her, the ‘others’ through whom Lurie will learn to care are the dogs he helps look after at an animal shelter.<sup>50</sup> The dogs are present to him at first only in body, that which is. He glibly quotes the church fathers in denying that animals have ‘proper souls’ (78). But, in helping Bev Shaw at her clinic – which has become something of a hospice for unwanted animals (much as Elizabeth Costello’s sister runs a hospice for dying humans) – his scepticism about their ‘thoughts’ and ‘feelings’ makes way for compassion for the dogs, so that by the end he can reflect on ‘what he no longer has difficulty in calling by its proper name: love’ (219). He may be helped in this by the love of a crippled dog: ‘he is sensible of a generous affection streaming out toward him from the dog. Arbitrarily, unconditionally, he has been adopted; the dog would die for him, he knows’ (215). It is perhaps for this reason that Coetzee uses, of all animals, the dog: not only for its lowly status but because of its capacity for unstinting love that will give itself wholly to the other. Just as the true love relationship in Coetzee’s *Age of Iron* (1990) is one between a tramp and his dog, so here it is the dog who exemplifies the ‘greatest love’, that which will die for another being. The love Lurie receives is wordless, and he, too, learns to give of himself in the presence of dying dogs through absolute silence. ([T]he space of death is a space where language has no place’, writes Marais, quoting from *Foe*: ‘...this is not a place of words’ [2006: 88])

The two markers of change in Lurie are his unexpected tears after an episode of ‘*Lösung*’ (2000: 142), as he calls it – putting down unwanted dogs – and his care for dead dogs. The ‘unawareness’ (Boehmer, 2006: 139) which Elleke Boehmer refers to is evident in his unpreparedness for the tears that overcome him (‘tears flow down his face that he cannot stop’), and his lack of understanding: ‘He does not understand what is happening to him. Until now he has been more or less indifferent to animals’ (Coetzee, 2000: 143). The second marker is found in behaviour he can explain even less: his care for the bodies of dead dogs, from which he can expect nothing in return. In guarding the corpses’ dignity, escorting them into the fire of the incinerator, Lurie

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<sup>50</sup> The first indication of imaginative sympathy for another is found in Lurie’s interest in the disconsolate, abandoned bulldog Katy, who is kennelled on his daughter’s smallholding.

renders a last service to the lowest of the low, in the face of the most extreme alterity, that of both animals and death. That this becomes a duty of care for him is evident in his sense of having betrayed the dogs during a time away from the Eastern Cape ('For that betrayal, will he ever be forgiven?' [178]). 'Why has he taken on this job?' he asks himself, and struggles, again, to give it meaning, concluding that, if it is not for the dogs, who are dead and know nothing of 'honour and dishonour', it must be for himself: '(f)or his idea of the world, a world in which men do not use shovels to beat corpses into a more convenient shape' (145-146). But it is the dogs' perceived need that moves him: 'he is prepared to take care of them once they are unable, utterly unable, to take care of themselves. A dog-man, Petrus once called himself. Well, now he has become a dog-man: a dog undertaker; a dog psychopomp, a *harijan*' (146). The man who was once too selfish, too proud to show either concern for another or remorse for harm inflicted, has reduced himself to an untouchable – being, precisely in this, a child of God<sup>51</sup> in serving the untouchable. In this he shows empathy for others who constitute – *are* – even less than the suffering body: they are dead bodies. (Alan Northover [2009: 289-290] has pointed out that Lurie, who once refused penance and scoffed at community service, ends up doing both.)

Besides the dogs, whose suffering evokes Lurie's empathy and feeling involvement, Bev Shaw is another catalyst for change. She is initially despised as 'dumpy', singularly unattractive, by Lurie, through whose eyes women – even his daughter – are represented in terms of their level of attractiveness to men (the male gaze thereby exercising power in the narrative). He cannot understand why Lucy appreciates Bev and sees her as something of a mentor. Yet Bev is another character who, out of love, takes suffering upon herself. The work she does at the clinic – which culminates in the putting down of unclaimed, unwanted dogs – is difficult. When a goat is brought to her with wounds too long neglected to be healed, Bev seems to draw his pain into herself, kneeling beside him, stroking him and speaking quietly, so that the goat becomes still. Her distress, when the owner has dragged the animal away to be slaughtered, is evident – so much so that the ever-ironic Lurie, to his own surprise, finds himself trying to comfort her. When asked if she minds the job of mercy-killing, she replies: 'I do mind. I mind deeply. I wouldn't want someone doing it for me who

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<sup>51</sup> The term *harijan* was Gandhi's name for the lowest caste, the 'untouchables', meaning, literally, Vishnu's creature; child of god.

didn't mind. Would you?' (85) Bev bears the cost of caring, suffering, for each animal, the humblest other, in order to mark its passing as a being that matters, escorting it with compassion. This is then what Lurie, in his own way, continues after their deaths, since the mystery of the soul of the other has become manifest to him in the theatre of death, and he does not want their passing to be 'unmarked, unmourned' (178).

Lurie knows that, in the greater scheme of things, this service to the bodies of dead animals is 'nothing, less than nothing', but in the trajectory of his life it represents a significant change, the enactment of empathy, 'real actions', beginning at the most basic level. Lucy, too, after giving up her title to her land, is left, as she says, 'at ground level. With nothing. Not with nothing but. With nothing. No cards, no weapons, no property, no rights, no dignity' (205). This is the stripped, vulnerable, humble position she has opted to take, which she must 'learn to accept', and, she says, 'perhaps that is a good point to start from again' (205). The sense of a beginning is extraordinarily hopeful in so bleak a novel. Lucy, who could leave the country, chooses to stay, on these terms, and without illusions. After centuries of usurpation, expropriation and exploitation, this seems to be the novel's only viable answer to the 'question of how the white man shall live in South Africa', as Coetzee puts it in *White Writing* (Coetzee, 1988: 81).

When Lurie comments on Lucy's chosen life with the words, 'Like a dog', she agrees: 'Yes, like a dog' (205). This seems to denote only the humblest abasement, but Lucy's last words also point to the capacity for self-sacrificing love which the dog exemplifies, the ethics of the crucifixion. The root of Cynicism, the ancient Greek philosophy which taught that happiness was to be found in virtue, is *Kynikos*: doglike (canine). Northover quotes Borchert in this regard: 'happiness [for the Cynics] could be achieved by the understanding and strength of mind to want nothing, lack nothing' (this is echoed in Lucy's words, 'With nothing...With nothing' [205]). Hence, 'the most characteristic feature of Cynicism was an asceticism that sought to reduce physical wants to a minimum, as in the case of the animals after which Cynics were named, and to achieve spiritual independence like gods.' Northover concludes: 'according to the cynics, one can only become like gods by living like dogs' (2009:303). The Son of Man, who had nowhere to lay his head, the God who dies for



love of others, represents the perfection of ethics, and Lucy stands in this line. (One is also reminded of the God/dog inversion in Coetzee's *Age of Iron*.)

The articulate Lurie learns a wordless love; and silence is also a hallmark of Lucy's stance. When at first she remains mute before her father (while possibly confiding in her friend Bev Shaw), the reader understands that the trauma and Lurie's maleness, as well as his dealing in abstractions, make it difficult for her to speak. But she also does not – indeed, it seems she cannot – explain the choices she makes in the aftermath of the rape, at least not to her father, in words he would understand. If her actions in absorbing the offence against her and bearing it may be compared to the Crucifixion, as Cornwell suggests – an introversion of violence – then her silence bears comparison to that of Jesus at his trials, prophesied by Isaiah:

He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,  
Yet he opened not his mouth;  
Like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,  
And like a sheep that before its shearers is dumb,  
So he opened not his mouth. (Is 53:7)

Jesus' refusal to defend Himself before Pilate may be related to his earlier words about losing his life, emphasising his individual freedom to choose his course: 'I lay down my life, that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord' (Jn 10:17,18).

Abraham, too, is associated with silence, and, while Lurie's earlier actions represent a perversion of Abraham's obedience to his love for God, Lucy's sacrifice perhaps invokes the silence of the cost of doing right, in a way that transcends human ethics, and can therefore not be easily understood by others. Derrida notes that Kierkegaard writes 'Fear and Trembling' under the pen-name *Johannes de Silentio*, of which Derrida writes: 'This pseudonym keeps silent; it expresses the silence that is kept (1998: 155). He relates this silence to that of Abraham in the Biblical account: 'Abraham doesn't speak of what God has ordered him to do, he doesn't speak of it to Sarah, or to Eliezer, or to Isaac. He must keep the secret (that is his duty), but it is also a secret that he *must* keep as a double necessity because in the end he *can only* keep it: he doesn't know it, he is unaware of an ultimate rhyme or reason' (155). Derrida

seems to suggest that Abraham does not fully understand, could not explain if he wanted to, what he must do. Of Abraham's enigmatic response to his son's question, Derrida writes that he speaks without lying, but also without telling. 'To the extent that, in not saying the essential thing, namely, the secret between God and him, Abraham doesn't speak, he assumes the responsibility that consists in always being alone, entrenched in one's own singularity at the moment of decision' (156). (One can compare this to Lucy's insistence, 'in my life I am the one who makes the decisions' [Coetzee: 2000:198]). In fact, Derrida argues, no language exists in which this responsibility could be explained: 'there is no language, no reason, no generality or mediation to justify this ultimate responsibility which leads me to absolute sacrifice... in favour of another absolutely imperative duty binding me to the wholly other' (1998: 165). Unlike the tragic hero, Abraham cannot speak, cannot lament ('Abraham can neither speak nor commiserate, neither weep nor wail' [166]). Derrida quotes Kierkegaard's words: 'he speaks no human language. And even if he understood all the languages of the world... he still could not speak – he speaks in a divine language' (167). Lucy, too, it seems, would need the 'tongue of a god' to articulate her course.

The figure of Abraham also stands behind Lurie's final act: the sacrifice of the dog he has grown fond of, whom he bears 'in his arms like a lamb' (2000: 220) to be put down. '(R)ather than ending,' writes Pamela Cooper, 'the novel stops... the scene of sacrifice becomes a spectacle of forces suspended, calling forth echoes, left to hang' (2005:36). The novel's last words express Lurie's decision, 'Yes, I am giving him up' (220). The 'gift of death', to use Derrida's words, is not described, only anticipated. The sacrifice, the bearing of the burden of the other, with love, is what matters. (And, if Abraham's shadow falls over this scene, bearing the beloved to the place of sacrifice, the possibility is not foreclosed, for the sentimental reader, of another angelic intervention.)

But these endings, or beginnings, for Lurie and his daughter, these essentially private redemptions, do not satisfy everyone. Zoë Wicomb cites Lurie's 'non-naming' of marginalised, very needy people in his trips to the incinerator:

By the time the orderlies arrive in the morning with the first bags of hospital waste, there are already numbers of women and children waiting to pick

through it.... There are vagrants, too, who hang about the hospital grounds by day and sleep by night against the wall of the incinerator, or perhaps even in the tunnel for warmth. (Coetzee, 2000:145)

In the light of this human need, to which Lurie does not respond, Wicomb questions the value of Lurie's empathy: 'If his self-marginalisation and professed humility in the company of dogs is not simply a matter of hyperbolic posturing, it certainly escapes ethical engagement with the human condition' (Wicomb, 2002:219). This is true, but is the change in Lurie completely worthless? There are enough critics who have argued that alterity goes beyond the humanism of Levinas's conception, that animals are Other. If Lurie's attainment of empathy, of right sacrifice, is not an ending – as the novel has no ending – not an end, but a beginning, with the possibility of growth, then Wicomb's judgment is premature. If, on the other hand, his 'redemption' ends there, she is certainly right. The novel, of course, leaves the matter open.

Gareth Cornwell, for his part, returns to the historical parallel of Lucy's sacrifice, in the record rivalled by fiction:

Examination of the historical record with which *Disgrace* seeks to compete (see Coetzee, "The Novel Today" 3) forcibly reminds us of some awkward facts; first, that Richard Gush of Salem was an eccentric individual whose celebrated gesture did nothing to alter the course of history, and that a mere sixteen years later there began what Coetzee (quoting Mostert) has described as "the most terrible of [the frontier] wars, 'a war of race, perhaps the first of its kind,'" whose conduct attested to "the active, personal hatred by now felt by the Xhosas for the whites" (Coetzee, "Noel Mostert" 338).... In the long view of history, the attack in *Disgrace* on the Luries, the "personal hatred" (156) that Lucy senses to be animating her rapists, is neither more nor less than a resumption of the last Frontier War. (2003:53)

This 'last war', then, is the post-apartheid struggle for land, for redress of colonial appropriation, 'usurpation' – where the victory is a foregone conclusion. Cornwell goes on to cite Coetzee's account (in 'Noel Mostert') of Sir Harry Smith's appalling conduct in relation to a local chief, Maqoma, who is made to prostrate himself, with Smith's knee on his neck, as an example to the Xhosas, and concludes: 'One cannot help but see Lucy's acceptance of her necessary "Subjection. Subjugation" (159) by

Africans as an exact reproduction in reverse of this symbolic spectacle of unequal power relations' (53).

Do Lucy's enactment of forgiveness and subjection of herself in the novel, like Gush's historical heroism, offer little long-term value to society? Lurie, who disagrees with the choices she makes and leaves the smallholding, sees 'the people she lives among' as the problem:

An image comes to him from the *Inferno*: the great marsh of Styx, with souls boiling up like mushrooms. *Vedi l'anime di color ci vines*. Souls overcome with anger, gnawing at each other. A punishment fitted to the crime. (209)

Coetzee has used imagery from Dante's *Inferno* before, in *Age of Iron* (1990), to depict the suffering in the townships during South Africa's state of emergency which preceded democratisation. In this, later, infernal vision, it is not divine justice that is seen taking its course, but interpersonal violence. The implication is again that of the cyclical re-enactment of history, the inability to escape from the wrongs of the past, the condemnation to an endless cycle of revenge, enacted one upon another. And, while Lurie's view is not to be confused with that of the narrator, there does indeed seem to be no answer, in the absence of either justice or mercy, for injustice on the scale on which it has occurred, and with such enduring effects still making themselves felt. The trouble with vengeance, Lurie tells his daughter, is that the desire for revenge is not easily satisfied. (The Judaic commandment of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth was not given to prescribe retribution so much as to limit its scope, containing the urge for revenge and bringing the matter to an end.) 'Vengeance is like a fire,' Lurie says. 'The more it devours, the hungrier it gets' (112). Cornwell writes that 'in the vision of *Disgrace*, white South Africans can expect no meaningful absolution from historical guilt through the mechanisms of the civil state (and these would of course include the TRC)' (Cornwell, 2003: 63). Both secular confession and racial vengeance are processes without end.

It is in this light that Lucy's subjection to that history, seen by the same writer as Christ-like, intended to break the cycle of avenging violence, is seen as 'ideal', 'mythic'. ('It would have to be said,' writes Cornwell, 'that nobody "in reality" is

even remotely likely to behave in the way that Lucy Lurie does' [2003: 54]<sup>52</sup>). But he also questions whether her 'intervention' should be seen as purely mythical. Instead, he turns to Coetzee's essay (published in *Giving Offense*) on Erasmus's *In Praise of Folly* and the concept of *ek-stasis* or ecstatic experience, a kind of 'holy madness': 'a being outside oneself, being beside oneself, a state in which truth is known (and spoken) from a position that does not know itself to be the truth' (Coetzee, 1996 in Cornwell, 62).<sup>53</sup> (The 'unawareness' Attwell and Boehmer speak of is also reflected here.) This position, Coetzee writes, 'is not created simply by declaring oneself outside the fray. It becomes available only to the subject who declares himself outside the discourse commanding the fray, that is outside reason, that is, inside a certain kind of folly [or madness]' (in Cornwell, 62). This description brings to mind Lucy's divine madness, which she cannot explain in the reasonable terms required by her father. Lucy's decisions, Cornwell believes, represent a 'deeply religious response', if 'unauthorised by orthodoxy' (63). (Lucy, it must be remembered, states unequivocally that she believes in this life only.) Cornwell also sees such 'madness' reflected in Lurie's final act, which, he says, the reader cannot understand or interpret: 'Redolent of sacrifice and self-sacrifice, it appears as a religious observance, a ritual prompted by a "faith" that David Lurie has himself not yet begun to understand' (63). The 'only hope' for white South Africans to shed the burden of the past, Cornwell concludes, 'would seem to be ontological: some form of self-surrender involving more than just thought... which renders the individual open to an ethical *ek-stasis* beyond or outside of history (the intervention of grace?)' (63).

This argument reiterates that for the collective guilt of colonialism and apartheid, there can be no remedy, no form of collective cleansing or absolution. There can be no adequate reparation for centuries of entrenched injustice. Only for the individual, and outside of history, can a private redemption be found – and I accept Cornwell's

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<sup>52</sup> The irony is that South Africa's Christian churchgoers should be expected to follow the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount, from which the teaching of going the extra mile, enacting forgiveness, is taken. Moreover, those who forgave perpetrators at the TRC showed that such costly forgiveness is possible.

<sup>53</sup> Cornwell describes such ecstasy as 'prompted not by reason but by feeling' (2003:62), which would certainly be true of both Lucy's and Lurie's choices. However, it seems to me – and I may be quarrelling with Erasmus – to reflect an impoverished view of mystical experience, discounting the human spirit, that God-breathed mystery which in the Bible is distinguished from the soul (Heb 4:12; 1 Cor 14:14, 15)

argument that Coetzee, who sees no absolution through a secular process of confession and repentance, which belongs to ‘another discourse altogether’, finds that discourse in the discourse of faith. However, in Lucy’s case one can see her ‘holy madness’ as bearing fruit in her environment, and as not being limited to private acts. In Lurie’s case the outcome of his ‘redemption’ remains inconclusive.