

Negotiating Foundations: Nation, Homeland and Land in J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*

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With the demise of apartheid, South Africa has become a nation in flux and transition, preoccupied with remaking and redefining itself. Undoubtedly, within the postapartheid context, literature has a role to play in redefining the South African polity. For Derek Attridge and Rosemary Jolly, the emphasis in the remaking of the “new South Africa” should fall on the acknowledgement of difference without fetishizing it (5–13). Like other postapartheid narratives such as Breyten Breytenbach's *Dog Heart* (1999) and André Brink's *The Rights of Desire* (2001), J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999) is acutely conscious of its situation within the postapartheid context and engaged with redefining the South African nation. In this essay, I argue that what is distinctive about Coetzee's novel is that, within a postapartheid context of uncertain flux and upheaval, it interrogates the identity of the South African nation at its foundations. I will show that the novel posits a foundational discourse that alludes to how the true foundation of South Africa lies in a conception of the nation as the homeland of black South Africans. Conversely, the novel critiques the foundational discourse of white South Africans as a duplicitous rhetoric by means of which whites lay false claim to South Africa as homeland. Foundational discourses that underpin the South African nation are subject to interrogation, contestation, and even to being rewritten in non-foundational terms.

In examining the foundations of the South African nation, *Disgrace* is, further, strongly inclined to conceive of the nation as a *homeland*. South Africa, in other words, is thought of not merely in the impersonal terms of a nation, but as a homeland toward which one feels a vital sense of belonging and emotional attachment. One is not just citizen of a nation but rather the nation is one's homeland and heartland. To conceive of the nation as a homeland is, to adopt Kenneth Parker's expres-

sion, to approach the nation as “the space where the affections center” (67). Specifically, *Disgrace*’s inclination to conceive of South Africa as a homeland is enacted in terms of an emotional relation to the *land* of South Africa (which one may playfully suggest is the literal foundation of the nation). One aspect of Coetzee’s interrogation of the foundations of South Africa will be the attempt to imagine, for the white South African, a conception of the South African nation that is not predicated on land.

Disgrace and National Epic

‘Shameful!’—
brimming with indignation, Pallas Athena broke out.
‘Oh how much you need Odysseus, gone so long—
how *he’d* lay hands on all these brazen suitors!’
(*Odyssey* 1.294–6; original emphasis)

The themes of nation and homeland in *Disgrace* are broached through the novel’s inconspicuous use of the epic genre as intertext, specifically its subtle invocation of the *Odyssey*. At the most basic level, *Disgrace* contains a narrative parallel with the *Odyssey* by means of which it figures the homecoming of black South Africans and their reclamation of South Africa as their *homeland*. Unlike precursors like *Ulysses*, the Homeric parallel in *Disgrace* is small-scale and inconspicuous, escaping critical attention thus far. As I will demonstrate, Petrus along with Lucy’s assailants represent homecoming Odyssean figures, Lurie parallels the defiant suitors, while Lucy is the Penelope who finally “marries” homecoming Petrus. Accordingly, Petrus, Lurie and Lucy are characterized along the lines of their respective Homeric epithets: Petrus is resourceful and cunning, especially with words,¹ Lurie is brazen (“Mad, bad, and dangerous to know” [77], as Lucy puts it.), while Lucy is circumspect. Lurie’s impudence, which echoes the suitors, is also suggested by his attitude at the inquiry: “He is going into this in the wrong spirit. But he does not care” (47). To be sure, *Disgrace*’s intertextual relationship with the *Odyssey* is more complex than I can examine in the limited space here. Some aspects I do not explore are the novel’s dual Odyssean parallels, its extensive bricolage of the *Odyssey* and Odyssean texts like *Ulysses* and,

further, the import of subjecting this foundational text of Western literature to bricolage, particularly in a postapartheid context. The reader, however, need not probe too deeply to detect *Disgrace's* allusions to the *Odyssey*: its twenty-four chapters,² its ironic references to Lurie's *nostos* upon his return to Cape Town,³ Lurie's frequent statements that a god acted through him (52, 89, 192),⁴ even moments when Lurie imagines a supernatural sign (126, 191). One could playfully suggest that while there are no gods in Coetzee's end-of-the-millennium novel, there are dogs, beings who arguably effect, not from above but from below, a small though fundamental change in Lurie. *Disgrace* further contains a playful nod to the epic convention of a journey to the underworld in Lurie's first visit to the animal shelter, where he encounters snarling dogs at the entrance and an "inner room" of death for unwanted animals (80). Aptly, a drug used to put the animals down evokes for Lurie an image of Hades: "*Lethal*: the name of a drug? He would not put it beyond the drug companies. Sudden darkness, from the waters of Lethe" (83).

In this essay, I will confine my discussion of *Disgrace's* Homeric intertext to the narrative parallel suggested above. The *Odyssey* intertext in *Disgrace* is perhaps most dramatically present in the attack scene at the point where the dogs are shot:

Now the tall man appears from around the front, carrying the rifle. With practised ease he brings a cartridge up into the breech, thrusts the muzzle into the dogs' cage. The biggest of the German Shepherds, slaving with rage, snaps at it. There is a heavy report; blood and brains splatter the cage. For a moment the barking ceases. The man fires twice more. One dog, shot through the chest, dies at once; another, with a gaping throat-wound, sits down heavily, flattens its ears, following with its gaze the movements of this being who does not even bother to administer a *coup de grâce*.

A hush falls. The remaining three dogs, with nowhere to hide, retreat to the back of the pen, milling about, whining softly. Taking his time between shots, the man picks them off. (95–6)⁵

This episode is a telescoped transposition of Odysseus' spectacular homecoming and his massacre of the suitors in Book 22. Let me quote the opening of Book 22 though I would like to stress that the *entire* Book 22 ("Slaughter in the Hall") right up to the *absence of grace* in the cruel execution of the unfaithful maids,⁶ is implied as a subtext to the episode:

Now stripping back his rags Odysseus master of craft and battle
vaulted onto the great threshold, gripping his bow and quiver
bristling arrows, and poured his flashing shafts before him,
loose at his feet, and thundered out to all the suitors:
'Look—your crucial test is finished, now, at last!
But another target's left that no one's hit before—
we'll see if I can hit it—Apollo give me glory!'

With that he trained a stabbing arrow on Antinous ...
just lifting a gorgeous golden loving-cup in his hands,
just tilting the two-handled goblet back to his lips,
about to drain the wine—and slaughter the last thing
on the suitor's mind: who could dream that one foe
in that crowd of feasters, however great his power,
would bring down death on himself, and black doom?
But Odysseus aimed and shot Antinous square in the throat
and the point went stabbing clean through the soft neck and out—
and off to the side he pitched, the cup dropped from his grasp
as the shaft sank home, and the man's life-blood came spurting
out his nostrils—

thick red jets—

a sudden thrust of his foot—

he kicked away the table—

food showered across the floor,

the bread and meats soaked in a swirl of bloody filth.

The suitors burst into uproar all throughout the house
when they saw their leader down. They leapt from their seats,
milling about, desperate, scanning the stone walls—

not a shield in sight, no rugged spear to seize.
They wheeled on Odysseus, lashing out in fury:
'Stranger, shooting at men will cost your life!'

'Your game is over—you, you've shot your last!'

'You'll never escape your own headlong death!'

'You killed the best in Ithaca—our fine prince!'

'Vultures will eat your corpse!'

Groping, frantic—

each one persuading himself the guest had killed
the man by chance. Poor fools blind to the fact
that all their necks were in the noose, their dooms sealed.
With a dark look, the wily fighter Odysseus shouted back,
'*You dogs!* you never imagined I'd return from Troy—
so cocksure that you bled my house to death,
ravishing my servant-women—wooed my wife
behind my back while I was still alive!
No fear of the gods who rule the skies up there,
no fear that men's revenge might arrive someday—
now all your necks are in the noose—your doom is sealed!'

(1–42; my emphasis)

The suitors are aptly called “dogs” and one cannot but be impressed by the vivid, luxuriant, even indulgent representation of violence in Homer's text. One also observes Coetzee's neat transposition of Homer's opening lines:

Now stripping back his rags Odysseus master of craft and battle
vaulted onto the great threshold, gripping his bow and quiver . . .

Now the tall man appears from around the front, carrying the rifle.

Beneath the attack on Lucy's smallholding lies a larger subtext, what we can view as a larger untold epic nationalist narrative. At the most

basic level, the *Odyssey* subtext serves as an interpretative reading of the end of apartheid and, more broadly, the end of minority white dominance in South Africa. It figures the triumphant homecoming of black South Africans after long years of displacement, their righteous reclamation of their homeland and their punishment and expulsion of illegitimate, badly-behaving white occupants from their homeland. Following the allusion to epic, the unnamed “tall man” is physically impressive: not only is he tall, he is “handsome, strikingly handsome, with a high forehead, sculpted cheekbones, wide, flaring nostrils” (92).⁷ Petrus is linked to the tall man through verbal association. In our first encounter with Petrus, on the day Lurie arrives at Lucy’s smallholding, he is also described as a “tall man.” In addition, Petrus’ first appearance echoes the Homeric motif of Odysseus as the man at the threshold: “*A man is standing in the doorway, a tall man in blue overalls and rubber boots and a woolen cap. ‘Petrus, come in, meet my father,’ says Lucy*” (63–4; my emphasis). Within the narrative parallel, Petrus as a version of Odysseus at the threshold does go on to (re)possess the land and in the process “marry” a Penelope-figure in Lucy.

By invoking epic narrative, *Disgrace* posits a discourse of the South African nation that functions as an alternative to South Africa’s prevailing national discourses, which one encounters in its new Constitution and its controversial Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). Both the Constitution and the TRC, in their interrelated ways, postulate dominant national discourses based on truth-telling, reconciliation and the forsaking of revenge. South Africa’s political transition from apartheid to democracy was achieved not by a bloody revolution but by multi-party negotiations that led to the drawing up of an Interim Constitution in 1993, whose final version was ratified in 1996 after the country’s first-ever democratic elections in 1994. The Interim Constitution, which inaugurated a democratic state of human rights, also contained a postscript, aptly titled “National Unity and Reconciliation,” which outlined a program of national reconciliation through the tools of forgiveness and amnesty. In envisioning the country’s future, the postscript states: “The pursuit of national unity, the well-being of all South African citizens and peace require reconciliation between the people of South Africa and the

reconstruction of society.” It then sets forth its vision and program of national reconciliation, firstly, through its much quoted moral suasion that offences of the past be met not with retaliation but forgiveness and, secondly, through amnesty provisions to past offenders:

The adoption of this Constitution lays the secure foundation for the people of South Africa to transcend the divisions and strife of the past, which generated gross violations of human rights, the transgression of humanitarian principles in violent conflicts and a legacy of hatred, fear, guilt and revenge.

These can now be addressed on the basis that there is a need for understanding but not for vengeance, a need for reparation but not for retaliation, a need for *ubuntu* and not for victimization.

In order to advance such reconciliation and reconstruction, amnesty shall be granted in respect of acts, omissions and offences associated with political objectives and committed in the course of the conflicts of the past.⁸

Following the 1994 elections, this postscript was subsequently passed by Parliament as the “Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act” (1995) which became the basis of the TRC’s mandate.

The TRC enlarged upon and propagated more widely the Constitution’s discourse of national reconciliation and forgiveness. Under the TRC, led by Bishop Desmond Tutu, the Constitution’s program modulated into a Christian-inflected discourse of confession, forgiveness, healing and reconciliation. As a high-profile event that was widely covered by the national and international media, the TRC in effect became an influential instrument in the remaking of the nation, its widely propagated discourse a narrativization of a new national identity. Albie Sachs’ terse comment—“The Commission of Truth and Reconciliation. It is the creation of a nation” (qtd. in Wilson 13)—though exaggerated nevertheless underscores the importance accorded to the TRC in the remaking of the nation. In the final *Report* of the TRC, Bishop Tutu, quoting the Constitution, also claims a foundational place for the TRC: “Like our Constitution, the Commission has helped in laying ‘the secure foun-

datation for the people of South Africa to transcend the divisions of the past” (23).

In his extensive study of the TRC, Richard Wilson examines how the work of truth commissions, including the TRC, are inevitably bound up with the project of narrativizing the nation. “Truth commissions, like all nation-building processes construct a revised national history and ... write into being a ‘new collective memory.’ ... [T]he formulation of a shared national past is simultaneously the basis of the assertion of a shared national future” (14). In the South African example, Wilson observes that “the ‘new South Africa’ national personhood became tied up in how to respond to past human rights abuses. Being authentically South African comes to mean sharing the trauma of apartheid and uniting in the subsequent process of ‘healing the nation’” (14). Wilson further observes that the TRC frequently resorted to a narrative of the nation as a sick body in need of healing through Christian notions of confession, forgiveness and reconciliation:

Firstly, the nation is conceived as a physical body What type of body is it? A sick one—one that is in need of healing. Healing the nation is the popular idiom for building the nation. What is the healing treatment prescribed? Truth-telling and, flowing from this, forgiveness and reconciliation. How do these treatments heal the national body? They open the wounds, cleanse them and stop them from festering. (14–5)

While the TRC’s discourse of forgiveness and healing was widely propagated, it did not mean that participants at TRC hearings necessarily heeded its rhetoric. As Wilson observes:

For the first six months of the Human Rights Violations hearings around the country, Commissioners specifically pressed those testifying to forgive the perpetrators then and there. After hearing each testimony, they asked as a matter of course, ‘Do you forgive the offender?’ This question was seen as fairly outrageous by numerous observers ... and just as many victims, and was occasionally met with such a hostile response that it

eventually had to be abandoned. However, at subsequent, HRV hearings, victims were more subtly pressed by Commissioners to testify, to forgive and to reconcile. Throughout the entire amnesty process, victims were asked as a matter of routine whether they opposed the application and whether they forgave the applicant. (119)

Evidently, the *Odyssey* subtext in *Disgrace* contests the discourse of forgiveness and reconciliation advanced by the Constitution and the TRC. This situation can be thought in terms of the opposition between two national discourses or even in terms of a national discourse being contested by a more fundamental *homeland* discourse, the latter evoked by the novel's epic intertext. While the Constitution urges "understanding but not ... vengeance," the *Odyssey* subtext starkly delineates a narrative of homeland reclamation accompanied by a revenge ethic notable for its intensity, indulgence and will to settle all scores. Coetzee signals his will to contest prevalent national discourses advocating forgiveness and reconciliation by using an intertext that does not mince its stance of deep hatred, anger and vengefulness. Following Robert Nozick's formulation, the *Odyssey* advocates *revenge* which sets no limits on the punishment as opposed to *retribution* which "sets an upper limit on punishment according to the seriousness of the wrong (what lawyers call 'proportionality')" (qtd. in Wilson 161). The revenge ethic has a prominent place in Homer. Not only is Odysseus' revenge given divine sanction, the reader is further invited to savor his revenge both in its—through the narrative refrain that the denouement will not be reached "till the suitors [have] paid the price for all their outrage" (13.220)⁹—and its magnificent actualization in Book 22. In contrast with Coetzee's spare rendition of carnage ("There is a report; blood and brains splatter the cage."), Book 22 invites one to read with relish its voluptuous depictions of the suitors' violent deaths, from the overture of Odysseus' arrow slicing through Antinous' neck to the subsequent slaughter of the suitors *en masse*, rendered through epic simile:

The attackers struck like eagles, crook-clawed, hook-beaked,
swooping down from a mountain ridge to harry smaller birds

that skim across the flatland, cringing under the clouds
but the eagles plunge in fury, rip their lives out—hopeless,
never a chance of flight or rescue—and people love the sport—
so the attackers routed suitors headlong down the hall,
wheeling into the slaughter, slashing left and right
and grisly screams broke from skulls cracked open—
the whole floor awash with blood. (316–24)¹⁰

Though the representation of carnage in *Disgrace* is spare, the implication is that Homer's *entire* chapter of hatred, revenge and violence—in all its massiveness and turbulence—is invisibly compressed within it. (For this reason, I have quoted at length from the *Odyssey* to give a sense of the pressure of an extensive intertext within Coetzee's spare prose.)

The *Odyssey* intertext clearly serves as an oppositional discourse to the TRC's discourse though its specific critique of the TRC is more elliptical and open-ended. In the most ostensible terms, the Homeric narrative questions the effectiveness of the TRC in carrying out national reconciliation. Though the TRC's discourse of forgiveness and healing may have been widely propagated, the presence of a revenge subtext suggests that its engagement may have been superficial. As a subtext, the Homeric text literally posits a deeper and hidden reality that the TRC has not come to grips with. This view is corroborated by Wilson's conclusion that on balance the TRC had little effect in transforming popular conceptions of justice as retributive into its ideal of restorative justice.¹¹ In this reading, the revenge subtext is a sign of a deeper condition the TRC has not successfully fathomed. The reconciliation it programmatically advocates is too "easy" and does not address deeper, more fundamental issues in the South African condition. In this sense, the persistence of an unsettling revenge subtext also functions to resist the scenario, observed by Rob Nixon, of how the TRC's "state-orchestrated forgiveness may open the doors to forgetfulness" ("Aftermaths" 76). In her discussion of the TRC, Ingrid de Kok highlights the frequent criticism of the TRC that it may "unwittingly encourage cultural and social amnesia." De Kok refers to "the TRC's imperative to have the story—often called by commissioners 'this chapter of our history'—closed" (59). *Disgrace's*

revenge subtext serves to resist any easy closure—or forgetfulness—of the past that the TRC may effect.

At the risk of going against current critical sympathies for antifoundationalist thinking, I argue that the role of the novel's Homeric subtext is to point not only toward a deeper condition but toward *foundational* issues that relate to the South African nation. As I have mentioned, *Disgrace* is a text engaged in the interrogation of the South Africa nation at its *foundations*. (The novel's conception of the South African nation in terms of a "homeland" is one indication of how it probes the impersonal concept of nation for its deeper emotional core.) In the most general terms, the subtextual status of the Homeric narrative alludes to a level of anger and violence that has not fully manifested itself to the country, one perhaps still in a state of repression. It is an anger and violence that the nation, not least the TRC, has not become conscious of nor reckoned with.¹² Further, the Homeric revenge narrative is of such a scale and intensity as to suggest that the payment exacted by black South Africans is not only for wrongs committed during the apartheid era, but for the accumulated crimes going back to the first white offences against the indigenous people in the colonial era. In this regard, the Odyssean subtext represents not just a deeper reckoning of white offences but a reckoning of transgressions at the foundational level, one that takes into account white crimes on the soil of South Africa in their amassed historical totality. The suitors who shamelessly bleed and exploit Odysseus' kingdom are Coetzee's apt proxies for whites and their outrageous behavior in South Africa. One notes, for example, how Eumaeus' complaint to the disguised Odysseus resonates with the white exploitation of South Africa: "All too long we've sweated/over these white-tusked boars—our wretched labor—/while others wolf our work down free of charge!" (14.470–2). Hyperbole in Homer effectively conveys the extensive scale of white offences in the country; "their [the suitors'] pride and violence hit the iron skies" (15.6), we are told at one point.

In invoking the *Odyssey* as intertext, Coetzee posits not only an alternate national discourse, but also an alternate foundational discourse which, in addition to suggesting an alternative conception of national foundations, also contests the new national Constitution in its role as

foundational discourse of the new South Africa. We know that though the Constitution “lays the secure foundation for people of South Africa,” it is also the product of a political compromise that is by no means final. The nation’s cornerstone is, in other words, not set in stone but open to critique and rewriting, a process in which *Disgrace* partakes. Epic is, among other things, a narrative of national foundations. As M. M. Bakhtin observes:

[The] constitutive feature [of epic] is the transferral of the world it describes to an absolute past of national beginnings and peak times. The absolute past is a specifically evaluating (hierarchical) category. In the epic world view, “beginning,” “first,” “founder,” “ancestor,” “that which occurred earlier” and so forth are not merely temporal categories but *valorized* temporal categories (15; original emphasis)

While Bakhtin’s main point is epic’s relegation of national history to a sealed off, valorized temporal sphere, he does in passing conceive epic’s role as a narrative that inscribes national foundations.

In invoking a foundational discourse, *Disgrace* seeks to define the South African nation in fundamental terms that hark back to origins and beginnings. The intertextual narrative of Odysseus’ homecoming and homeland reclamation therefore implies a reading of recent events in South Africa not merely as a victory over the apartheid state but a victory that has resonance for the original precolonial African homelands. Coetzee is not suggesting that victory over apartheid actually recovers the ancient homelands, but intimates that a truer formulation of national foundations in South Africa lies in a conception of precolonial African kingdoms and chiefdoms in which are implied *the original homelands of black South Africans* and *their ownership of the land of South Africa*. The Odyssean leitmotif of homeland reclamation therefore implies a corrective to a history of land dispossession not confined to events in the apartheid era, but conceived in a more fundamental sense. Land dispossession is not conceived say in a limited sense as caused by twentieth-century legislation like the Group Areas Act and the Native Land Act in the apartheid and segregation eras respectively. Rather the epic

leitmotif implies a conception of land dispossession in a sense accumulated through the long centuries of land conflicts, traced to its origins in the first territorial conflicts in the 1650s. The lengthy exilic years now implied by the term “odyssey” aptly underscores this cumulative historical sense. Equally appropriate is the setting of the novel’s action on the Eastern Cape which is territory that has been historical witness to the first land wars. As Grant Farred observes:

The Eastern Cape border, since those long ago, infamous wars among the white colonists, the Afrikaner Trekkers and the indigenous black people, marks if not the original point of conflict then certainly the most enduring site of antagonism between black and white. From at least the eighteenth century the Eastern Cape has played host to struggles against colonial incursion, struggles over livestock, over boundaries, over control of the land. (17)

The novel’s Eastern Cape setting is in line with its interrogation of the South African nation to its possible foundations.

In *Disgrace’s* alternative formulation of foundations, the novel stresses that South Africa is not merely nation but *homeland* to black South Africans. The notion of homeland reinforces the deep sense of belonging and attachment black South Africans have in relation to the land of South Africa, while it also foregrounds the dimension of *land* in a deliberately literal conception of foundations. This playfully literal understanding of national foundations is not misplaced and is a vital component of any attempt to fathom more deeply the true foundations of South Africa. Alluding to the land wars that mark South African history, *Disgrace* suggests that the dimension of land is literally one of the problematic foundations of the nation, particularly in the form of unresolved land conflict.

By positing an alternative foundational discourse, *Disgrace* questions the adequacy of the Constitution as the recently installed “foundation” of the country. As mentioned, the Constitution is largely a compromise or deal resulting from political negotiations. Within the terms of this deal, democratic rights for the latter-day nation were secured, enshrin-

ing a “future founded on the recognition of human rights, democracy and peaceful coexistence and development for all,” while issues of the past were, depending on how one sees it, either dealt with through the TRC or seemingly written off. In many ways, the compromise seemed to write off outstanding issues of the past: amnesty was granted for human rights offenders; victims were required to relinquish their legal right to seek redress or reparation; little material reparation has been made to apartheid victims and to black South Africans at large. Overall, the pace of material redistribution has been slow so that commentators have cautioned against the fallacy of a “new South Africa” (see Nixon, “An Everybody” 24). While the new dispensation of rights is laudable, one wonders how shaky the new Constitutional foundation is, especially one that seems not to have adequately addressed many outstanding inequities of the past. *Disgrace* reflects awareness of the superficiality and instability of this compromise. It gestures toward the deeper foundations of black South Africans’ claim to South Africa as homeland and their prior ownership of the land, issues that have not been adequately addressed. It also shows the compromise of the Constitution being subject to revision, as we shall see, in Lucy’s negotiation and deal with Petrus. In representing Lucy’s transaction with Petrus in language that mirrors the Constitution (“an alliance, a deal” [203]), the novel suggests that the political deal of the Constitution is far from final but continues to be remade, with a larger price for the compromise borne by the white South African.

White Homeland Discourse and the Critique of South African Pastoral

If the homeland discourse for black South Africans remains subtextually occluded in *Disgrace*, the homeland discourse for white South Africans by contrast gets an airing in the novel. White national discourse is visible in *Disgrace* in the form of pastoral discourse, in particular white South African pastoral. The latter is a prominent discourse through which Afrikaners construct their relation to South Africa as their nation, indeed more than nation, as *homeland*. In *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa*, Coetzee examines how the ideology of South African pastoral enables the Afrikaner to lay proprietorial claim to the

land of South Africa. Pastoral discourse in fact constructs a myth of the Afrikaner's natural and transcendent right to the land. Land figures prominently in this Afrikaner national discourse. As we shall see, the Afrikaner conception of South Africa as homeland is inextricably bound up with a relation to the *land* of South Africa, the latter often coded in the terms of transcendence and territorial depth, e.g. the pastoral tropes of being at one with or rooted in the land. In *Disgrace*, when fragments of pastoral rhetoric surface within the web of Lurie's consciousness, they are not just incidental elements but synecdoches of a larger homeland discourse. The rivalry of opposing homeland discourses in Coetzee's postapartheid text is played out in terms of distinctive genres. If the epic mode codes black South Africans' claim to South Africa as homeland, then the pastoral mode codes that of the Afrikaners.

In *Disgrace*, Lurie constantly thinks of Lucy (as well as Petrus) in terms of pastoral. Upon arriving at Lucy's smallholding, Lurie imagines his daughter in terms of South African pastoral: "Now here she is, flowered dress, bare feet and all, in a house full of the smell of baking, no longer a child playing at farming but a solid countrywoman, a *boervrou*" (60). After Lucy's rape, Lurie imagines that Lucy persists in staying on on her farm because of her love for the land which is a leitmotif of South African pastoral: "She is here because she loves the land and the old, *ländliche* way of life" (113). In the novel's final vision of Lucy in the last chapter (217–8), Lucy is perceived by Lurie in terms of an elaborate pastoral representation. Here pastoral takes on a Romantic register as the narrative alludes to Wordsworth's "Lucy poems."

Though *Disgrace* features a white homeland discourse, its goal nevertheless is to critique and negate this discourse. In the following discussion, I will demonstrate that one important impulse in the novel is its ironization and negation of pastoral discourse and how, by this gesture, the novel seeks to undermine a foundational Afrikaner discourse. Critics have analyzed the role of pastoral in *Disgrace* though, in my view, they fail to detect the novel's crucial ironic stance towards pastoral (for example, see essays by Rita Barnard).¹³

Coetzee's most extensive writing on the genre of South African pastoral occurs in *White Writing*. In this critical volume, Coetzee analyzes the

ideology of South African pastoral through the English-speaking farm novels of Olive Schreiner and Pauline Smith, but especially through an analysis of the Afrikaans *plaasroman* of the 1920s–40s period, in particular the farm novels of C. M. van den Heever. Coetzee's lengthy analysis of pastoral in *White Writing*, particularly the sections on Van den Heever's farm novels, is important as it allows us to view in detail how pastoral functions as a homeland discourse for the Afrikaner and, more importantly, the terms by which this discourse lays (the Afrikaner's) claim to South Africa as home. The discussion in *White Writing* further suggests that, besides being a homeland discourse, pastoral is also a foundational discourse for the Afrikaner in terms of how it encodes the transcendent basis of the Afrikaner's relation with South Africa as well as how it inscribes his origins in South Africa. Pastoral joins the Constitution and the epic intertext as the assortment of foundational discourses evoked in *Disgrace* in its interrogation of national foundations.

In *White Writing*, Coetzee discusses the role pastoral discourse plays in constructing for the Afrikaner a relation to South Africa as homeland which, in more specific terms, is a relation to South Africa with the following interrelated features: a natural proprietary right to the land of South Africa that is figured not in terms of individual but "trans-individual familial/tribal" (4) ownership of the land implying a genealogy going back to the founding fathers; a transcendent or organic bond with the land of South Africa; and an attachment to the earth that is couched in ethical dimensions of piety, good stewardship and love for the land. One immediately observes that, as articulated by pastoral, the Afrikaner's homeland relation to South Africa is defined primarily in terms of his relation to the land of South Africa. This fixation on the land is underscored by Van den Heever's statement, quoted by Coetzee, that the basis of Afrikaner culture and nationhood lies in the Afrikaner's "bondedness" with the land:

In an essay entitled "The Form of the Afrikaner's Civilization and Culture" [Van den Heever] writes that "the slumbering might of the culture of every people" has its basis in "the bondedness of man to the earth." Man is "mystically united ... by

a dark love” to the earth, which is the “soil of generation” of national culture. (87)

In *White Writing*, Coetzee underscores the mind-bogglingly dense and elaborate rhetoric that pastoral develops around the Afrikaner’s relationship with the land. Though not explicitly stated in *White Writing*, Coetzee’s unspoken charge is how the Afrikaner lays claim to the land of South Africa by means of this elaborate rhetoric. The Afrikaner’s pastoral rhetoric of mystical fusion or loving “bondedness” with the land, viewed ironically, dramatizes literally (!) how he has the land of South Africa in his tenacious clutch. The Afrikaner, in other words, lays claim to the land of South Africa by, as rhetorically figured, a crude unyielding clutching of the land! As we shall see, *Disgrace* ironizes the codes of pastoral to expose the illegitimacy of its implied transcendent claim to the land.

Let me at this point give a sense of pastoral’s elaborate rhetoric of the land which Coetzee analyzes in *White Writing*. An important point Coetzee makes is how Van den Heever’s farm novels construct for the Afrikaner a “myth of natural right” to the land by foregrounding the labor of the founding fathers:

In the myth of natural right elaborated by Van den Heever, the founding fathers pay for the farm in blood, sweat, and tears, not in money: they hack it out of primeval bush, they defend it against the barbarians, they leave their bones behind in its soil. (85)

Given that white occupants claim their “natural right” to the land through their labor what results is the “occlusion of black labor” (5) in South African pastoral:

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. (5; original emphasis)

As Coetzee points out, the detection of South African pastoral's silence about black labor would expose its claim of natural right to the land as a myth. Further, the claim of natural right to the land is not the claim of an individual but of an entire genealogy. The farm in fact becomes the locus of an extended genealogy in which the trace of the founding fathers can be discerned. Van den Heever's farms embody:

... an organic mode of consciousness belonging to a people who, from toiling generation after generation on the family farm, have divested themselves of individuality and become embodiments of an enduring bloodline stretching back into a mythicized past. (6)

Pastoral discourse posits the land as being claimed not just by an individual but by an entire genealogy that stretches back to the "mythicized" origin of the founding fathers. Pastoral is in this sense a foundational discourse for the Afrikaner as it inscribes for him, however mythically, his origin in South Africa, coded in terms of a relation with the land.

The dense rhetorical web that pastoral develops around the Afrikaner's relation to the land may also take on high-sounding ethical or transcendent dimensions. Because the farm is seen as the embodiment of an ancestral genealogy, to sell or abandon the farm is to violate the trust of the ancestors. "Inherited ownership of the farm therefore becomes a sacred trust: to alienate the farm means to forsake the bones of the ancestors" (85). For characters of Van den Heever's novel *Somer*, the potential sale of their ancestral farm Driefontein is discussed in terms of one's ethical obligations towards one's bloodline: "Driefontein that has been in the family since the Great Trek!" "Great-grandfather, Grandfather, Father and all the others would be shamed if we let the ground go" (qtd. in *White Writing* 84). Ownership of the farm in fact involves multiple ethical codes—there is the code of being a good steward to the land, the code of tending the land that fulfils one's duties towards the ancestors and further the code of loving the land in a relation akin to marriage:

Besides farming the land in a spirit of piety toward *voorgeslagte* and *nageslate* (past and future generations), besides being a

good steward, the farmer must also love the farm, love this patch of earth above all others, so that his proprietorship comes to embody a marriage not so much between himself and the farm as between as between his lineage and the farm. Such a marriage, which must be exclusive (monogamous) and more than merely proprietorial, will entail that in good years the farm will respond to his love by bringing forth bountifully, while in bad years he will have to stand by it, nursing it through its trials. The final test that the bond between them is supramaterial will be passed when a mystic communion of interpenetration takes place between them, when farmer becomes *vergroeid* (intergrown, fused) with farm: “Never before had he felt such a bond with the earth. It was now as if the life within it were streaming up into his body ... as if he and the earth were living in a silent understanding (*Groei [Growth]*).” (86)

This long passage illustrates the elaborate rhetorical web pastoral weaves between the Afrikaner and his land. The upshot is that the Afrikaner does not “own” the land in a mere material sense. Such ownership, as well as questions of ownership, are superseded by the complex, supramaterial bond that emerges between him and the land, one mediated by elaborate ethical and transcendent codes. By the time the bond reaches its apotheosis, when “a mystic communion of interpenetration takes place between [the Afrikaner and his land],” there is no longer any question who has laid claim to the land (the question of claim having in fact been rendered irrelevant).

As one might expect, pastoral discourse in *Disgrace* echoes the rhetoric found in *White Writing* though, as I argue, it is subject to radical ironization. In addition, though Lurie himself already takes an ironic stance towards pastoral, this posture does not preempt the text’s *further* ironization of Lurie’s use of pastoral. In the novel, Lurie thinks of Lucy’s relation to the land following the above codes of South African pastoral. He imagines her sturdy embeddedness in the land (62) as well as her love of the land (113). Following pastoral ideology, he also imagines persons as having an organic relationship with the land; he thinks of Ettinger as

“a man of the earth, tenacious, *eingewurzelt* [rooted in]” (117) and of Lucy’s unborn child as a “child of this earth” (216). (Significantly, the latter characterization is met with Lucy’s resisting silence.) My larger argument, however, is that Lurie’s pastoral representations of Lucy are not only ironized but *wholly* negated because they constitute *entirely* unreliable representations of Lucy. Though Lurie may construct Lucy’s relation to South Africa in pastoral terms, Lucy *herself* does not conceive her relation to the country in these terms. In reading *Disgrace*, it is crucial to distinguish between Lurie’s (mis)representations of Lucy’s relation to South Africa and, to the extent that we can ascertain, Lucy’s *actual* relation to South Africa, as Lucy herself conceives it. If pastoral as a homeland discourse is inapplicable to and vacuous for Lucy, then in Lucy one finds articulated an alternative mode of conceiving South Africa as home. Similarly, while pastoral is not Lucy’s foundational discourse, one finds articulated in Lucy a foundational discourse in an alternative register.

To begin, Lucy, at a fundamental level, does not even view her smallholding as a farm: “Stop calling it *the farm*, Lurie. This is not a farm, it’s just a piece of land where I grow things—we both know that” (200; original emphasis). In Lucy’s epistemology, the land is stripped of pastoral’s rhetorical and ideological coding; her statement in fact reflects a mind *devoid* of pastoral rhetoric and ideology. Given pastoral’s dense rhetorical web, its erasure within Lucy’s consciousness is significant—one could suggest that Lucy’s mind is decolonized of white pastoral ideology, a contrast with how pastoral epistemology persists in framing Lurie’s consciousness. Careful reading, for instance, shows that Lucy does not conceive the topography of South Africa in terms of pastoral’s binary division of country/city, a rhetorical structure that dominates Lurie’s consciousness. As Lucy stresses, her site is “just a piece of land,” implying that it is undistinguished from other pieces of land in the nation. A site in Cape Town would for Lucy be no different from her site in the Eastern Cape, both being equally “just [pieces] of land.” While Lurie constantly thinks of escaping the country to the city (“If she had any sense she would quit: . . . consign the farm to Petrus, return to civilization” [151]), Lucy shows a lack of thinking in terms of safe and unsafe sites, specifically in terms of the binary between a safe city and an unsafe

country. In her statement of intent after the rape, Lucy says: “It was never safe, and it’s not an idea, good or bad. I’m not going back for the sake of an idea. I’m just going back” (105). When Lucy remarks that “[i]t was never safe,” she is referring to her condition of living in the new South Africa—one without safety—which she has clear-sightedly countenanced and embraced. Her term of reference is not a South Africa that can be falsely divided to create zones of escape, but *South Africa itself* which “was never safe.” Her final sentence that she is “just going back” is thus a statement of her intention to continue to stay on in *South Africa itself*, on an unsafe site no different from other unsafe sites in the unsafe nation, as opposed to an intention to stay on on “the farm” with all the pastoral connotations Lurie evokes.

Let me add that Lucy’s statement that she is not going back “for the sake of an idea” further rejects any suggestion that her actions are motivated by a pre-existing ideology like pastoral. This statement is consistent with the principle Lucy establishes earlier as important for her—that she “[doesn’t] act in terms of abstractions” (112). Among the implications of this principle is the insight that Lucy’s acts are not determined by abstract ideologies like pastoral. When Lurie later thinks that Lucy stays on on the farm “because she loves the land and the old, *ländliche* way of life,” he misreads her. Lucy continually accuses her father of misreading her (112; 161) and Lurie’s persistence in approaching Lucy through a pastoral epistemology constitutes a misreading of her that results in vacuous representations of her.

To detect more acutely the novel’s ironization of Lurie’s pastoral discourse, one needs to be aware of Coetzee’s extensive use of unreliable narration, particularly as it applies to Lurie’s interior monologue. Attentive reading will reveal that *extensive* sections of Lurie’s interior monologue are in fact unreliable, if not wholly baseless and vacuous. For example, Lurie presumes that what motivates Lucy’s silence on her rape is its shame and frequently weaves elaborate narratives of shame over her silence, like the one below:

[Lucy] would rather hide her face, and he knows why. Because of the disgrace. Because of the shame. That is what their visi-

tors have achieved; that is what they have done to this confident, modern young woman. Like a stain the story is spreading across the district. Not her story to spread but theirs: they are its owners. How they put her in her place, how they showed her what a woman was for. (115; see also 108–10, 132)

At no point, however, does Lucy share Lurie's assumption that shame underlies her silence. When she gives her reason for her silence, it has nothing to do with Lurie's notions of shame (112). Lurie's elaborate monologue on Lucy's shame proves wholly vacuous—it tells us more about his presumptuous attempt to speak on Lucy's behalf (and thereby impose his ethics on her) than it reliably represents Lucy's motivations. Indeed, Lurie's internal monologue is so extensively unreliable that the novel's representations of key characters like Lucy and Petrus, which are focalized through this monologue, are often significantly, if not *wholly*, unreliable. Critics have thus far not detected Coetzee's use of extensive unreliable narration in *Disgrace* though he has employed this mode in earlier texts like *Age of Iron* and *The Master of Petersburg*.¹⁴

Awareness of the novel's use of radical unreliability enables us to see how it not only ironizes pastoral but subjects it to total negation. The latter is achieved by Coetzee's sly strategy of constructing pastoral representations that, in the context of the narrative, amount to nothing in terms of being reliable representations. Take, for example, Lurie's lyrical closing view of Lucy that stretches for two pages:

He reaches the fence and stops. Lucy, with her back to him, has not yet noticed him. She is wearing a pale summer dress, boots, and a wide straw hat. . . .

Lucy straightens up, stretches, bends down again. Field-labour; peasant tasks, immemorial. His daughter is becoming a peasant. . . .

So: once she was only a little tadpole in her mother's body, and now here she is, solid in her existence, more solid than he has ever been. *With luck* she will last a long time, long beyond him. When he is dead she will, *with luck*, still be doing her ordinary tasks among the flowerbeds. And from within her

will have issued another existence, that *with luck* will be just as solid, just as long-lasting. (217; my emphasis)

A wary reader would detect the novel's subtle irony in the pastoral idealization that leads Lurie to simplify Lucy's persistence on the smallholding. In Lurie's assessment, it is through luck that Lucy will persist. His pastoral epistemology also idealizes Lucy's actions as simple and eternal. Lurie's pastoral idealization occludes the significant price Lucy calculates she must pay to stay on (158) and the careful deliberation behind her actions. It is certainly not through luck that Lucy persists and her actions are far from ordinary, uncomplicated tasks. As a reliable representation of Lucy's motivations, this passage is wholly vacuous. Far from being legitimized as a homeland discourse, Lurie's pastoral discourse in the novel is ironized as having zero validity in defining a relation to South Africa. Lucy will indeed persist in her relation to South Africa though, as I argue in the next section, in terms of *her* own ethical code and not pastoral transcendence.

The novel is further critical of how pastoral defines homeland relations in terms of territorial depth. Within pastoral's economy, land is figured as an entity one may lay hold of in a *deep* way. In one of Lurie's first pastoral representations of Lucy, criticism is gently directed at how Lucy is figured as having a relation of depth with the land:

She talks easily about these matters. A frontier farmer of the new breed. In the old days, cattle and maize. Today, dogs and daffodils. . . .

They walk back along an irrigation furrow. Lucy's bare toes *grip the red earth*, leaving clear prints. A solid woman, *embedded in her new life*. Good! If this is to be what he leaves behind—this daughter, this woman—then he does not have to be ashamed. (62; my emphasis)

Lurie's pastoral epistemology leads him to figure (erroneously) Lucy's relation to the land as one of *entrenching herself* in the land. His minimal image of Lucy's toes *gripping* the earth gently hints at the clinging relation to the land implied in the pastoral discourse he uses. As we shall see,

Lucy *herself* does not conceive a relation in terms of territorial depth. The trope of territorial depth is amplified in Ettinger whom Lurie figures as a character organically bonded with the earth. Within Lurie's informal pastoral echelon, Ettinger's "true organicism" is set against Lucy's "false pastoralism":

Petrus will not be contented to plough forever his hectare and a half. Lucy is still chickenfeed: an amateur, an enthusiast of the farming life rather than a farmer. Petrus would like to take over Lucy's land. Then he would like to have Ettinger's too, or enough of it to run a herd on. Ettinger will be a harder nut to crack. Lucy is merely a transient; Ettinger is another peasant, a man of the earth, tenacious, *eingewurzelt* [i.e., rooted in]. (117)¹⁵

Lurie's narrative is typically unreliable here and irony at a few levels is present in this passage. While Lurie ranks Lucy below Ettinger, the reverse is actually true: it is not Lucy who is the transient but Ettinger. As Lucy clear-sightedly observes, it is "just a matter of time before Ettinger is found with a bullet in his back" (204). Conversely, as I argue in the next section, it is Lucy who exhibits a tenacious persistence in the land though in a mode distinct from Ettinger's tenacious entrenchment. The passage further ironizes the pastoral cliché of Ettinger as a "man of the earth" by suggesting that this organic trope finds its corollary in Ettinger's tenacious clinging to the land, a gesture underscored by the trope of territorial depth ("*eingewurzelt*"). In this ironic reading, what lies beneath the transcendent rhetoric of Ettinger's organic bond with the land is but the impulse to cling tenaciously to the land. Further, tropes of territorial depth in pastoral, like the motif of being "rooted in" the land, become precisely a measure of one's *unyielding* hold of the land. Earlier on, Lurie imagines *how* Ettinger, "man of the earth," in practice remains tenaciously rooted in his land parcel:

... Ettinger telephones, offering to lend them a gun 'for the meanwhile.' 'Thank you,' he replies. 'We'll think about it.'

He gets out Lucy's tools and repairs the kitchen door as well as he is able. They ought to install bars, security gates, a prim-

eter fence, as Ettinger has done. They ought to turn the farmhouse into a fortress. Lucy ought to buy a pistol and a two-way radio, and take shooting lessons. But will she ever consent? She is here because she loves the land and the old, *ländliche* way of life. If that way of life is doomed, what is left for her to love? (113)

There is a gesture toward unmasking the organic rhetoric of Ettinger's "natural" bond with the earth to reveal that the true basis of Ettinger's deep bond with the land is the use of material force now so clearly displayed. It is perhaps also significant that this depiction of the material basis by which Ettinger holds on to the land is juxtaposed to the pastoral rhetoric of loving the land which, I have argued, is vacuous. The juxtaposition invites consideration that the rhetoric of loving the land, which proves hollow, and the ferocious clinging to it by all means are corollaries. Though we experience a vacillation in the passage from the tough rhetoric of Ettinger's militarized response to the soft rhetoric of love Lurie (misguidedly) attributes to Lucy, they are but two sides of the same impulse to cling to the land. This skeptical reading of love as a possessive, clinging impulse is echoed by the parallel in *Boyhood* (122–3) and *Youth* (98–100) of maternal love as an imprisoning force that clings to the child.

The novel is critical of pastoral's duplicitous rhetoric of territorial depth, organicism, love and transcendence. The intensity of South African pastoral's transcendent rhetoric, Coetzee slyly implies, is precisely the measure of its ferocious unyielding grasp of the land. *Disgrace* further doubles pastoral's motif of tenacious clinging by suggesting how deeply this white discourse entrenches itself in the psyche. In the novel, the mental sphere is figured in terms of land imagery to underscore that relation to the land is determined not only by material structures but by mental rhetorical structures like, as discussed, white pastoral discourse. Lecturing on the operation of the Romantic imagination in *The Prelude*, Lurie refers to "the sense-image, kept as fleeting as possible, as a means toward stirring or activating *the idea that lies buried more deeply in the soil of memory*" (22; my emphasis). The trope of territorial depth is again

evoked though in a non-literal sense to suggest how an idea or “a great [archetype] of the mind” (22) can be deeply rooted in consciousness. At a later point, Lurie self-knowingly reflects on how prejudices settle and stagnate in his mind:

He does not like women who make no effort to be attractive. It is a resistance he has had to Lucy's friends before. Nothing to be proud of: a prejudice that *has settled in his mind, settled down*. His mind has become *a refuge of old thoughts, idle, indigent, with nowhere to go*. He ought to chase them out, sweep the premises clean. But he does not care to do so, or does not care enough. (72; my emphasis)

Though the subject here is unattractive women, the term “settled” playfully suggests how settler rhetoric itself can become settled in the mind, taking the form of old and idle prejudices entrenching themselves “indigenously” in the mind. The rhetoric of the Afrikaner's deep-rootedness in the soil of Africa is doubled in the suggestion of its deep-rootedness in the soil of the mind. Pastoral discourse, one could say, clings tenaciously not just to the land, but to the mind. Even as the novel traces a deeper foundation to this white foundational discourse, it attempts to *eliminate* this foundational discourse by inviting one to read a character, Lucy, whose mental slate is wiped clean of pastoral, in its effort to re-imagine the foundations of one's relation to South Africa as homeland. Lucy's decolonized consciousness contrasts with Lurie's whose irony towards pastoral is inadequate in eradicating its deep-rooted persistence in his mind.

Lucy and Foundations: Tenaciously “Rooted in” South Africa

Through Lucy, the novel attempts to negate and rewrite white foundational discourse. I have suggested how in Lucy's mind pastoral discourse is eliminated. Lucy is thus free from conceiving her relation to South Africa in terms of pastoral's duplicitous and self-serving codes. Further, through Lucy, the novel re-writes the pastoral trope of being “rooted in” South Africa. Below I argue that Lucy is as tenaciously “rooted in” in South Africa as is Ettinger though in a manner distinct from the lat-

ter's pastoral mode. Lucy's tenacious persistence in South Africa is not to be questioned though it is conceived not in terms of pastoral transcendence as Lurie imagines (217) but in terms of Beckettian poetics. Further, though Lucy may be "rooted in" in South Africa, her gesture is not conceived in terms of land or territorial depth. Through Lucy, the novel presents an alternative way of conceiving white foundations in South Africa.

Lucy's tenacious rootedness in South Africa is suggested by Coetzee's coding of her in Beckett's non-totalizing trope of repetition and infinity, present in the latter's novel trilogy, *Molloy*, *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable*.¹⁶ In the aftermath of the rape, when Lucy tells Lurie her intention is "to go on as before" (105), she echoes the famous last words of Beckett's unnamable at the close of the trilogy: "... where I am, I don't know, I'll never know, in the silence you don't know, you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on" (414). The immediate parallel suggested is between Lucy and the persistence and inextinguishability of the unnamable who *is* dead, can't go on *yet* still goes on. Lucy's Beckettian response constitutes a mode of rootedness in South Africa distinct from how rootedness is envisioned by South African pastoral. Lucy's process of rooting herself in South Africa is, within the Beckettian mold, continually coming to a halt, a point of exhaustion, a point of death, though it is driven by a larger imperative and will to restart and go on. The Beckettian dialectic of negation and persistence is implied in Lucy's letter to Lurie which, echoing the unnamable, is her "last word" (161) to him. Her letter also reiterates her frustration of being misread by her father:

Half an hour later an envelope is pushed under his door. 'Dear David, You have not been listening to me. I am not the person you know. *I am a dead person and I do not know yet what will bring me back to life. All I know is that I cannot go away.*

'You do not see this, and I do not know what more I can do to make you see. It is as if you have chosen deliberately to sit in a corner where the rays of the sun do not shine. I think of you as one of the three chimpanzees, the one with his paws over his eyes.

‘Yes, the road I am following may be the wrong one. But if I leave the farm now I will leave defeated, and will taste that defeat for the rest of my life.’ (161; my emphasis)

Beckettian poetics is echoed in Lucy’s posture of death and uncertainty, with the only minimal certainty being the fact that “[she] cannot go away.” It is in terms of these conflicting Beckettian topoi of radical negation and inextinguishability that Lucy will persist, go on, be tenaciously rooted in South Africa. In the novel’s final vision of Lucy, Lurie is right to imagine Lucy’s persistence in perpetuity (217) though the irony is that Lucy will not persist in terms of pastoral immortality as Lurie imagines but in terms of Beckettian inexhaustibility. Put schematically, one encounters a playful juxtaposition of traditional and poststructuralist conceptions of infinity and, more specifically, the recasting of Romantic organic transcendence into Beckett’s non-totalizing infinity. Through Lucy, white foundational discourse is rewritten so that it has its basis not in pastoral transcendence but in Beckettian poetics.

It is crucial to read Lucy accurately as Lucy, in particular her epistemology, is key to the novel’s rewriting of white foundations. A careful reading of Lucy will reveal an epistemology that is free from transcendent modes of thought and that instead operates in minimal and non-absolutist modes, which are indicative of Lucy’s paradoxical stance of conceiving her South African foundations in non-foundational ways. The reader, however, may find it difficult to make out Lucy’s perspective given that her speech is often spare or punctuated by silence¹⁷ and, more importantly, that she is accessible only through Lurie’s mediation and misinterpretation. In order to read Lucy adequately, one needs to make a conscious effort to *re-imagine* the novel against the grain of its lopsided bias, with Lucy as a character in her own right as opposed to her subordinate status in the current text. Such an act would heed the novel’s metafictional cue that “people are not divided into major and minor” and that all persons are subjects in their own right (198). The task is to imagine the story of *Disgrace* re-told in Lucy’s perspective, free from its subordination within Lurie’s unreliable epistemology. Despite Lurie dominating the present lopsided text, I argue that the text con-

tains *sufficient* material on Lucy for one to reconstruct an adequate view of Lucy's epistemology in its own right.

The practice of reading *against* Lurie's dominant voice to arrive at a more accurate understanding of Lucy's epistemology can be applied for instance in our reading of Lucy's tendency toward silence. Here it is crucial to read *against* Lurie's (incorrect) assumption that Lucy's silences conceal her disgrace (115, 109). Earlier, I suggested that the *Odyssean* parallel cues the reader on seeing the figures in *Disgrace* as characterized by Homeric epithets. Viewed in the mold of Penelope, Lucy is "circumspect."¹⁸ Indeed, an important structural contrast in the novel is the discrepancy between Lucy's circumspection and Lurie's recklessness in thought and speech (208), with the implication that while Lurie's epistemology is radically unreliable, Lucy's epistemology in relation to the "new South Africa" is the more wary, clear-sighted and reliable. As suggested, Lurie's recklessness results in gross misreadings of Lucy and Petrus, and the tendency to speak on behalf of other characters. In contrast, Lucy's silences are part of her circumspect epistemology that carefully mulls over the various possibilities within her present position in the "new South Africa." Thus, "circumspect" Lucy at one point tells Lurie, "There is nothing you can suggest that I haven't been through a hundred times myself" (157). Lucy's brooding silences in the narrative reflect not her shame but her circumspect mentality in active process.

Even as Lucy demonstrates that she is tenaciously rooted in, determined to conceive her foundations in South Africa, she displays an epistemology characterized by non-absolutist and minimal modes. She stays on not in a posture of ironclad certainty and transcendence, but one simultaneously characterized by doubt (Beckettian) and circumspection (Penelopean). Such a stance eschews foundational, totalizing pronouncements and restricts itself to modest, limited observations. Lucy's stance is further minimal in her eschewing of actions based on abstractions (112) which confines her acts to being motivated by a restricted epistemology of immediate empirical reality. Decolonized of totalizing abstractions, Lucy acts only in terms of the immediate concrete reality, a modality that also subjects her to the non-absolutist nature of empirical reality that she accepts. Thus, Lucy's acceptance of Petrus' "marriage

offer” is based on an assessment of Petrus and her circumstances that is as notable for its circumspection as it is limited to a concrete, non-absolutist reality:

‘No. Wait. Before you get on your high horse with Petrus, take a moment to consider my situation objectively. Objectively I am a woman alone. I have no brothers. I have a father, but he is far away and anyhow powerless in the terms that matter here. To whom can I turn for protection, for patronage? To Ettinger? It is just a matter of time before Ettinger is found with a bullet in his back. Practically speaking, there is only Petrus left. Petrus may not be a big man but he is big enough for someone small like me. And at least I know Petrus. I have no illusions about him. I know what I would be letting myself in for.’ (204)

Even as Lucy is rooted to South Africa, she establishes her relation to South Africa in modest modes. It is not given to totalizing abstractions but confined to immediate empirical reality. It relinquishes absolutist formulations to be content with relative formulations. It is also limited by its posture of circumspection. Yet, precisely because Lucy’s relation to South Africa is modestly limited, it is in its minimal way clear-sighted of the country’s realities. In Bev’s quiet praise of how “[Lucy] lives closer to the ground than [either herself or Lurie]” (210), the reader finds a suggestion of Lucy’s commendably clear-sighted epistemology—one that is more reliably proximate to the country’s realities. The novel in fact enacts a refiguring of territorial tropes so that while Lucy is not “rooted in” the land, she is clear-sightedly “[close] to the ground.” Though Lucy does not clutch the land, she is still intimate with it.

The impulse in the postapartheid period to rethink the white South African’s relation to South Africa by rewriting the rhetorical relation to the land is, Coetzee discerns, also present in the work of his contemporary, the Afrikaner novelist Breyten Breytenbach. In Coetzee’s review of Breytenbach’s *Return to Paradise* (1993), he observes:

The plague that Breytenbach pronounces on all parties ... makes up the less interesting half of the book. Its best pages ad-

dress a more intimate and a more fundamental concern: what it means to him to be rooted in a landscape, to be African born. (*Stranger Shores* 306)

As I have argued, the issue of “what it means ... to be rooted in a landscape” is an equally vital concern for Lucy and for *Disgrace* as a whole. Coetzee views Breytenbach’s subsequent work *Dog Heart*, published in the same year as *Disgrace*, as articulating an ethics of relation to the land: “The land, says Breytenbach [in *Dog Heart*], belongs to no one, and the correct relation to the land is the nomad’s: live on it, live off it, move on; find ways of loving it without becoming bound to it” (*Stranger Shores* 313). In its own way, through its critique of pastoral and rewriting of white foundations, *Disgrace* too is in quest of articulating a “correct relation to the land.”

Ultimately, however, in its effort to rewrite white foundations, *Disgrace* would effect a shift in the conception of homeland away from land towards *people*. Though Lucy is “rooted in” South Africa, the novel eliminates the territorial connotations of the trope: Lucy relinquishes her land and stays on not by way of land ownership. Coetzee has observed that the emphasis on land in white South African literature and art actually masks a failure to engage with South Africa’s indigenous people. In *White Writing*, he speculates that the prominence of the “empty landscape” topos in South African (though Eurocentric) landscape poetry and art belies a failure to conceive of South Africa as a “peopled landscape.” He observes:

... the continued apprehension of silence (by the poet) or blankness (by the painter), stands for, or stands in the place of, another failure, by no means inevitable: a failure to imagine a peopled landscape, an inability to conceive a society in South Africa in which there is a place for the self. (9)

Such a dynamic, where the white emphasis on land masks a neglect of people, is expounded as a theme in Coetzee’s “Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech”:

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 and animals and flowers.

If one fails to see the relevance of this talk about love, one can replace the word *love* with the word *fraternity*. The veiled unfreedom of the white man in South Africa has always made itself felt most keenly when, stepping down for a moment from his lonely throne, giving in to a wholly human and understandable yearning for fraternity with the people among whom he lives, he has discovered with a shock that fraternity by itself is not to be had, no matter how compellingly felt the impulse on both sides. Fraternity ineluctably comes in a package with liberty and equality. The vain and essentially sentimental yearning that expresses itself in the reform movement in South Africa today is a yearning to have fraternity without paying for it.

What is the price that has to be paid? The very lowest price is the destruction of the unnatural structures of power that define the South African state. (*Doubling* 97; original emphasis)

Though Coetzee is referring to the apartheid era, the pathway he outlines of a shift from relationship with land to one with people, along with the *price* to be paid for such a shift, is still relevant for *Disgrace*. In *Lucy*, the novel imagines a relation with South Africa that is primarily in terms of people and not land. Lucy roots herself in South Africa in a manner that involves not land but long-term, non-fly-by-night relations with people. Further, *Disgrace* reflects the awareness that relations with people involve a price, in particular, the outstanding debt white South Africans owe black South Africans. In the course of the novel, Lucy negotiates the price to be paid by her as she establishes roots with people.

Lucy's orientation towards people is demonstrated by her capacity for empathy (which accompanies her circumspection) and by her non-evasive countenancing of the likely (though by no means determinate) price she has to pay for staying on in South Africa:

She broods a long while before she answers. ‘But isn’t there another way of looking at it, David? What if ... what if *that* is the price one has to pay for staying on? Perhaps that is how they look at it; perhaps that is how I should look at it. They see me as owing something. They see themselves as debt collectors, tax collectors. Why should I be allowed to live here without paying? Perhaps that is what they tell themselves. (158; original emphasis)

The course of the narrative sees Lucy working out the price she has to pay for staying on, a process reflected by the narrative’s play with deictic expressions (“*that* is the price”). By the final stages of the novel, the price—again indicated by “that”—has shifted as Lucy enters into a deal with Petrus in which she yields her land to him in exchange for his protection: “Yes, I agree, it is humiliating. But perhaps that is a good point to start from again. Perhaps that is what I must learn to accept. To start at ground level” (205). Faced with the price exacted by anonymous assailants-at-large and, separately, with the price exacted by Petrus with whom she is familiar and in an offer that has advantages to herself and her child, Lucy chooses to accept Petrus’ offer and in effect pays a lower price. The recurrence of deictic expressions involving “that” indicates shifting contexts and the continual working out of the price to be paid for Lucy to become part of the South African community. Petrus’ offer, though not entirely altruistic, is primarily a goodwill gesture that *eases* the price obligation on Lucy even as it reflects Petrus’ shrewd initiative in devising a plan of long-term protection for Lucy. Contrary to Lurie’s reading of Petrus as threatening (202–3), Petrus’ stance towards Lucy is generally one of help and goodwill, reflected for instance in Bev’s remark on how “Petrus slaved to get the market going for Lucy” who thus “owes [Petrus] a lot” (140). Lucy does starkly countenance the possible price she might have to pay for staying on. Nevertheless, as a result of Petrus’ good-intentioned (and shrewd) intervention, she pays a smaller price for which she also gains long lasting roots in Petrus’ community.

In its play with deictic expressions, the novel may be alluding to Bishop Tutu’s justification of the TRC’s amnesty provision as recounted in Antjie Krog’s *Country of My Skull*:

Suddenly people seem to find the idea of amnesty repugnant. And Tutu is the one to explain: “We did not decide on amnesty. The political parties decided on amnesty. The amnesty clause was inserted in the early hours of the morning after an exhausted night of negotiating. The last thing, the last sentence, the last clause, was added: amnesty shall be granted through a process of reconciliation. And it was only after *that* was put in, that the *boere* signed the negotiations, opening the door to our election.” Tutu repeats this story in all the languages he can muster. (30–1; original emphasis)

In the TRC *Report*, Tutu agrees: “Amnesty is a heavy price to pay. It is, however, the price the negotiators believed our country would have to pay to avoid ‘an alternative too ghastly to contemplate’” (12). In the national scenario of deal-making, the “that” turns out to be the amnesty provision for offenders in a conception of the price for the deal as one borne by apartheid victims. *Disgrace* suggests how the deal of the Constitution does not work and figures the “that” as a price that continues to be worked out and one primarily to be borne by whites and not by blacks. Lucy’s transaction with Petrus is termed a “deal,” an “alliance” (203), a “negotiation” (205), invoking language that deliberately mirrors the process of the Constitution. The novel suggests that, beyond the ineffective national deal of the Constitution, deal-making continues “[close] to the ground” as individuals continue to negotiate the price for the foundation of the “new South Africa.”

Notes

- 1 Petrus is characterized as one who has a distinct command of and affinity for the English language. We are told that when Petrus speaks, he “[savours] the phrase” (64), “brings out the words with a flourish, showing off his mastery” (136) and “pronounces the words as if he has never heard them before, as if they have popped up before him like a rabbit out of a hat” (152). He is also capable of sly puns (“A woman must be marry.” [202]) and, equally, has the sly “habit of letting words hang in the air” (152). Lurie’s view that English is “an unfit medium” for Petrus’ story (117) is in fact a patronizing underestimation of Petrus’ resourcefulness and cunning with the language which, I argue, is a sign of his alignment with Odyssean *polymetis*.

- 2 There are structural parallels within the twenty-four-chapter division of the two texts. For example, Odysseus' triumphant reclamation of his great hall in Book 22 of the *Odyssey* is paralleled by events in Chapter 22 of *Disgrace* in which Petrus too clinches his "victory." Petrus' proposal of "marriage" to Lucy is accepted and Lucy cedes her land to him. While the chapter contains no physical violence, Lurie aptly thinks of Petrus' marital proposal—his coup de grace—in martial terms: "So ... that is what all the shadow-boxing was for: this bid, this blow!" (202).
- 3 "So he is home again. It does not feel like a homecoming" (175). Lurie's homecoming is deliberately anti-heroic—he finds himself in a situation of obsolescence and dispossession as opposed to one of victorious restoration: "The end of roaming. What comes after the end of roaming? ... The life of a superannuated scholar, without hope, without prospect ..." (175). He discovers his house burgled and his possessions usurped: "He wanders through the house taking a census of his losses. ... Who is at this moment wearing his shoes?" (176).
- 4 For example, in recalling his encounter with Melanie, Lurie thinks: "*I was a servant of Eros*: that is what he wants to say, but does he have the effrontery? *It was a god who acted through me*. What vanity! Yet, not a lie, not entirely" (89; original emphasis).
- 5 In addition to being a condensation of Book 22 of the *Odyssey* as I explain below, this passage is also a bricolage of textual fragments from Robert Fagles' translation of the *Odyssey*. It incorporates fragments from (a) Athena's prophetic foreknowledge of the suitors' doom: "I have a feeling some will *splatter* your ample floors/with all their *blood and brains*" (13.452–3); (b) from the description of "[the suitors leaping] from their seats, *milling about*, desperate, scanning the stone walls ..." (22.23–4) after Odysseus' first arrow brings down Antinous; (c) from the description of Odysseus' decimation of the suitors trapped in the hall:

... he, as long as he'd arrows left to defend himself,
 kept *picking suitors off* in the palace, one by one
 and down they went, corpse on corpse in droves. (22.124–6; my emphasis)
- 6 Book 22 ends with the execution of the unfaithful maids where Telemachus makes it clear that they will not die swift, merciful deaths: "No clean death for the likes of them, by god!" (488). Coetzee alludes to this ethic in the tall man's failure to administer a *coup de grâce* to the dying dog.
- 7 The tall man and his accomplices use a lie to get into Lucy's house. Their ruse alludes to Odysseus' encounter with Cyclops in its use of "nobody" ("Is no one there." [93]).
- 8 According to the TRC *Report*, *ubuntu* refers to a traditional African value that generally translates as "humaneness." "Its spirit emphasizes respect for human dignity, marking a shift from confrontation to conciliation" (127). For a discussion of the strategic use of *ubuntu* in the reconciliation process, see Wilson (9–13).

- 9 In another example, the underworld seer Tiresias assures Odysseus: “No doubt you will pay them back in blood when you come home!” (11.135).
- 10 The killing of individual suitors, their collaborators and the disloyal maids are equally notable for their indulgence in gory violence. Take, for example, Melanthius’ death: “They hauled him out through the doorway, into the court,/ lopped his nose and ears with a ruthless knife,/ tore his genitals out for the dogs to eat raw/and in manic fury hacked off hands and feet” (22.501–4).
- 11 Wilson concludes: “One of the main results of my ethnographic inquiries was the centrality of emotions of vengeance in popular legal consciousness and practices of revenge in local justice institutions. Despite the existence of many rarefied national institutions dedicated to protecting human rights (not only the TRC, but also the Gender Commission, the Constitutional Court and the Human Rights Commission) enclaves of revenge controlled by militarized youth and punitive elders continued to shape the character of justice in the townships of South Africa. Because it was guided by a religious-redemptive notion of reconciliation, the TRC was never able to engage with, much less transform, these emotions and structures” (xx).
- 12 Within the narrative context of Lurie as the focal character, the subtext alludes to the occlusion of black anger from his mental sphere, underlining a white character’s *inability to imagine* the scale of anger he is faced with for the offences of his race. Lurie’s blindness and folly are mirrored by the suitors’ ignorance: “Poor fools blind to the fact/that all their necks were in the noose, their dooms sealed.”
- 13 This failure stems from the failure to observe that Lucy’s consciousness is distinct from Lurie’s.
- 14 I discuss Mrs Curren’s extensive unreliable narration in *Age of Iron* in “Love and Indifference in J. M. Coetzee’s *Age of Iron*.”
- 15 Lurie’s assessment of Lucy in terms of a “false pastoralism” may strike one as contradicting his earlier view of Lucy as “no longer a child playing at farming but a solid countrywoman.” Contradiction and inconsistency are features of Lurie’s unreliable narration and should be read precisely as such.
- 16 For accounts of this structure, see the poststructuralist readings of Beckettian repetition in Connor and Hill (59–78).
- 17 Lucy’s silences are an important feature of her characterization. Silence punctuates her dialogues with Lurie. For example: “There is a long silence” (155). “She is silent” (157). “She broods a long while before she answers” (158). “There is a pause between them” (205). “There is a long silence between them” (216).
- 18 Lucy’s association with Penelope is also suggested by the wild geese on her smallholding which echo the portent of Penelope’s geese (19.602–24). Coetzee too gives a (playful) symbolic dimension to Lucy’s geese (88).

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