

**RETURN TO THE FARM: LANDSCAPE AS A SITE FOR THE
INTERROGATION OF IDENTITY IN THREE WORKS OF
J. M. COETZEE**

David Nel

Pietermaritzburg

January 2002

Submitted as the dissertation component in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts in the Department of English,
University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg.

Declaration

Unless specifically indicated to the contrary in the text, this thesis is
entirely my own work.

Abstract

The dissertation focuses on J. M. Coetzee's novels The Life and Times of Michael K., Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life and Disgrace, analysing the central protagonists' engagement with the landscape in general and specifically focussing on the farm as a site on which identities are interrogated. By way of introduction the two central themes, landscape and identity are highlighted with respect to Coetzee's theoretical work, specifically White Writing and Doubling the Point. Introductory discussion on the 'farm novel' and 'autobiography' is also given in the first chapter.

In the second chapter, Boyhood is examined as an influential text in the rereading of Coetzee's allegorical work Michael K. The intention is to elucidate the power relations which underlie the earlier novel by means of a comparative analysis of the mother-child, father-child culture-child and author-text relationships found in Boyhood. Consideration of Coetzee's critical analysis of Olive Schreiner's Story of an African Farm is given towards establishing links between Coetzee's fiction and the farm novel genre.

The third chapter focuses on Disgrace as 'another take' on the farm novel. The position of the white male 'self' in post-apartheid South Africa is interrogated through an analysis of the protagonist David Lurie's fictional 'return to the farm.' 'Subject'/ 'other' relations are also discussed with a view to understanding identity formation.

In the final chapter, conclusions are drawn regarding the relationship between Coetzee's fiction and the farm novel genre. Finally, the failure of lineal consciousness and the 'self' becoming redundant are considered.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank my supervisor, David Attwell for his considerable encouragement and insightful comments.

CONTENTS

Chapter 1

Introduction	1
--------------------	---

Chapter 2

Return to the farm: <u>Life and Times of Michael K</u> and <u>Boyhood</u>	18
--	----

Chapter 3

“I am the gardener and the dog-man”: Identity and the post-apartheid novel. An analysis of <u>Disgrace</u>	43
---	----

Chapter 4

Conclusion	70
Notes.....	73

Bibliography

CHAPTER ONE

'This is my landscape. The marrow of my bones. The plains. The sweeping veld. The honey-blond sandstone stone. This I love. This is what I'm made of. And so I remain in the unexplainable wondrous ambush of grass and light, cloud and warm stone.'

As I stand half-immersed in the grass crackling with grasshoppers and sand, the voices from the town hall come drifting on the first winds blowing from the Malutis - the voices, all the voices of the land.

The land belongs to the voices of those who live in it. My own bleak voice among them.

The Free State landscape lies at the feet at the last of the stories of saffron and amber, angel hair and barbs, dew and hay and hurt.' - Antjie Krog 'Country of My Skull'

INTRODUCTION

With the handing over of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's report to President Mandela on 29 October 1998 the public cleansing through a process of story telling was brought to a close. The government-appointed commission provided a forum for citizens of a new nation state to reflect, to recall and investigate the memories of victims and perpetrators of the previous political order; an emergence of the present out of the recollections of the past in a public arena transpired. The personal and private interrogation of identity by individuals would be more difficult to document. The fiction of J.M. Coetzee probes identity as part of a larger 'existential-historical' problem and becomes the central concern of this dissertation.

It is my contention that it is essential for a postcolonial society to experience both public and private 'cleansing' to enable an emergent culture to assert itself in a new context, with an identity reconciled with, but significantly separated from the previously dominant culture. It is through the processes of language and narrative that individuals privately, and collectively as communities can re-present

history and develop an understanding of one's own position in an historical narrative: a reflexive positioning of the 'self' into an historical framework. The desire to 'become' is dependent on an understanding of where the 'self' has been; the complexities of penetrating and engaging with the 'other' demand reassessment of 'self'. Post-apartheid South Africa is undergoing shifts in power relations throughout all strata of society. Where does the 'self' belong if its historical 'place' no longer exists? How does the colonial consciousness shift when the time of the 'barbarians' arrives? Do 'white' South Africans have the language, the medium of exchange to become players in the narrative of the new order?

The objective of this research is to examine Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life (1997) as an influential text in the rereading of Coetzee's allegorical work The Life and Times of Michael K. (1983). The intention is to elucidate the power relations which underlie the earlier novel by means of a comparative analysis with the mother-child, father-child, culture-child and author-text relationships evident in Boyhood. It is proposed that both central figures John and Michael K. transcend the power relations of a discourse of dominance through a cathartic engagement with the land. I hope to show that the recognition of difference between belonging to the land and the ownership of it, essentially a bridging of the subject/object divide, equates with the cleansing process mentioned earlier. In Disgrace (1999), the third work in this study, the 'farm' is once again the site on which a protagonist struggles with questions of identity, but for David Lurie it is a postcolonial/ post-apartheid landscape which

cannot be transcended without submission to a new order: life on the farm is at best harsh, at worst, anarchical.

LANDSCAPE

Two concepts frame this study; 'landscape' and 'identity', and it would be appropriate at the outset to explore the theoretical meanings of each. Landscape is a complex notion stretching beyond geography:

Landscape circulates as a medium of exchange, as 'a site of visual appropriation, a focus for the formation of identity'; the 'semiotic features' of landscape generate historical narratives. In this sense, landscape is dynamic; it serves to create and naturalize the histories and identities inscribed upon it, and so simultaneously hides and makes evident social and historical formations. It is through the cultural processes of imagining, seeing, historicizing and remembering that space is transformed into place, and geographical territory into a culturally defined landscape.(Darian-Smith et.al.3)¹

Landscape changes from space to place through the process of naming, drawing maps and boundaries, and the contestation of ownership. The meaning and representation of landscape is derived from, and in turn affective upon the history of place. Power relations in colonial societies entail dominance of the place in both physical-militaristic terms, and significantly in the construction of the 'Other' in colonised territories through codes of representation. The meanings attached to

the landscape and the encoding thereof by the coloniser seem diametrically opposed to the 'idea' of the landscape held by the indigenous peoples. By its nature the act of colonising requires ownership, therefore the determination of boundaries, the closing-in of space; and secondly, domination over the landscape, the human inhabitants, and the fauna and flora. The influence of the Cartesian divide invades the thought of European colonisers, separating Man from God, from nature, separating the body from the soul emphasising individualism. This raises questions regarding the representation of Europeans in Africa, whose indigenous inhabitants are exempt from such an influence, before the arrival of Europeans.

If the landscape is encoded, in what language do we decode it? As Coetzee asks:

How are we to read the African landscape? Is it readable at all? Is it readable only through African eyes, writeable only in an African language? Is the very enterprise of reading the African landscape doomed, in that it prescribes the quintessentially European posture of reader vis-a-vis environment? (White Writing 62)

In a society in which power relations are characterised by a discourse of dominance the representations of the landscape will be scripted according to the will of those holding the power. The representation will be such that it reaps the optimum exchange value. If a colonial government desires settler farmers from the metropolis, the landscape will be portrayed in the language of fertility and opportunity. If the desire is to show the strength and endurance of Empire over adversity, the landscape is written in the language of alienation and barbarism.

This raises the question of text: is the landscape constructed differently in colonial and postcolonial texts? How does the landscape change in reality? A comparison of Michael K. and Disgrace on this issue will be undertaken later in this study.

In White Writing(1988), Coetzee addresses the complexities involved in representing landscape in literature. He introduces the dilemma by questioning why the garden myth failed to take hold in the imaginations of the early Europeans arriving in Southern Africa. The Cape of Good Hope was established as a garden colony to supply ships passing on their way to other conquered territories, but this was no garden of Eden, as many of the other 'New World' colonies were depicted. "The Cape," suggests Coetzee, "belonged not to the New World but to the farthest extremity of the Old: it was a Lapland of the south, peopled by natives whose way of life occasioned curiosity or disgust but never admiration."(White Writing 2) Yet this garden at the end of the "oldest continent" is an "enclosed world entire to itself," not a garden of innocence but of degeneration. Visitors from Europe warned that:

Colonists were declining into the idle and brutish state of the Hottentots...Africa might turn out to be not a Garden but an anti-Garden, a garden ruled over by the serpent, where the wilderness takes root once again in men's hearts. (White Writing 3)

To avoid the slide to barbarism the settlers should claim the landscape through cultivation; the creation of the garden would entail the taming of the harsh land with the reward of elevating the European 'self' above the idleness and primitiveness of the indigenous peoples. Thus a process of dividing the African landscape into defined farm-spaces was set in motion and in time these would become represented in literature and the visual arts.

THE FARM NOVEL

Coetzee draws our attention to the problem 'writing' the landscape from a European perspective; if the labour of white settlers is to be foregrounded, then the toil of black people must be occluded:

Pastoral in South Africa therefore has a double tribute to pay. To satisfy the critics of rural retreat, it must portray labour; to satisfy the critics of colonialism, it must portray white labour. What inevitably follows is the occlusion of black labour from the scene: the black man becomes a shadowy presence flitting across the stage now and then to hold a horse or serve a meal. In more ways than one the logic of the pastoral mode itself thus makes the incorporation of the black man - that is, of the black serf, man, woman or child - into the larger picture embarrassing and difficult. For how can the farm become the pastoral retreat of the black man when it *was* his pastoral home only a generation or two ago?(White Writing5)

The relations between white and black people co-existing on a farm become particularly significant to this study in the chapter in which Disgrace is analysed. The reclamation of the "pastoral home" is carried out in the postcolonial context of the novel both through subtle assertions of power and acts of violence. The ways in which the European mind constructs the meaning of the farm is a concern in Boyhood, and the 'love of earth or soil' which Coetzee explains the *plaasroman* gives representation to, is intrinsically different from the way Michael K. engages with the land:

The love of earth or soil that we read of in CM van den Heever's novels is not, however, a variety of love felt by the city-dweller for parkland or by a labourer for the earth he is hired to till, but solely that felt by a man for the earth he owns. Thus

self-realization - realization of the self not as individual but...
as the transitory embodiment of a lineage - becomes tied to
landownership and to a particular kind of spiritual experience
available only to landowners.(White Writing 87)

Michael K. is a city-dweller, a municipal gardener whose bond with the earth is revealed when he returns his mother's ashes to the farm where she was born. In the following chapter I will argue that K does indeed have some form of 'spiritual experience' through engagement with the land, not tied to landownership but through the awakening of the sub-conscious to a sense of 'belonging' to the land. When about to consume the first pumpkin of his own toil K prays and 'his heart suddenly flows[s] over with thankfulness...like a gush of warm water.'(Life and Times of Michael K. 156) The relationship between Afrikaners and the land is no less a spiritual union than that which K experiences but its articulation is stymied, as Coetzee writes:

Though the ideal farmer of the *plaasroman* is wedded to the soil of the farm, he is not consciously aware of his married state or becomes aware of it only when it is too late, when he is threatened with losing his farm. Why should this be so? The answer is that the farmer is *natuurmens* (natural man); and once natural man becomes able to articulate his essence in language, he is thereby removed from the realm of nature. Hence the marriage between farmer and farm must remain an unarticulated one, a blood-marriage too deep for words. Yet the paradox is that until this marriage is brought to consciousness the *plaasroman* cannot articulate itself. The craft...must therefore lie in creating the preconditions for an epiphany.(White Writing 88)

If then, as Coetzee suggests, the 'problematics of consciousness' are inherent in the *plaasroman*, are we expected to read Michael K.'s 'return to the farm' and

his 'epiphany' described earlier, as an adaption of the South African farm novel? In Countries of the Mind Dick Penner points out that Coetzee has indeed considerable 'interest in and erudition concerning the farm in history and in fiction'.(Penner 100) This fact is not in doubt, as any reader of White Writing would agree. How far does Coetzee allow his interest in the farm novel to influence his own writing? Penner painstakingly draws comparisons between The Life and Times of Michael K. and the farm novel genre, giving particular emphasis to the symbolic similarities between this novel and John Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath. Both novels, Penner tells us:

Are set against a background of social turmoil in which the dispossessed tillers of the soil are oppressed by the powers of industrial capitalistic societies. In Steinbeck's novel the banks seize the land of the farmers in the wake of drought and worldwide economic collapse. The hostilities between the two groups are manifested in armed clashes between migrants and police, the starvation of children and adults, murder, and the underlying theme of 'wrath' in the narrative. Michael K....is set against a background of civil war in which rebels have taken up arms against government military forces and, as in Steinbeck's novel, 'the army of the homeless and destitute' have inundated the cities seeking work and food: 'entire families had been turned off the farms they had worked on for generations'.(Penner 102)

Penner correctly shows parallels in the two novels, and draws our attention to the 'naturalistic elements' of the landscape and how humans are viewed 'in the context of the animal kingdom'. However as Attwell asserts, Coetzee's interest in the farm novel, as shown in several essays in White Writing, is primarily to elucidate:

The ideological equipment of the colonists in their efforts to establish

relationships with the land based on property and the maintenance of existing social relations. K is a different kind of creature from the historical subjects who invest the soil with this kind of significance.(Attwell 96)

The significance of the *plaasroman* to Coetzee's novels should not be over-elaborated. Without engaging in a metaphorical analysis linking the farm novel genre to Coetzee's work, one can acknowledge that farm stories provide the author with a medium to develop understandings of the social, cultural and political hues of the South African landscape. Set in a crime-ridden post-apartheid South Africa Disgrace foregrounds the problem of continued white ownership of African space. The 'love' Lucy has for the farm in Salem, her father's assistance in purchasing the property and his initial enthusiasm of having his offspring farming the landscape are violently brought into context by the arrival of intruders. Jennifer Wenzel has written an interesting paper on the *plaasroman* tradition in an era of land reform. Using the investigations into the murders of white farmers as her starting point she correctly concludes that the mere suggestion that not all attacks are purely criminal, that the slow pace of land reform could have provided motivation for these murders, highlights the significance and sensitivity surrounding land issues:

That the issue of land reform could be implicated as a motive for murder reveals the profound - and volatile - significance of land in the postapartheid era. [...] While the Land Reform program seeks to ameliorate the history of land dispossession in the colonial and apartheid eras, returning land to black South Africans will involve, to what extent or with how much coercion is not yet clear, the surrender of land by white South Africans.(Wenzel 91)

Wenzel analyses Boyhood towards an understanding of Coetzee's use of the farm

novel tradition to portray the complexities of land issues and she suggests that there is a “willingness on Coetzee’s part to embrace, and yet qualify, the continuing cultural tradition of Afrikaner love for the land that he has criticized in his earlier work.”(105)

While recognizing Coetzee’s interest with the *plaasroman*, I believe that complex relations, involving belonging and responsibility to the land and to the others for whom the land holds significance, is the key to redemption of John in Boyhood. Likewise, David Lurie becomes entangled in a farm story; if any redemption is possible it will entail the acceptance of some responsibility to the ‘land’, but the post-apartheid white protagonist cannot be in a position to claim land to which he belongs and so his redemption, if any, will come through helping the stray animals who live on the land.

IDENTITY

Central to this study is an investigation into the interrogation of identity. What is of immediate concern is how the landscape (in its fullest connotation) and the farm(as a specific South African ‘location of history’), become the sites on which characters in Coetzee’s novels, consciously or sub-consciously, toil with selfhood and their relationships to the historical epoch which envelops them; how the ‘farm’ becomes the stage for the “existential-historical dramas” which Attwell refers to in an interview with Coetzee:

Although the existential dimension...is clearly ruled by the linguistic, the former is still there as a ghostly field of possibility...What it points to...is a curious tension between (Coetzee’s) respect for the linguistic-structural conditions of fiction, and the existential-historical dramas being played out within them.(Doubling the Point 59)



Each of the main protagonists in the novels of concern to this study, John, Michael K. and David Lurie journeys to a farm and has an experience which invokes questions regarding their identity. These experiences need to be understood within a broader framework of Coetzee's work as whole, and his critical writings on the colonial and the fictional constructions of identity. Attwell in framing a question for Coetzee, introduces the term 'poetics of reciprocity':

The *I-You* relation, however, connects with larger things in the whole corpus of your work, what I would like to call broadly the poetics of reciprocity. This takes various forms...in Michael K. and Foe [it] involve(s) questions of authorship, the tensions between readers, storytellers, and the subjects or characters of stories; forms of this relation can also be traced through to your interest in problems of consciousness, and of desire and its objects.

Reciprocity and, by implication, the problem of identity are obviously of central importance in a colonial literature. (Doubling the Point 58)

Through a critical mode of engagement with the farm novel tradition Coetzee addresses 'reciprocity' and the problem of identity. In my discussion I will use Coetzee's own theoretical work on identity and the farm novel. I will also 'borrow' economically from Levinasian theory, through a reading of a Michael Marais study, in my discussion of 'self' and 'other' relations. Clearly an extensive elaboration of the Levinasian 'system' is beyond the ambit of this study.



In the introduction to White Writing, Coetzee raises the problem Europeans in Africa encounter in a search for 'language' with which to formulate identity within the African space; a 'language' which can give representation of the 'self', and in which reciprocity is possible:

The quest for an authentic language is pursued within a framework

in which language, consciousness, and landscape are interrelated. For the European to learn an African language “from the outside” will therefore not be enough: he must know the language “from the inside” as well, that is, know it “like a native,” sharing the mode of consciousness of the people born to it, and to that extent giving up his European identity. (White Writing 7)

To what extent can the European ‘share the mode of consciousness’ of the African without a degree of appropriation? There is clearly a problem, for the European ‘self’, of assimilating the ‘other’ into a shared landscape of experience. How is the ‘other’ constructed in the subject’s search for identity and how should this process be addressed through fiction? Coetzee raises the question:

Is there a language in which people of European identity, or if not of European identity then of a highly problematical South African-colonial identity, can speak to Africa and can be spoken to by Africa? (This argument pushes the African into an intrinsically double-bound situation: in order to convince the European that he appreciates Africa he must give evidence of a degree of alienation from it; once he is thus alienated he can no longer claim to be by nature at one with it.) (White Writing 7-8)

Thus we (authors and readers of texts) enter into a minefield of ethical dilemma: how should texts show responsibility for the ‘other’ without appropriation into the discourse of colonial dominance; and how should the ‘poetics of reciprocity’ reconcile the political with the ethical? Michael Marais in his essay ‘Writing with Eyes Shut’ (1998) argues that we cannot understand Coetzee’s fiction as a political endeavour to ‘give voice’ to the ‘other’, but in ‘*ethical*’ terms as a refusal to do so.’ (Marais 45)

When the ‘self’ is interrogated through fiction where is the ‘I’ to be found? If

the discourse is informed by the Cartesian subject-object dualism, then the 'I' can only achieve realisation through the detachment from 'other'. If the drama unfolds upon a space previously occupied by the 'other', the subjective 'I' will appropriate the space and violate 'otherness' for his/her own requirements. Coetzee, as will be discussed elsewhere in this study, recommends a fiction which does not 'supplement' history but rather 'rivals' the process; Marais suggests that:

Coetzee shares Emmanuel Levinas's understanding of history as "an identification of the same," or "a relationship between men [that] ignores a position of the I before the other in which the other remains transcendent with respect to [the subject]"...in this conception the very experiences which form the events that comprise history are grounded in a refusal of responsibility for the other...this is an argument for establishing in the novel a relation with the other that *exceeds* history's realm of mastery.(Marais 46)

Chapters 2 and 3 this study will investigate whether the farm as landscape can indeed become a space outside the immediacy of history, and to what extent the protagonists in the novels manage to close the subject-object divide.

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

It is pertinent at this point to consider the autobiographical nature of Boyhood, and to review Coetzee's own perspectives on autobiography. Coetzee chose to re-visit his own childhood in an autobiographical novel at a time when South Africa's public cleansing process was taking place. In writing his autobiography he thus engages in a private examination of the historical self at the same time that the country is engaging in a public examination of its historical past. The fact that the book is written in the third person may cloud for some readers its autobiographical purpose. However, as Shaun de Waal points out

The device is apt. How many people, looking back 50 years, speaking of a self that existed a half of a century ago can use 'I' without feeling, to some degree, that it means a different person? Many autobiographies are precisely about the mutations of that 'I' over time, are attempts to gather all those instances of 'I' into one coherent whole.....and the use of the third person admits a certain gap between author and character, a novelistic space in which each has a little more room to manoeuvre. He can see himself, as it were, from the outside.²

This allows Coetzee further engagement with the question of the self's presence to the self, although in this case it is a temporal detachment not one concerned with consciousness.

It is important to settle on an accurate definition of the type of autobiographical mode which Coetzee adopts in Boyhood. In his 1985 essay entitled "Confessions and Double Thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoevsky" Coetzee explores how these authors:

confront or evade the problem of how to know the truth about the self without being self deceived, and of how to bring the confession to an end in the spirit of whatever they take to be the secular equivalent of absolution.(Doubling the Point 252)

He acknowledges that there is a problem with the notion of confession when used in the secular sense and that:

We can demarcate a mode of autobiographical writing that we can call *confession*, as distinct from the *memoir* and the *apology*, on the basis of an underlying motive to tell an essential truth about the self.(252)

The essay provides further clarity regarding these terms in an appendix in which he

cites definitions from Francis R Hart:

Confession (is) 'personal history that seeks to communicate or express the essential nature, the truth, of the self.' *Apology* (is) 'personal history that seeks to demonstrate or realise the integrity of the self' , (and) *Memoir* (is) personal history that seeks to articulate or repossess the historicity of the self'. Thus *confession* is ontological, *apology* ethical and *memoir* historical or cultural. (418-19)

Shaun de Waal, in his review of Boyhood, refers to the book as a memoir and undoubtedly there is much of this mode evident in the text. However Coetzee does appear to have engaged in a process of greater complexity than just to "articulate or repossess the historicity of the self." Firstly, I intend to show that the notions of ownership suggested by the term 'repossess' contradict Coetzee's own position on and in author-text relations. The use of the word 'repossess' is thus problematic. Secondly, passages in Boyhood reveal the purpose of the text to extend well beyond articulation of a historical epoch of the self:

He knows he is a liar, knows he is bad, but he does not change. He does not change because he does not want to. (Boyhood 34)

The third person narrator is positioning John's young 'self' in an ethical dilemma. Why is there no desire to change? The inexperienced self as re-presented 50 years later by the author is able to identify and articulate that he chooses not to stop lying because:

If he stopped lying he would have to polish his shoes and talk politely and do everything that *normal* boys do. In that case he would no longer be himself. If he were no longer himself, what point would there be in living? (34-my emphasis)

As an autobiographical piece this extract is concerned with the question of identity and

ethics and is similar to an 'apology' in Hart's terms. There are excerpts from the text which could be considered to present an ontological moment of the self which, if we accept Hart's definitions, would correspond with the mode of confession:

Beauty and Desire; he is disturbed by the feelings that the legs of these boys, blank and perfect and inexpressive, create in him. What is there that can be done with legs beyond devouring them with one's eyes? What is desire for?
(Boyhood 56)

Are these normal prepubescent feelings? The desire certainly appears to submit to a sexual connotation which the boy cannot knowingly have perceptions of. The desire for beauty could metaphorically represent the author's longings for the perfect aesthetic, an admission that even as a young child he felt the yearning of an artist. There is evidence that Coetzee is providing the case for the parallel development of sexuality and art:

He has an idea of the perfect human body. When he sees that perfection manifested in white marble, something thrills inside him; a gulf opens up; he is on the edge of falling. Of all the secrets that set him apart, this may in the end be the worst. Among all these boys he is the only one in whom this dark erotic current runs; among all this innocence and normality, he is the only one who desires.(57)

The language used here indicates that 'observation' or confession of the boy's inner nature made by an older more experienced self; the words 'a dark erotic current' may signify what his feelings were, but he could not have understood them in those terms considering his sexual naivete:

Yet he is not ignorant. He knows how babies are born. They come out of the mother's backside, neat and clean and white.(57)

The use of the word 'confession' is used reservedly in the previous paragraph to locate an ontological mode in parts of Boyhood. Coetzee himself suggests that:

Dostoevsky's Notes from Underground and Tolstoy's Kreutzer Sonata can strictly be called *confessional fictions* because they consist for the greater part of representations of confessions of abhorrent acts committed by their narrators. (Doubling the Point 252)

The abhorrence re-presented in confessional autobiography or fiction cannot be extruded from the text of Boyhood; however the term 'confession' does serve to broaden our understanding of the mode of writing used in the book. The mode used, together with the third person narrative, presents a fictional account which allows for engagement with questions of being and becoming. Here I am in agreement with Attridge, who asserts that:

In Boyhood, it is primarily Coetzee's choice of person and tense that prevents the interminable spiralling of confession by short-circuiting it before it even gets going. The use of the third person implicitly disassociates the narrative voice from the narrated consciousness, telling us that this was another person - that we are reading, to use Coetzee's term, an *autrebiography*, not an autobiography. (Attridge 81)³

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission provided a forum for 'confession' in the public sphere and Coetzee gives acknowledgment to its significance in the South African historical process by using the TRC as a point of reference for the disciplinary hearing at which David Lurie must 'confess' in Disgrace. Lurie's apparent lack of genuine remorse leads to his dismissal and a 'return to the farm'. In fact, much of Disgrace is post-confession fiction written into a postcolonial/post-apartheid narrative, revisiting the farm novel genre in a critical gesture toward the failings of the pastoral myth.

CHAPTER TWO

Return to the Farm: The Life and Times of Michael K.
and Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life

In Coetzee's essay 'The Novel Today'(1988) he distinguishes between two modes of writing: that which supplements history by reproducing the conflicts created by power relations in a society, and writing which 'rivals' history by creating its own space in which to operate.⁴ Coetzee argues that there has been a production of novels concerning South Africa which seemingly investigate the 'real historical forces' and in doing so become subsumed by historical discourse:

In South Africa the colonisation of the novel by the discourse of history is proceeding with alarming rapidity...the novel cannot be both autonomous and supplementary. If the novel aims to provide the reader with vicarious first-hand experience of living in a certain historical time, embodying contending forces in contending characters and filling our experience with a certain density of observation, if it regards this as its goal, for the rest - for what I will call its principal structuration - depending on the model of history - then its relation to history is self-evidently a secondary relation. ("The Novel Today" 3)

Coetzee argues the case for a mode of writing which is not enveloped by history, but which 'rivals' history by operating "in terms of its own procedures and issues in its own conclusions," in a sense by creating an autonomous space in which reflexivity can be exercised. However the author cannot completely distance himself from the historical

moment. As Attwell contends:

Coetzee cannot avoid having to deal with his national situation. Every attempt in the novels to hold South Africa at arm's length, by means of strategically nonspecific settings or socially improbable protagonists, simply confirms the intensity of this struggle.(Attwell 3)

The creation of time, place, character and plot in the novel The Life and Times of Michael K. allows for a detached reflection on the apartheid-era South Africa, a society in which the discourse of dominance became interwoven with the discourse of the struggle for freedom and emergence. By engaging with the land as a cultivator Michael K. can for a time transcend the historical and political narrative which throughout the novel threatens to enmesh him. He is positioned as 'other' by the state and by history. Although K. is representative of the millions of 'othered' people who at the time of the novel's publication(1983) had become embroiled in violent resistance to the oppressive system, Coetzee chooses not to cast Michael in the role of freedom fighter, but rather to set up a 'rivalry' to the historical process by creating an allegorical myth in which he is able to resist by keeping 'the Idea of Gardening' alive: through the use of strategic silence and the personal 'awakening' in his own garden, K. (for a time at least) is a free man, outside the sphere of colonial history. Without stretching the symbolism too far, we can agree that 'underground'/covert resistance to the state and to the historical 'times', played a major role in the liberation struggle. Susan Van Zanten Gallagher maintains that:

At least three different Afrikaner myths are retold in Michael's story: the Afrikaner's heroic independence and alienation from modernity, the tragic suffering endured in the concentration camps of the Anglo-Boer War, and the pastoral return to the land.(Gallagher 151)

The first two 'myths' referred to in this extract can be dismissed as invalidated, however it is the third of these myths which reverberates the concerns of my own study. Michael K.'s 'return to the land' will be compared to that of the Afrikaner/European child, John, in Boyhood. John in his own way is 'othered' by his father and by history, so potential existential parallels exist in the two texts. With reference to Michael K, Gallagher suggests that:

Coetzee's recasting of the myth of the return to the land...reveals both the oppressive patriarchy at the heart of the Afrikaner myth as well as the historical conditionality of Michael's Edenic myth. Although it sounds the thundering chords of oppression and cataclysm, it also speaks in a still small voice of an alternative world of freedom and peace. The failure of Michael's history does not necessarily imply its impossibility. Instead, his story provides a prophetic guideline for the new order that will emerge from the ravages of the war. In keeping alive "the idea of gardening," Michael posits a new history for his land.(Gallagher 160)⁵

On leaving Huis Norenius (an institutionalised boarding establishment) at the age of 15,

Michael K. (a subaltern of no specified ethnic lineage, but clearly non-white) is employed by the municipal services department of Cape Town, with the rank of 'Gardener, grade 3(b)'. As readers we have already been introduced to Michael K's otherness: born with a hare lip, a condition which often causes speech defects, K. is presented as the silenced other whose own 'cultivation' is seen as abnormal by society. Preferring to be on his own, his employment in a municipal park provided him with 'a measure of solitariness' but essentially a 'product' of the state rising 'slowly in the service (of the Department of Parks and Gardens) to become Gardener, Grade 1.'

(Michael K. 5) The relationship between the state and the individual is unveiled: the employer-employee relationship is akin to the father-son dynamic but not one which K. has the desire to develop further, for the position of father is represented by hegemony and rules of authority:

How fortunate that I have no children, he thought: how fortunate that I have no desire to father...my father was Huis Norenius. My father was a list of rules on the door of the dormitory, the twenty-one rules of which the first was 'There will be silence in the dormitory at all times'. (Michael K. 143)

Huis Norenius is a silenced space. The 'father' silences the 'other'. The allegorical nature of the novel suggests that Michael K.'s lack of desire to become a father himself, reflects a wish to be independent of and liberated from this type of relationship. When K. is questioned by the medical officer and camp commander he chooses his own silence to thwart any attempt by the state authorities to master him.

Relations between state and individual are clearly seen as dysfunctional, especially when viewed from the position of the individual. Without discussing the implications of phallogentrism (it is not difficult to understand the state as a father figure), I do wish to analyse Coetzee's own relationship with his father: relations that can be deduced from a reading of Boyhood and considered as an underlying influence on his creative construction father-son relations in Michael K. This opens the door to a complex matrix of possible paternal relationship structures: is the author the 'father' of the text?; does the author silence the text to maintain authority?; is the state the 'father' of the author?; does the author choose his own silence (as Michael K. does) in order to 'rival' rather than supplement the historical narrative, and is this the reason why Coetzee chooses to revisit his 'boyhood' in the third person? The implication here is that Coetzee resists the father-figure of the apartheid state, rivaling the dominant political narrative through his fiction, but cannot avoid a personal sense of guilt by association. John's father in Boyhood is portrayed as a weak failure and despite the boy's recognition of it, he cannot realistically 'disassociate' himself from the family. As Attridge points out, "the life that is narrated is marked by fiercely-kept secrets and an acute sense of shame"(Attridge 80). In Boyhood, John cannot ascertain a fixed position which his father should occupy in order for his life to be 'normal'. There appears to be an awareness on John's part of a need for a father figure, but what this role entails and where he should position himself within the family dynamic remains ambiguous:

He has never worked out the position of his father in the household.

In fact, it is not obvious to him by what right his father is there at all.

In a *normal* household, he is prepared to accept, the father stands at

the head: the house belongs to him, the wife and children live under his sway. (Boyhood 12)⁶

This however is not a “normal” family. John lives a double life: the “prince” of the home where he and his mother dominate and his father is “no more than an appendage”(12);and conversely at school, where he is “a lamb, meek and mild” living in constant fear of the cane (13). There is more than a suggestion of a divided self: John’s ‘I’ is weak, but the ‘he’- the intuitive self ‘acts’ in this world. The condition is brought on by the dysfunctional father-son relationship as intensely foregrounded in the following text:

He wants his father to beat him and turn him into a normal boy.
At the same time he knows that if his father dared to strike him, he would not rest until he had his revenge. If his father were to hit him, he would go mad; he would become possessed, like a rat in a corner, hurtling about, snapping with its poisonous fangs, too dangerous to be touched. (Boyhood 13)

This imagined violent resistance to paternal authority contrasts with Michael K.’s use of silence as passive resistance to the state interrogators as Michael Marais correctly points out:

K’s silence enables him to resist linguistic reification by denying the camp commander and the medical officer their position of mastery. In

the absence of an object the subject position of mastery cannot exist.
 (“Languages of Power” 35)⁷

K’s first attempt to position himself ‘away’ from the state is by stealing tools from the municipal gardener’s shed to use in the construction of a vehicle to transport his mother back to her place of birth(Michael K. 13), and significantly embark on a ‘return to the farm’. The journey back to Prince Albert becomes a negotiation of binary opposites between the father-figure represented by the state and its institutions (his biological father having been completely marginalised from the narrative), and the mother-figure, first in person then as ashes to be interred as the seeds of survival through cultivation:

As the mother opposes the father, gardening is the opposite of this corrosive notion of power. From the moment K leaves Cape Town and travels into the jaws of the war with his mother in the cart, his resistances become associated metonymically with the mother; and when K distributes her ashes like seed and turns them into the soil of the farm, *cultivation* is added to the chain of significance.
 (Attwell 95)

The mother’s request to return to Prince Albert knowing that she does not have long to live, gives K a purpose, a goal he needs to achieve in an otherwise purposeless life. His mother is symbolically a burden, which if endured can set him free. In Boyhood

John's 'double life' creates for him the "burden of imposture"(13). Childhood, as described in the *Children's Encyclopaedia*, is alien to him:

Nothing he experiences in Worcester, at home or at school, leads him to think that childhood is anything but a time of gritting the teeth and *enduring*. (Boyhood 14)⁸

The landscape of childhood is without value or purpose until John has an experience which for him suggests that there could be a meaningful life, a purpose despite his own difference and self-perceived failings; he is saved from drowning by his scout troop leader:

From that day onward he knows there is something special about him. He should have died but he did not. Despite his unworthiness, he has been given a second life. He was dead but is alive. (Boyhood 17)

As readers we can identify the parallel process of renewal occurring in both protagonists. The autobiographical John, striving to understand what he is and how he is to 'become', is reflected in the allegorical figure of the earlier novel. Just as Michael K is marginal due to his race, education, and physical disfigurement, John is marginalised in a world controlled by adults and alienated from people his own age:

Once during their early months in Worcester, a boy from his class had wandered in through the open front door and found him lying on his back under a

chair. 'What are you doing there?' he had asked. 'Thinking,' he had replied unthinkingly: 'I like thinking.' Soon everyone in his class knew about it: the new boy was odd, he wasn't normal. From that mistake he has learned to be more prudent. Part of being prudent is always to tell less rather than more. (Boyhood 29)

There is a parallel to this passage in Michael K. which indicates that the 'self' has the potential to 'escape' from undesirable circumstances through silent reverie, a thought process of 'emptying' the mind:

One of teachers used to make his class sit with their hands on their heads, their lips pressed tightly together and their eyes closed, while he patrolled the rows with his long ruler. In time, to K, the posture grew to lose its meaning as punishment and became an avenue of reverie; he remembered sitting hands on head through hot afternoons with doves cooing in the gum trees and the chant of the tables coming from other classrooms, struggling with a delicious drowsiness. (Michael K. 94)

The young John becomes aware of the power of silence as guardian of his own 'otherness'; being "not normal" can be protected through a strategy of silence in a process which parallels Michael K's own method of resistance. However, both John and Michael K do have stories which need to be told. In The Life and Times of Michael K., the personal mother-child relationship shows that power relations can take other forms beyond dominance and oppression. In fact when his mother dies, K is at a

complete loss. He begs the hospital for something to do, not for employment but merely for a reason and space in which to live:

‘I don’t want money,’ he said, ‘just something to do. Sweep the floor or something like that. Clean the garden.’ (40)

Coetzee places Michael K. in a non-space: to whom or what does the marginalised person turn to when the ‘self’ is drawn onto a landscape of nothingness? In a sense it is a state in which the ‘other’ is *without* consciousness, *outside* the sphere of ‘self’. Coetzee however, recognizes that K cannot remain “in a pocket outside time”(82) indefinitely. Ironically, with his mother dead, K turns to the state (hospital) in search of a father-mother figure. K does not request much, but his reference to garden work hints at his innate bond with the earth. The garden, the place where the seed takes root or dies, must be cleaned, brought out of K.’s sub-conscious mind and attended to. K. will remain *outside* until his discovery of the farm, for him a place of belonging, and the act of gardening begins. ‘Gardening’ works both as a symbolic device and as a natural behaviour for anyone existing in a land of war. Although K asserts that he is “not in the war”(189), history leaves no-one unscathed and K literally must propagate a garden for his own survival.

Circumstance forces K to continue his journey and in need of food he climbs over a barbed wire fence into an overgrown fruit orchard. We find K returning to a state of nature “chewing as quickly as a rabbit, his eyes vacant” (53). K is personally closing the Cartesian divide between man and nature (subject and object), but the textually

created utopia has already been colonised. The mapping of land and erection of fences at the southern tip of Africa by Europeans was initially for no other reason than gardening. If the Dutch East India Company had not required fresh fruit and vegetables for sailors, this story of Africa could have been completely different. Coetzee explains in his introduction to White Writing that:

The colony of the Cape of Good Hope was indeed a kind of garden. But the future promised by the Cape seemed to be less of the perfection of man in a recovered original innocence than of the degeneration of man into brute.(3)

So the passage which describes K gorging the worm-infested fruit appears to be an allegorical aside to rival the dominant historical narrative. The colonisers through a process of fencing in farms, and forcing nomadic hunters off the land set the historic power relations of dominance in motion. The African landscape on which humans and nature co-exist is disturbed by the assertion of the colonial cultivators. However when people are systematically alienated from their 'own' space, without a place within the new 'colonial' landscape and this process of 'othering', alienating and marginalising is continued over time, the margins eventually begin to disappear. K is able to wander on his journey across farmland unimpeded by the fences framing each pocket of the colonial space. The fences are in need of constant repair, an ongoing reaffirmation of boundaries, so it is ironic that someone such as K, for whom the fences hold no substance, is at one point drafted into a work-gang repairing fences. In fact, it is labour that K has an affinity for:

K liked the leisureliness of the work and its repetitiveness...Once the farmer took K aside, gave him a cigarette, and commended him. 'You have a feel for wire,' he said. 'You should go into fencing. There will always be a need for good fencers in this country, no matter what. If you carry stock, you need fences: it's as simple as that.'(Michael K. 130-1)

The farmer is being intentionally ironical here, showing his patronising disdain for the 'other'. It is an irony which reverberates throughout the novel; as K's relationship with the land is revealed and developed in the narrative, his 'space' is closed in by farm and camp fences. The text reminds one that the pastoral idyll cannot be attained, providing an "account of the intransigence of the interior landscape, the stultifying effects of colonial culture, and the futility of attempts to live meaningfully in South Africa."(Attwell 104) The antipastoralism of Olive Schreiner's Story of an African Farm is revisited by Coetzee:

Walking in great loops, he skirted first one farmhouse, then another. The landscape was so empty that it was not hard to believe at times that his was the first foot ever to tread a particular inch of earth or disturb a particular pebble. But every mile or two there was a fence to remind him that he was a trespasser as well as a runaway.(Michael K. 133)

Michael K enters into a relationship with the landscape which cannot be defined in terms of ownership, but rather through the occupation of personal space within a

symbiotic framework. On the farm, despite the harsh conditions, Michael finds a bond with the land, a reawakening(81). However, the idyll, the “fit of exultation”(82) is in time violated. When K encounters the Visagie grandson on the farm his thoughts are contrastingly reflective of Robinson Crusoe:

K sat on his heels poking the fire, barely listening, thinking : I let myself believe that this was one of those islands without an owner. Now I am learning the truth. Now I am learning my lesson.(Michael K. 84)

Coetzee’s critical analysis of Story of an African Farm addresses the question of the occupation of land by both indigenous people and colonisers. Coetzee explains that it is difficult to:

distinguish Schreiner’s farm from raw nature: it is undomesticated ...indomesticable. But the farm is also a place of human habitation, and indeed so human in its bigotry, hypocrisy, and idleness that all that redeems it from being an African town in miniature is its setting in nature.... it is impossible to live an integrated life upon it. Either one lives on the inhospitable land...and perishes or one lives in the farmhouse and succumbs to *adulthood*⁹ becoming another Tant’ Sannie counting one’s money, counting one’s sheep. For the farmhouse is at war with nature.
(White Writing 64-5)

This representation of the ‘farm’ is echoed in the stories told by John’s aunts and

uncles in Boyhood. Although only his uncle Son is still a farmer, relatives who have long before given in to failure and fled the land to the cities still gather at Christmas and recall the past. This provides John with an avenue along which to develop his own perceptions and relations with the land. The Coetzee family has all but lost the war with nature and attempts to domesticate the land and rear animals cannot be sustained through generations:

...after his grandfather's death, the barnyard began to dwindle, till nothing was left but sheep. First the horses were sold, then the pigs were turned into pork (he watched his uncle shoot the last pig: the bullet took it behind the ear; it gave a grunt and a great fart and collapsed, first on its knees then on its side quivering.) After that the cows went and the ducks...The burden of agriculture could be shed too.(Boyhood 82)

This is symbolic of the process of degeneration which the extended Coetzee family experiences in their relations with the land; and specifically the farm. It is a narrative indicative of Afrikaner nostalgia: the retracing of the stories of past glories in a glossing over of their new positions in a rapidly changing society:

When, refreshed by an after-dinner nap, his aunts and uncles congregate on the stoep to drink tea and tell stories, their talk sometimes turns to old times on the farm. They reminisce about their father, the 'gentleman farmer' who kept a carriage and pair, who grew corn on the lands below the dam which he threshed and ground

himself. 'Yes, those were the days,' they say, and sigh. They like to be nostalgic about the past, but none of them want to go back to it.

(Boyhood 82)

John's relatives (besides Uncle Son) are incapable of returning to the farm except for brief holidays, because of the degeneration of their ability to assimilate with the land; and consequently have lost the desire to farm the land.

Coetzee suggests that Olive Schreiner's portrayal of the 'farm' is slanted, one-sided and that there is:

An alternative story of the farm...identified with Old World farming rather than farming in the colonies. In such a story, the farm is not simply a house or settlement in a fenced space, but a complex: at one and the same time a dwelling place, an economy, in particular the members of the family (in however extended a sense) who both own the farm in law and are owned by the farm - owned in that they owe it their truest labour, their livelihood and ultimately their lives. (White Writing 65)

The relationship between farmers and the land which the author recognises as part of this 'alternative story' is one which the Coetzees cannot establish, but which Michael K shows basic understanding of by returning to the farm of his mother's birth. The deserted Visagie farm has succumbed to the forces of history, the civil

war in the country has driven people from the land, and the structures which 'New World' farmers erected in their efforts to domesticate nature are crumbling. K's 'return' is to a landscape which is being reclaimed by nature:

he climbed a crest and came in sight of a low whitewashed farmhouse beyond which the land rose from rippling flats to foothills and then to the steep dark slopes of the mountains themselves. (Michael K. 70)

This first image of the farmhouse emphasises its relative insignificance within the larger landscape: the hills and mountains appear to be enveloping the human structure.¹⁰ Michael K approaches the house and is confronted by its derelict state:

The shutters were closed and a rock pigeon flew in at a hole where one of the gables had crumbled, leaving timbers exposed and galvanised roof-plates buckled. A loose plate flapped monotonously in the wind. Behind the house was a rockery garden in which nothing was growing. (Michael K. 70)

The crumbling remains of the Visagie farmhouse serve as a monument to the temporary existence of a Western scheme of order which had been imposed on the land. Ironically, this very same dry landscape had been the 'home' of nomadic tribal groups for hundreds of years. Symbolically the passage seems to insist that the current dominant order is already in decay and that an emerging order will come 'from' the land. As a child Coetzee was very familiar with the landscape referred to in The Life and Times of Michael K and indeed the following passage from

Boyhood reiterates the previously discussed image's significance:

The other place to which he does pilgrimage each year is Bloemhof, where the first farmhouse stood. Nothing remains now but the foundations, which are of no interest. In front of it there used to be a dam fed by an underground fountain; but the fountain long ago dried up. Of the garden and orchard that once grew here there is no trace. (Boyhood 97)

Again we are presented with the remains of a failed farming experience, a battle lost in the struggle against nature, the equivalent of the story told by Olive Schreiner. What of the other 'story'? Coetzee explains that:

In this story, the farmer has both rights and obligations. However absolute his ownership, he has duties to his heirs (as well as, to a lesser extent, to his forbears), and even to the ecology of the farm - that is to the farm as nature. (White Writing 65)

This clearly voices the need for balance and sympathy in any system of relations . The farmer may own the land through the possession of title deeds, but the act of farming can only succeed in co operation with nature. Michael K and John have both, in their own way, become enmeshed in a network of relations, which as has been discussed elsewhere in this study, can be defined as 'dysfunctional' or 'not normal'. Neither K nor John can negotiate their respective positions in order to

facilitate a normalisation of relations. K the marginal figure, and John, a mere boy are in fact powerless.

However, by following Coetzee's own telling of the 'alternative story' (essentially an elaboration of the 'belonging to' versus the 'ownership of' themes) we as readers observe both protagonists using this as a device to transcend the power relations in which their lives are set. Coetzee concludes his outline of the 'alternative story' with this passage:

(The farmer) is, in the language of myth, forbidden to rape the land. Instead he must husband it, giving it a devoted attention that will bring it to bear manifold , yet keep it fertile for succeeding generations. In the logic of the myth, the sons who inherit the farm husband the same land; or to put it another way, the generations of husband-farmers are the same (mythic) man.(White Writing 65-6)

In order for rebirth, regeneration to occur, and for John to 'emerge' from 'boyhood' with an understanding of his own identity, the above story must be re-told: the 'cleansing' of the narrative in which each protagonist finds himself depends on employment of this device.

For Michael K the act of bringing his mother's ashes initiates his own engagement with the earth:

The time came to return his mother to the earth. He tried to dig a hole on the crest of a hill west of the dam, but an inch from the surface the spade met solid rock. So he moved to the edge of what had been cultivated land below the dam and dug a hole as deep as his elbow. He laid the packet of ash in the hole and dropped the first spadeful of earth on top of it. Then he had misgivings. He closed his eyes and concentrated, hoping that a voice would speak reassuring him that he was doing right - his mother's voice, if she still had a voice, or a voice belonging to no one in particular, or even his own voice as it sometimes spoke telling him what to do. But no voice came. So he extracted the packet from the hole, taking the responsibility on himself, and set about clearing a patch a few metres square in the middle of the field. There bending low so that they would not be carried away by the wind, he distributed the fine grey flakes over the earth, afterwards turning the earth over spadeful by spadeful. (Michael K. 80-1)

For Michael K the returning of his mother's ashes to the earth becomes a symbolic ritual. There is careful intention in selecting the correct site, and there is no scattering the ashes in the wind. There is no consciousness but his own to guide the process; the voices of his 'history' are silenced. This is not a 'return to the farm' in the *plaasroman* guise, no sense of family or community destiny, for K it is a ritual of "responsibility". The first attempt to dig a hole is unsuccessful: K strikes solid rock in a reminder that the earth is not always compliant with the human will. By turning his mother's ashes in to the soil K becomes a gardener:

This was the beginning of his life as a cultivator. On a shelf in the shed he found a packet of pumpkin seeds.... and on the pantry floor he had even picked up a solitary bean. (Michael K 81)

Significantly K has become a gardener on his own terms, outside of human intercourse: a gardener by virtue of his unification with nature and not by state rank. The allegorical nature of this novel allows readers to enter into the text, to explore for themselves the dynamic of the hegemonic apartheid state. K's rebirth as a gardener, in Coetzee's own terms his becoming a husband of the land(10), creates new possibilities for power relations. K can now choose his position, and at times considers the vegetables which he grows as both children and siblings. Gardening empowers K to be part of the land, not above and dominant, nor below and subservient, but within and alive:

The impulse to plant had been reawoken in him; now, in a matter of weeks, he found his waking life bound tightly to the patch of earth he had begun to cultivate and the seeds he had planted there. (Michael K 81)

Correspondingly, John in Boyhood responds to the 'alternative story', the engagement with the land as a means of displacement or escape from the dominant narrative in his life. The following passage illuminates the system of relations in which the boy is enmeshed:

He knows that his father sides with his family against him. This is one of his

father's ways of getting back at his mother. He is chilled by the thought of the life he would face if his father ran the household...He denies and detests his father. He will not forget the day two years ago when his mother for the one and only time let his father loose on him, like a dog on a chain (I've reached the limit, I can't stand it anymore!) And his father's eyes glared blue and angry as he shook him and cuffed him.(Boyhood 79)

Proponents of psychoanalytical critical theory would surely highlight the Oedipal dynamics of this extract; for our purposes though, it serves as a representation of positional space which the 'self' desires to vacate. This can only be achieved once a new space is located, for John the farm fulfills this need:

He must go to the farm because there is no place on earth he loves more or can imagine loving more. Everything that is complicated in his love for his mother is uncomplicated in his love for the farm.(Boyhood 79)

His world, however is in a state of flux, and his bond with the farm tainted with ambiguities:

The farm is not his home; he will never be more than a guest, an uneasy guest. Even now, day by day, the farm and he are travelling different roads, separating, growing not closer but further apart. One day the farm will be wholly gone, wholly lost; already he is grieving at that loss.(Boyhood 79-80)

Powerless to reverse the process of degeneration, John carries the burden created by his forbears to fulfil their obligations to the land : to the farm as part of nature. In this John is similar to the position represented by the Visagie grandson in The Life and Times of Michael K who has likewise been 'disinherited' by the forces of history but who returns to the farm as an army deserter and tells his story:

'Our family used to spend every Christmas here....Family would keep coming till the house was bursting at the seams. I've never seen such eating as we used to do'...

The more he talked the more vehement the grandson became...He knew the farm, he would find a place where (the army) would never dream of looking. (Michael K 84)

The Visagie grandson has an affinity to the farm which for him represents safety from the government army which he has deserted. For the Visagies the relationship with the farm was one of ownership. Whereas for John Coetzee in Boyhood the nature of such an affinity is non-proprietary and explained in terms of "belonging":

The secret and sacred word which binds him to the farm is *belong*. Out in the veld alone he can breathe the word aloud: *I belong on the farm*. What he really believes but does not utter, what he keeps to himself for fear that the spell will end, is a different form of the word: *I belong to the farm*. (Boyhood 95-6)

This passage highlights the central tenet of this dissertation: that the understanding of the difference between belonging to the land and ownership of it must be brought into full consciousness in order to transcend historically aberrant power relations:

The farm is greater than any of them. The farm exists from eternity to eternity. When they are all dead, when even the farmhouse has fallen into ruin like the kraals on the hillside, the farm will still be here.(Boyhood 96)

The universal ‘lesson’ here is that the cycle of history is essentially the history of the earth along a continuum uninterrupted by human history thus it is delusional for humans to claim ownership of the earth. Developing the consciousness of *belonging to* the land is critical in the process of being a fulfilled individual, culture or society. This realisation can take the symbolic form of a ‘cleansing’ ritual such as undertaken by John:

Once out in the veld far from the house he bends down and rubs his palms in the dust as if washing them. It is ritual. He is making up a ritual. He does not know yet what the ritual means, but he is relieved there is no one to see and report him.(Boyhood 96)

This private cleansing of the prepubescent self is performed in language through the construction of text by the mature author, who ironically is now in a position to “report him.” Through the process of story telling Coetzee and the readers of the

text are, in Walter Benjamin's terms "having counsel": the representation of the experience reaches fullness through sharing.

The land to which John in Boyhood 'belongs' and from which he is born: "He has two mothers. Twice born: born from woman and born from the farm."(Boyhood 96) is the earth to which Michael K is connected by a metaphorical umbilical cord:

There was a cord of tenderness that stretched from him to the patch of earth beside the dam and must be cut. It seemed to him that one could cut a cord like that only so many times before it would not grow again.(Michael K 93)

For K it is only his relationship with the earth which will allow for survival and protection:

Like a worm he began to slither toward his hole, thinking only: let darkness fall soon, let the earth swallow me up and protect me.(Michael K 148)

He does not choose to join the guerrillas and become a part of the liberation struggle . However it is his own reasoning which provides the justification for his choice and which reflects humility and inner wisdom:

He even knew the reason why; because enough men had gone off to war saying the time for gardening was when the war was over; whereas to stay

behind and keep gardening alive, or at least the idea of gardening because once that cord was broken, the earth would grow hard and forget her children. That was why. (Michael K 150)

How then does *belonging to* the land and the symbol of *gardening* contribute to Coetzee's notion of a mode of writing which rivals history? As described earlier 'gardening' is the reason the Cape of Good Hope was initially colonised, although in time Europeans would have 'discovered' another source of wealth - a population in need of Christianity. However, K's gardening rivals this process of history by providing another option: gardening enables Michael K to transcend the 'enlightened' Cartesian divide between subject and object, and to escape the discourse of dominance, living "beyond the reach of calendar and clock in a blessedly neglected corner, half awake, half asleep...thinking without passion (What is it to me, after all? he thought), it was no longer obvious which was host and which parasite." (159)

Although the novel is anti-pastoral in nature, readers are left with a powerful image of survival. For Michael K the truth about himself lies in being a 'worm', a 'mole', a 'gardener': the propagator of his own history .

CHAPTER THREE

‘I am the gardener and the dog-man’: Identity and the post-apartheid novel. An analysis of Disgrace.

Disgrace(1999) can be considered as ‘another take on’ or re-casting of the farm novel; significantly it is a post-apartheid narrative which examines ‘identity’ and the relations between ‘self’ and ‘other’ in a postcolonial context. The analysis offered here proceeds through an examination of the central protagonist’s relocation from city to farm. Although the intention is to foreground the farm as the central landscape through which David Lurie’s identity is interrogated, it is necessary to contextualise his life in the city, his relations with women, his Romantic ideals and his guarded confession; in order to place Lurie on the farm, he must first be withdrawn from his past. His move to the farm is not a return to the land of his father(in the farm novel tradition), but to the smallholding of the daughter in a changed society which results in a violent encounter with ‘others’; to this degree, the novel can be considered anti-pastoral.

It is difficult to point to a specific date or event which clearly marks the turn of the tide in South African history. Certainly it is not the ambition of this project to decide on the exact moment of change; transformation of societies often comes creeping like the ageing gene, slowly and naturally within a larger system, and then suddenly and uncontrollably spurred on by some significant event. David Lurie the central protagonist in J. M. Coetzee’s Disgrace is initially presented as the image of

the 'charming man':

His childhood was spent in a family of women. As mother, aunts, sisters fell away, they were replaced in due course by mistresses, wives, a daughter. The company of women made him a lover of women and, to an extent, a womanizer. With his height, his good bones, his olive skin, his flowing hair, he could always count on a degree of magnetism. If he looked at a woman in a certain way, with a certain intent, she would return his look, he could rely on that. That was how he lived; for years, for decades, that was the backbone of his life. (Disgrace 7)

Lurie holds an alluring dominance over the feminine, an aspect of his identity which he will lose, and as the narrative unfolds, a need for new type of relationship with women emerges. The farm will not allow him to reassert his dominance and it is in his daughter and Bev Shaw's work, that he will seek solace. While living in Cape Town the power relations seem set in place, but in this man's private life, as in the fluid political sphere of public life of the postcolonial, these relations are in a state of flux:

Then one day it all ended. Without warning his powers fled. Glances that would have responded to his slid over, past, through him.

Overnight he became a ghost. If he wanted a woman he had to learn to pursue her; often in one way or another, to buy her. (Disgrace 7)

The catalyst for Lurie's 'return to the farm' is immanent, not a 'return' in the strictest sense (there is no indication that his family were ever farmers) but a relocation of place in troubled times. This I suggest is not unlike the "agitation for a return to the land"(White Writing 76) felt by farmers forced to urban areas during the Great Depression, but certainly it is not a return in which an ideal of "enlightened patriarchy, instinctualism, tilling of the soil as a quasi-religious act"(76) can be pursued. What drives David Lurie away from his 'place' in the city to the farm on the 'old' frontier?

Lurie cannot accept that his powers have waned, and it is in pursuit of dominance that he falls from grace in the public arena. His imminent fall does not at first set alarm bells ringing amid his impulsive Romantic desires. His pursuit of the feminine results in a sexual encounter with a student. Although the lover, Melanie, is "passive throughout", Lurie "wakes the next morning in a state of profound wellbeing,"(Disgrace 19) - a false consciousness as it turns out - his private conquest is not without consequence, and his public confession is soon demanded at a disciplinary hearing. The members of the disciplinary committee clearly reflect the transformation of public institutions which is demanded by the new society; representation is evident of diverse cultural, racial and gender groups, and students have sent an observer. When asked if he has any objections to the makeup of the committee, Lurie displays his reluctance to participate in an open public hearing into what he tightly guards as his private masculine ('I am a grown man') world:

'I have no challenge in a legal sense...I have reservations of a

philosophical kind, but I suppose they are out of bounds...I am sure the members of this committee have better things to do with their time than rehash a story over which there will be no dispute. I plead guilty to both charges. Pass sentence, and let us get on with our lives.’(Disgrace 48)

For Lurie, and those members of South African society whom he symbolizes, the problem lies in these very words. How do we “pass sentence” and “get on with our lives”? It is a problem of discontinuity: confession without penitence cannot demand absolution. In the introduction to chapter one of this study I suggested that a process of ‘cleansing’ for both perpetrators and victims of an abhorrent political system was necessary before the ‘new’ can emerge from the ‘old’; this process would involve storytelling and ‘confession’ beyond a mere acceptance of guilt. David Lurie refuses to accept ethical responsibility for his actions, confessing only to succumbing to the impulses of ‘Eros’. This is inadequate in the minds of the committee; a public statement of apology is required before we can “get on with our lives” but Lurie is vehement:

‘Before that secular tribunal I pleaded guilty, a secular plea. That plea should suffice. Repentance is neither here nor there. Repentance belongs to another world, to another universe of discourse.’(Disgrace 58)

So it is to “another world” that he must turn. His academic career in ruins, Lurie leaves the transformed urban landscape of the Cape Technical University to visit his

daughter in the rural Eastern Cape. The catalyst for change in Lurie's life has occurred and although he is not at first aware of its significance, Lucy's smallholding will become the site on which any Romantic ideals, which he may still hold on to, become severely tested. Transformation on a rural landscape is far less fluid than in cities and academic institutions, and ironically his return to the feminine in the form of his daughter, will take him into the front row of the theatre of masculine violence.

Lurie's arrival in Salem clearly marks a new phase in the narrative. As readers we are taken back into an older Africa- not one of renaissance as one might expect from the postcolonial (the novel clearly critiques this notion of the postcolonial) - but to a time in history when Europeans contested the land with 'others'. With the idyll soon to be disturbed, the pastoral setting is offered tantalisingly in timeless prose:

His daughter's smallholding is at the end of a winding dirt track some miles outside the town: five hectares of land, most of it arable, a wind-pump, stables and outbuildings, and a low, sprawling farmhouse painted yellow, with a galvanized-iron roof and a covered stoep. The front boundary is marked by a wire fence and clumps of nasturtiums and geraniums; the rest of the front is dust and gravel. (*Disgrace* 59)

This description is idyllic; certainly not the landscape which one may expect from a postcolonial representation. Coetzee is not taking the reader back in historical time; this is not an acceptance of the idyllic myth of the pastoral but the setting of a

framework in which current history can be explored. It is not on the surface that meaning is found, but beneath and within. This 'farm' becomes the locale of history, just as readers have encountered in Coetzee's earlier novels. In Disgrace however, the pastoral possibility is allowed one moment to flower, as the above passage suggests. This description contrasts sharply with the post-apocalyptic representation of the farmstead in Michael K:

The shutters were closed and a rock-pigeon flew in at a hole where one of the gables had crumbled, leaving timbers exposed and galvanized roof-plates buckled. A loose plate flapped monotonously in the wind. Behind the house was a rockery garden in which nothing was growing. There was no old wagonhouse such as he had imagined, but a wood-and-iron shed, and against it an empty chicken-run with streamers of yellow plastic blowing in the netting-wire. On the rise behind the house stood a pump whose head was missing. (Michael K 70-1)

This representation through the gaze of Michael K. sets the landscape on which he must struggle for survival, David Lurie by contrast has everything to lose, except the possibility of his own self-discovery. His arrival at Lucy's smallholding is portrayed as temporarily idyllic: flowers are in bloom, the aromas of baking waft through the house, and his daughter has *seemingly* fulfilled the myth of a return to the farm:

She had fallen in love with the place, she said; she wanted to farm it properly. He helped her buy it. 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*. (Disgrace 60)

This passage, *read in isolation*, places the Luries - father and daughter - almost outside history; their participation in the historical process seems negligible; the impact of history upon their lives *in this instant* is silent. The idyllic moment is glimpsed at by the reader, but it is a false existential period of narrative time: the Luries are not in a pastoral paradise and closer analysis of the text in this passage provides clues to the place's historical involvement. This is African space, but David Lurie is in a position to assist his daughter to acquire ownership of it; regardless of whether they have any sense of belonging to the land. Although there is no reference to 'others' or 'Africans' here, their silent claims are heard loudly.

Coetzee's use of the word '*boervrou*' is powerful in its connotation. Afrikaners and English speakers of European decent are united in historical opposition to the African. In the present, the fears of both groups are voiced as one. The idyll never exists because history is omnipresent. When David voices his concern that Lucy is alone on the smallholding an intriguing dialogue ensues which throws the narrative forward into 'real' historical time:

'There are the dogs. Dogs still mean something. The more dogs, the more deterrence. Anyhow, if there were to be a break-in, I don't see that two people would be better than one.'

'That's very philosophical.'

‘Yes. When all else fails, philosophize.’

‘But you have a weapon.’

‘I have a rifle. I’ll show you. I bought it from a neighbour. I haven’t ever used it, but I have it.’ (Disgrace 60)

Violent crime in post-apartheid South Africa has woven stories of its own. There is a belief that intruders will be deterred from entering private property by the presence of dogs. It is a widely held belief that is all too often proven incorrect; in a sense it has become a mythical notion, a South Africanism rooted in apartheid folklore: ‘blacks hate snakes’, ‘they are terrified of dogs’, ‘throw them in the river and they can’t swim.’ Lucy’s declaration that ‘dogs still mean something’ echoes throughout the remainder of the novel and will be discussed later. For her however, the dogs’ ‘meaning’ is not justified; they are powerless to protect her from attack and merely become victims of violence themselves. Similarly, there is an ongoing debate regarding ownership of guns. The belief that having a weapon will ensure a person’s safety is offset by the evidence that many violent crimes are committed in order to steal weapons. So although there is much allegorical weight in Disgrace, Coetzee does not remove the narrative too great a distance from the ‘real’, even if what many white South Africans experience as ‘real’ is in fact misplaced modern mythology. To this end Lucy’s quip that ‘When all else fails, philosophize’ resonates the irony of her own and David’s situation. David’s contemplation at this point is not without an awareness of the forces of history:

Dogs and a gun; bread in the oven and a crop in the earth. Curious

that he and her mother, cityfolk, intellectuals, should have produced this throwback, this sturdy young settler. But perhaps it was not they who produced her: perhaps history had the larger share. (Disgrace 60-1)

Lurie clearly has a perception of Lucy's 'position' in this place which differs markedly from her own perceptions. This raises the question of Lucy's identity. We gather that she is a white lesbian woman whose partner has recently left her. She was a member of a 'new-age-hippie' commune who lived on the smallholding and continued to do so when the group separated. In order to remain on the land, Lucy required ownership thereof and her father helped with the purchase. She has created a simple rural life for herself making a living growing flowers and vegetables for a Saturday market; she also runs boarding kennels for dogs. Does she carry any guilt or responsibility for the European colonists from whom she has descended? Is she merely repeating the historical patterns of the past by claiming ownership of the land, albeit through legal purchase? Not unlike Michael K., Lucy has left the urban hub of history, rejected her life as city-dweller to take up the life of a gardener:

She talks easily about these matters. A frontier farmer of the new breed. In the old days, cattle and maize. Today, dogs and daffodils. The more things change the more they remain the same. History repeating itself, though in a more modest vein. Perhaps history has learned a lesson. (Disgrace 62)

These are David Lurie's thoughts as he walks with Lucy on a tour of her gardens

and his 'self' is clearly 'unrooted', his own place, position, selfhood, is in a sense othered by history; yet he seems to find solace in Lucy's apparent assimilation of historical conditions. He seems satisfied with the possibility of his lineage becoming part of the garden; he desires to remain painted into the landscape through the toils of his offspring:

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.(Disgrace62)

In this moment there is a slight recognition, probably subconscious, of an ethical responsibility to the land by Lurie; in spite of his own ethical failings on a masculine-to-feminine level, there is a *false suggestion* that he may yet be offered the possibility of redemption through the embedding of offspring in the earth. This recalls Michael K's reasoning that, "once that cord was broken, the earth would grow hard and forget her children." (150) However the machinations of ethical dilemma are not so easily resolved: Lurie's relations with 'other', be it human, animal or the land are of an inner-personal nature, and responsibility cannot be transferred through the filial connection. His instant of redemption represented by Lucy's 'bare toes' gripping 'the red earth,' soon changes to a rejection of the land and the corresponding return of his shame, his disgrace:

Poor land, poor soil, he thinks. Exhausted. Good only for goats. Does

Lucy really intend to spend her life here? He hopes it is only a phase...

Without warning a memory of the girl comes back: of her neat little breasts with their upstanding nipples, of her smooth flat belly. A ripple of desire passes through him. Evidently whatever it was is not over yet. (Disgrace 64-5)

There is an intervening incident which initiates Lurie's about-turn: his embracing of the land is transformed into rejection of self ("whatever it was is not over yet") and the other ("Poor land...Good for only goats") following the introduction of Petrus into the narrative. On several occasions in the novel Lurie is confronted with the inescapable face of the 'other'. Marais, in offering a Levinasian argument suggests that:

Subjects attain and assure their freedom by ensuring that otherness does not stand in their way, and knowledge is the principal means by which they annul otherness and thereby assert their autonomy. ("Impossible Possibilities" 5)

Lurie's experience of the farm is intrinsically linked to the encounter with the 'other'. The moment of the other standing in the pathway of the self is explicitly constructed in the text and deserves close analysis. We observe the instantaneous closing-in of freedom, the shutting down of the possibility of some 'pastoral' redemption, and the

positioning of the other in a distorted mirror-image of the subject: Lurie himself must become the “dog-man”. Ironically, it is the proclamation by the other, of what he is, that serves as a marker for a possible redemption for Lurie later in the novel. Lucy has been questioning her father about the incidents which led to his resignation from the University:

‘What I had to say they didn’t care to hear. So perhaps I won’t miss it. Perhaps I’ll enjoy my release.’

A man is standing in the doorway, a tall man in blue overalls and rubber boots and a woollen cap. ‘Petrus, come in, meet my father,’ says Lucy...

He is left with Petrus. ‘You look after the dogs,’ he says to break the silence.

‘I look after the dogs and I work in the garden. Yes.’ Petrus gives a broad smile. ‘*I am the gardener and the dog-man.*’ He reflects for a moment. ‘*The dog-man,*’ he repeats, savouring the phrase. (Disgrace 63-4)¹¹

David Lurie recognizes Petrus as a black man with whom his daughter has formed a business partnership. In one instant the subject (Lurie) is contemplating freedom, (‘Perhaps I’ll enjoy my release’) and in the next, the other (Petrus), ‘is standing in the doorway’ asserting his own identity with the declaration of title: “*I am the*

gardener and the dog-man.” Lurie, in this moment of his life, is without title: the cognition of selfhood, of identity, cannot be realised, whereas Petrus (who would normally in the farm novel represent the silenced other) is able to give voice to his position. This encounter between Lurie and Petrus is played out in Lurie’s consciousness and it is relevant to consider whether Lurie as subject develops a sense of responsibility to the ‘other’. Marais explicating Levinas on ‘the immanence of the subject’s consciousness’ perhaps offers a framework from which an understanding of David Lurie can be developed (my intention here is not to delve into a philosophical discussion on Levinasian theory but merely to borrow judiciously from the terminology in order to set up a framework):

Owing to this self-affirming cognitive procedure, the free subject is enthralled in a world that has been constituted by its own cognitive categories. The strategies of adequation through which the objects and people in this self-constituted world are mastered and possessed impose on the subject a state of isolation from other beings which Levinas terms being ‘for-oneself’(1987). Because of this ‘ontological solitude’, the autonomous subject is a self-sufficiency that does not care for other beings.(“Impossible Possibilities” 5)

Because Lurie cannot find ‘mastery’ over the other, nor at this time feel any ethical responsibility to the other, he seeks solitude by taking a long walk along the farm road. The pastoral idyll of earlier has deserted his consciousness, he sees only “poor land, poor soil” and his sexual desire, his disgrace, returns in its place(65). Clearly,

Lurie is 'unsettled'; unable to let go of the past he confides to Lucy, his dissatisfaction with the present, as a consequence of his disciplinary hearing:

'These are puritanical times. Private life is public business. Prurience is respectable, prurience and sentiment. They wanted a spectacle: breast-beating, remorse, tears if possible. A TV show, in fact. I wouldn't oblige.' (*Disgrace* 66)

Here we have David Lurie voicing his yearning to be the autonomous subject, through the separation of the private from the public life. In a Levinasian sense this would entail being 'for oneself' and denying the existence or significance of the other.¹² Lurie hopes that a private confession of guilt would suffice to exonerate him from his irresponsibilities; but otherness, whether in the guise of a sexual victim, marginalised farm workers, animals or the land itself, cannot be excluded; otherness will infiltrate the consciousness through the power of difference. Being different to the subject, the other is external to the subject. However there can be no internal, without the existence of the external. So the private life cannot exist in a void disassociated from the public realm. The infiltration of the other is often violently real, as the attack/rape in the narrative exemplifies. Ironically, much of the representation of the other in this case mirrors Lurie's own being: the masculine violently asserting itself over the feminine. As Marais points out, Levinas metaphorically explains the infiltration of otherness as "a thief in the night" ("Impossible Possibilities" 6), which ties in with Lurie's own forced experience. The point is made that the subject while unable to exclude the other, cannot appropriate the other by

determining its significance; however, Coetzee positions Lurie into the narrative in an inescapable confrontation with the other which has the effect of 'disabling' his 'self-centred consciousness'. The farm attack and rape of Lucy is pre-empted by Lurie's fear of this possibility. He has discussed security with his daughter and questioned Petrus on the matter, whose reply, although given with a smile, is in a sense, a warning that "Everything is dangerous today" (Disgrace 64). The arrival of three black strangers on the farm and the subsequent violence serves to highlight the inadequacies of a subject placing itself in the centre of the landscape. When others from the margins infiltrate, control is easily lost and positions reversed. Neither guns nor dogs can protect the position and Lurie soon finds himself a prisoner, unable to understand the language of his keepers:

'Hai!' says the man, and smiles grimly, and calls out some words.

There is a burst of laughter. A moment later the boy joins him, and they stand beneath the window, inspecting their prisoner, discussing his fate. He speaks Italian, he speaks French, but Italian and French will not save him here in darkest Africa. (Disgrace 95)

David Lurie is imprisoned as much by his own European identity as he is by the attackers. There is a contestation for place revisiting the farm landscape and Lurie does not have the medium of exchange, a language- a mode of consciousness, through which a sense of liberty can be negotiated. This reiterates Coetzee's central question in White Writing: "Is there a language in which people of European identity, or if not of European identity then of a highly problematical South African-colonial

identity, can speak to Africa and be spoken to by Africa?"(White Writing 7-8) For David Lurie, locked in a lavatory on an isolated farm in Africa, while his daughter is being raped, the answer to the author's question is clear. In fact, there is an air of resigned expectation that this moment would eventually be reached:

So it has come, the day of testing. Without warning, without fanfare it is here, and he is in the middle of it. In his chest his heart hammers so hard that it too, in its dumb way, must know. How will they stand up to the testing, he and his heart?(Disgrace 94)

The infiltration of the other has taken an extreme and violent form. Lurie, the "*servant of Eros*"(89), is silenced, his heart is "dumb" and the self is divided: "they... he and his heart". This moment in the narrative recalls the discussion of a poem earlier in the novel; Lurie cannot generate a response from his students to his question regarding the nature of Lucifer, and offers his own interpretation:

‘Never mind. Note that we are not asked to condemn this being with the mad heart, this being with whom there is something constitutionally wrong. On the contrary, we are invited to understand and sympathize. But there is a limit to sympathy. For though he lives among us, he is not one of us.’ (Disgrace 33-4)

Is Coetzee inviting the reader to understand and to a limit, sympathize with Lurie?

He is the character in the novel most governed by "the mad heart" and the statement

“For though he lives among us, he is not one of us” suggests a sense of not *belonging* in this place. Ironically, it is Lurie himself who voices these words; and yet, he is incapable of realising his own position on the landscape, for in a sense he is alienated and othered by Africa and Africans:

He is helpless, an Aunt Sally, a figure from a cartoon, a missionary in cassock and topi waiting with clasped hands and upcast eyes while the savages jaw away in their own lingo preparatory to plunging him into their boiling cauldron. (Disgrace 95)

However, the infiltration of the other need not be a violent intrusion; in Boyhood the young John is fascinated by the annual arrival of sheep shearers. Their differences to him are marked; the shearers’ appearance, language and behaviour are different but never out of place. John is in awe of the possibilities which these ‘others’ represent:

The Afrikaans the shearers speak is so thick, so full of strange idioms, that he can barely understand it. Where do they come from? Is there a country deeper even than the country of Voelfontein, a heartland even more secluded from the world? (Boyhood 93)

The farm has for David Lurie become a place of lost freedom. Although the Luries have not been a family of farmers, Lurie has harboured hope that Lucy has found a home on the farm(60). Sub-consciously there has been the desire to etch a place of belonging on the African landscape, if not for his self, then for his offspring. The

farm attack however, serves to remind him that he does not belong, that redemption must be sought elsewhere. This recalls the memoir of John in Boyhood:

The farm is not his home; he will never be more than a guest, an uneasy guest. Even now, day by day, the farm and he are travelling different roads, separating, growing not closer but further apart. One day the farm will be wholly gone, wholly lost; already he is grieving at that loss. (Boyhood 79-80)

Although Disgrace is not a farm novel or *plaasroman* in the strictest sense (it has been referred to as ‘anti-pastoral’)¹³, Coetzee’s interest in the genre (“the love of the farm remains unarticulated until faced with its loss”), allows for a possible reading of Lurie’s subjectivity through a metaphorical link with the above passage from Boyhood. If the farm can be considered as representing the African landscape as a whole, Lurie as symbolic of the European identity, discovers that he can only be an “uneasy guest”, that Africa and he are “travelling different roads.” This seems to suggest an acceptance of the isolation of subject from object within the same landscape, but as Lurie discovers, the subject’s autonomy is interrupted by the other. Importantly, it is the catalyst for change. His being on the farm presents Lurie with situations through which he could find redemption and a positioning of the ‘self’ in a more positive light than “uneasy guest”. He does not however, endeavour to develop a relationship with Petrus and his family, thereby failing to overcome his feelings of alienation; nor does Lurie engage with the land, he has no desire to be a farmer. If ‘farm’ as landscape is to be a site for the ‘self’ to find meaning then a constructive

engagement with the land is called for. Coetzee in discussing the farm novels of C.M. van den Heever suggests that in a *plaasroman* scenario any rights a farmer has to a piece of land depend on good stewardship of the land(White Writing 85), this is outside the ambit of Lurie's relocation to the farm. For Lurie, "the preconditions for an epiphany, an eruption of words, in which for the first time the farm appears to the farmer in the glory of its full meaning, and for the first time the farmer fully knows himself"(White Writing 88)- do not exist. He has strongly denied the will to become a better person, been unwilling to accept ethical responsibility to 'others'. When requested to volunteer help at an animal clinic(prior to the farm attack), Lurie is reluctant, replying:

'But only as long as I don't have to become a better person. I am not prepared to be reformed. I want to go on being myself. I'll do it on that basis.'(Disgrace 77)

I have suggested earlier that the TRC hearings offered individuals a 'cleansing' of the past. David Lurie does not believe in bringing about personal change, does not see the need for it. Coetzee constructs a dialogue between father and daughter which speaks to the issue of guilt and cleansing. I include a fairly lengthy extract here as it is necessary to take my discussion forward through a close textual analysis:

'In any event,' she says, 'to return to the subject, you are safely expelled. Your colleagues can breathe easy again, while the scapegoat wanders in the wilderness.'

A statement? A question? Does she believe he is just a scapegoat?

‘I don’t think scapegoating is the best description,’ he says cautiously.

‘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. The censor was born, in the Roman sense. Watchfulness was becoming the watchword: the watchfulness of all over all. Purgation was replaced by the purge.’

He is getting carried away; he is lecturing. ‘Anyway,’ he concludes, ‘having said farewell to the city, what do I find myself doing in the wilderness? Doctoring dogs. Playing right-hand man to a woman who specializes in sterilization and euthanasia.’(Disgrace 90-1)

Although for Lurie the farm does not have the “preconditions for an epiphany”, it does eventually become a space where an element of self-realisation can occur. Using ‘landscape’ in its fullest connotation, we observe the subject’s *experience* as being ‘expelled’ from the centre, out toward the margins- ‘the wilderness’ of existence -not only as punishment for his own failings, but so that his ‘colleagues’ remaining in the centre, “can breathe easy again.” The term ‘wilderness’ here suggests a marginalisation on both a public and private level. The individual (white male) is exiled into a ‘political wilderness’ and ‘economic / career wilderness’ by the demands for transformation in the new emerging society; and privately the subject is awoken to a

shift away from a self-centred consciousness by the infiltration of the other. This process of a person being forced out toward the margins recalls a point I made earlier regarding Michael K.; the more an individual is othered by the historical process the greater the likelihood that the margins will begin to disappear, deconstructing any framework for identity formation. The ideal scenario would be the co-existence of mutually significant subjects/objects responsible to each other and the landscape on which the 'existential-historical dramas' are played out.

David Lurie resists the position of "scapegoat"- the goat that must carry the burdens and misdeeds of all into the "wilderness". This reflects his insistence on the private impulse being separated from public contrition(Disgrace54). Symbolically goats do not hold any positive virtues for Lurie, they are meagre creatures living on barren land as suggested by: "Red hills dotted with sparse, bleached grass. Poor land, poor soil, he thinks. Exhausted. Good only for goats"(64), the ritual of scapegoating and the barrenness of the farm form a close association in Lurie's mind. Furthermore the practice of 'cleansing' the society through a ritual of driving collective guilt out of the public consciousness is no longer acceptable; power relations have shifted, 'the gods died' and the public demands transparency of the private, 'the watchfulness of all over all.'¹⁴ For Lurie, life in South Africa has lost its inner-spiritual quality, become just moments of life or death; following the farm attack and the rape of Lucy this loss of being empties him:

He has a sense that, inside him, a vital organ has been bruised, abused -perhaps even his heart. For the first time he has a taste of what it will

be like to be an old man, tired to the bone, without hopes, without desires, indifferent to the future. (Disgrace 107)

The protagonist is dragged to the lowest point of disillusionment through a narrative which offers little redemption for a man 'out of place' on the landscape and who is seemingly incapable of living the ethical life through a recognition of his responsibility to the other. He cannot carry the burdens of the farm alone while his daughter recuperates. Drained of his life force he cannot envisage the 'self' beyond the present:

The onus is on him to manage their daily life. But it has come too suddenly. It is a burden he is not ready for: the farm, the garden, the kennels. Lucy's future, his future, the future of the land as a whole - it is all a matter of indifference, he wants to say; let it all go to the dogs, I do not care. (Disgrace 107)

Three points in this extract need analysis; "burden", "indifference" and "let it all go to the dogs." Lurie is faced with the burden of responsibility to the other, in this case his daughter and the farm. In spite of his doubts, it is an opportunity for him to change, to accept the burden, not as the "scapegoat" carrying the "sins of the city" but as novice farmer "to save the garden from parching." (114) This European man is cast into a position which parallels that of Michael K. who is faced with carrying the burden of his ailing mother back to the farm and is presented with the possibility of keeping the "idea of farming alive."

The phrase “a matter of indifference” is repeated in the text (109) and serves to emphasise the hollowness of ‘self’. Lurie is ‘out of place’ and significantly an ‘empty place’- a spirit of indifference, if any, emanates from within. He describes himself as “like a fly-casing in a spiderweb, brittle to the touch, lighter than rice-chaff, ready to float away.” (107) He is ‘losing’ himself, like the land he is “going to the dogs”:

This is not what he came for - to be stuck in the back of beyond, warding off demons, nursing his daughter, attending to a dying enterprise. If he came for anything, it was to gather himself, gather his forces. Here he is losing himself day by day. (Disgrace 121)

He has earlier dismissed the suggestion of caring for dogs at the Animal Welfare clinic(77) and is likewise reluctant to assume responsibility to the farm and daughter; ironically it is the losing of the ‘self’ which can present the possibility of redemption through ethical relation to the other as Marais asserts:

The emphasis on Lurie’s resistance to the burden of responsibility in these descriptions of his relationship to his daughter indicates that, just as he does not choose to become the dogs’ ‘keeper’, he does not choose to become his daughter’s ‘keeper’. It happens because he *loses* himself and, in the process, gives himself to the Other. (“Impossible Possibilities”15)

However Lurie assumes responsibility to keep the farm gardens alive, to assist Lucy

where he can and, in the concluding sections of the narrative he assists in the euthanasia of animals , as an act of love.(Disgrace 219) Marais says that it would be a mistake “to conclude that Lurie ever *accepts* his responsibility for other beings” and that he “rebels against the *infinite*, insatiable nature of this responsibility” (“Impossible Possibilities”15). I believe that Coetzee intentionally links a possibility of redemption for Lurie to an engagement of the subject with the animal realm. In a sense, David Lurie understudies the role of Petrus as ‘I am the gardener and the dog-man.’ It is the recovery of the ‘self’ through an engagement with the other. Here ‘other’ is used broadly, representing human and non-human beings, and the land itself. It has been shown how both Michael K. and John experience such a recovery, if only temporarily, and David Lurie is given such a possibility:

One by one he brings in the cats, then the dogs: the old, the blind, the halt, the crippled, the maimed, but also the young, the sound - all those whose term has come. One by one Bev touches them, speaks to them, comforts them, and puts them away, then stands back and watches while he seals up the remains in a black plastic shroud.(Disgrace 218-19)

The activity described here becomes a ritual, the human-animal ritual of transportation across the life/death threshold. As a ritual of assistance it benefits both receiver and giver: David Lurie’s participation in the ritual will be rewarded with the easing of his own passage to selfhood: “*It gets harder all the time...Harder, yet easier too.*”(219) Lurie has already shown a willingness to participate in ritual, it is an activity he is

attuned to:

Wine, music: a ritual that men and women play out with each other. Nothing wrong with rituals, they were invented to ease the awkward passages. (12)

Evening falls. They are not hungry, but they eat. Eating is a ritual, and rituals make things easier. (111)

The ritual which brings the narrative to a close significantly bonds the human subject and the non-human other through acts of compassion: the subject is no longer 'autonomous' and the 'self-sufficiency that does not care for other beings' has been overcome.¹⁵ Coetzee has connected the European subject to the African landscape, despite the subject's inability to find a 'language to fit Africa' (White Writing 7); animal imagery pervades the three novels with which this study is concerned and in Disgrace the relationship between human and animal is a significant narrative mechanism. The bond is established both on symbolic and realist levels. Lurie asserts at the outset that:

Were he to choose a totem, it would be the snake. Intercourse between Soraya and himself must be, he imagines, rather like the copulation of snakes: lengthy, absorbed, rather abstract, rather dry, even at its hottest. (Disgrace 2-3)

The imagery is sexual in nature and symbolises Lurie's own sexual being, his overwhelming desire for women; however, the snake is also symbolic of healing, hence the use of the image in the medical fraternity. It is healing of the self that Lurie subconsciously requires, a deliverance which is grounded ultimately within his relations with the landscape through the animal realm. The "predator" intruding into the "vixen's nest, into the home of her cubs"(10) must seek redemption through an ethical relationship of responsibility to the other, in this case, the compassionate euthanasia of animals, especially dogs. A mythical possibility underlies the text: archetypes, symbols, ritual and mythological patterns could be sought for below the realist mode: the 'farm' and 'garden' have long been considered as mythical places, and Lurie suggests to his students that "moments like that will not come unless the eye is half turned toward the great archetypes of the imagination we carry within us." (23) The following exchange between Lucy and her father crystallises the significance of the human-animal relations in the narrative:

'You don't approve of friends like Bev and Bill Shaw because they are not going to lead me to a higher life.'

'That's not true, Lucy.'

'But it is true. They are not going to lead me to a higher life, and the reason is, there is no higher life. This is the only life there is. Which we share with the animals. That's the example that people like Bev try to set. That's the example I try to follow. To share some of our human privilege with the beasts. I do not want to come back in another existence as a dog or a pig and have to live as dogs or pigs

live under us.'(Disgrace 74)

Lucy shows a sense of ethical responsibility here; the dogs and pigs are representative of the universal other and the passage can be read in terms of South African history. The meaningful existence of the subject, depends on ethical relations with the other, regardless of the political locus of power. In other words, the relations between people of all cultural groups on the landscape (Africa) need to be nurtured and 'worked at'- not unlike the 'idea' in van den Heever's novel Groei on which Coetzee comments:

Every *plaasseun* who is prepared to work hard and live frugally
can make a living on the ancestral farm.(White Writing 96)

For David Lurie however, his experience of the 'farm' on one level, and by extension the post-apartheid South Africa there does not appear to be an emergence "into consciousness"(White Writing 98). Lurie cannot see a shared destiny between black and white people, his daughter has become "a chattel of the Petrus clan -a *bywoner* without a voice" and "the scenes of Petrus clearing his land, aided by Lurie, recall the passages in Foe in which Friday is set to work on the stone terraces, alongside his master."¹⁶ For Lurie, the symbolic European male in the narrative, there is no idyll on the farm, but the landscape becomes the site for the interrogation of his identity.



CHAPTER FOUR

CONCLUSION

In the three novels discussed in this dissertation we read the narratives of the central protagonists through their engagement with or experience of specific landscapes. In all three accounts the landscape takes the form of a South African farm. By accepting a broad definition of the concept of landscape as proposed by Darian-Smith, Gunner and Nuttall in their work Text, Theory, Space, the farm can be understood as a site for the formation and interrogation of identity. The stories of Michael K, John Coetzee and David Lurie are generated out of larger historical narratives but become personalised to each within a specific farm locale. Coetzee has written significant literary criticism of the farm novel genre, specifically in his book White Writing and this has informed my own reading of his novels in which the narrative is generated upon a farm setting. If the farm novel genre can be broadly considered as pastoral, perpetuating an idyllic myth through labour and ownership of the land, then Coetzee's novels tend to be anti-pastoral as the dynamics set up between protagonist and farm seem to dismiss the idyll. Although each protagonist encounters the possibility of 'achieving identity' or 'self-realisation' or 'personal redemption', there is no epiphany through ownership of the farm. By contrast to the farm novel, the non-proprietary relations with the land which are evident in The Life and Times of Michael K and Boyhood provides a sense of 'belonging' to the land for both Michael and John, although as the narratives unfold both are removed from the farm and returned to the city. The Luries in Disgrace have a title deed for the farm, but within the post-

apartheid context of the novel neither can lay claim to ownership thereof, and David Lurie certainly never develops a sense of belonging to the land.

Coetzee's concern in White Writing that Europeans cannot find the 'language' through which they can speak to Africa is evident in Disgrace. As David Lurie's identity unravels on the farm landscape, his 'mode of consciousness' remains alienated from Africa. The Africa which is represented in the novel is at times harsh and violent as Coetzee critiques any notion of a postcolonial paradise. If Lurie is to find any 'place' in Africa he must be reinscribed into a new postcolonial arrangement, becoming a "figure on the margins of history."¹⁷ Lurie seems to find solace in Lucy's pragmatic acceptance of the 'new arrangements'. Pregnant with a child by one of her rapists, Lucy informs her father that her love for the child in her body will grow, that "one can trust Mother Nature for that"(216). Through Lucy, Lurie envisages a future, not an idyll of which he is part, but an existence for others "less and less" connected to himself.

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 here 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. So it will go on, a line of existences in which his share, his gift, will grow inexorably less and less, till it as may well be forgotten.(Disgrace 217)

This extract clearly illustrates Coetzee's 'new take' on the farm novel, the significance of lineage in the farm narrative is reversed as the father becomes decreasingly inscribed on the landscape. This contrasts with the van den Heever novels in which:

transcendence is attained via conscious acceptance that the unit of life is the lineage, not the individual...the manifestation of the lineage in historical time is the farm, an area of nature inscribed with the signs of the lineage: with evidences of labour and with bones in the earth. Lineal consciousness brings about a liberation from the sense of being alone in the world and doomed to die: as long as the lineage lasts the self may be thought to last. (White Writing 109)

By contrast, for David Lurie there is to be no perpetuation of the self, just a slow erasure from the landscape itself, while assisting in the euthanasia of other homeless beings, until "(his) time comes. It will be little enough, less than little: nothing."

(Boyhood 220) If any dignity is regained by Lurie it is the giving up of the self completely and the finding of a co-existence with the animals he works with in the clinic. Nevertheless, the novel concludes within an atmosphere of pessimism in which the self is redundant.

NOTES

1. This carefully constructed expression of 'landscape' draws on insights from W. J. T. Mitchell(ed.), Landscape and Power, Chicago and London, Chicago University Press, 1994.
2. Mail and Guardian. Oct. 3-9 1997, p21.
3. From Attridge, D 'J.M. Coetzee's *Boyhood*, Confession, and Truth' in Critical Survey, Volume 11, Number 2 (1999). Coetzee uses the term 'autobiography' in Doubling the Point (394).
4. Coetzee, JM "The Novel Today." Upstream 6.1 (1988): 2-5
5. Michael's gardening is a gesture to the possibility of a 'life' to rival history, not to create a 'rival line' to the Visagies.
6. My emphasis. This scenario takes on an interesting guise in the postcolonial context of Disgrace: Lucy decides, notwithstanding the acts of violence committed against her, that she will live under the authority of Petrus allowing him to assume the role of 'father'. (Disgrace 205)
7. Marais, M "Languages Of Power" English in Africa 16.2 (1989): 35
8. My emphasis.
9. My emphasis.
10. Coetzee returns to this image in Boyhood. The description used is: 'always the land scape enclosing them.' (90)
11. My emphasis.
12. The yearning that a person may have for a strictly 'private' mode may be forced on them. Lucy cannot be blamed for being 'for oneself' when she gives her reason for not reporting the rape to the police. In a sense it reflects David Lurie's own opinions regarding the sanctity of the private experience. Lucy explains her decision:

'You want to know why I have not laid a particular charge with the police. I will tell you, as long as you agree not to raise the subject again. The reason is that, as far as I am concerned, what happened to me is a purely private matter. In another time, in another place it might be held to be a public matter. But in this place, at this time, it is not. It is my business, mine alone.'
 (Disgrace 112)
13. Lowry, E. 1999 'Like a Dog' in LRB Vol 21, No 20
14. I have given a personal interpretation of the text in the chosen extract. It is not suggested that Coetzee intended or the text itself insists on such a reading.

15. Reading Marais (2001:5) on Levinas here, Lurie is no longer being 'for-oneself'.
16. From Lowry, E. 1999 'Like A Dog' in LRB Vol21, No 20
17. Carol Iannone reiterates this point in her review of Disgrace for Commentary Magazine March 2000.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

PRIMARY TEXTS:

Coetzee, J. M. Life and Times Of Michael K. London: Secker and Warburg, 1983.

Coetzee, J. M. Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life. London: Secker and Warburg, 1997.

Coetzee, J. M. Disgrace. London: Vintage, 1999.

SECONDARY TEXTS:

Attridge, Derek. "J. M. Coetzee's Boyhood, Confession, and Truth". Critical Survey. 11.2 (1999): 77-93.

Attwell, David. J. M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.

Chapman, Michael. Southern African Literatures. Harlow: Longman, 1996.

Coetzee, J. M. White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988.

Coetzee, J. M. "The Novel Today". Upstream. 6.1 (1988): 2-5

Coetzee, J. M. Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews. Ed. David Attwell. Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press, 1992.

Crehan, Stewart. "Rewriting the Land; or, How (Not) to Own It". English in Africa. 25.1 (1998): 1-26.

Darian-Smith, Kate, Gunner, Liz and Nuttall, Sarah. "Introduction". Text, Theory, Space: Land, literature and history in South Africa and Australia. Ed. Kate Darian-Smith, Liz Gunner and Sarah Nuttall. London: Routledge, 1996. 1-22.

Gallagher, Susan Van Zanten. A Story of South Africa: J. M. Coetzee's Fiction in Context. London: Harvard University Press, 1991.

Head, Dominic. J. M. Coetzee. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

Huggan, Graham and Watson, Stephen. "Introduction". Critical Perspectives on J. M. Coetzee. Ed. Graham Huggan and Stephen Watson. London: Macmillan Press, 1996. 1-12.

Iannone, Carol. "The Horror - Review of Disgrace by J.M. Coetzee". Commentary Magazine. (March 2000): online: www.commentarymagazine.com/003/bk_iannone.html

Lowry, Elizabeth. "Like a Dog". London Review of Books 21.20 (October 1999): online: www.lrb.co.uk/v21/n20/lowr2120.htm

Marais, Michael. "Languages of Power: A Story of Reading Coetzee's Michael K/ Michael K". English in Africa. 16.2. (1989) 31-48

Marais, Michael. "Writing with Eyes Shut: Ethics, Politics, and the Problem of the Other in

the Fiction of J. M. Coetzee". English in Africa.25.1 (1998): 43-60

Marais, Michael. "'Little Enough, Less Than Little: Nothing': Ethics, Engagement, and Change in the Fiction of J. M. Coetzee". Modern Fiction Studies 46.1 (Spring 2000): 159-182.

Marais, Michael. "Impossible Possibilities: Ethics and Choice In J. M. Coetzee's The Lives of Animals and Disgrace". 2001. Unpublished manuscript.

Penner, Dick. Countries of the Mind: The Fiction of J. M. Coetzee. New York: Greenwood Press, 1989.

Wenzel, Jennifer. "The Pastoral Promise and the Political Imperative: The *Plaasroman* Tradition in an era of Land Reform". Modern Fiction Studies 46.1 (Spring 2000): 90-113.