

COETZEE'S *DISGRACE*: BYRON IN ITALY AND THE EASTERN CAPE C. 1820

By

Kai Easton

Rhodes University

Abstract

Disgrace significantly marks J. M. Coetzee's first real venture from the *Western Cape* in his South African-based fiction. But his provincial shift is all the more noticeable because it takes us into the heart of 'Frontier Country'. This is not just an historical term, but a designation used in publicity by the Eastern Cape Board of Tourism today, as can be seen by a series of signs dotting the landscape from Grahamstown to the settler village of Salem on the Grahamstown-Kenton road (see also Gareth Cornwell's recent paper, *Disgraceland*, April 2003).

In the first section of the paper, I explore the historical geography of *Disgrace* through accounts and 'configurations' of the Eastern Cape by a network of nineteenth-century British colonial figures, from the naturalist and traveller William Burchell to the painter Thomas Bowler. One question is how these specific narratives and images inaugurate, shape, or question the 'romance' of settlement on the eastern frontier, and what this might mean for the contemporary fictional but also 'real' landscape of *Disgrace*.

The second section of the paper turns to *Disgrace* itself, to see whether the activity of composing 'Byron in Italy' – in the newly divided provinces of the Western and Eastern Cape – plays out a tension between the realism that Coetzee adopts for his narrative and the specific kind of 'Romanticism' that the figure of Byron ultimately represents. Byron was in Italy, after all, during a crucial moment in colonial Cape history. And it is worth noting that Coetzee's specific signalling of Byron's time in Ravenna coincides exactly with the decision by the House of Commons in 1819 to send some 4,000 British settlers, including the minor Romantic poet Thomas Pringle, to begin a new life on the eastern shores of the Cape of Good Hope.

Fort Hare Institute of Social and Economic Research

Working Paper No. 35

ISBN: 1-86810-101-0

Contact: Anne King at [aking@ufhel.ac.za/](mailto:aking@ufhel.ac.za)

Introduction

Disgrace significantly marks J. M. Coetzee's first real venture from the *Western Cape* in his South African-based fiction. But his provincial shift is all the more noticeable because it takes us into the heart of 'Frontier Country'. This is not just an historical term, but a designation used in publicity by the Eastern Cape Board of Tourism today, as can be seen in the series of signs dotting the landscape from Grahamstown to the settler village of Salem on the Grahamstown-Kenton road (see also Cornwell, forthcoming).

While the connection between Byron and the Eastern Cape in my title circles around the date of 1820, the interval I cover actually stretches into the 1860s: thus from the 'foundational' date of British settlement to the aftermath of this: decades of Xhosa resistance to Britain's sometimes random/spontaneous colonial boundaries. Through a selective extracting of accounts and 'configurations' of the Eastern Cape by a *network* of nineteenth-century British colonial figures, from the naturalist and traveller William Burchell to the painter Thomas Bowler, I examine the *historical* geography of *Disgrace*. One question is how these specific narratives and images inaugurate, shape, or question the 'romance' of settlement on the eastern frontier, and what this might mean for the contemporary fictional but also 'real' landscape of *Disgrace*.

I then turn briefly to *Disgrace* itself, to see whether the activity of composing 'Byron in Italy' – in the newly divided provinces of the Western and Eastern Cape – plays out a tension between the realism that Coetzee adopts for his narrative and the specific kind of 'Romanticism' that the figure of Byron ultimately represents. Byron was in Italy, after all, during a crucial moment in colonial Cape history. And it is worth noting that Coetzee's specific signalling of Byron's time in Ravenna coincides exactly with the decision by the House of Commons in 1819 to send some 4,000 British settlers, including the minor Romantic poet Thomas Pringle, to begin a new life on the eastern shores of the Cape of Good Hope.¹

In terms of landscape and *Disgrace*, Gareth Cornwell has just offered us a spectacularly *local* history of the settler village of Salem and the story of Richard Gush in particular; Rita Barnard has read it as a 'reconfiguration of Coetzee's abiding interest in the colonial pastoral' (2002: 386), updating his project in *Life & Times of Michael K* and *In the Heart of the Country*); and Grant Farred has addressed the idea of the frontier/border setting of the novel more generally as well as the literary significance of Salem more specifically (2002a; 2002b).

¹ See also Graham Pechey (2002: 380).

In terms of Byron, critics have been more wary. Though *Disgrace* has been the subject of at least two special journal issues and numerous reviews and other critical articles, Byron largely has remained a peripheral figure in discussions of the novel.²

Thus, a second question is why, having written back to Defoe and Dostoevsky (in *Foe* and *The Master of Petersburg*, respectively), should Coetzee now turn to Byron in the way that he does? And why – in this many-storied novel – are critics *not* turning to Byron as the focus of their attention? Is Coetzee’s storyline in this regard unconvincing or elusive, in as much as Lurie himself is having difficulties composing his chamber opera on Byron and Byron’s ‘last attachment’, the young Contessa Guiccioli? What if (and this is but a theory) Coetzee’s manuscripts revealed Byron to be a false lead – a story that, in the early drafts, he simply couldn’t get off the ground and decided to incorporate as Lurie’s compositional failure?

Today, I want to explore the possibilities of textual interaction in Coetzee’s *Disgrace* between these two distant and unfashionable plots – the two rather resistant storylines of what I shall call 1) *composing the Eastern Cape*; and 2) *composing Byron*. For the landscape described in the publicity for the British emigration scheme was in effect a ‘*composition*’, textually and visually authored by the Government, as well as by resident writers and travellers to the Cape. In the advance publicity for *Disgrace*, the publishers have not engaged with either of these storylines, focussing instead on more dramatic contemporary events.

I shall return to this in my closing remarks, but I would first like to suggest that the idea of ‘composing Byron’ refers not simply to Lurie’s artistic endeavours, but also to the historical and fictional implications of *Coetzee’s* authorial choice to situate Byron – the greatest British Romantic poet – during the time of his exile in Italy.

Composing the Eastern Cape

W. J. Huggins

If the settlement scheme of 1820 required advance descriptions of the designated territory allocated to British settlers (descriptions which were often romanticised and not altogether factual), it also, of course, stimulated a range of visual and literary responses (both real and imagined) to this new landscape. One

² See, for example, the special issues of *Scrutiny*2 and *Interventions*, both published in 2002.

such example is a painting by W. J. Huggins from 1833. Just over a decade after settlement, Grahamstown is described in the caption as ‘the Metropolis of the Eastern Division of the Cape of Good Hope’. (Butler (ed): 1974: 201). Indeed, shortly after the 1820 settlers arrived and flocked to the town from their farms, Grahamstown became a capital to rival Cape Town. And, as Coetzee writes in a review of Noël Mostert’s *Frontiers*, ‘Though Grahamstown is today no more than a provincial town, it remains the cradle of British culture in South Africa’. (Coetzee 2002: 336)

While Grahamstown’s swift growth from a military base in 1812 to a fully-fledged settlement is not in question, the portrayal of it here by Huggins is. In Guy Butler’s edited volume on the 1820 settlers it is described as: ‘A rather romanticized painting ... of the town looking south-east’. Moreover, it is suggested that ‘It is unlikely that Huggins ever visited the town. It is more probable that he composed this picture from several sketches by less experienced artists’. (Butler (ed.) 1974: 201)

William J. Burchell

If this is indeed true, it is in sharp contrast to the images left by an earlier traveller: the naturalist and accomplished amateur painter, William Burchell, whose *Travels in the Interior of Southern Africa*, published in two volumes in 1822 and 1824 (the year that Byron died), insists throughout on his sincere attempts at accuracy and truthful representation: in his journals, paintings and, especially, in his elaborately and laboriously constructed map. Helen M. McKay even asserts in her introduction to *Burchell’s Landscapes* that

[h]is sketches may be said to have been the first pictorial productions of the country for he did them in the field and not, like the pictures of earlier days, drawn from recollection or imagination. (McKay 1952: xv)

Burchell had travelled extensively in the Karoo and the eastern borders of the Colony. In 1819, his geographical expertise of the area led to a request from the Select Committee for the Poor Laws for ‘evidence’ of the desirability of the Cape as a proposed site for British emigration, and his favourable and convincing response seems to have finalised the Government’s decision.³ In a typically meticulous and exhaustive pamphlet, Burchell followed up his testimony with *Hints for Emigration to the Cape of Good*

³ Note that Lord Charles Somerset, Governor of the Cape had been corresponding with the Colonial Secretary Bathurst about this very idea since 1817 (see Keegan 1996: 62).

Hope that same year. It was apparently ‘extensively read’ (Butler (ed.) 1974: 73) by many would-be settlers, to whom Burchell offered this prospect:

Such a body of colonists would require a large and connected area of land fit for agriculture and pasture. This is no where to be found within the present limits of the Colony, except at its eastern extremity; where there is an extensive unoccupied tract of the most beautiful and delightful country, varied with every diversity of scenery and surface; abounding in herbage, wood and water; and having a soil which, the writer has no hesitation in saying, is capable of feeding large herds of cattle

Here the vine may be cultivated with success; and that lucrative branch of agriculture may at last be shared by the British nation. (Burchell 1819: 20-21)

Though a man of the Enlightenment and a scientist by trade, Burchell had occasional Romantic leanings. No doubt his description of the eastern frontier was in some areas absolutely true but, to the large group of settlers who struggled to make their own way on the allocated plots just a year later, his words must have sounded exceedingly optimistic.

Burchell arrived in Cape Town in 1810 after working as a botanist for five years on the island of St Helena. Another five years later, when he departed from the Cape, Napoleon would be conquered at Waterloo and the Cape Colony secured for the British Empire.

Napoleon & Byron

Thus, as British settlers arrived on the eastern shores of Algoa Bay, British troops monitored, from their peninsular military base in Simonstown on the western side of the colony, the conquered French emperor on Burchell’s former ground, the island of St Helena, many miles off the western coast of southern Africa.

Many miles away yet, in the provincial Italian city of Ravenna, Lord George Gordon Byron was in the process of writing — with great ease and fluency but not without controversy — the early cantos of his satirical masterpiece, *Don Juan*. Napoleon was his *hero* (as he was for many of the more liberal Romantics). Born in 1788, the year before the French Revolution, Byron was absolutely ‘*dazzled*’ by him (MacCarthy 2002: viii]; he even compared himself to Napoleon, ‘hailing himself in *Don Juan* as “the grand Napoleon of the realms of rhyme”’ (Bainbridge 1995: 2). His own recent biography was rather

different, but he also found himself in exile after allegations by his wife, Annabella Milbanke, concerning – not least – incest with his half-sister Augusta Leigh. Byron thus left England for Europe in 1816, in disgrace. Napoleon died, while Byron was in Italy, in 1821.

These brief overlapping biographies — to be complemented by the key figure of Thomas Pringle before we leave the 1820s — may seem irrelevant to Coetzee's fictional representation of the Eastern Cape in the present day, but there is an intriguing critical intertextuality between much of this material and Coetzee's non-fiction: his own essays and reviews in *White Writing* (1988) and *Stranger Shores* (2001). Coetzee's interest in 'the Discourse of the Cape' (as he refers to it in his Introduction to *White Writing*) goes back many years, and has been consistently played out in his South African-based novels since his earliest fiction. As he says in *Doubling the Point*:

... the materials for *Dusklands* had begun to be assembled a long way back. William Burchell, for instance, I had been reading and making notes from as early as 1962, knowing that they would go into some such book as *Dusklands* turned out to be. (Coetzee, 1992: 19)

Pringle's relevance – though he only lived as a settler in the Cape for six years – is at once literary, historical and geographical.

Thomas Pringle

Born in Scotland in 1789, the year of the French Revolution, a year after his near compatriot and more famous contemporary, Byron, Thomas Pringle was a minor Romantic poet, made more famous once he returned to Britain from the Cape to act as Secretary of the Anti-Slavery Society. (This move in 1826, in effect, removed him of his settler status.) Unlike Byron, he was an admirer of Wordsworth, and tended towards a similar kind of nature poetry. His *African Sketches*, published in the year of his death (1834: also the year of the abolition of slavery, and the arrival of the young artist Thomas Bowler to the Cape from England), comprise his collection of *Poems Illustrative of South Africa* and *Narrative of Residence*. But Pringle wrote an earlier *Account* (in 1824, the year of Byron's death) which attempts to establish a *real* picture of the then present conditions of settlement.

I do not mean to attribute any great blame to the travellers and tourists for their tempting descriptions; for the Zuureveld [*sic*] is really a pretty country, and to persons passing hasti[l]y through it, who had no acquaintance with agriculture or the peculiarities of the

soil and climate, it could scarcely fail, in favourable seasons, to display a very alluring aspect, and to call forth encomiums far too unqualified. It would have been fortunate for the emigrants, doubtless, if they had listened more sceptically to such accounts; ... (Pringle 1824: 5-6).

Though Pringle is often the ultimate Romantic poet in his descriptions of the South African landscape, his *prose* is ambiguously more realistic.⁴ In this passage, while he relates the settlers' initial hopes on arriving at the Cape in pastoral terms, a sense of their reality is immediately conveyed:

At length they found themselves in Albany, with a serene sky above, and verdant plains and bowery groves around them. They pitched their tents under the shade of fragrant acacias, and groves of the gorgeous-blossomed caffer-boom, and believed, for a brief space, that all those Arcadian dreams and romantic anticipations were about to be actually realized. (Pringle, 1824: 7-8)

The true story is that the emigration scheme was hurried, the land allotted insufficient, and the chosen group of 4,000 settlers (out of some 90,000 applications) not particularly suited to farming.

The first Pringle farm was at Baviaans Kloof some distance north of most of the English settlers, but, as Malvern van Wyk Smith has pointed out, Glen-Lyndon (as it came to be known),

could hardly have been in a more contentious spot, [it was] on the very edge of the so-called "Neutral Ground" or "Ceded Territory" from which, just a year before their arrival, the Xhosa had been evacuated... (van Wyk Smith, 8).

And here we come back to the two questions at the centre of this paper: 1) how do the historical boundaries of the Eastern Cape shape or interact with the contemporary landscape of *Disgrace?*; and 2)

⁴ See, for example, Valerie Letcher (2002), both for a comparative look at the writings of Harriet Ward and for this reference to Pringle and Lord Charles Somerset. 'It is sometimes difficult for a modern traveller to achieve the same vision of the Eastern Cape countryside, but it was not uncommon for this landscape to be compared with the great parks of the English landed gentry. This tendency can be discovered in Thomas Pringle's description of the Zuurveld and in his poems. In advocating settlement, Lord Charles Somerset describes Albany thus: "I know not how to give an idea of it, unless by saying that it resembles a succession of Parks from the Bosjeman's to the Great Fish River"'. See also Keegan 1996: 62.

how does Coetzee's inclusive Cape geography (Western and Eastern Cape: Cape Town, George, Grahamstown, Salem), together with the Byron story, illustrate a tension in this novel between *realism* and *Romanticism*?

We have just noted the real 'Neutral Ground' which inspires Pringle's Romantic border-ballad ('The Forester of Neutral Ground', which Dan Wylie will be discussing). Coetzee intriguingly signals twice in his text to the area historically just east of here: 'Kaffraria' [see Coetzee: 1999: 122, 135]. But is this accurate? Is he stretching the geography of 'British Kaffraria', as it was then officially known, to include Grahamstown and Salem (which would be entirely incorrect) or is he using 'Kaffraria' (as he actually calls it) more loosely – or imaginatively – to refer to the whole territory before it was expanded by further colonial legislation – before, even the designation of 'Albany' (where Grahamstown and Salem in fact are located) or the Zuurveld (the former name for Albany)?

To get a sense of the distance between Grahamstown and 'Kaffraria', we have the following passage from a Rev. Shrewsbury who, in 1826, was working across the frontier with the Xhosa:

It certainly is pleasing to think that from my circuit in the heart of Caffraria I can at any time ride on horseback in the short space of 5 days to Graham's Town and behold England in miniature (cited in Lester, 69; see Fast (ed.), 1994: 27).

A contemporary map from Guy Butler's edited volume, *The 1820 Settlers*, shows the Cape as it was demarcated by the British in 1819: here we have Albany, The Ceded Territory, and Kaffraria. But these boundaries were extremely unstable throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as we see from the more detailed map reproduced in Alan Lester's *Imperial Networks*, which shows the territory of 'Albany and the eastern Cape Frontier, [from] 1778-1865' (2001: 47).⁵

The frequently changing colonial geography of the Cape is, in fact, even commented on by William Burchell in the first volume of his *Travels* in 1822. A meticulous cartographer as well as a naturalist, Burchell wrote the following footnote:

⁵ My thanks to Alan Lester for clarifying the shifting boundaries of the region in our email correspondence in April 2003. Note that, as the map referred to here makes clear, British Kaffraria 1847-65 takes over most of the territory of the former province of Queen Adelaide 1836-37. See also the final chapter in Lester (2001) for an excellent discussion of British Kaffraria.

The names of the different *Colonial districts* have been omitted, not only because their boundaries are ill defined and little known, even to the inhabitants themselves, but principally because they have lately been so much altered, or subdivided into new districts, and will probably undergo still greater changes, that in the course of a few years the divisions of this map would only serve, as those of former maps now do, to mislead. A proof of it has occurred during the engraving of this; for scarcely was the word *Albany* put upon the copper, when I received information that the boundaries of that district had been altered by proclamation of the Cape Government. (Burchell, 1822: 579-80).

As if foreshadowing the territory of *Disgrace*, the cover of the paperback edition of Coetzee's *White Writing*, features a lithograph of a painting by Thomas Bowler of 'GRAHAM'S TOWN, FROM THE BAY ROAD'. Bowler was born in Hertfordshire in 1812 (the same year Colonel Graham 'founded' the military base of Graham's Town; the same year that Byron became famous overnight with the publication of *Child Harolde's Pilgrimage*). He arrived in the Cape in 1834 and had planned to go to the Eastern Province in 1841 'in search of the picturesque' (about which Coetzee has written in *White Writing*, concerning Burchell and Pringle), but it wasn't until much later that he actually spent time sketching the frontier. The Graham's Town painting is one of the illustrations in his 1865 collection specifically and thematically entitled:

The Kafir Wars and the British Settlers in South Africa: A Series of Picturesque Views from the Original Sketches by T. W. Bowler.

The sketch, he declares in the accompanying text,

though not the best point of view to show the full extent, the length, and extraordinary breadth of the streets, the large military civil establishments, churches, and buildings of the city

nevertheless offers, a

very faithful representation of the first glimpse of the fair Albanian town nestling among its grassy hills.

Bowler's description – if not his painting – further supplies us with detail of its founding, its growth, its architecture, and its significance *in the wider scheme of frontier relations*.

‘[i]n times of war it has always been the *refuge* of many of the country families. The Caffres, more than once, attempted to attack upon it, but were cowed or repulsed by the military and settlers before they could effect any damage. (Emphasis added)

Unlike the more humanitarian Burchell and Pringle, Bowler sees no ambiguity in British occupation, but the significance of his paintings is summed up in the following extract from Edna and Frank Bradlow's biography. Tellingly, their Introduction highlights the ‘Romanticism’ of the eastern frontier in Bowler's time, while also remarking on the value of his paintings as records of a landscape in the making:

From a geographical point of view, Bowler's Kafir War series cannot be overestimated. They show the changing face and contours of the Eastern Province and Border districts more forcibly than the most fluent writing. The gentle streams flowing through wild and dense undergrowth, over rocky ledges; the fat cattle grazing on the abundant greenery in the native villages of Chumie and Burns Hill, are now to be seen only in the albums of Bowler and [Thomas] Baines. Encroaching civilisation has altered the Border districts to such an extent, that it is hard to believe that these pictures were not merely a figment of Bowler's artistic imagination. (Bradlow and Bradlow 1955: 82)

Composing Byron

By the time of British Kaffraria's official demise as a province in 1865, Teresa Guiccioli had been mourning Byron for 41 years. Thus, in a very real sense the imagining of the ‘Byron in Italy’ plot in *Disgrace* extends to the ground that I've covered as far as Bowler – to the mid 1860s (also the historically crucial period of Sir George Grey's administration and the fateful Cattle-Killing) And thus we arrive at my key extract from *Disgrace* and the second half of this paper on ‘composing Byron’:

There is still the Byron project. Of the books he brought from Cape Town, only two volumes of the letters are left – the rest were in the trunk of the stolen car. The public library in Grahamstown can offer nothing but selections from the poems. But does he

need to go on reading? What more does he need to know of how Byron and his acquaintance passed their time in old Ravenna? Can he not, by now, invent a Byron who is true to Byron, and a Teresa too? He has, if the truth be told, been putting it off for months: the moment when he must face the blank page, strike the first note, see what he is worth.... *Will this be where the dark trio⁶ are at last brought to life: not in Cape Town but in old Kaffraria?* (Coetzee 1999a: 121-22; emphasis added).

In fiction, David Lurie is a scholar who has done his homework, but his own composition has no real narrative direction. This is to be contrasted with the 'real' Lord Byron, who was, at the time of British settlement at the Cape, at his highest creative powers and not worried about narrative direction. In *Don Juan*, he is said to have 'extemporized the poem from episode to episode; "I have no plan," he said, "I had no plan; but I had or have material'". (Abrams and Stillingner [eds] 2001: 395). Like Lurie's chamber opera, however, *Don Juan* remains unfinished. As Byron's most recent biographer Fiona MacCarthy notes, the epic poem breaks off at the end of Canto XVI 'with a cliff-hanger ... as the sexually voracious Duchess of Fitz-Fulke enters Juan's bedroom concealed in a friar's cowl. The first fourteen stanzas of a further canto were in Byron's baggage when he left for Greece (2002: 446). However, Byron's poem, unlike Lurie's chamber opera, is of course published and is still considered 'the longest satire, and one of the longest of all poems, written in English.' (Abrams and Stillingner [eds] 2001: 395)

Byron had not worked on *Don Juan* continuously, having halted the project temporarily at the request of Teresa. She was distressed by the reviews in England, accusing Byron of 'shocking' immorality (see Origo 2000:257). When he picked up the poem again, it was only after Shelley's appraisal of it as a 'masterpiece' with the 'stamp of immortality'. (MacCarthy 2002: 399) Teresa relented.

'I obtained a permission from my Dictatress to continue,' he wrote, '*provided* it was to be more guarded and decorous and sentimental in the continuation than in the commencement.... The embargo was only taken off upon these stipulations'. (Origo 2000: 326)

Teresa was thus in control of the historical Byron's text, as she becomes ultimately of David Lurie's: for 'Byron, in the new version, is long dead' and Lurie now turns his focus to Teresa whose 'sole remaining

⁶ Teresa's 'humiliated husband' (who has, however, much encouraged their liaison in some ways), is the third member of the trio that Lurie refers to here.

claim to immortality, and the solace of her lonely nights, is the chestful of letters and memorabilia she kept under her bed....' (Coetzee 1999a: 181)

However, the idea to compose the opera with Teresa in her later years, still mourning and celebrating the life of Byron, only comes to Lurie in the *Western Cape*. Despite thinking he might raise the chamber opera in 'old Kaffraria', Lurie cannot get his project moving at his daughter Lucy's farm in the Eastern Cape: his mind is on 'country ways'.⁷ It is only after the attack and his alienation from Lucy when he returns to the looted house in Cape Town (his academic home and the 'mother city' of the historical Cape Colony) that the project begins to take off. He changes tack, but it is now – with the addition of a toy banjo -- transforming itself. 'It is not the erotic that is calling him after all, nor the elegaic, but the *comic*'. (Coetzee 1999: 184; emphasis added)

David Lurie calls himself a disciple of Wordsworth, but he is ironically more of a counterpart to the legendary Lord Byron (who was dismissive of Wordsworth, especially in the Preface to *Don Juan*). The accusations against Lurie are rather different from those that led Byron into exile, as is his 'state of disgrace', but at his most superficial, he epitomises what has been termed the 'Byronic'.

But the Byronic and Byron were not entirely the same thing: As Jacques Barzun wrote in 1953:

Byron's thoughts, works, and character as a whole cannot be adequately summed up in the figure of a headlong lover in an open collar, whose fits of melancholy are a pose...

The Byronic is found in Byron's early works and in those of his large literary progeny. Byron himself is to be found in the usual first-hand sources of biography, and especially in his letters...They bring us within his magnetic field of force, which was not, as the Byronic stereotype might suggest, mere agitation and recklessness. It was concentrated mind, and high spirits, wit, daylight good sense, and a passion for truth – in short a unique discharge of intellectual vitality.

Indeed, some of Byron's image was self-fashioning (he constantly reinvented himself), and some of it was created by Teresa, as one of his many biographers. And we can see the cumulative effect of his

⁷ See, for example, page 65 of the novel and Barnard's article (2002)..

legend in the painting which illustrates the backcover dustjacket of MacCarthy's biography (2002): '*Liszt at the piano*. 'Nineteenth-century European Romanticists at the shrine of Byron and Beethoven.'

As for the Romantic label, Byron is considered a 'Romantic' today, but this designation was only applied to him after his death, as it was not until the late nineteenth century that Romanticism actually became a School. And Byron really is a chief example of its heterogeneity, for in many ways his later work resisted Romanticism with its focus on the individual. He was in fact radically sceptical of the poet's role; and the importance that Romanticism attached to the imagination equally could not be reconciled with Byron's ultimate abandonment of poetry to the real politics of liberating Greece from Turkey. Byron died in Greece in 1824.

In *Disgrace*, Byron is not only struggling to get into this text as Lurie's fictional creation, he is likely to be confused – by readers of the novel – with his author, David Lurie. This was actually the poet Byron's own situation, as Lurie tells his students in the Romantics course he teaches at Cape Technical University:

'We continue with Byron,' he says, plunging into his notes. 'As we saw last week, notoriety and scandal affected not only Byron's life but the way in which his poems were received by the public. Byron the man found himself conflated with his own poetic creations – with Harold, Manfred, even Don Juan.'
(1999a: 31).

The mode of realism which Coetzee adopts has had equally ironic consequences, compelling some readers to conflate Coetzee with his character David Lurie, and to see Coetzee's recent emigration to Australia as a direct response to the bleak vision of the new South Africa he represents in *Disgrace*.⁸

In the much debated 'Racism and the Media' submission by the ANC on *Disgrace* (see, for example, Attwell's excellent discussion [2002]), there is of course no mention of Byron in the SAHRC transcript summary of the story, but nor is Byron referred to in the advance publicity for *Disgrace* from Coetzee's UK publishers, Secker & Warburg:⁹

⁸ On realism and *Disgrace*, see Cornwell (2002); Pechey (2002). Note also Coetzee's 'What Is Realism?' (1997).

Description: A divorced, middle-aged English professor finds himself increasingly unable to resist affairs with his female students. When discovered by the college authorities, he is expected to apologise and repent in an effort to save his job, but he refuses to become a scapegoat in what he sees as a show trial designed to reinforce a stringent political correctness. He preempts the authorities and leaves his job, and the city, to spend time with his grown-up lesbian daughter on her remote farm. Things between them are strained – there is much from the past that they need to reconcile – and the situation becomes critical when they are the victims of a brutal and horrifying attack.

Conclusion

So why go back into history when Coetzee has written such a profoundly *new* South African novel? Why look at Byron? These two storylines may only be tangentially linked by intersecting facts and dates, empirical histories, and a network of coincidences and geographical placements. However, it could certainly be argued that Coetzee's setting of Grahamstown and the 'peaceful' settler village of Salem is symbolic of the whole cultural legacy of the eastern frontier – the architecture, poems, paintings, novels, diaries, journals – which have bolstered and celebrated white settlement even to the present day.

Jeanette Eve's *A Literary Guide to the Eastern Cape* – written as a tour guide of literary figures and their connections with the Eastern Cape – was launched at the recent Grahamstown Festival. It is beautifully produced. It is valuable and wide-ranging and pitched at a general audience, and thus it would be unfair to expect it to do more: to critically analyse the literature it surveys; to be ask what the Eastern Cape actually is (how is it imagined differently from the Western Cape? What are the connections and continuities, etc.) Eve's approach reveals a passionate response to the landscape and literature she has been researching for over a decade, and the book includes extracts and poems, including one of her own. In a chapter called 'Settler Country', she devotes an entry to Coetzee in the opening section on 'Salem'. *Disgrace* is described as:

a bleak story, disturbing in its implications, and the Salem it depicts is far from peaceful. Details of setting are scant – 'a wind-pump', a 'sprawling farmhouse painted yellow, with a galvanised-iron roof and a covered stoep', 'a wire fence,' 'a mud-walled dam', 'dust

⁹ I am grateful to Publicity at Secker & Warburg for sending this information sheet to me before the publication of

and grave', 'red hills dotted with sparse, bleached grass'. However, like the notes of tenderness that occasionally relieve the grimness of the story, 'clumps of nasturtiums and geraniums' growing near a fence or the 'solid blocks of colour: magenta, carnelian, ash-blue' of the beds of flowers grown for sale, lighten the landscape of *Disgrace*. In Salem itself there are times when the yellow of mimosa blossoms or the scarlet of aloes noticed by other writers relieve the historical village's somewhat dreary setting. (Eve 2003: 161)

There is intriguingly something of the prose of the Romantic travellers and settlers writing about the Cape in the 1820s in the above description of the 'real' Salem with the fictional landscape of *Disgrace*. Eve's brief remarks do not allow her to elaborate on Coetzee's stark landscape in terms of the human relations at the centre of this contemporary frontier story: between a modern-day *boervrou*, Lucy, Lurie's daughter, and her former assistant, Petrus – now her co-proprietor, a 'man of substance' in the Eastern Cape, whose house, built by a Land Claims grant, is, by the end of the novel, on a rise overlooking Lucy's homestead.

If Coetzee's grim realism is at once an updating of the colonial pastoral – a 'new South African' antipastoral (see also Barnard 2002; Lowry 1999), it also contains a Romantic or utopian dimension (see Cornwell, forthcoming). Certainly, if there is a hint of Coetzee's desire for the Romantic, and a possible interpretation of Lurie's attempts to compose a chamber opera on Byron in Italy, it is in his interview in *Doubling the Point* on the writings of Robert Musil.

I think of my own prose as rather hard and dry; but there remains in me a tug toward sensual elaboration – toward the late-Romantic symphony and away from the two-part invention, say. (1992: 208)

Recent work on *Disgrace* has described history in the novel as 'gloomy' (Attwell 2002: 338); or Coetzee's relationship with history and historiography as 'perpetually adversarial' (Barnard 2002: 391). But what if we look at it more productively? Is it not possible to read in *Disgrace* a *creative* engagement with history? History seems to be cyclical (thus gloomy), but Byron and the comic also intervene. After all, as Byron once remarked to his friend Lady Blessington: 'with me there is, as Napoleon said, but one step between the sublime and the ridiculous' (cited in MacCarthy 2002: vii).

Disgrace in 1999.

As Shelley noted, in *Don Juan*, Byron was writing ‘something wholly new & relative to the new age’ (cited in MacCarthy 2002: 399). Byron himself ‘insisted that *Don Juan* [was] ‘a satire on the *abuses* of the present state of society,’ and ‘the most moral of poems.’ (cited in Abrams and Stillingner [eds] 2001: 396) *Disgrace* is not, of course, like Melanie’s play, *Sunset at the Globe Salon*, a ‘comedy of the new South Africa’, but rather – as Zoë Wicomb has suggested in a forthcoming article – a story of ‘excess and magnification’. Thus, Coetzee’s seeming adoption of *realism* is undercut by a deceptive combination of modes and a jostling of stories. What *Disgrace* finally offers is both ‘reality’ and extremes of reality (as we read in Lucy’s choice),¹⁰ but also the possibility in the new South Africa of romance, of satire in the Byronic mode of *Don Juan*.

¹⁰ See Coetzee in Wark interview following his second Booker Prize win (1999a).

Bibliography

- Abrams, M. H. and Jack Stillinger, eds. (2001) *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 7th ed., Vol. 2A: 'The Romantic Age' (New York: W. W. Norton).
- Attridge, Derek (2000) 'Age of bronze, state of grace: music and dogs in J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*' , *Novel* 34, 1: 98-121.
- Attridge, Derek (2002) 'Introduction', *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 4, 3: 315-20. 'Special Topic: J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*', edited by Derek Attridge and Peter D. McDonald.
- Attwell, David (2002) 'Race in *Disgrace*', *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 4, 3: 331-41.. Special Topic: J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*, edited by Derek Attridge and Peter D. McDonald.
- Bainbridge, Simon (1995) *Napoleon and English Romanticism* (New York: Cambridge University Press 1).
- Barnard, Rita (2002) 'Country Ways', *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 4, 3: 384-94. 'Special Topic: J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*', edited by Derek Attridge and Peter D. McDonald.
- Barzun, Jacques (1953) 'Byron and the Byronic', *The Atlantic Monthly*. (See online edition: *The Atlantic Online*) www.theatlantic.com/issues/53aug/barzun.htm.
- Bowler, Thomas (1865) *The Kafir Wars and the British Settlers in South Africa: A Series of Picturesque Views*. From original sketches by T. W. Bowler. With descriptive letterpress by W. R. Thomson (London: Day & Son, Ltd. Capetown & Port Elizabeth: J. C. Juta. Graham's Town: C. Nixdorff. Edinburgh: Hill, Princes Street).
- Bradlow, Edna and Frank Bradlow (1955) *Thomas Bowler of the Cape of Good Hope: His Life and Works with a Catalogue of Extant Paintings* (Cape Town & Amsterdam: A. A. Balkema).
- Burchell, William J. (1819) *Hints for Emigration to the Cape of Good Hope* (London: J. Hatchard & Son).
- Burchell, William J. (1822 & 1824) *Travels in the Interior of Southern Africa*. 2 vols. (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme & Brown, Paternoster Row).
- Butler, Guy (ed) (1974) *The 1820 Settlers: An Illustrated Commentary* (Cape Town: Human & Rousseau).
- Butler, Marilyn (1981) *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries: English Literature and Its Background, 1760-1830*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Byron, George Gordon Baron. (1949) *Don Juan / Lord Byron*. With an introduction by Peter Quennell. (London : John Lehmann).

- Coetzee, J. M. (1999a). *Disgrace* (London: Secker & Warburg).
- Coetzee, J. M. (1992) *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*. Edited by David Attwell (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press).
- Coetzee, J. M. (1999b). Interview [by satellite] with Kirsty Wark upon receiving the Booker Prize in October 1999.. BBC Newsnight. Audio available online on www.bbc.com.
- Coetzee, J. M. (2001) *Stranger Shores: Essays 1986-1999*. (London: Secker & Warburg).
- Coetzee, J. M. (1997) 'What Is Realism?' *Salmagundi* 114/115: 60–81.
- Coetzee, J. M. (1988) *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa* (New Haven, Conn. & London: Yale University Press).
- Cornwell, Gareth (forthcoming) 'Disgraceland: History and the Humanities in Frontier Country', *English in Africa*.
- Cornwell, Gareth (2002) 'Realism, Rape and J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*'. *CRITIQUE: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 43, 4: 307-22.
- Crais, Clifton C. (1992) *The Making of the Colonial Order: White Supremacy and Black Resistance in the Eastern Cape, 1770-1865* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press).
- Day, Aidan (1996) *Romanticism*. [The New Critical Idiom.] London and New York: Routledge.
- Eve, Jeanette (2003) *A Literary Guide to the Eastern Cape: Places and the Voices of Writers* [with drawings and photographs by Basil Mills] (Wetton, Cape Town: Double Story Books [Juta]).
- Farred, Grant (2002a) 'Back to the borderlines: thinking race *Disgracefully*', *Scrutiny2: Issues in English Studies in Southern Africa* 7, 1 [Symposium on *Disgrace*]: 16-19.
- Farred, Grant (2002b) 'The Mundacity of Violence: Living in a State of Disgrace', *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 4, 3: 352-62. 'Special Topic: J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*', edited by Derek Attridge and Peter D. McDonald.
- Jeaffreson, John Cordy (1884) *The Real Lord Byron: the story of the poet's life* (London : Hurst and Blackett).
- Keegan, Timothy (1996) *Colonial South Africa and the Origins of the Racial Order* (London: Leicester University Press).
- Lester, Alan (2001) *Imperial Networks: Creating Identities in Nineteenth-Century South Africa and Britain* (London and New York: Routledge).
- Letcher, Valerie (2002) 'Five Years in Kaffirland: Harriet Ward, Frederick l'Ons and Nineteenth-century Ways of Looking at South Africa', *English in Africa* 29, 1: 5-25.
- Lowry, Elizabeth (1999) 'Like a Dog' [review of *Disgrace* and *The Lives of Animals*], *London Review of Books*. Online edition: www.lrb.co.uk/v21/n20/low2120.htm.

- MacCarthy, Fiona (2002) *Byron: Life and Legend* (London: John Murray).
- McKay, Helen M. (ed.) (1952) 'Introduction'. *Burchell's Landscapes*, Volume 2. *The South African Drawings of William J. Burchell* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press).
- Marais, Mike (2000) 'The possibility of ethical action: J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*', *Scrutiny2: Issues in English Studies in Southern Africa* 5, 1: 57-63.
- Mostert, Noël (1992) *Frontiers: The Epic of South Africa's Creation and the Tragedy of the Xhosa People* (New York: Knopf).
- Origo, Iris (2000 [1949]) *The Last Attachment: The Story of Byron and Teresa Guiccioli as told in their unpublished letters and other family papers* (Books & Co./Helen Marx Books). With a foreword by Jonathan Galassi.
- Pechey, Graham (2002) 'Coetzee's Purgatorial Africa: The Case of *Disgrace*', *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 4, 3:374-83. 'Special Topic: J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*', edited by Derek Attridge and Peter D. McDonald.
- Pringle, Thomas (1834) *African Sketches*. [In prose and verse.] (London: E. Moxon).
- Pringle, Thomas (1824) *Some Account of the Present State of the English Settlers in Albany, South Africa* (London: T. and G. Underwood; Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd).
- Taylor, Jane (1999) 'The impossibility of ethical action', *Mail and Guardian* 23-9 July: 25.
- van Wyk Smith, M. (2001) 'Borders of Solitude: Thomas Pringle and the Wordsworthian Imagination in South Africa', *Romantics and Revolutionaries: Proceedings of the 1998 AUETSA Conference*, edited by P. S. Walters, A. van der Vlies, T. van Niekerk and C. Hornby (Grahamstown: Department of English, Rhodes University).
- Wicomb, Zoë (forthcoming) 'Translation and Coetzee's *Disgrace*', *Journal of Literary Studies*.