

The search for grace: explorations in third space and writing South Africa in the 21st Century

I want to look at three novels, which explore the ‘problematics of space and identity’ so central to the South African existence. They are placed in settings, which explore the meeting point of rural and urban, of white and black of Christian and traditional African belief, of Science and Mythology, of academic research and lived realities. They portray place as an exploration of third space, of hybridity, exploring the question of whether the third space can be imagined in some concrete way, can be placed in a specific location.

In *Disgrace* the encounter between cultures is described as destructive, frightening violation. The outlook on the farm as at the university is bleak. David Lurie has nothing to offer the world but his tired cynicism as a lecturer; is defeated by the still conflicting cultures, the expedient pull of political correctness at the university and the vengeful, dominating act of land-reclaiming by Petrus on his daughter, Lucy. And yet there is a terrible and beautiful hope in his love for a dog, in his insistence on the dogs’ dignity, even in death, which is demeaning only if one assumes the relative values of animals and humans – and the novel defies those values, deliberately and clearly – when all is broken, nothing can be assumed, everything must be looked at afresh and love for a despised dog may be a kind of salvation.

The pastoral world to which Lurie flees from the cynical university is all but idyllic: it is poor, the climate is awful, the land is barren, the people hard. And yet in the tradition of pastoral writing, it is here, rather than in the jaded Cape Town where Lurie finds a way to go on. And the narrative of the new rural South Africa of the second part of the novel, questions the politically correct posturing of the university committee of the first half. The simplistic reading of David Lurie as the colonial white man taking possession of every woman he encounters and so deserving his fate, is not all. There is more going on here: yes historically the retribution of Petrus is apt, but personally; individually? If we look at the persons involved; at the crimes committed – what kind of a world is it that rewards what Petrus did yet punishes David Lurie who is sordid, perhaps, but not malevolent? If we accept that then we have agreed that racial identity is paramount in moral judgement and any other personal fidelities and choices matter not at all. Nevertheless David Lurie remains impossible to like and so the novel starkly drives home a truth about South Africa, where, like in Nazi Germany, even silence was a crime, and everyone is disgraced. And that is the overall sense of *Disgrace*: failure and degradation.

In David Lurie's daughter's story a more abiding theme of South African literature, of postcolonial literature can be found: the fraught question of the land. In Lucy's submission to Petrus' proposals, there is an almost complete role reversal of the previous land politics in South Africa. Violence and violation, fear and submission remain the dominant themes, albeit with dominance reversed. And it leads for me to the question of whether the land can become the site of that third space of postcolonial theory, not merely the site of a continual cycle of revenge.

The novel barely touches on where to turn for grace, preferring the rock bottom compassion extended to dogs, whose suffering has gone unnoticed in the spectacular proportions of the human one. And yet, even there – there is something of Ndebele's ordinary, of the mundane, which survives – perhaps even triumphs. Moments of grace survive (they are mostly bare inklings) and they begin with the love of a dog and the writing of music which is not a grand opera.

Bishop Tutu points to a way in his memoir of the Truth and Reconciliation hearings: *No Future without Forgiveness*. Because forgiveness, impossible as it is (and it *is* impossible, because unforgivable things were done), is the only thing which breaks the cycle of history, of colonialism's harm and revenge, in the same way as the gift breaks the cycle of exchange, of economy, according to Derrida. That is political and philosophical or theological/pastoral theory – how does that translate into literature? Can this debased, poverty-stricken and brutal rural world be written hopefully again?

In post Apartheid novels of South Africa the question of land ownership makes the pastoral genre almost a necessity. It is so much a part of the consciousness of all the people of South Africa – their place in relation to the land, post Apartheid, post brain drain, in the midst of land restitution, farm murders and a society which still struggles with the extremes of rural poverty and the bleak hope offered by urbanisation.

The disgraced pastoral genre in South Africa is making a kind of comeback: not only in Coetzee's own writing but also in Marguerite Poland's *Shades* and *Recessional for Grace*, in Andre Brink's *Praying Mantis* and in my *The White Kudu*. The landscape shapes the narrative in these novels, and becomes a searching moral exploration of the relationship between people and people; between people and the land.

A place may be the source of intimacy. It compensates for loss. Intrinsicly it can't betray.

It can be built – and even shared.

It can be beloved.

(Recessional for Grace, p305)

Here is what Bachelard writes about inhabited space transcending geometric space and of the valorisation of a centre of concentrated solitude, which becomes also a community of resistance to the storm. However he also states that ‘the space we love is unwilling to remain closed forever’. The place in which things are experienced, where a narrative forms, takes on values and becomes beloved – becomes home. Hendrik explains it to Joshua in *The White Kudu* as knowing the names of places and the places knowing your name and therefore being able to talk to you. Bachelard, quoting William Goyen, describes it thus:

That people could come into the world in a place they could not at first even name and had never known before; and that out of a nameless and unknown place they could grow and move around in it until they knew and called with love, and call it HOME, and put roots there and love others there; so that whenever they left this place they would sing homesick songs about it and write poems of yearning for it,

(The Poetics of Place, p58)

Can such places, can a beloved home, which demands our protection, in novels become a trope for an encounter with otherness, which does not lead to violence, or rejection or dominance? And can the stories of these places function as ways of healing? Can the broken middle of South Africa be mended?

The answers in these novels are tentative at best. In *Recessional for Grace* there is the cattle byre, which Poland describes elsewhere:

There is an old cattle byre on the plain below Ubombo made over a century ago from the twisted branches of trees. The wood is ancient, petrified into shapes, almost rocklike, the palisades deeply supported by cow dung laid in layers for generations. There is a reverence in the place (as there is in any cattle byre), a fragrant silence when the herd is at pasture, a sense of community and ease when it is kraaled. It is here that the ancestral shades gather, where the cows are milked, where the herd is brought at night, where the drongo calls, in praise of cattle.

(The Abundant Herds, p10)

The cattle byre is the heart of a Zulu homestead. But in her novel the cattle byre lies in the shadow of the ridge of the jackal, the place of lamentation, the sacred pool contains the

corpse of a cow. There is a dead fly in the holy water font in Godfrey's mother's room. Homes, even sacred homes are not inviolable.

In Andre Brink's *Praying Mantis* the places, the settings are all initially comfortably recognisable settings of South African colonial narrative: farms, wilderness and mission stations, one-horse border towns, but they are written from both points of view - the missionnee and the missionary.

Each place becomes inhabited space as described by Bachelard in *Poetics of Space* through Cupido's reverential dialogue with Heitsi Eibib, with Anna, with animals. This changes at Graaff Reinet, when he becomes Christian, though his dialogues with the Christian God have the same tone as those with Heitsi Eibib, they are no longer linked to the place he is in, this God has no deictic references and Anna, Cupido's wife know that something is lost thereby, the world is no longer home but a long exile:

'What will become of us when he turns me away from Tkaggen, or you from Tsui Goab? What will happen if I can no longer dream the way I am used to?'

'Who says that will happen?'

'He speaks about his own Lord-God. He doesn't belong among us.'

'Don't you think there is enough space around for Tsui-Goab and Heitsi-Eibib and Tkaggen together with his Lord-God?'

'No, Cupido. Soon you will see there is no longer enough space for them all. The day will come, just you wait, when he will tell us: Now you must choose. It is either one or the other.'

(*Praying Mantis*, p106)

And so, though at Dithakong there is immensity and openness to the gods, the mission cannot acknowledge it anymore and so each space remains its own, there is no third space developed between the missionary and the traditional Khoisan beliefs, which Brother Read had been able to maintain precariously. It is destroyed, because of an insistence on unitary and exclusive narratives by which places are either wilderness or redeemed. They cannot be both, once Brother Read is gone.

The third space is precarious in *Praying Mantis*, is fragile. There is much that stands against it: Brother Moffat, the border clashes, land disputes, history.

In *Recessional for Grace* that same exclusivity threatens the possibility of plurality: here it is largely intellectual attitude, which insists on a unitary version, on only one root

metaphor for the narrator's work on the Nguni cattle names. Love and beauty are not permitted within academic work, an academic study must remain only that, beauty is an inadmissible word. She is to complete a dictionary, not redeem a life. Yet the narrator of *Recessional for Grace* knows that the academic work is not enough – she wants the human story, too.

The human story is not approached directly – the narrative is circumspect; it is imaginative fiction and research at once and the places where it lived are already in the past, can only be reconstructed imaginatively and even that remains a recessional. The reader is never actually within the sanctuary, is always already retreating from it.

The only facts the narrative allows, are the photograph of the inala patterned cow, Godfrey's note about his umwemwe calf, the fragile one, which was slaughtered by his father for expedience; and a place called Enseleni. But the painting of the cow, which should have confirmed the redemption, cannot be found by the narrator, despite Godfrey's unmistakable map. The imagined third space in which traditional African culture, western academic traditions, love and the sacred could all exist together can be imagined, but it cannot quite be found. A glimpse has to be enough – because for the narrator, that makes the rest bearable.

And what happens to the pastoral when it is set in a harsh rather than a lush or lyrical landscape? It examines the relationships all the more critically and urgently as it does so at the limits, symbolised by a landscape, often drought-stricken, which challenges survival. *The White Kudu* is set at the edge of a desert. The desert is Bachelard's immensity, while the farm like a house is a site of intimacy. And both exist only in the long shadow of the colonial past and the new shadow of neo-colonialism, of the need for finance from the Western world, which too often still defines the limits of even the African Renaissance. In the desert, the pastoral narrative becomes also an exploration of mortality – an encounter with death, which according to Levinas is the final boundary of our sameness – death is the ultimate other we encounter. It defines our final limits and so becomes the basis of our ethics, which Derrida explores in the idea of hospitality.

Because it is at these points of liminality, of encounter with the other that hybridity, third space, openness (call it what you will) matters. It is here that it moves from confusion and a broken middle to hospitality and the mood can shift from anxiety to celebration. This mood, this cultural space seems to be where hybridity, the third space is situated. In stories - in the spirit of showing not telling - authors choose to approach it through a concrete, imagined place, because it is and it isn't; it's mythopoeic, it's the kingdom of God, it is hybridity – heresy insurrection and deconstruction. It is N'osimasi the time of the Gods when

animals were still human, when they and the plants all talked to us. The South African farm, hovering between the domestic and the wild, between man and nature and where black and white have always already worked and lived more closely together, and where some of the traditional African culture has not been entirely destroyed offers such a place of meeting; an objective correlative through which to explore that third space.

In *The White Kudu* space from the beginning is not entirely definable. The farm which is the main site of action is called Pniel – named for the biblical place in which Jacob wrestled with an angel – an encounter therefore of two worlds. The veld there is described as meeting place of Karoo and Kalahari; everything is liminal: Joshua the scientist must deal with the valorisation of the land he is exploring with mythical belief and his role in that.

No one in the novel has only one identity: Adam is both farmer and philosopher; Hendrik is farmhand and shaman, Joshua is both exploration geologist and must become mythical hunter in the local legend. And each one plays some part in the story of the white kudu, which dreams them all repeatedly, as Hendrik said.

The harsh climate, the difficult history - national, tribal and personal - make the place all but non-inhabitable. What makes it inhabitable is hospitality – the willingness to be in the presence of otherness and not to reduce it, to fit it to the shapes of a unitary perception of the world.

And every interpretation of its meaning is undercut by different possibilities – as in the conversation between Hendrik and Joshua about the moon, which is both lifeless rock and a feather from the bird of truth. The narratives deconstruct each other – they can perhaps not both be true, and yet they are – that is the impossible third space which the characters have to inhabit.

When I first began working on this piece, this ‘something about hybridity in contemporary South African novels’, I realised that I was not thinking about Bhabha’s carefully defined and not defined third space. I was thinking of a feeling that I have had all my life: of belonging and not belonging, of exile and home being the same place. My understanding of the concept of hybridity is based on my experience of growing up in Apartheid South Africa, a multiple outsider. I was born of German speaking parents on a Mission farm. And when we first went to school, we were suspect because our parents were missionaries and so stood in a different place to other whites in the race relations of the country; we were suspect because we worshipped in a different church, and we were suspect because we spoke a different language. Then we were moved to an English medium school

and once again we were outsiders – for similar reasons, now doubled. And all the while at home, on the farm we lived in a strange mixture of the usual feudal farmer labourer relationship, but also in the more pastoral relationship of a mission station. We grew up speaking three languages, worshipping in several churches and learning the manners and habits of several cultures.

We simply knew that no-one was completely right: that everything every belief and statement and feeling and attachment was localised, contextualised, was partial, though it might at times feel complete. And it is with delight now that I, having grown up in a country which favoured division and totality, which did not appreciate links between people across barriers it was at great pains to set up, discover that there are many others who feel that way too, and suddenly the exile finds that this home after all. That not all heresy must live on the margins alone.

Nevertheless, hybridity is an abstract place, it is hard to define and pin down partly because that is what it stands against: certainty totality. It seems to be at least a cousin of Keats' negative capability as well as to Derrida's deconstruction.

On the most practical level, in terms of how to live this hybridity, most helpful is Amartya Sen's description of all identity as plural and as choice not destiny. Identity is so often central to South African narrative, as Joel Matlou explores in his cycle of short stories, which fragment the unitary identity of the protagonist usual in a bildungsroman.

Single identities are no longer viable, they become incoherent and the decision to value one above the other, as happens in Coetzee's *Youth* causes only unhappiness, an overwhelming sense of hopeless inferiority and that lost-ness which characterises so much of the youth in South Africa. But that depends on the value placed on hybridity, whether identity-confusion is seen as a negative or progressive thing.

And in a country in which there has been so much talk of destiny, especially of group destiny, people are now writing novels about choice. Difficult choices, personal choices that have ramification in spiritual as well as political and moral spheres.

Cupido Cockroach decides to become a Christian and then a missionary, he decides to learn to write, he chooses his fate, which includes all his gods. Clement Godfrey chooses expedience and abandons his herd, abandons Grace and his work on the cattle names and breeding – he abandons his mythopoetic world and denies that love and beauty matter.

Grace is left to shoulder the disgrace, as Miriam is in *The White Kudu* and they share Cupido's confusion and despair when the world they believed was true, and right is denied by someone they trusted or loved. It is a collision of world views and values, which leads only to

pain because the various identities of the characters are not allowed. There is no place for a third space in the narrative of Clement Godfrey, John Shackleton or Brother Moffat. And in such narratives confusion and horror are inevitable, destined in the clash of cultures which occurred during colonialism and Apartheid - and that is South Africa's version of Gillian Rose's broken middle. But beyond these three characters, these three novels also do more than explore the anguish of this broken middle. Tentatively, some of the characters do more than get unstuck on the root-metaphors of a divided nation. They accept their own shifting plurality; the narratives open up and the confusion, which was destructive, becomes joyful and ultimately healing. For Cupido this happens only right at the end, when Arend comes to take him away after he has written his final letter to God; but for Joshua and the people of Abelshoop it comes sooner; it comes when Joshua becomes Mvundla and Sharon becomes Kamiyo – both African praise names and nicknames for the parts they have played in the lives of the people of Abelshoop.

What in *Disgrace* is defeat because there is only submission and refusal to shift perspective here becomes celebration. In these novels the result of insisting on a single identity is loneliness; but they also suggest there is another choice, when faced with what is strange.

How do we relate to that which is strange? Derrida suggests that the alterity of the other places us under an obligation of hospitality. Because it is in the encounter with what is other that the characters fully realise their own limits and thereby their mortality, and so reach empathy for the other. Hospitality must be unconditional as must forgiveness in Derrida.

The White Kudu explores narrative as hospitality as the demand for it, the refusal of it and the final sharing of it. Joshua, an Englishman arrives at a town in a hybrid setting, it is both Karoo and Kalahari, shifting from one to the other, and it is a meeting place. He is drawn into a story, is told he is a character in the story and he must respond. He a scientist must decide whether he believes the story and how he will live with that. The future of the whole community hinges on whether he responds generously, with hospitality or reductively, expediently as his predecessor had done. He responds more or less generously and so, at the end of the novel, material existence has stabilised for the inhabitants of Abelshoop; the discovery of mineral wealth has made the local economy viable and life can go on. But the source of the economy, mining is destabilising the land, because the farm, which functions in South African narratives like Bachelard's house for the psyche, is physically destabilised, made hollow and shaky and subject to seismic events by the mine, which historically is also

the main pull of urbanisation and so became antithesis: a site of the conflict of urban and rural, English and Afrikaans; white and black in South Africa.

So healing and acceptance happen in very concrete terms at the same time and through the same means as destabilisation: the new names, the new landscape of dumps and holes and mine heads, make life both possible and frighteningly changeable. None of the characters can go back home. The moment of reconciliation is not permanent, N'osimasi, for all the mine's political expedience in choosing it as a name, belongs to legend and not to life. It cannot be captured except in story; and the middle where people live and love and work and eat and die must remain broken, as Gillian Rose insists.

The broken middle cannot be mended. The way life can go on is through further exploitation. The land and the people have both been irremediably harmed by history and all the people are exiles, in the place where long ago their ancestors were at home. And maybe that is what hybridity is – it is not finding a different, less broken world, but knowing how, tentatively and in great uncertainty to live in the broken one – aware of one's own responsibility in that, aware of which fragments one is responsible for – and so can belong to, for a while and painfully.

Forgiveness, hospitality, welcoming a stranger - these are the gifts in these novels, which interrupt the narrative and economy of the worlds described. In all of them in some way the narrative is disrupted. Whether it is by the constant intrusion of the narrator as in *Recessional for Grace*, which unsettles the reader but also draws him in, allowing him the choice of what to believe; or whether it is the sense of the white kudu legend determining Joshua's story, determining history; Narratives about that third space, it seems must be tentative, disrupted, careful and questioning.

In each novel there are characters, which refuse the story, refuse to become part of it, insist that they remain untouched by the experience of liminality. Godfrey chooses expedience over his love for Grace and his Nguni herd. And Grace knows that when he does that, 'nothing is sacred' anymore, the gift of grace has been refused. The result is betrayal and despair.

Because the pastoral third space of these novels is a mythopoeic world, not mimetic, it requires co-operation, requires Bachelard's community against the storm - like the world of Heitsi Eibib in *Praying Mantis*, but also the world of the Christian missionaries, who made of drought and war and persecution God's will and so endured.

That mythopoeic world is narrative. Hendrik says to Joshua, in *The White Kudu* the desert has begun to tell you its stories. Subversion of genres, opening up of old narratives, the

realisation of the layers in stories and then placing these newly discovered stories in a South African reality is a way of being hospitable, of living in hybridity, which is to be constantly deconstructing, joyfully and fearfully – to discover the other in the self, to discover difference and others where all seemed to cohere, yet not turn away from that.

The discovery is uncertain, the narrative tentative, because the margin for error is huge and has been transgressed so often and so brutally and failure is a constant possibility:

Disgrace shows this failure, with a bare flicker of hope; *Praying Mantis* explores the despair of having known hybridity, but seeing it refused. *Recession for Grace* shows abundance abandoned and regretted. In *the White Kudu* I have tried to explore what happens after such a failure. Can those who come after pick up the pieces, can the story be redeemed and the white kudu go home? Yes and no. The white kudu goes home, life becomes possible again even bearable, but at great cost. Because in a world dominated by the separation of the I and the other, dominated by the ideas of a clash of civilisations, of doomed and destined identities and narratives which, in creative writing classes around the world must be based on conflict; the gift, abundance is glimpsed only in its impossibilities, but the hope of it, the finding it however briefly, remains sacred. And that: briefly, barely contained in space and time is the third space.

So one writes South Africa as third space, not an easy, brochured Rainbow nation, where all is well now, nor as something soteriological, it is not always still coming, it is here now, because it can be simply the knowledge that love and the beauty of patterned cows are admissible and thereby the ordinary becomes the extra-ordinary – in the broken middle. It is a place where grace is always already retreating, but it is also a place where the need for grace remains admissible, recognised, celebrated.

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