Lessons from the Dead Masters: 
Wordsworth and Byron in J. M. Coetzee’s 
Disgrace 

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As one whose research interests lie in the field of Romanticism, most specifically Wordsworth and Byron, I was obviously intrigued by J. M. Coetzee’s use of these poets in Disgrace. Subsequent readings of the work have convinced me that more attention needs to be paid to the deeper implications of their presence in the text. Certainly many scholars have explored the significance of David Lurie’s professional interest in the Romantic poets and the novel’s imbeddedness in what Jane Taylor has referred to as “the European Enlightenment’s legacy of the autonomy of the individual” as well as a specifically “eighteenth century model of philosophical sympathy” (1999, 25). Yet I feel that insufficient attention has been paid to the significance of Romanticism, the Wordsworthian and the Byronic in the novel. Generally, the commentary ranges from seeing Lurie’s academic interests as symptomatic of his white colonialist mentality to a more nuanced but insufficiently developed focus on the possibilities lying behind Coetzee’s startling juxtaposition of two of the most famed and yet most overtly antagonistic of the Romantic poets. Zoë Wicomb is representative of the first approach. In her estimation, Lurie may be rejected since he “looks to Europe as the centre of reference” and “our feelings and experiences of nature need not be structured by poetic discourses from the metropolis” (2000, 216).1

I feel that such criticisms lead to an inadequate reading of the significance of Wordsworth and Byron in the novel. Much more is going on in Disgrace than a simplistic anti-Eurocentricism, and the ethical and political dimensions of early nineteenth-century Romanticism cannot be
dismissed as irrelevant metropolitanism. The troubled early decades of nineteenth-century Europe, with their questioning and rejection of centuries-old power structures and authority figures, can speak to present-day South Africans. Likewise, the Romantic belief in the need to resist the atomistic tendencies of rampant industrialization and capitalism and the concomitant destruction of our very planet, which forms a current in this novel, has an obvious bearing on life in contemporary South Africa. The same is obviously true of Coetzee’s concern with the power of the empathetic imagination to awaken us to the needs of others, both human and animal.

John Douthwaite, while equally judgemental of Lurie’s specialization, recognises the nuanced use Coetzee makes of Romanticism. He points out that ironically Lurie is no romantic and that his Romantic class, though optional, is obviously not inspiring its members (2001, 143). He further notes that Lurie uses culture as a weapon “which he deploys constantly to assert his identity as a superior being, and consequently his right to appropriation and suppression of the inferior” (2001, 156-7). Douthwaite is not alone in noting Lurie’s “total lack of psychological and emotional involvement,” although he does not point out that it is precisely this that both Wordsworth and Byron deplored (2001, 131). Perhaps Douthwaite’s most intriguing point vis-à-vis the Romantic component of the novel is that “intertextuality may be seen as another important device deployed in Disgrace to subvert Lurie’s discourse” (2001, 157). However, Douthwaite does not pursue this in his article, which is concerned primarily with an illuminating close reading of linguistic features. It is this subversion of, or as I prefer to argue, the ironic potential of, both Lurie’s field of study and the juxtaposition in the novel of Wordsworth and Byron which will form the basis of this paper.

There are some critics who have treated the Romantic aspects at greater length. Michael Marais’s focus on the “excessive alterity” of Lucy Lurie as deeply revealing of Coetzee’s interest in a “respect for the otherness of other beings” trembles on the brink of a truly Wordsworthian theme (2001c, 37, 38). Wordsworth’s poetry is frequently concerned with questions of “otherness.” The poetry of the 1790s constantly focuses on the outcasts and the marginalized and the very real difficulties entailed in bridging the divide between middle-class poet and these figures. Marais is also interested in the philosophical component of the novel and he notes the specifically nineteenth-century Hegelian interest in “the relation of dominance and subservience” (2001c, 33). In earlier articles Marais has pointed out that the dominant movement in Disgrace is “determined by a tension between desire and responsibility” (2000b, 174) and that Lurie’s relations with others are
“instrumental relations” (2000a, 60). The Romantics, writing in the wake of the French Revolution, were as concerned with the competing values of desire and responsibility, or, in the terms of the period – rights and duties – as they were with defending art against the demands of a growing instrumentalism in human relations and the growth of capitalist values. It is Wordsworth who forlornly notes in his great sonnet how “getting and spending we lay waste our powers.” 2 I feel that Marais raises issues which can be seen as those of the Romantic period without himself choosing to pursue these specific links.3

The title of Rita Barnard’s paper “Disgrace and the South African Pastoral” points to her concern with “the erosion of the old pastoral opposition of country and city” which is a quintessentially Wordsworthian theme (2003, 206). Yet her slightly altered rendering of Wordsworth’s famous phrase as “spot in time” (2003, 218) when discussing Lurie’s sight of Lucy among the flowerbeds, perhaps best shows that her attention is not wholly on a Wordsworthian reading of Lucy Lurie even though her identification of “death, change and the confrontation of otherness” as an important theme in the novel inevitably calls to mind the Lucy poems (2003, 203n3). Indeed, Barnard specifically cites Wicomb’s reading when herself commenting on Lurie’s unsuccessful attempts to inspire his students with a Wordsworthian moment (2003, 216).

Perhaps most indicative of the paucity of critical focus on the Romantic elements in the text is that the issue of Scrutiny2 devoted to a “Symposium on Disgrace” contains little other than Lucy Graham’s brief discussion of Lurie’s Prelude class (2002, 7). Graham, however, does not point out how Wordsworth is being misread here. She, like others, sees the Romantic tradition as one that has “aided and abetted his [Lurie’s] misuse of Melanie” (2003, 12) with little attention to the gap between Lurie’s abuse of his Romantic “masters” and what those “masters” might have taught him. Indeed her identification of Coetzee’s interest in “how it is possible to care for the other if that other is infinitely unknowable” (2003, 11) does not go that step further to reveal that it is that which lies at the very heart of Wordsworth’s agonised poems about illiterate vagrants and all those others who are seemingly remote from middle-class experience.

Besides the lack of critical attention there has also been some misrepresentation of Romanticism and the Romantic period. Like Wicomb, Colleen M. Sheils sees Lurie’s Romantic interests merely as proof of his “escape to the traditions of a European literary past” (2003, 40). She argues that because he has “lost a sense of belonging in his own country, he draws from the traditions of an imperial culture” (2003, 40).4
In the light of such omissions or misunderstandings I wish to emphasise some specifically Romantic ideas and focus on the ways in which Coetzee uses Wordsworth and Byron (and how Lurie frequently misuses them). It would seem that Coetzee has deliberately yoked two apparently contrasting poets from the High Romantic period in order to emphasise ways in which, despite the differences between them and the vast cultural and historical differences between nineteenth-century Europe and late twentieth-century South Africa, these poets imaginatively face up to the difficulties underlying human relations as well as the complex interaction with the world we all live in. My purpose is not to offer a complete reading, but merely to alert readers to the nuanced texture of the Romantic context of the novel in the hope that this will enrich our reading of a novel which has already been discussed imaginatively and provocatively.

**Wordsworth and Byron: meaningful contrasts**

At the risk of succumbing to what Marais has called the “simplistic dualisms” which have often characterised the critical reception of the novel (2001c, 33), I will list some of the major dichotomies which stem from the juxtaposition of Wordsworth and Byron. Coetzee, I will argue, uses these dichotomies both to structure the novel and to sharpen the issues for they foreground the quintessentially Romantic interest in the paradoxical oppositions which lie at the heart of the fully experienced life.

The major settings in *Disgrace* are Cape Town and the farm near Salem, and the novel’s trajectory is from the urban to the rural. There is also a movement from the “brisk winter air” (1999, 11) to spring (196) and, finally, the summer season of blooming” (216). We are soon told that Lurie has elected to give a course on the Romantic poets and that he has written a book on Wordsworth but is now “playing with the idea of a work on Byron” (4). In this novel set in the new South Africa of 1997 there appears that earlier watershed period when the French Revolution had overturned the old regime and with it all the old certainties, when the urban was encroaching visibly on rural England and when this rural/urban contrast was neatly encapsulated by the two most successful poets of the period, the rural and supposedly simple Wordsworth and the urban and deeply sophisticated Byron. These oppositions suffuse the novel.

Lurie’s concern with passion, both his awareness of the waning possibilities of sexual passion or the more aesthetic “literary passions” that he quizzes Melanie about (13), is a deeply Byronic concern. The layperson’s idea of Byron – handsome libertine, disgraced outcast, gloomy and
rebellious satirist, author of works like *Cain, Lara, Mazeppa, Don Juan*, all of whose eponymous heroes are thought to be autobiographically revealing – is of course a caricature, best summed up by Caroline Lamb's witty but highly partisan “mad, bad and dangerous to know” which Lucy Lurie teasingly uses to describe her father (77). Byron both was and was not the character the world took him for. Certainly, Byron could render the grand operatic mode which strongly contrasted with Wordsworth’s deliberate attempt to achieve simplicity of manner. Sexual passion too was important to Byron in ways that it was not (at least publicly) important to Wordsworth. The tragedy of the fleeting nature of passion is rendered both in Byron’s *Letters* (most notably in those of 1820 which Lurie is currently reading) and, hauntingly, in the great lyric of 1817 alluded to by Lurie, “The end of roving. Though the heart be still as loving and the moon be still as bright. Who would have thought it would come to an end so soon and so suddenly: the roving, the loving!” (120). Yet it is the paradox of passion, that it is both a destructive and a creative force, which was Byron’s abiding subject: “there is a fire / And motion of the soul . . . a fever at the core, / Fatal to him who bears [it]. . . .” (*Childe Harold* 3.42).

The words ‘disgrace’ and ‘grace’ inevitably have Byronic and Wordsworthian significance. Byron’s self-exile was part of his perceived ‘disgrace’ as Lurie reminds his students: “He went to Italy to escape a scandal. . . . notoriety and scandal affected not only Byron’s life but the way in which his poems were received by the public” (1999, 15, 31). Conversely, the concept of grace is essential in Wordsworth’s thinking. The word itself occurs more than seventy times in his poems where it implies a blessed state, both morally and artistically. Two of the major female characters in *Disgrace* are derived from the works of Wordsworth and Byron, Lucy and Teresa, daughter and mistress. It is Lurie’s relationship with his daughter and with the Teresa story that forms a vital part of the novel’s meaning.

**Wordsworth: the paradox of simplicity**

Before I discuss the paradoxical merging of these contrasting referents I will trace sequentially the major Wordsworthian and Byronic references in the novel. On the fourth page we learn that Lurie’s third published work was on Wordsworth. The title of this work is hardly exhilarating, *Wordsworth and the Burden of the Past*, although alluding to a plausible topic of Wordsworthian scholarship, also inevitably suggests a depressing inheritance likely to smother poet, scholar or reader. Lurie first speaks of Wordsworth to Melanie: “He has been one of my masters” (13). This sounds
both pompous and complacent. Similarly assured is his opinion that “for as long as he can remember the harmonies of *The Prelude* have echoed within him” (13). Another of Lurie’s opinions is that the “origins of speech lie in song” (4). Yet he has little understanding of either harmonies or the lyric. The novel will reveal the ways in which the starved and weak “lyric impulse” emerges, sufficient only to make him humbly recognise how uncertain, precarious and rare is artistic creativity (214). He explains to Melanie at this early stage that poetry is like “a flash of revelation and a flash of response” (214). Although the phrasing might be Wordsworthian (Wordsworth’s daffodils “flash upon that inward eye”), the arrogant assumption (“in my experience”) is far removed from Wordsworth’s awareness of the unpredictable and unmerited nature of such illumination. The word “flash” appears again in the great apostrophe to the Imagination which follows on from the very section of *The Prelude* which Lurie discusses with his uncomprehending class (21-3). In the lines from *The Prelude* quoted by Lurie, Wordsworth is contrasting two ways of seeing, seeing literally with the eye, the most despotic of the senses, and seeing imaginatively. The apostrophe to the Imagination that follows (Prel. 6.592-616) tells of the invisible world revealed “with a flash” – awe-inspiring, bewildering, animating and, like grace, unexpected, undeserved, a blessing. Undoubtedly, Lurie has little imaginative insight at this stage. His world-weariness combines with a shockingly instrumental use of the Wordsworth text to convey “covert intimacies” to Melanie, an attitude both disrespectful of the poem and blind to the deeper implications of the lines (1999, 23). He might pontificate to the class but at this stage he shows no sign of internalising that vital Romantic concept, the empathetic imagination.

The crucial importance of the imagination to Wordsworth is further alluded to by Coetzee at the end of Chapter Five: “William Wordsworth (1770-1850), nature-poet. David Lurie (1945-?), commentator upon, and disgraced disciple of, William Wordsworth. Blest be the infant babe. No outcast he. Blest be the babe” (1999, 46).

The nature of this statement is striking in its formality and, in its allusion to the “babe,” strangely elliptic. This elliptic allusion to the second book of *The Prelude* “Blest the infant Babe . . . No outcast he” (233, 241) has not received sufficient critical attention. The context from which the slightly misquoted words come is worth pointing out. After a paragraph extolling Coleridge as one to whom the “unity of all hath been revealed” (221), Wordsworth apostrophises the “infant Babe” who, blessed by being nursed and rocked in his loving mother’s arms, acquires “[a] virtue which irradiates and exalts / Objects” (239-40). He is thus “[n]o outcast” (241) for “[a]long
his infant veins are interfused / The gravitation and the filial bond / Of nature that connect him with the world” (242-44). More important even than this sense of connectedness with both animate and inanimate nature is the moral sense with which the babe learns to respond to the other: “already shades / Of pity cast from inward tenderness / Do fall around him upon aught that bears / Unsightly marks of violence of harm” (248-51). It is this empathy with others (the dogs, Bev Shaw, even Pollux), the hard path which Lurie must travel, that makes this final paragraph of Chapter Five deeply ironic. Either Lurie is forgetful of the context from which the words come or Coetzee is reminding his readers of this context. It was from Coleridge that Wordsworth learnt that “we are all one Life” (Griggs 2: 864), a sentiment which inspired the latter’s strongly held conviction, expressed forcefully in “The Old Cumberland Beggar,” that “we have all of us one human heart” (1: 267). Later in The Prelude we read: “By love subsists / All lasting grandeur, / That gone, we are as dust” (1: 267). A moral sense was inextricably linked with creative ability in Wordsworth’s philosophy. A little further on from the previously quoted lines we read: “This spiritual Love acts not nor can exist / Without Imagination” (188-9). The “blest the infant Babe” paragraph concludes with one of Wordsworth’s greatest statements about the poetic spirit which ideally infuses both the literal poet and all mankind. The Babe, “[f]rail creature as he is,” lives “an inmate of this active universe,” infused with power thereby to become “creator and receiver both, / Working but in alliance with the works / Which it beholds” (253, 254, 258-60). It is for these reasons that I would agree with Marais that the novel demonstrates in his words an “imaginative identification” which becomes an “ethical attempt” (2000a, 57). As Lurie falteringlly learns humility and the need to love the unlovable, so the blasé Romantic scholar becomes the incipient artist.

Coetzee’s significant use of names has been noted by many. Light and dark antitheses are obvious. Melanie, whose name is derived from the Greek word for ‘dark,’ suggestive of her exoticism (in Lurie’s eyes), transmutes into ‘Gloria’ on the stage of the Dock Theatre. She is also the antithesis in name to Lucy, derived from the Latin word for ‘light.’ Lurie makes love to Melanie on the bed in his daughter’s former room (1999, 29), a yoking of the mistress and daughter which will have metaphorical significance later in the novel as the mistress figure of Teresa Guiccioli is brought into apposition with the daughter, Lucy. Most of the novel takes place in the environs of the smallholding near Salem where Lucy now lives alone, her companion, Helen (another name with light connotations, from helios, the sun) having left for Johannesburg. Lucy might well have been named after Wordsworth’s Lucy, given her father’s research interests. Certainly, the Wordsworthian
association is uppermost in Lurie’s otherwise odd comment “Today, dogs and daffodils” (62). Since when have daffodils been the likeliest flowers to be grown on a rather modest smallholding near Salem?

Wordsworth’s five poems centring on the Lucy figure are most notable for their extraordinary combination of simplicity of expression and ambiguity of meaning. What is clear is that all of the poems consider issues of otherness, change and death – themes which critics such as Rita Barnard have stressed in readings of the novel (2003, 203 n.3). As with the Lucy poems, the important question in Disgrace is how to read the enigmatic Lucy figure, for the reader, like this character’s father, is in danger of “miss [ing] the point entirely” (112).10

Like Wordsworth’s Lucy, who unostentatiously ‘dwells’ in her environment, Lucy Lurie is immediately shown as quietly at ease in her simple surroundings:

‘And you? Is this what you want in life?’ He waves a hand toward the garden, toward the house with sunlight glinting from its roof.

‘It will do,’ replies Lucy quietly.

(70)

Many critics have noted how Lucy is, in Georgina Horrell’s words, “naturally ‘imbedded,’ planted in her environment” (2002, 27). At her smallholding the Wordsworthian ideal of being part of nature immediately starts to affect Lurie. He performs, for him, the extraordinary action of lying down beside a dog, “He stretches out beside her on the bare concrete. Above is the pale blue sky. His limbs relax.” (1999, 78; my emphasis).11

The Wordsworthian echoes accumulate. When Lurie is listening to Lucy giving her edited version of the attack to the two policemen, into his mind comes the juxtaposition “Lucy’s secret; his disgrace” (109). Once again the yoking of the terms is meaningful from a Wordsworthian perspective. Lurie’s disgrace is the opposite of Lucy’s secret. She conceals from the policemen aspects of the incident. She has her own reasons for doing this, and these arise from her particular way of being in the world. This way of being is manifested later as involving grace, an association underlined when Rosalind misremembers Lucy’s friend’s name as “Grace” (187).12 When Lurie later talks to Mr Isaacs he broadens his previously narrow conception of his disgrace and speaks of it as a state of being (172). In Wordsworth’s terms the state of being without grace is the condition of us all and the beneficence of grace is a gift rarely bestowed and never guaranteed. Perhaps the most notable and earliest depiction in his work comes in “The Leechgatherer” of 1802, a poem which focuses on a favourite
Wordsworthian theme, the unknowability of the other. It is “by peculiar grace, / A leading from above, a something given” (50-1) that the downcast Traveller meets the old Leechgatherer and is thereby given solace on which he can constantly draw, not unlike that given the speaker by the golden daffodils or the song of the solitary reaper. Lucy Lurie’s inscrutable choice of living is one which her father must both accept and acknowledge. The father will learn from the child for, as Wordsworth knew, there are all kinds of ways in which conventional roles are reversed and “[t]he Child is father to the Man.”

When he reads the inaccurate Herald report Lurie is pleased for he feels that “David Lurie, disciple of nature poet William Wordsworth” will hardly be recognised in the description of the events surrounding a “Mr Lourie” (1999, 116). Is this a way of suggesting his growing discomfort with the previous self-description? How much was he ever really a disciple of William Wordsworth? How much has he ever understood the essence of Wordsworth’s following impassioned plea?:

Why is it we feel
So little for each other, but for this,
That we with nature have no sympathy,
Or with such things as have no power to hold
Articulate language?
(“Fragment from the Alfoxden Notebook” 1.268)

Lurie is changing, he is “losing himself day by day” (1999, 121). He initially sees this as negative, “[t]his is not what he came for . . . If he came for anything, it was to gather himself, gather his forces” (121). It is this however which lies at the heart of the empathetic imagination. Still later, recalling Bev Shaw’s accusation “You don’t understand, you weren’t there,” he realizes “if he loses himself [he can] be there,” imaginatively at least (160). Yet he still finds Lucy increasingly unfathomable. He sees her as possibly “living in the shadow of the attack,” possibly becoming “a darker person altogether” (124). This is however the very essence of Wordsworth’s “Lucy,” the mysterious, the enigmatic, the infinitely paradoxical, and it is perhaps a measure of Lurie’s gradual change that he is becoming more alert to the strangeness of his beloved daughter. Within a page or two he is marvelling too at Bev Shaw:

How does she get it right, this communion with animals? Some trick he does not have. One has to be a certain kind of person, perhaps, with fewer complications.
The sun beats on his face in all its springtime radiance. Do I have to change, he thinks? Do I have to become like Bev Shaw? (126)

Who would have guessed Lurie would have come to this? Yet the “springtime radiance” is symbolic. The desired simplicity is one of the hardest but most essential of traits to acquire as “the simple Wordsworth” understood. Lurie is even able to contemplate a time when his daughter will guide him rather than the reverse (156). Yet already, unbeknown to him, she is guiding him and he is becoming more truly a “disciple of nature poet William Wordsworth” (116). Dining with Melanie Isaac’s family he describes life on the smallholding in what seems to him to sound like: “Country life in all its idiot simplicity. How he wishes it could be true! He is tired of shadows, of complications, of complicated people. He loves his daughter, but there are times when he wishes she were a simpler being: simpler and neater” (170). The irony is of course that Lucy’s simplicity is essentially enigmatic and Lurie has yet to discover both the determination and the intricacy of Lucy’s resolve.

Back briefly in his Cape Town home Lurie is snubbed by neighbours. This makes him think of “William Wordsworth on his first stay in London” seeing in a pantomime Jack the Giant Killer labelled “Invisible” (178). Yet the most memorable of labelled persons that Wordsworth describes seeing during that London visit is “a blind Beggar, who, with upright face, / Stood, propped against a wall, upon his chest / Wearing a written paper, to explain / His story, whence he came, and who he was” (Prel. 7.639-42). On seeing this man Wordsworth writes that his “mind turned round / As with the might of waters” (643-4). The labelled blind beggar becomes a fitting emblem of the theme which emerges from his London memories – that of urban alienation, “how men lived / Even next-door neighbours . . . yet still / Strangers, nor knowing each the other’s name” (116-8). Within the city his mind goes back in contrast to the Maid of Buttermere “who lives in peace . . . without contamination does she live / In quietness, without anxiety . . . Her new-born infant, fearless as a lamb” (320-5). Lurie is by now honest enough to recognise that it is he who has failed to attend to the lessons of the great poets, “So much for the poets, so much for the dead masters. Who have not, he must say, guided him well. Alter, to whom he has not listened well” (1999, 179). This is the man who had arrogantly claimed to Melanie that “Wordsworth has been one of my masters” (13). Slowly he is learning their lessons.

Returning to Salem he finds Lucy re-energised. She also challenges him to rethink her position in his hierarchy:
You behave as if everything I do is part of the story of your life. You are the main character, I am a minor character who doesn’t make an appearance until halfway through. Well, contrary to what you think, people are not divided into major and minor. I am not minor. I have a life of my own, just as important to me as yours is to you, and in my life I am the one who makes the decisions.

Bev Shaw explains Lucy’s strength as being tied to her secure sense of being. “She lives closer to the ground than you. Than either of us” (210). In the resonantly numbered Chapter twenty-four, our penultimate view of Lurie is of him visiting Lucy. Before the depiction of the courtliness of the visitation Lurie has a panoramic view of the farm from the hillcrest (216). It is the “season of blooming” and, among the flowers, Lucy is working (216). He watches her as “she bends over, clipping or pruning or tying” (217). The present participles, the girl in the distant landscape, the observer on the hill, all recall Wordsworth’s poem about the solitary reaper who is “[r]eaping and singing by herself . . . And o’er the sickle bending” (1: 657-8). The link between Lucy Lurie and the reaping girl is emphasised by the next insight Lurie has: “Lucy straightens up, stretches, bends down again. Field-labour; peasant tasks, immemorial. His daughter is becoming a peasant.” (1999, 217). He has a vision of her future. “When he is dead she will, with luck, still be here doing her ordinary tasks among the flowerbeds” (217). However valid or not such a vision might be, it indicates Lurie’s acceptance of Lucy’s chosen path, however much it still remains a mystery to him. He recognises that he has lacked insight: “The truth is, he has never had much of an eye for rural life, despite all his reading in Wordsworth. . . . Is it too late to educate the eye?” (218). What Lurie refers to here is more than merely the physical sense of sight. We are back in The Prelude where the speaker is crossing the Alps and the despotic external eye has to give way to the inner eye of the imagination. At last Lurie seems to recognise Wordsworth’s point that the inner eye of the imagination is a moral force which enables us to see ourselves as necessarily a part of all creation with a moral duty to interact with the rest of creation in a non-egoistic way. With this understanding he is able to give up the dog he has learnt to love. Our final view of him is reminiscent of another Wordsworthian figure, the weeping shepherd necessarily giving up the last of his flock in the poem of that name. “Along the broad highway he came, / His cheeks with tears were wet: / Sturdy he seemed, though he was sad; / And in his arms a lamb he had.” (1: 295). The similarity with Lurie is quite clear: “Bearing him in his arms like a lamb, he re-enters the surgery. . . . ‘Are you giving him up?’ ‘Yes, I am giving him
up” (1999, 220). This conclusion to the novel thus has a Wordsworthian ring. In a second “Fragment from the Alfoxden notebook,” Wordsworth had written:

And never for each other shall we feel
As we may feel, till we have sympathy
With nature in her forms inanimate,
With objects such as have no power to hold
Articulate language. In all forms of things
There is a mind.

(1: 268-9)

Byron: the paradox of passion

But what of Byron in the text? Wherein lies the significance of the Wordsworth scholar turning his attention to Byron? In what ways do these two antithetical Romantic poets work together to enrich the meaning of Coetzee’s text? The major focus of this second part of the paper will necessarily be on Lurie’s Byron project and how his altered conception of it both demonstrates his development and reveals that the two poets, despite their differences, share a commitment to the symbiotic relationship between empathy and creativity which underlines the Romantic conception of the imagination.

Lurie’s Byron project is first described as something he is “playing with” (1999, 4). This dilettantish trait seems to govern Lurie’s behaviour. We have already seen that he has “toyed with the idea” of asking Soraya “to see him in her own time” (2). He plans to write a “meditation on love between the sexes in the form a chamber opera” (4). As the novel progresses we will see how this grandiose proposal is reduced to a much more humble attempt at conveying the nature of love. Lurie will have to learn about love for initially he is someone who seems cynical and remote towards others. All he knows of ‘love’ is really sexual self-indulgence. Similarly, his summing up of Byron replicates the populist view with no real understanding of Byron’s depths:

I’m working on Byron. On his time in Italy.’
‘Didn’t he die young?’
‘Thirty-six. They all died young. Or dried up. Or went mad and were locked away. But Italy wasn’t where Byron died. He died in Greece. He went to Italy to escape a scandal, and settled there. Settled down, had the last big love-affair of his life. Italy was a
popular destination for the English in those days. They believed the Italians were still in touch with their natures. Less hemmed in by convention, more passionate.

(15)

As he does with Wordsworth, Lurie misreads this master as a mere seducer whom he takes as a model, for within moments he is using poets and poetry as merely a means to seduce Melanie (16). His wily words to Melanie that a woman has a “duty to share” her beauty for it “does not belong to her alone” (16) will come back to haunt him when the rapists take what they want from Lucy.

Despite pointing out to his students that “Byron the man found himself conflated with his own poetic creations” (31), Lurie himself seems to treat Byron in this way. He reads Byron’s creation, Lara, not only as an alter-ego of Byron but also of himself. Furthermore, he narrowly identifies Lara with Lucifer, thereby reducing the complexity of the character (32-3). The passage from *Lara* discussed with the class is filled with irony for it tells of Lara’s apparent selflessness which is however prompted by neither pity nor moral integrity but a desire to be seen as different and special. Eccentric behaviour *per se* is merely perverse behaviour. Lurie will learn that one’s motivation for action is vitally important. He will later ask himself why he feels the need to save the honour of the dog corpses and he will recognise that it can only be “[f]or himself, then. For his idea of the world, a world in which men do not use shovels to beat corpses into a more convenient shape for processing” (146).

Months later when Lurie resumes his Byron project his life has changed markedly:

This is how his days are spent on the farm. He helps Petrus clean the irrigation system. He keeps the garden from going to ruin. He packs produce for the market. He helps Bev Shaw at the clinic. He sweeps the floors, cooks the meals, does all the things that Lucy no longer does. He is busy from dawn to dusk.

(120)

He now feels the need to “invent a Byron who is true to Byron” (121). Since he now lacks his books and his notes, he has to strive to enter *imaginatively* into the heart of Byron and Teresa. It is not easy and as the weeks pass on the farm he feels that the characters of his proposed project are “beginning to fade away” (141). When Lucy finally speaks to Lurie about her bewilderment at the very personal hatred demonstrated by the rapists he is
led to ponder the enormity of rape itself: “What had all this attitudinizing to do with what he suspected rape to be: the man lying on top of the woman and pushing himself into her? He thinks of Byron” (160). Certainly, Byron was one who usually had his sexual way with whom he pleased. Yet the morally culpable man was also the imaginative artist. Lurie must imaginatively enter the experience of rape, “he can, if he concentrates, if he loses himself, be there, be the men, inhabit them, fill them with the ghost of himself. The question is, does he have it in him to be the woman?” (160). The Romantics all held that the imagination is the source of empathy and, hence, creativity. Shelley’s words ring out from 1821: “A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains and pleasures of his species must become his own. The great instrument of moral good is the imagination” (1962, 233-4).

By his attempt to imagine the act perpetrated against Lucy, Lurie’s creative block will be lifted. He begins to recognise that as a teacher he has also abrogated responsibility. He soon acknowledges this to Bev Shaw: “[t]eaching was never a vocation for me. Certainly I never aspired to teach people how to live. I was what used to be called a scholar. I wrote books about dead people. That was where my heart was. I taught only to make a living” (1999, 162). Yet it was his supposed master, Wordsworth, who affirmed “I wish either to be considered as a Teacher, or as nothing” (de Selincourt 1937, 170). Having reached this point of self-awareness and, indeed, humility, Lurie’s creative urge returns:

> In his head Byron, alone on the stage, draws a breath to sing. He is on the point of setting off for Greece. At the age of thirty-five he has begun to understand that life is precious.

> Sunt lacrimae rerum, et mentem mortalia tangent: those will be Byron’s words, he is sure of it. As for the music, it hovers somewhere on the horizon, it has not come yet.

>(1999, 162)

Lurie must still acquire the full lyrical impulse for, as he admits to Mr Isaacs, “I lack the lyrical. I manage love too well. Even when I burn I don’t sing, if you understand me. For which I am sorry. I am sorry for what I took your daughter through” (171). Burning and singing – on the surface these terms seem to encapsulate the passionate self-destructiveness of Byron and the lyrical simplicity aspired to by Wordsworth. Yet both poets burned with creativity, both poets revealed a truly lyrical voice, and it is that paradoxical and creative combination which underlines the thematic merging of the two
Romantic poets in this text. Perhaps Lurie will find that they have guided him despite himself.

**Burning and singing**

Although a relatively large space in the final chapters is given to Lurie's Byron project it has received surprisingly little attention from most critics. When Lurie resumes work on his project while in his Cape Town home, he recognises that what he had initially planned was a depiction of the final stages of the estrangement of the self-obsessed lovers. It would have been filled with melodramatic, indeed operatic, sentiment: “baulked passion,” “stifling summer heat,” “gloomy drawing rooms,” “smouldering” resentment (180). Yet his recent experiences have made him recognise that this conception no longer comes “from the heart” (181). Instead he now focuses on Teresa in her middle age, her ‘romantic’ story now subject to the passage of time and the deflation of conflicting versions. Lurie realizes that it is this “plain ordinary woman” that he must render: “Can he find it in his heart to love this plain, ordinary woman? Can he love her enough to write music for her? If he cannot, what is left for him?” (182). It will be a test of his empathetic imagination and can only come about with empathetic identification which is perhaps another name for selfless love. He will show Teresa bringing her beloved Byron back to life just as he struggles to bring her to life (183). It is an imaginative project comparable with his empathetic identification with Lucy or Bev Shaw or with the dogs and perhaps, eventually, with Petrus.

Byron and Teresa will need their own music, not the grandiose “purloined songs” he had first envisaged (183). Rejecting the piano, he takes down from the attic “the odd little seven-stringed banjo” that he bought for Lucy when she was a child and eventually “pick[s] out” on it “the music he will give to Teresa Guiccioli” (184, 211). Thus daughter and mistress, Wordsworth and Byron, symbolically fuse as Lurie takes his first uncertain steps towards a discovery of the nature of creation: “So this is art, he thinks, and this is how it does its work! How strange! How fascinating!” (185). He is gripped by his project, truly impassioned in ways unknown to the blasé Lurie who spoke to Melanie of “literary passions” but knew not what they really meant: “The opera is no longer a hobby, not any more. It consumes him night and day” (214). The mode he seeks is no longer erotic or even elegiac but comic as the folly of humankind is ruefully acknowledged. Lurie is therefore acquiring that lyricism which he has hitherto lacked. Passion is rendered with the complexity familiar to Byron, a force both creative and
destructive. So essential for life, for creativity, passion nevertheless has its often cataclysmic consequences. Thus Allegra, too, is brought in, that unwanted daughter, a stern reminder of her father’s more destructive passions (186).

It is significant that the final chapter begins with Teresa and ends with the man bearing a dog “in his arms like a lamb” (220). So it is framed by the Byron and Wordsworth referents and, within the chapter, we have Teresa, Lucy among the flowers and Lurie with the dogs. Lurie, while “[s]itting at his table in the dog-yard” (213) imagines Teresa “cradling” Lucy’s banjo “like a child” (214). The notes are played softly “so as not to wake her father” (214). Fathers (Gamba and Lurie) and daughters (Teresa and Lucy) merge. He knows the opera is not and never will be a great work or even a publishable work but perhaps it will produce “like a bird a single authentic note of immortal longing” (214). The echo of Keats’s nightingale is inevitable; the Romantic world of the early nineteenth century permeates the bleak clinic building. This final twenty-fourth chapter ends with Lurie giving to oblivion the twenty-fourth dog (219).

*Disgrace* therefore argues that Romanticism is not simply a Eurocentric throwback, something to be rejected out of hand in post-colonial South Africa. Instead, this novel addresses the major proposition of Romanticism – the essential nature of the creative imagination which is our only means to enter the experience of another, of overcoming our atomistic isolation from the rest of creation. Keith Sagar has observed that it is the “very nature of the creative imagination . . . to seek patterns and wholes; to break through the hard shell of the ego and anthropomorphism into what we now call holistic or biocentric consciousness” (2006). Or, to put it into Lucy Lurie’s terms, “[t]here is no higher life. This is the only life there is. Which we share with the animals” (74). It is not surprising to hear in these words an echo of Wordsworth who tells of how all are “called upon to exercise their skill, / Not in Utopia . . . But in the very world, which is the world / Of all of us, – the place where, in the end, / We find our happiness, or not at all” *(Prel.* 11.139-44).

NOTES

1. The anti-Eurocentrist approach has been noticeable. Linda Seidel writes that Lurie’s “literary references are to a vanished world, a different context,” and detects in the name ‘Pollux’ “a reminder of another rape, of Leda by the swan (and, by extension, perhaps, of Africa by Europe)” (2001, 4).

2. Derek Attridge briefly addresses the way the novel questions “the notion of cost, the measurement of profit and loss” as a way of evaluating art (2000, 118).

3. Other critics raise, only to drop, issues covered in my paper. Michael Holland, having noted that the novel abounds in “references and allusion” and that the reader
is suspended “awkwardly between aesthetic pleasure and moral unease” focuses on questions of language and narrative stance even while making sharp points about Lara and Lurie’s planned opera (2002, 396-7).

4. There are some troubling errors in Sheils’s paper. The French Revolution was not “proletariat-driven” (2003, 41); Byron did not favour “political and social egalitarianism” (2003, 41); Don Juan cannot be described as “a narrative of love” (2003, 44). Sheils reads the lines from Lara as about Lucifer rather than about Lara seen briefly as comparable with Lucifer (2003, 42-3). Most disturbing is her complete misreading of the implications of the term cavaliere servente. This term is not equivalent to any modern sense of “servant” and to compare Byron’s status as a cavaliere servente to Teresa Guiccioli with Lurie’s role as “servant to dogs” just does not make sense (2003, 42).

5. I use the 1850 edition of The Prelude for Lurie chooses to do so.

6. Azoulay (2002, 40) links the Babe image to Lucy’s unborn child and her decision to keep it.

7. Coleridge writes as follows to William Sotheby on 10 September 1802: “Nature has her proper interest; and he will know what it is, who believes and feels, that every Thing has a life of it’s [sic] own, and that we are all one Life” (1956, 459).

8. The 1805 Prelude is even more apropos to the novel: “From love, for here / Do we begin and end, all grandeur comes, / All truth and beauty – from pervading love – / That gone, we are as dust” (149-52).

9. Attridge’s fine study also focuses on the two major strands of the novel as being the chamber opera and the role played by animals, themes which increase in importance and are vitally linked (2000, 106).

10. Mike Marais comments on this (2001c, 33).

11. Yet he still retains his spurious Wordsworthianism when, in answer to Lucy’s pragmatic “I’m not sure that I have a soul. I wouldn’t know a soul if I saw one,” he responds, “That’s not true. You are a soul. We are all souls. We are souls before we are born” (1999, 79). Wordsworth’s great Ode speaks of “the Soul that rises with us, our Life’s Star, / Hath had elsewhere its setting” (59-60), but the poem’s real focus is on “primal sympathy” (184) and the “human heart” (203) and, once again, that is a lesson from his ‘master’ that Lurie has yet to learn.

12. Attridge points out that grace is not the opposite of disgrace that it is “something given, not earned . . . a blessing you do not deserve” (2000, 109,110). He notes Rosalind’s error but makes no more of it.

13. See “I wandered lonely as a cloud” and “The Solitary Reaper.”

14. See “My heart leaps up.”

15. There is here surely an allusion to one of Wordsworth’s most baffling poems “The Idiot Boy” published in Lyrical Ballads 1798? Wordsworth always defended its “idiotic simplicity” in the face of much critical ridicule. See his letter to John Wilson, 7 June 1802.

16. The number, twenty-four, has always had significance for classical authors whose works were often presented in multiples of twelve, thus suggestive of the hours of the day/night.

17. It is not inconceivable that the moral vegetarian Shelley would have considered enlarging the concept of ‘his species’ to include all living things.
WORKS CITED


