

A narrative of forgiveness: South Africa

Forgiveness in the novels of J.M. Coetzee

Master Thesis *Conflicts, Territories and Identities*

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Storytelling is another, an other mode of thinking. It is more venerable than history, as ancient as the cockroach.... Like cockroaches, stories can be consumed. All you need to do is tear off the wings and sprinkle a little salt on them.... Cockroaches can also be colonized. You can capture them in a cockroach trap, breed them (quite easily), herd them together in cockroach farms... you can do minute dissections of their respiratory systems.... You can, if you wish, dry them and powder them and mix them with high explosives and make bombs of them. You can even make up stories about them, as Kafka did, although this is quite hard. One of the things you cannot -apparently- do is eradicate them. They breed, as the figure, has it, like flies, and under the harshest circumstances.... It is said that they will still be around when we and all our artefacts have disappeared.

J.M. Coetzee, 1986¹

Artworks in and of themselves have a closer relationship to politics than other objects, and their mode of production has a closer relationship to acting than to any other type of occupation. For one thing, it is a fact that only artworks need the public sphere in order to gain recognition; a similar affinity is expressed in the fact that artworks are spiritual-intellectual objects. In Greek terms, Mnēmosynē – remembering and remembrance – is the mother of the muses, which is to say that it is through thinking and remembering that reality is revaluated. This revaluation makes it possible to arrest and objectify the intangible, namely events and deeds and words and stories.

Hannah Arendt, 1959²

¹ Coetzee, J.M. (1988), pp. 2-5.

² Arendt, Hannah (1959; 2007), pp. 190-191.

Abstract

The main subject of this master thesis was forgiveness in South Africa. The purpose of this study was to investigate how the novels of the Nobel Prize winner J.M. Coetzee reflect the discourse on forgiveness in South Africa from 1974 (during Apartheid) to 2009 (after Apartheid). Other aims coming from this central question were to find out what forgiveness is, whether it can be stimulated, and how it was stimulated by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission South Africa. Finally, it was studied whether Coetzee reflects whether forgiveness took place or not, and whether he was hopeful for the future.

The methods applied were that of close reading and text analysis. The theoretical study examined forgiveness from four perspectives: a. philosophical/critical, b. theological, c. psychological and d. political. The practical study examined and analysed the novels playing in South Africa of J.M. Coetzee.

It was found that the novels reflect the discourse on forgiveness and the time frame in which the discourse took place. The novels of Coetzee reflect the discourse by showing the doubts and thoughts about all aspects of forgiveness. The results revealed that the novels are an important historical source for research on forgiveness in South Africa.

The principal conclusion was that novels are a good source to study history and the opinion of one person at least, and a specific group of persons at most.

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Preface

Of course we are all fictioneers. I do not deny that.

Since this is my master thesis, it is me to decide what I will write in the preface. And since I am, like Coetzee, in a way, a rebel and not willing to conform completely to the system – or scared to do so – I will write a very personal preface. Personal and intimate, like Coetzee does in his books. Or aren't his books personal? Who is who and what is true? What is fiction, what is narrative? What is subjective, what is objective? How does this correspond to the real world? It is the reader who decides.

A scientist once said: 'Sometimes a scream is better than a thesis.' This thesis is a scream. During the realization of this thesis, there were moments I screamed, or almost screamed. Not because I did not know how to continue (although somewhere on the road I wondered whether I would ever write the last word), but because of the intense books Coetzee writes. None of his books is light, easy or funny, none of them is ridiculous or does not make a point. I read ten of Coetzee's novels in two weeks, all about South Africa. In the end, there is nothing left than screaming.

A friend of mine once told me that writing a thesis is like a journey: you start somewhere and you don't know where you will end. Writing my thesis made me think about many related topics. The topic of my thesis is forgiveness after violent conflict. So many themes are attached to this: shame, guilt, memory, pain, loss, bitterness, grieve. No easy subjects to be occupied with. Forgiveness in general, however, is not that uncommon, and the themes attached to it are neither. Forgiveness is everywhere.

While I was working on this thesis, I wrote some questions that popped up in my head, on the blackboard in our kitchen. One of these was: 'Is it the will or the soul who forgives?' The next question could only be: do we have a soul? Influenced by Coetzee's (disturbed?) way of picturing man-woman relationships, I wrote down: 'Can penetration be compared with colonisation?' Maybe I should explain this one (I had to explain my flatmates, at least, before they agreed). What I mean is this: penetration is, in a way, taking or capering of something/someone. A synonym for penetration is entering. Moreover, there is a shared connotation of power between penetration and colonisation. One of the sections that hit me most is:

'I behave in some ways like a lover – I undress her, I bathe her, I stroke her, I sleep beside her – but I might equally tie her to a chair and beat her, it would be no less intimate.'³

I read ten books of Coetzee in two weeks. It did not make me happy. It did not make me smile. It made me scared and sad. At bad days I concluded: the world is lost, we'll all go to hell. Males first. The male Coetzee is able to depress me, to make me think, wonder, observe, philosophize, cry, scream. Is that a feature of a virtuous writer? Another section goes without explanation:

'Maybe, for men, hating the woman makes sex more exciting. You are a man, you ought to know. When you have sex with someone strange – when you trap her, hold her down, get her under you, put all your weight on her – isn't it a bit like killing? Pushing the knife in; exiting afterward, leaving the body behind covered in blood – doesn't it feel like murder, like getting away with murder?'⁴

Not the best thing to think about when a guy is laying on top of you.

The contents of my thesis appears to be twofold: one is forgiveness; the other is the author J.M. Coetzee. So where did this journey of writing and reading take me? To love and to hate and to love the novels of Coetzee. To love and to hate South Africa. To love and to hate men. To understand South Africa, to understand forgiveness and to understand Coetzee. More or less. 'To explain is to forgive,' Coetzee writes in *In the Heart of the Darkness*. To understand to a certain extent. To forgive is to remain human. The best thing that can be reached is awareness: Coetzee made me aware.

Did I dramatize? Maybe I did, maybe I did not. I just told a narrative. In the end, we are all *fictioneers*.⁵ There are two ways to find out: read ten Coetzee's in two weeks or read my thesis and draw your own conclusion. It is the reader who decides.

And here is the structure of my thesis:

³ Coetzee, J.M. (2007), p. 52.

⁴ Coetzee, J.M. (1999), p. 158.

⁵ Word created by Coetzee in *Summertime*.

Chapter 1 will outline the societal and scientific relevance of my master thesis. Furthermore, I will explain my research question and sub questions.

In Chapter 2, the theoretical framework, my aim is to give a clear introduction to the term forgiveness, and indirectly to its practice in post-violence peacebuilding. Forgiveness sounds like a philosophical or religious term, and is used in many political processes of today. Despite its generally acknowledged importance in peacebuilding processes, there remains great disagreement over what forgiveness actually means.

I will outline the several definitions of forgiveness and public forgiveness, and concepts attached to it, such as amnesty, retributive justice and religion. I will draw an image of the concept 'forgiveness' from four different perspectives: philosophical/critical (what is it?), psychological (how does it work in the human brain?), theological (what is the role of religion?) and political (what does forgiveness work in political context?). I will also discuss its complex relationship to two key concepts: justice, and reconciliation. I make an important distinction between interpersonally-based understandings of forgiveness, and what is now developing as a pragmatic approach of 'political forgiveness.' Since South Africa is my study object, the concept of forgiveness will be connected to the case of South Africa. Still, I will discuss forgiveness in a general context. Forgiveness is not only an important theme in connection to South Africa – it is important to all post-conflict situations, and even more than that: to all human beings.

In Chapter 3 I will explicate the selection of the books and writers and the methods I will use to come to an answer to the research questions.

Chapter 4 will be the analysis of the books I selected. This is the actual research.

Last but not least will be my conclusion and the answer to my questions. I will finish with which research further to do.

Finally, I wish to say that I enjoyed the journey. Some people asked me: do you ever want to read Coetzee again? At first I thought: maybe not in the next twenty years. But momentarily *Foe* is waiting for me.

To the reader: enjoy and be aware. Screaming is allowed.

Chapter 1. Introduction and research questions

No future without forgiveness (1999) is one of the best-known books worldwide about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, the TRCSA or TRC for short. Its author Desmond Tutu, the very powerful archbishop in religious South Africa and chairman of the Commission, knew how to make a point. Forgiveness is surely not the same as reconciliation, but without forgiveness, coexistence in the Rainbow Nation, as South Africa with all its different peoples is sometimes called, is impossible. Since forgiveness is such an important topic in every post-conflict area and in South Africa in particular, I consider it to be a valuable subject to study.

One of the goals, not to say the most important goal of the TRC was to stimulate forgiveness. Despite the heated debate in literature and politics about this emphasis on forgiveness, one cannot deny that forgiveness to some degree is important to create a sustainable peace, especially as long as the different struggling parties deliberately want to live together within the same borders after the conflict. Although forgiveness is accepted to be crucial, the question remains whether it should be part of the political peace-building process and if so, how. Opinions differ. Should (and could) one manipulate a person, a people or a nation to forgive?

Nevertheless, South Africa chose for a peace-building process including forgiveness. The question is whether this approach worked out so far. Measurability is important to every peace-building process (and every other process, research, et cetera). But how does one measure whether forgiveness has taken place in South Africa?

Novelist and Nobel Prize winner J.M. Coetzee is one of South Africa's best export products. He wrote famous books like *Life and Times of Michael K* and *Disgrace* and won several prestigious prizes. His first novel was published in 1974, his most recent in 2009. That means that he lived and published during Apartheid, which officially ended in 1990, and during and after the period in which the Truth and Reconciliation Commission did its investigations (1995-2003). My central theme is: is there any progression or some other line to discover in how Coetzee saw forgiveness in South Africa, as reflected in his books? And if so, how does this represent the discourse on forgiveness?

Obviously, it is debatable whether I should have chosen black writers, since forgiveness should come from the victims of the Apartheid system in the first place. Although it is very interesting to read novels of black South African writers, they are not that easy to find: there is the problem of language, of distribution, of illiteracy. Furthermore, my goal is to see whether there is development in the account of forgiveness over the years, during Apartheid, during the transition to democracy and in the new South Africa and I could not find a black South African with such an excessive oeuvre. Coetzee is considered to be a great, engaged, English-language author and therefore a suitable choice. In chapter 3 I will explain my choices more elaborately.

1.1. Relevance / Central goal

The central goal of my thesis is to find out how J.M. Coetzee's novels reflect the important discourse on forgiveness in South Africa. According to his books, did forgiveness take place? What was the role of the TRC in this? Is the author hopeful about the future?

Because forgiveness is an inherent process, it is hard to tell whether it did or did not take place in a particular society. Although many victims stated before the TRC that they forgave the perpetrator, we cannot be certain that they really did. In my opinion, any form of art shows what really lives in a culture, whether the artist did or did not incorporate a specific theme (in this context, forgiveness) consciously in his work. I chose to look at the novel, but I could have chosen movies or performing arts or any other kind of art. Art shows what lives in a country, without serving a specific political purpose. In this sense I agree with Julian Bell⁶, who presented art as 'a frame within world history, in all its breadth, [that] is continually reflected back at us – rather than as a window which opens onto some independent aesthetic realm.'⁷

An important question in the light of peace-building is what forgiveness between population groups exactly is and whether – and if so, how – this can be promoted after a violent conflict. One of the goals of the several Truth and Reconciliation Commissions, that exist or have existed in several countries, is to reconcile different parties. As Archbishop Desmond Tutu, chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, stated, reconciliation

⁶ Bell, Julian (2007), p. 7.

⁷ Of course there is a lot to say against this statement. For example, that art is an imperfect and selective mirror.

won't be reached without forgiveness. So, can forgiveness be promoted or is it a process that has to take place naturally?

The theoretical goals of my thesis are to formulate what (public) forgiveness is from different perspectives and how it comes forward in the selected novels of Coetzee. I divided the different aspects mentioned in the literature on forgiveness in the next perspectives: philosophical, theological, psychological and political. In my opinion, all the aspects can be categorized under one of these perspectives. For instance, the South African believe Ubuntu is ranged under the theological perspective, the juridical aspects under the political perspective, memory and remembrance under the psychological perspective. And since a novel is a narrative, I will give a short introduction to narrative theory.

The practical goals of my thesis are to analyse the novels in the light of the discourse on forgiveness. Could one see a red line through all the observation subjects? Does this line develop over time? How do the novels respond to the actual events in South Africa?

The theoretical and practical goals should lead to an answer to my research questions. How do the novels express the discourse on forgiveness? Can we see a glimpse of forgiveness? And how does it relate to the TRC? Does it make sense to incite forgiveness? The answers are useful for following Truth and Reconciliation Commissions elsewhere.

1.1.1. Societal relevance

In many post-conflict countries the concept of 'public forgiveness' is on the rise. However, it is not exactly clear what the term means, nor whether the concept 'forgiveness' allows for such use of the term in public or political contexts. Furthermore, the assumption that public forgiveness might stimulate the reconciliation process is controversial. Many 'Western' authors, policymakers and 'human rights' defenders are sceptical and believe that the reconciliation process is not really well served by public forms of forgiveness. Some believe that public incitements to forgiveness contribute to cooperation and stability, so people can

leave the loaded past behind.⁸ Others believe that similar incitements can lead to impunity and injustice.⁹ Most academicians see the different sides of the case, positive and negative.

In this thesis, I will take a close look at forgiveness in South Africa, where the incitement to forgiveness was a major part of the building process of internal peace. Furthermore, because I will focus on novels, I hope to give another perspective on the case. Art should not be left out by measuring the state of things, because it is one of the most important and fair sources of information. It is one way to measure whether forgiveness did or did not take place in South Africa. In practise, this would have relevance for future Truth and Reconciliation Commissions: is it useful to focus on and incite forgiveness?

1.1.2. Scientific relevance

There is a broad academic network investigating the question of forgiveness and what the effect of the TRC in South Africa is or has been. Obviously, several academicians have already taken a close look at the motives of the TRC in literature or other narrative art, but the question whether forgiveness has taken place in South Africa was not deeply studied in relation with novels. And because ‘measuring’¹⁰ forgiveness has not been connected to the creative utterance that art is, an important view on forgiveness has been neglected.

In my opinion, novels can give a view on how South Africans look at the TRC and its role in forgiveness. Furthermore, I hope to filter out the perspectives on forgiveness of the novelist: does *he* believe that forgiveness has taken place? This would give an idea of how South Africa as a nation will function in the future. The discourse of forgiveness is heated¹¹: is this reflected by the novels, and if so, how? Scientifically, this has relevance for future Truth and Reconciliation Commissions elsewhere, which without any doubt will follow.

⁸ For instance: Edelstein, Jillian (2002); Gutmann, Amy & Dennis Thompson (2000), pp. 22-44; Hamber, Brandon (2007), pp. 115–125; Collins, Mairead (2008); Chapman, A.R. (2007), pp. 51–69.

⁹ For instance: Tutu, Desmond (1999); Froestad, J. and C. Shearing (2007), pp. 534–555; Wuye, James Movel and Muhammad Nurayn Ashafa (1999).

¹⁰ Obviously, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to measure to what extent forgiveness took place. Psychotherapists developed tests to measure the consequences of trauma. Hazan wrote an article about the subject: “Measuring the impact of punishment and forgiveness: a framework for evaluating transitional justice,” [http://www.icrc.org/Web/eng/siteeng0.nsf/htmlall/review-861-p19/\\$File/irrc_861_Hazan.pdf](http://www.icrc.org/Web/eng/siteeng0.nsf/htmlall/review-861-p19/$File/irrc_861_Hazan.pdf), but I consider this article more a discussion of the different aspects of transitional justice than a real measurement of forgiveness.

¹¹ See for example footnote 3 and 4, or the Executive summary, Public Forgiveness in Post-Conflict Contexts: <http://www.ru.nl/cve/publicforgiveness/narrative/narrative/>, checked on 1-7-2010.

1.2. Research Questions

My research question is: How do the novels written by J.M. Coetzee reflect the discourse on forgiveness in South Africa?

Questions arising from this: What is forgiveness? Has the TRC had any influence on forgiveness, and if so, what was that influence? According to Coetzee's novels, did forgiveness take place after Apartheid in South Africa?

To answer these questions, I need to know what the concepts mean. In the theoretical part of my thesis, I want to explore the concept of 'forgiveness'. What exactly is meant by this rather vague term? What do philosophers have to say about it? Does the meaning of 'forgiveness' allow for a public use of the term? Is it possible to forgive on behalf of others, and if so, under what conditions? Under what conditions can people grant forgiveness or ask for it? May political and religious leaders stimulate forgiving attitudes? What is the role of religious oratory in public appeals? What role plays forgetting in forgiving?

I do not assume that I will be able to give a definite answer to the question whether forgiveness really has taken place or not. That question takes a lot more time and investigation and might be impossible to answer. But I do think that when one wants to answer this particular question, one should take a look at art to get to the unconscious thoughts and emotions lying behind. Therefore, my general question is:

- How do the novels written by J.M. Coetzee reflect the discourse on forgiveness in South Africa?

The sub-questions I will try to answer are:

- What is forgiveness (from a philosophical, theological, psychological and political perspective)?
- What is the role of the TRC in stimulating forgiveness? What do the novels of J.M. Coetzee point out about that?
- Did forgiveness take place in South Africa according to the novels of J.M. Coetzee?
- Is the author hopeful for the future?

The question to what extent forgiveness plays a role in the selected novels will be answered. How forgiveness exactly ‘works’ is not completely known (yet), but I will give a general overview of the different views, sides and perspectives on forgiveness. Furthermore, I will explain what the connection is between the TRC and forgiveness.

In short: the emphasis of my thesis will be on forgiveness after conflict and on how the selected novels reflect this concept through time.

1.3. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission: a short introduction

Back in 1994, the Institute for Democracy in South Africa organised two conferences to explore how to deal with the past. In November of that year, the new government introduced the *Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Bill* in parliament on the basis of their recommendations. In close collaboration with civil society and after many public hearings, the parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Justice made some changes to the bill, which was then enacted into law by the President on 19 July 1995.

The Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act was the founding legislation for the TRC. The mandate of the TRC, as stated by the *TRC Act*, was one of the most ambitious mandates of truth commissions to date. It assigned the following tasks to the TRC:¹²

- to establish a picture as complete as possible of the causes, nature, and extent of the gross violations of human rights during the period from 1st March 1960 to the cut-off date in 1993, later extended to 1994;
- to facilitate the granting of amnesty to persons who make full disclosure of all the relevant facts relating to acts associated with a political objective and who comply with the requirements of this Act;
- to establish and make known the fate or whereabouts of victims and to restore the human and civil dignity of such victims by granting them an opportunity to relate their own accounts of the violations of which they are the victims, and by recommending reparation measures in respect of them;

¹² *The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report*, Volume 1, Chapter 4, p.54

- to compile a report providing as comprehensive an account as possible of the activities and findings of the Commission, which contains recommendations of measures to prevent the future violations of human rights.

In order to achieve these tasks, three committees were called into existence: the Committee on Human Rights Violations, the Committee on Amnesty, and the Committee on Reparation and Rehabilitation. The seventeen commissioners appointed by the president in December 1995 were to decide among themselves which committee they wanted to belong to.

The Human Rights Violation Committee was mandated, amongst other things, to enquire into systematic patterns of abuse, to attempt to identify motives and perspectives and to establish the identity of individual and institutional perpetrators. This Committee held public hearings all over the country in which hundreds of people came to testify about past abuses. Apart from personal hearings on Human Rights Violations, also a number of special hearings, for example on women or political parties and institutional hearings, for example on the health sector or faith communities, were held.

The primary function of the Amnesty Committee was to consider applications for amnesty that were made in respect of any act, omission or offence associated with a political objective committed between 1st March 1960 and 6th December 1993. The cut-off date was later extended to 10th May 1994 by an amendment to the interim Constitution. The final date for the submission of applications was 30th September 1997 and in order to be granted amnesty, the applicant had to give full disclosure of the committed violation.

The main task of the Committee on Reparation and Rehabilitation was to recommend policies to the government regarding reparations and rehabilitations of victims of gross human rights violations. In addition, it also had to make recommendations on the creation of institutions conducive to a stable and fair society, and on the measures to be taken in order to prevent the repetition of human rights violations.¹³

¹³ Verdoolaege, Annelies (2001), http://cas1.elis.ugent.be/avrug/TRC/01_12.htm, checked on 28-05-2010.

The first part of the Final Report of the TRC was handed over by Archbishop Tutu to President Mandela in October 1998. The second and last part came out in 2003 and was officially accepted by President Mbeki.

1.4. The narrative as mirror

(South African) Literature is a mirror of the state of things. I am referring to the novel, which is a 'reflector' of historical conditions and actual political circumstances.¹⁴ Nothing is spared then: rape, murder, torture, violence in all and every imaginable shape and sizes are characteristic features of the contemporary South African novel. The novelists themselves seem to have been traumatized by history. They were witnesses of what happened under the Apartheid regime; more often than not, they were victims who decided to leave their home country, either because they could no longer endure what was going on, or because they were forced to go into exile. In their books, they feature traumatized individuals and put their own experiences into words. They also bear witness to the collective trauma of their nation, and as such, their works of art are narrative attempts of coming to terms with the past.¹⁵

South Africa has a long oral tradition and human life is a narrative. A narrative is a story, but there is a thin line between the two concepts. Story is a series of events unfolding, narrative is the way in which these events and elements are related to an audience. In short: "Story is the irreducible substance of a story (A meets B, something happens, order returns), while narrative is the way the story is related (Once upon a time there was a princess...)"¹⁶ Brust tries to distinguish the 'story' and the 'narrative':¹⁷ 'say, that X injured Y in manner Z at time T. By referring to "facts" I mean to keep the door open not just to events, but also to reactions to events (say, that Y hit X at time T, and X felt angry). Notionally, the story consists of content abstracted from viewpoint. Normally there will be different ways of trying to convey the story, the content, but notionally just one content to be conveyed. Narration does the conveying or the telling; it organises events into some sort of pattern – say, a temporal pattern, a causal one, or one that supplies insight into motivation – and implies one or more perspectives.'¹⁸ A narrative includes a plot, the perspective of the narrator and the perspective of the actors. In a way, creating a narrative is creating an identity. This is exactly what

¹⁴ Mengel, E. (2010).

¹⁵ Ibidem.

¹⁶ O'Sullivan, Hartley, Saunders and Fiske (1983).

¹⁷ Brust, Imke (2006), p. 105.

¹⁸ Ibidem.

Archbishop Tutu and President Nelson Mandela tried to do by creating the narrative of the *Rainbow Nation*. By creating an optimistic story everybody could believe in, they hoped to produce a new nation. (Un)fortunately, the memory does not forget that fast.

In psychoanalysis the creation of life narratives – and storytelling in general – is a precondition for the patient’s ‘recovery’. The phrase ‘coming to terms with the past’ is an apt description of what is at stake here, because it is already expressive of the fact that this ‘recovery’ is achieved by putting one’s experience into words, by telling a story. As Crossley has emphasized, ‘...human psychology has an essentially narrative structure.’¹⁹ Speaking about the terrible truth, speaking about the unspeakable, would help the victim. This truth then ‘has not only a personal therapeutic but a public or collective value as well.’²⁰ Narratives are used to rebuild the individual’s shattered sense of identity and meaning.²¹

With the help of emplotment²², a trauma is embedded into the context of a life story. Autobiographical writing may be ‘a tool for healing,’ and this is not only true with regard to psychoanalysis but, so it seems, to literature in general, or to the novel as such. Whether the autobiographical story constructed in this way is true or not, is of secondary importance in this context. Mourning and empathy appear as essential ingredients of this new South African story because mourning creates a standstill and allows for reflection, while empathy generates reconciliation and initiates change.²³

One important narrative in South Africa is about the wondering soul: when a dead body is not buried, the soul will not go to rest. Therefore it is extremely important for South African people to bury their loved ones. (Of course, this is important to anyone, but this specific narrative might make the need even stronger.)

In this context, the narrative theories of philosopher Ricoeur on memory and forgetting are interesting. Narrative ethicists argue that forgiveness has a political dimension and is therefore

¹⁹ Crossley, M. L. (2000), p. 532.

²⁰ Leys, R. (2000), p. 109.

²¹ Crossley, M. L. (2000), p. 527.

²² Emplotment is the assembly of a series of historical events into a narrative with a plot, term by Hayden White. White, Hayden (1981).

²³ Brust, Imke (2006), p. 115.

not totally within the sphere of interpersonal relations.²⁴ Arendt, for example, perceives forgiveness to be a ‘form of human activity which belongs to the socio-personal sphere’ while Ricoeur has emphasized that forgiveness is, in the first place, something to be begged for from others, essentially from victims. Granting forgiveness means that it can also be refused and in addition, there is a right not to forgive as much as to affirm it. For Ricoeur, forgiveness represents a ‘healing contact with the past’ and symbolizes the success of ‘working through’ the past in such a way that it frees us from compulsion to repeat it.²⁵ The place of the ‘*thou*’ plays an important role in the philosophy of Ricoeur, which can be connected with Ubuntu (which will be further discussed in chapter 2). From Ricoeur’s perspective, forgiveness puts the I-and-Thou relationship at stake. While forgiveness is a gracious and generous act that belongs to the logic of love and not of justice, love does not in any way mitigate the need for justice.²⁶

Undeniably, South African writers have been traumatized. The narrative therefore serves different goals: the working through trauma of the author; the working through trauma of the public, the understanding of the conflict and a mirror of events. Even though highly personal, every narrative offers another perspective on a certain event. By using many perspectives, one could possibly reach a generally accepted narrative – that which we call history.

²⁴ Duffy, Maria (2009), p. 59.

²⁵ Anckaert (2000), pp. 32-34.

²⁶ Duffy, Maria (2009), p. 59. Ricoeur also developed a narrative theory of pardon. Although his theories are very interesting, it is going to far to go into that.

Chapter 2. Theoretical framework: framing forgiveness

Colonialism, Afrikaner and African, Apartheid, South Africa: signifiers of the horror of racial domination, discrimination, human rights violations and political and economical inequality. Truth, reconciliation, forgiveness, hearings and healing: signifiers of the transition to a democratic country, with one of the most democratic constitutions in the world, in fact. Although the damage is done and irreversibly, South Africa relived history, bringing the dead, and speak for them, in the hope to forgive.

Two of the most read books about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission South Africa (TRC) are *Country of my skull: Guilt, Sorrow, and the limits of Forgiveness in the New South Africa* by Antjie Krog and *No future without forgiveness* by archbishop Desmond Tutu. Considering the grave human rights violations during apartheid, the question rises how a divided nation as South Africa has to move on. Given the titles of the books I just mentioned, this question automatically leads to the concept of forgiveness.

Forgiveness has been an important topic in South Africa since the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) started in 1994. But what exactly is forgiveness, how does it work? What is the role of memory? What did the TRC want to achieve by the hearings, and what is the relation between forgiveness and reconciliation? Do people easier forgive when one confesses? Should the confessor be sorry? Could a victim forgive without reparation? And what aspects of the TRC are typical Christian? What is to forgive and what is unforgivable?²⁷ There are so many topics attached to the theme ‘forgiving’ in South Africa: forgetting, memory, justice, amnesty, the role of the TRC, the role of language and truth, the role of Christianity, western and African philosophies...

‘Everything is forgiven and forgotten,’ is a well-known saying. In the dictionary this sentence is followed by ‘no hard feelings’.²⁸ The saying has a positive connotation: after you are and have forgiven, everything is alright again. The question is whether forgetting and forgiving really are positive concepts. ‘Those who forget the lessons of history are doomed to repeat it,’

²⁷ Modern philosophers as Govier, Derrida and Arendt spoke about unforgivable actions, but this notion falls outside the scope of this thesis.

²⁸ Van Dale Grote Woordenboeken.

philosopher Santayana said.²⁹ And is forgiving not the diminishing of evil? Doesn't that run counter to justice? The western constitution demands that evil will be punished. Is forgiving a virtue or a vice?

Since the concept of forgiveness is one which can be studied from many different perspectives, I chose to look at it from four views: a. philosophical/critical, b. theological, c. psychological and d. political. Given the broad concept of forgiveness, I will give an overview of the different perspectives: I won't be able to discuss all there has been said about forgiveness, so it will be connected to South Africa in particular.

²⁹ Tutu, Desmond (1999), *Geen toekomst zonder verzoening*, Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, p. 35.

2.1. Philosophical/ critical perspective on forgiveness

Philosophy is relevant to a consideration of forgiveness, because forgiveness has necessary and sufficient conditions that are partly metaphysical and partly moral in nature.³⁰

Philosophers of all ages spoke about forgiveness. Because a complete history is not of particular interest to my thesis, I will not discuss all of the statements about forgiveness (nor am I able to). There is a small (and artificial) line between philosophy and critical theory. Critical theory could be seen as social philosophy, it contains examination and critique on society and culture. Moreover, forgiveness as a political feature is rather modern. Therefore, I will mainly discuss ideas of modern philosophers.

2.1.1. Forgiveness

What is forgiveness? No consensual definition of forgiveness exists. Researchers do agree on what is *not*: forgiveness should be differentiated from “pardoning” (which is a legal term), “condoning” (which implies a justification of the offense), “excusing” (which implies that the offender had a good reason for committing the offense), “forgetting” (which implies that the memory of the offense has simply decayed or slipped out of conscious awareness), and “denying” (which implies simply an unwillingness to perceive the harmful injuries that one has incurred). Forgiveness should also be differentiated from “reconciliation” (which implies the restoration of a relationship).³¹ Forgiveness can be seen as a sliding scale between a slight lessening of resentment towards a wrongdoer and a full acceptance and love of that person; reconciliation is also a sliding scale between a temporary cease-fire and abiding peace. Forgiveness and reconciliation are thus quite distinct, and they can but need not coincide.³²

When people forgive, their responses toward (or, in other words, what they think of, feel about, want to do to, or actually do to) people who have offended or injured them become more positive and less negative.³³ One might describe forgiveness as the release of negative emotions pertaining to a situation, no longer holding a grudge. Forgiveness means holding nothing against each other any more. It is about making a fresh start.³⁴

³⁰ Yandell, K. (1998), p. 35.

³¹ McCullough, M., K. Pargament and C. Thoresen (2000), p. 8.

³² Scott, J. (2009), p. 213.

³³ McCullough, M., K. Pargament and C. Thoresen (2000), *ibidem*.

³⁴ Gover, Trudy, speech at the conference Public forgiveness in post-conflict contexts, Nijmegen 6-3-2010.

Forgiving is the middle between rancour which cannot forget and superficiality without memory.³⁵ Forgiving and forgetting are often associated (and people are often advised to ‘forgive and forget’, as mentioned before). The common associating can be very misleading. Deeds forgiven need not be forgotten. Thinking of Nelson Mandela, it is hardly plausible that he forgot his twenty-seven years in prison when he forgave the white South Africans whose apartheid regime had put him there.³⁶ From an ethical perspective: he who forgets evil, does it wrong, and has not forgiven it yet. Whether he forgives the perpetrator will be clear when he remembers the evil. But who remembers everything, won’t be able to forget nor forgive.³⁷ Forgiving can be described in many middles, the middle of giving and taking, too much or too little giving, too early or too late. He who can forgive when somebody paid all his debts is too late, but easily forgiving does no good to justice. Giving amnesty before someone shows remorse and atones for his sins could be seen as destruction of moral capital.³⁸

Forgiving is also the bridge between norms and values. On one side we have the norm of justice: penalties should be fair, not too light and not too heavy. When somebody has served his penalty, we should not still bear rancour. On the other side is the value of reconciliation: the situation in which unjust has been settled and the community is reconciled. In the case of South Africa, the literary meaning of reconciliation (‘to make friendly again after estrangement’) is impossible to reach. There is nothing to go back to, no previous state one would wish to restore.³⁹ So I speak about the non-literary meaning of reconciliation: harmonize and the ability to coexist. The memory did not disappear, but she does not affect the present any more. The bridge between the just ‘reparation’ and the ideal ‘reconciliation’ can possibly be found in forgiveness.

According to Trudy Govier, one of the foremost political philosophers on this subject, forgiveness is not so much an emotion, as it is an attitude.⁴⁰ In this sense, forgiveness, at a minimum, is a *decision* to let go of the desire for revenge and ill-will toward the person who wronged you, so people can live together again.⁴¹ Having this attitude means that one has

³⁵ Tongeren, Paul van (red) (2000), p. 134.

³⁶ Govier, Trudy (1999), p. 60.

³⁷ Note: everywhere where I say ‘he’ can be said ‘she’ as well.

³⁸ Soyinka, Wole (1999).

³⁹ Krog, Antjie (1998), p. 146.

⁴⁰ Govier, Trudy, speech at the conference Public forgiveness in post-conflict contexts, Nijmegen 6-3-2010.

⁴¹ Lyubomirsky, Sonja (2009), <http://www.pbs.org/thisemotionallife/topic/forgiveness/understanding-forgiveness>, checked on 20-01-2010.

overcome resentment and that the past will not dominate the future any longer. But is forgiveness highly personal? Can it only take place between two persons, or also between one persons and a group, or between two groups, or between a relative of the victim and the perpetrator, instead of the victim himself?

Govier mentions three different accounts of forgiveness. In the classic scenario, forgiveness involves two parties, a wrongdoer and the one who has been wronged, called here the victim.⁴² This is called ‘bilateral forgiveness.’⁴³ In short: the wrongdoer expresses sorrow and regret for what he has done; the victim, for moral reasons and in response to this appeal, overcomes any resentment or anger toward the wrongdoer and accepts him as a person capable of moral dignity and equality; and on this basis reconciliation may begin. When a victim forgives a wrongdoer, this does not mean that she excuses him for what he did, ceases to blame him or hold him responsible for it, or condones the deed, rationalizing that it was somehow not wrong after all. To forgive is not to renounce the moral judgment that an action is wrong, it is only wrong actions that need to be forgiven. When we forgive, we assume that there is something to forgive - a wrong action for which the offender was responsible. A crucial point is that forgiveness applies to agents and not to deeds.⁴⁴ Concluding: one can forgive a person, without forgiving the deed.

The second account of forgiveness is quasi-forgiveness. This was first argued by Piers Benn. Benn argues that it is a victim, and only a victim, who is properly entitled to forgive an offender, and if someone is not entitled to forgive another, he cannot do it. On this view, ‘an individual enjoys quasi-forgiveness if third parties, whilst not [at] all condoning what was done, overcome the indignation they feel on behalf of those directly wronged.’⁴⁵

Forgiving is beneficial in many ways.⁴⁶ If a victim is able to forgive a wrongdoer, he accepts him again as a morally worthy person capable of more than wrongdoing. He benefits from this moral acceptance, from being no longer labelled a purely and solely a wrongdoer. She benefits from having forgiven, because he will be able to move forward constructively, not

⁴² Govier, Trudy (1999), p. 59.

⁴³ Govier, Trudy at the Congress Public Forgiveness in Post-Conflict Contexts, co-organized by Bas van Stokkom, Neelke Dorrn, Paul van Tongeren en Marjolein de Boer. Nijmegen, March 6, 2010.

⁴⁴ Govier, Trudy, *ibidem*.

⁴⁵ Scarre, Geoffrey (2004), p. 68.

⁴⁶ Govier, Trudy, *ibidem*, p. 60.

being preoccupied with harms done to him, not being fixated on, or captivated by, the hurtful past. Forgiveness offers the prospect of reconciliation and a restored relationship. In political context, and South Africa is a perfect example, such relationships between previously contending groups and individuals are essential for the restructuring of a civil society.⁴⁷

The third and last account is the one of unilateral forgiveness. This account is defended by Margaret Holmgren.⁴⁸ She claims that victims of wrongdoing must work through a process of responding to that wrongdoing in order to reach a state of genuine forgiveness. This process is central to the restoration of a victim's self-respect, and forgiveness is psychologically and ethically inappropriate whenever it is incomplete. But once this process is complete, Holmgren argues, forgiveness is *always* appropriate, whether the offender repents or not. On this account, forgiveness is an issue for a victim who has been hurt, who has been psychologically and morally wronged, and who must struggle to restore his own self-respect and move forward in life. A primary reason for introducing this account of unilateral forgiveness is that the appropriateness of forgiveness should not be restricted by the attitudes of wrongdoers. To say that if the perpetrator does not feel remorse forgiveness is not appropriate is to leave too much power to the perpetrators.⁴⁹ Unilateral forgiveness is sometimes called 'unconditional forgiveness'.⁵⁰

An intermediate form of forgiveness is invitational forgiveness.⁵¹ Invitational forgiveness may be understood as a unilateral initiative toward bilateral forgiveness. To forgive invitationally is to forgive in the absence of perpetrator acknowledgment and moral change, but to do so in the hope of eliciting such shifts. Invitational forgiveness is like unilateral forgiveness in that it is offered in the absence of acknowledgement from perpetrators. It is like bilateral forgiveness to the extent that the expectation is of establishing an improved relationship between victim and wrongdoer; the idea is that ultimately two parties will be involved. Mandela's forgiveness of white South Africans is best described as invitational forgiveness in this sense. It was clearly not bilateral, given the absence of general acknowledgement of the wrongs of apartheid South Africa. Nor was it unconditional forgiveness in any straightforward sense; it was a unilateral initiative made in anticipation of a bilateral relationship based on

⁴⁷ Ibidem.

⁴⁸ Ibidem, p. 61.

⁴⁹ Ibidem, p. 62.

⁵⁰ Govier, Trudy at the Congres Public Forgiveness in Post-Conflict Contexts. Nijmegen, March 6, 2010.

⁵¹ Ibidem.

acknowledgment. I believe that Mandela's announcements of forgiveness can best be understood as invitations to white South Africans to recognize the past for what it was, acknowledge their wrongdoing and resolve to move forward to develop and support new non-racist institutions. Invitational forgiveness is not an invitation *to forgive*; it is already forgiveness. Rather, invitational forgiveness is an invitation *to acknowledge and reform*. It is one way of urging moral change in those responsible for past wrongs.⁵²

2.1.2. The forgiveness family

Forgiveness has many appearances and as many descriptions and explanations.⁵³ Forgiveness can be understood as a concept that comes with norms or conditions attached. Forgiveness can be taken as a virtue - or not. The concept can be understood as a moral relation between two individuals, or as a political instrument, in which we may speak of groups forgiving each other, or governments forgiving individuals or vice versa. The meaning of forgiveness is non-exhausting and in order to avoid confusion, I will sketch five of these other meanings. The siblings of forgiveness are⁵⁴:

1. *political apology*: apology offered in a political context. This may include an apology offered by the appropriate state official for wrongs committed by the state or offered to the state;
2. *economic forgiveness*: the forgiving or pardoning of debts;
3. *political pardon*: non-judicial branch of government granting amnesty, clemency or mercy;
4. *judicial pardon*: the exercise of mercy or clemency by a court of law in the penalty phase of a trial;
5. *metaphysical forgiveness*: to give up resentment caused by the manifold imperfections of the world.

Neither in 3 nor 4 is the individual forgiven for his or her wrongdoing. Normally, in those cases, the pardoner will not be the person who was injured, or at least not have been singled out to be wronged. In none of 2, 3 or 4 is there a necessary connection to any particular sentiment. As mentioned before, pardon does not require the giving up of resentment.⁵⁵ These

⁵² Congres Public Forgiveness in Post-Conflict Contexts. Nijmegen, March 6, 2010.

⁵³ Griswold, C. (2009), p. 99.

⁵⁴ Ibidem.

⁵⁵ Ibidem, p. 100.

different siblings play a part in many post conflict situations. In South Africa, for example, all of the siblings were significant. I will not go any deeper into that now.

2.1.3. Public forgiveness

In the last decades there has been a pervasive trend towards public apologies, towards forms of national introspection and also towards public appeals to grant forgiveness. The issue of ‘public forgiveness’ has generated many discussions, ranging from severe criticism to approval. For many, to speak of forgiveness in the public realm is inappropriate and risky. However, in transitional justice context, appealing to forgiveness may strengthen peace, political stability and the process of national unity.⁵⁶

Usually, the topic of public forgiveness arises as it did in the South African case: in the aftermath of serious and widespread wrongdoing, where state and society seek a nonviolent transition to a society of sustainable peace. Reconciliation requires the cultivation of social trust and for this, attitudes and relationships are centrally important. If individuals and groups have wronged each other, especially if they have done so in the context of sustained struggles over a long period of time, they are likely to remain resentful, angry, and suspicious in the aftermath. Such attitudes will stand as major obstacles to reconciliation and to the building of functional institutions and the cooperation needed to make those institutions work. Public forgiveness would mean overcoming these attitudes; suspicion, fear, and animosity towards persons blamed for wrongdoing in a past conflict would dissipate so that their reintegration into an improved society would become possible.

2.1.4. Transitional justice

The concept of public forgiveness is most discussed in transitional justice context. When a country changes government after a conflict, one speaks of a transitional state.

Transitional justice refers to the short-term and often temporary judicial and non-judicial mechanisms and processes that address the legacy of human rights abuses and violence during a society’s transition away from conflict or authoritarian rule.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Congres Public Forgiveness in Post-Conflict Contexts. Nijmegen, March 6, 2010.

⁵⁷ Anderlini, Sanam Naraghi, Camille Pampell Conway and Lisa Kays (2007), p. 1.

2.1.5. Reconciliation

Until now I spoke about forgiveness. Forgiveness seems to be an important part of what is necessary for a country after conflict: reconciliation. “Reconciliation is a theme with deep psychological, sociological, theological, philosophical, and profoundly human roots – and nobody really knows how to successfully achieve it,” Johan Galtung said.⁵⁸ Reconciliation varies in meaning and significance. It can simply mean co-existence or it can mean dialogue, remorse, apology, forgiveness and healing. An important point about reconciliation is that it is not an attempt to restore things to how they were before the conflict, but rather about constructing relationships in a way that allows everyone to move forward together. It is therefore not so much about an end result, such as punishment, but rather about a sequence of processes that build and improve relationships. National reconciliation refers to a political form of consensus and interaction among parties and leaders. Societal reconciliation refers to the longer-term, more difficult process of community and individual reconciliation.⁵⁹ Reconciliation in general refers to a condition of mutual respect among former enemies, which requires the reciprocal recognition of the moral worth and dignity of others. It is achieved when previous, conflict-era identities no longer operate as the primary cleavages in politics, and thus citizens acquire new identities that cut across those earlier fault lines.⁶⁰ Whether public forgiveness is necessary to achieve reconciliation is not general accepted.

Reconciliation, like most normatively complex social phenomena, cannot be measured in any exact manner, and it is precisely this elusive yet very real quality that makes any discussion of its nature and sources difficult. Nevertheless, several broad approaches have emerged, ranging from a ‘minimalist’ legal one predicated on coexistence to a ‘maximalist’ approach based on mutual healing, restoration, and forgiveness.⁶¹ These approaches on reconciliation reflect the minimalist and maximalist approaches on forgiveness. Therefore, I will first explain the approaches to reconciliation.

Basically, two fundamental perspectives can be distinguished, a ‘minimalist’ and a ‘maximalist’ account, in each of which the relationship between justice and forgiveness is reflected in fundamentally different ways. In the minimalist account it is assumed that

⁵⁸ Galtung, Johan (2001), p. 3.

⁵⁹ Anderlini, Sanam Naraghi, Camille Pampell Conway and Lisa Kays (2007), p. 1.

⁶⁰ Verdeja, E. “Theorizing Reconciliation” http://www.temple.edu/tempress/chapters_1800/2043_ch1.pdf, p. 3, checked on 25-3-’10.

⁶¹ Ibidem.

forgiveness in the public sphere is often difficult if not impossible to achieve, and that the search for justice will be obstructed when participants are encouraged or 'forced' to offer forgiveness. In the maximalist account – in line with Bishop Tutu's approach - it is claimed that public calls for the population to forgive may contribute to the peace process. Political statements in which wrongdoers are granted forgiveness may relieve the burdens of the past, bring about hope and stimulate cross-community contacts and an out-group perspective.⁶²

A footnote: public forgiveness implies a public, a collective, a group. Philosophers are not unanimous about whether a collective can have an attitude or conscious after all. Therefore, public forgiveness will be a debated concept.

⁶² Congres Public Forgiveness in Post-Conflict Contexts, co-organized by Bas van Stokkom, Neelke Dorn, Paul van Tongeren en Marjolein de Boer. Nijmegen, March 6, 2010.

2.2. Theological perspective on forgiveness

Although teaching about the healing power of forgiveness has been entrenched within many of the world's religious traditions, the act of forgiving does not depend on having a religious frame of reference.⁶³ The importance of forgiveness is universal. Nevertheless, Christianity played a great role in the South African TRC.

2.2.1. Forgiving in South Africa

The TRC was a highly religious institute. The TRC's chair and deputy chair, Tutu and Boraine, are, respectively a former archbishop of the Anglican church and a former president of the Methodist Church of South Africa. Given the importance of Christianity in South Africa - 77% of the South Africans identify themselves as Christian - it is not surprising that the framework under which the TRC operates is heavily influenced by Christian thought and tradition. Many people find it distasteful that the originally Roman catholic concept of confessing is forced upon all, 23% non-Christian, South African people. 'I understand how Tutu identifies reconciliation with forgiveness. I don't, because I'm not a Christian and I think it grossly immoral to forgive which is unforgivable,' one writer complaint in a letter to the South African newspaper *Mail & Guardian*. However, Christianity is not alone in viewing truth and confession as preconditions of reconciliation; all the great religions sound these themes. Furthermore, most religious traditions place reconciliation above justice. In traditional African thought, the emphasis is more on restoring evildoers to the community than punishing them.⁶⁴

2.2.2. Ubuntu

This (South) African philosophy is called *Ubuntu*. Both Antjie Krog and archbishop Tutu mention this philosophy in books named above. The concept of 'Ubuntu' comes from the Zulu saying: *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*. This means 'a person is a person through (other) persons.' We are who we are because we are seen, because people around us respect and recognize us as a human being, as a person. In contrast with the western philosophy 'I think, therefore I am' of Descartes, Ubuntu believes 'I am because we are.'⁶⁵ Archbishop Tutu describes Ubuntu as: 'It is the essence of being human. It speaks of the fact that my humanity

⁶³ Edwards, D. (2009), p. 62.

⁶⁴ Graybill, Lyn, <http://www.nyu.edu/classes/gmoran/SOAFRICA.pdf>, checked on 19-01-2010.

⁶⁵ Groot, Dick de (2008), <http://www.ikbenomdatwijzijn.info>, checked on 19-01-2010.

is caught up and is inextricably bound up in yours. I am human because I belong. It speaks about wholeness, it speaks about compassion. A person with Ubuntu is welcoming, hospitable, warm and generous, willing to share. Such people are open and available to others, willing to be vulnerable, affirming of others, do not feel threatened that others are able and good, for they have a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that they belong in a greater whole. They know that they are diminished when others are humiliated, diminished when others are oppressed, diminished when others are treated as if they were less than who they are. The quality of Ubuntu gives people resilience, enabling them to survive and emerge still human despite all efforts to dehumanize them.’⁶⁶

For many Africans, while they may belong to different societies and have different traditions and rituals, Ubuntu usually has a strong religious meaning. Integrity and harmony in all of the cosmos is a fundamental concern in the African world-view. One of the most active participants in this reality is the human person and his or her interaction with other persons, with visible reality, and with all reality that is unseen (the spirit world and the ancestors). In general, the African belief is that your ancestors continue to exist amongst the living in the form of spirits. In order to maintain harmony in creation, one must thus seek to show respect to all living things (both those which are seen, and those which are not seen), that is, all of the created order (human beings, plants, animals) and the unseen world (the ancestors and spirit beings, as well as God).⁶⁷

A typical example of Ubuntu is given by Cynthia Ngewu, mother of Christopher Piet, speaking in the TRC: ‘This thing called reconciliation ... if I am understanding it correctly ... it means this perpetrator, this man who has killed Christopher Piet, if it means he becomes human again, this man, so that I, so that all of us get our humanity back ... then I agree, then I support it all.’⁶⁸ In the first place, Cynthia Ngewu implicated that she knew and accepted that, as the killer had lost all humanity because he was no longer human, he would be able to kill her child. Second, she knew and accepted that, to forgive him would open up the possibility for *him* to regain his humanity. Third, she understood also that the loss of her son affected her own humanity; she herself had now to live within an affected humanity. Fourth and most importantly, she understood that if indeed the perpetrator felt himself driven by her

⁶⁶ Tutu, Desmond (1999), p. 37.

⁶⁷ Forster, Dion (2006), p. 245.

⁶⁸ Krog, Antjie (1998), chapter 10.

forgiveness to regain his humanity, then it would open up for *her* the possibility to become fully human again.⁶⁹

2.2.3. Christianity

Recognizing the centrality of reconciliation and forgiving to all religious traditions, Tutu has called on all faith communities to contribute to the TRC process. The racial and religious spectrum of the country was represented in the commission: several Christians, a Muslim, a Hindu, two apostates and probably two agnostics.⁷⁰ According to Tutu, not many people complained about the highly spiritual and even Christian mark of the commission. Since forgiving, reconciliation and reparation are no daily terms in the political discourse, it is likely that people understood that the TRC had to be spiritual to come to reconciliation.

Another Christian aspect of the TRC is the urge to remember the past. In Christian tradition the injunction is not to ‘forgive and forget’, but to ‘remember and forgive.’ Forgiveness begins with remembering, a moral judgement of wrong, injustice, and injury.⁷¹ So if we make a comparison with Ubuntu: forgiving is not reserved for Christianity - on the contrary, I would say. But the urge to remember the past is not particularly part of the Ubuntu philosophy. Ubuntu is more practical: everything to make the wrongdoer and victim human again.

Nonetheless, should victims be expected to forgive perpetrators who have not apologized? One view is that forgiveness is two-sided, requiring not only mercy on the side of the victim, but also repentance on the side of the perpetrator. The TRC offered amnesty in exchange for full disclosure - remorse was not a requirement. Of course, Tutu encouraged perpetrators to apologize publicly, but the reality is that victims cannot be compelled to forgive any more than perpetrators can be forced to repent. As Tutu writes in his book: if an applicant of amnesty would have apologized abundantly one could say that this person was insincere; but if an applicant would apologize formal and somewhat short, one could say accuse this person of being cold and not sorry at all.⁷²

⁶⁹ Krog, Antjie (2006), <http://www.vanderleeuwlezing.nl/2006/lezing%20antjie%20krog.pdf>, checked on 19-01-2010.

⁷⁰ Tutu, Desmond (1999), p. 74.

⁷¹ Graybill, Lyn, <http://www.nyu.edu/classes/gmoran/SOAFRICA.pdf>, checked on 20-01-2010.

⁷² Tutu, Desmond (1999), p. 52.

The following example can be located between justice and forgiveness. “How can it be?” [the interviewer] asked furiously, ‘I interview this black woman, living in a shack in appalling conditions, illiterate, dirt poor, I ask her: ‘What did forgiveness and ten years of democracy brought you?’ She said: ‘Freedom and peace.’ I said: ‘But here you are, see how you live, you have nothing, a few yards from here, look at that mansion and the rich whites there.’ And you know what she said? She looked at me and said: ‘Ten years cannot put right what three hundred years made wrong.’ This is what she said. I can’t believe it. Is she mad? Is she stupid?’⁷³ Antjie Krog biggest fear is that black people are not allowed to forgive anymore. Black South Africans are often accused of being manipulated, primitive, confused, a-historical and mad to forgive and reconcile by western thinkers and journalists. Western people seem to admire revenge, and consider forgiveness to be weak.

Forgiveness, at a minimum, is a decision to let go of the desire for revenge and ill-will toward the person who wronged you. This might be the biggest difference between western and South African philosophy. Maybe westerners value justice and accompanying punishment higher. The TRC stated that there exists another kind of justice: recovering justice, which is apparently typical for the traditional African jurisprudence. The central theme of Ubuntu is not revenge or punishment, it is the healing of breaks, the restoration of balance, broken relationships, an attempt to recover both the victim and the perpetrator.

Nevertheless, although Ubuntu is considered to be an African concept, I believe it is a human concept. The notion of Ubuntu invites fellow human beings to truly listen to one another in our social and political engagement, so that during moments of witness about the pasts and our different roles in it we can *hear* and connect with one another at critical points when our humanness shines through.⁷⁴ Without getting too free-floating, I think this might be the essence of a justice based on the quest for human dignity and restoration of a moral order in societies previously characterized by violence and hatred. The ideas of social reconciliation and forgiveness that have emerged across the globe in recent years are not new, created by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The TRC is just a measure to execute these long-existing ideas, drawn from the universal values of care, compassion and empathy, values that are central in our perceptions of moral humanity. Ordinary people under certain circumstances

⁷³ Krog, Antjie (2004), <http://www.blesok.com.mk/tekst.asp?lang=eng&tekst=640>, checked on 20-01-2010.

⁷⁴ Gobodo-Madikizela, P. and C. Van Der Merwe (2009), p. 165.

are capable of far greater evil than we could have imagined. But so are we capable of far greater virtue than we might have thought.⁷⁵

⁷⁵ Gobodo-Madikizela, P. and C. Van Der Merwe (2009), p. 165.

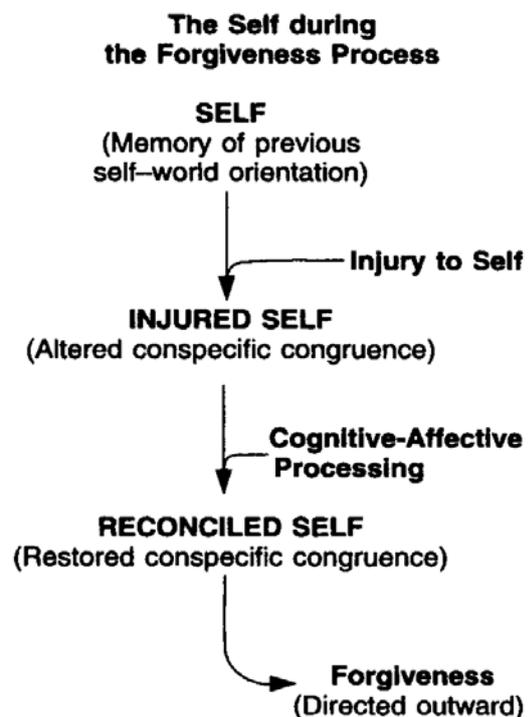
2.3. Psychological perspective on forgiveness

From a psychological perspective, one could define forgiveness as intraindividual, prosocial change toward a perceived transgressor that is situated within a specific interpersonal context.⁷⁶ When someone forgives a person who has committed a transgression against him or her, it is the forgiver (specifically, in his or her thoughts, feelings, motivations, or behaviours) who changes. However, forgiveness has a dual character; it is interpersonal as well as intrapersonal. Forgiveness occurs in response to an interpersonal violation (interpersonal), and the individual who forgives necessarily forgives in relation to someone else. Forgiveness has other people as its point of reference (intrapersonal). In this sense, forgiveness is a psychological construct.⁷⁷

2.3.1. Neuropsychology

I will not elaborate on the neuropsychology of forgiveness too much, but I think it is important to note that forgiveness is of course (also) a matter of the brain. Forgiveness can often occur via a number of different paths.⁷⁸ However, according to psychological theories, moral development, and the actual phenomenological process of forgiveness, there are certain specific patterns and paths that form at least the minimum requirements for forgiveness to occur.

Psychological models generally divide the forgiveness process into the following: 1. recognition of the injury to the self; 2. commitment to forgive; 3. cognitive and affective activity; and 4. behavioural action. See the model of forgiveness.⁷⁹



⁷⁶ McCullough, M., K. Pargament and C. Thoresen (2000), p. 8.

⁷⁷ Ibidem.

⁷⁸ Ibidem, p. 101.

⁷⁹ Ibidem, p. 106.

Forgiveness requires a complex neurocognitive process such that the new understanding of the self and its relationship with the world is analyzed so that the new and old understanding eventually are reconciled. This can occur via many possible neurocognitive and affective processes. For example, one could invoke a higher being (i.e., God), so a person might state that God caused the event to happen for reasons that cannot be explained without divine knowledge. Intrapersonal aspects of forgiveness include concepts of trust, benevolence, and the absence of anger and need for revenge or retaliation. One needs to accept the injury. All of these aspects are likely to become involved as part of the affectual and cognitive process necessary for forgiveness to occur. One important aspect of being able to forgive is probably the ability to identify or empathize with the offending individual. The injured person realizes that the offender is also human and capable of making mistakes⁸⁰ (which comes close to the concept of Ubuntu).

2.3.2. Freud

The actual act of forgiving is hard work. It includes a conscious and an unconscious part. As Freud said: the patient has to find the courage to focus on the manifestations of the sickness (trauma) and to consider the sickness as a strong opponent, as a part of himself. To face a problem, one has to admit first that there is a problem. Without realization, there won't be reconciliation.

In his essay *Remembering, Repeating and Working Through*,⁸¹ Freud realises that a patient fixated on his or her trauma repeats it compulsively instead of remembering it. In other words, action substitutes memory, insofar as the integration or adaptation of the traumatic event to consciousness has not occurred yet.⁸² The opposite of the urge to repeat is 'working-through' memory (which means forgiving with active forgetting, Freud's *Durcharbeiten*). Repetition is not remembering, it is a passive form of playing a movie in one's head. Of course we cannot change the past, the facts will remain the same. But the meaning we attach to what happened to us, can be changed. Events of the past stay open for new interpretations, and our projects have their repercussions on our memories. This is the remarkable 'afterwards' effect. So what

⁸⁰ McCullough, M., K. Pargament and C. Thoresen (2000), p. 101.

⁸¹ Freud, S. (1958),

<http://www.history.ucsb.edu/faculty/marcuse/classes/201/articles/1914FreudRemembering.pdf>, checked on 24-3-¹⁰.

⁸² Gobodo-Madikizela, P. and C. Van Der Merwe (2009), p. 240.

can be changed of the past, is its moral charge. And this is how working-through memories can lead to the path of forgiveness.⁸³

People all have different ways of looking at things. Everybody experiences events in another way. This can be explained in the view of a communication model from cognitive psychology.⁸⁴ According to this model, individuals have different ‘filters’, by which they delete, distort and generalize. If we do not delete, distort and generalize the events we take in consciously, we would be in sensory overload. There are other factors beside these filters, such as language, memory, attitude, decision making, etcetera, which make every person and every experience cognitively unique. Especially important in the light of South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission is language. When one tells a story, language is always the link, for better or for worse, between the messenger and the receiver of his message.

I will illustrate this with an example. The goal of the TRC was not only to offer a platform for victims, but also to deal with the past and come to reconciliation. Therefore, the TRC commissioner had to adapt individual stories to the umbrella master-story of reconciliation and healing of the nation. This aim can be derived from specific use of language during the hearings. One of the ‘tricks’ of the TRC was the subtle or explicit question: most people found it hard to resist.⁸⁵ For instance Gladys Papu, whose husband was killed: Rev Xundu (commissioner): ‘Thank you Mr Chairperson. Mam, I heard your story. I only have one question. According to you, what can be done so that there can be peace? Is there a conflict between yourself and this other group?’ Mrs Papu: ‘What I want is for them to come forward to tell the truth.’ Rev Xundu: ‘You are saying that reconciliation can be built if they can come forward?’ Mrs Papu: ‘Yes, if they can come and tell the truth.’ Rev Xundu: ‘If they can come forward you will forgive them?’ Mrs Papu: ‘Yes.’ Rev Xundu: ‘Thank you.’⁸⁶ This is only one of many examples of how important language is in every message we want to send, and in this case, in every goal we want to reach. The question is though, whether this people, who were more or less forced to say they forgave somebody, were capable of forgiving and whether they still feel resentment.

⁸³ Ricoeur, Paul (1995), pp. 14-16.

⁸⁴ Bandler, Richard en John Grinder (1975), p. 75.

⁸⁵ Verdoolaege, Annelies (2004), http://cas1.elis.ugent.be/avrug/trc/04_02.htm, checked on 20-01-2010.

⁸⁶ Ibidem.

2.3.3. Memory

Memories become language in the narrative. With narrative I mean every story in the exchange of daily life. We need to use our memory critically. The critical use of memory means that we need to tell the narrative differently under different circumstances. So not only from our own perspective, but also from the perspective of the other. This rewording of the past is of crucial importance in making history and creating collective memory.⁸⁷ Memory has more to do with the ‘creation of meaning’ than with the actual happening in the past. The diversity of oral history consists in the fact that ‘wrong’ statements are still psychologically ‘true’ and that this truth may be just as important as factually reliable accounts.⁸⁸

Every memory is selective. While telling a story, the memory selects what events seem meaningful and important for the history one is telling. One can only forgive what is not forgotten. When forgiving goes together with an active forgetting, our working-through memory, forgiving can be healing. The forgetting does not relate to the particular event, which should be remembered, but it relates to the guilt that paralyses the memory.⁸⁹ Past, present and future are inextricably connected. The ability to coexist (i.e., reconciliation) can only be possible when the past is not paralysing anymore.

Many researchers described the steps that lead to forgiveness and designed structured interventions that promote it. Almost all descriptions are based on Freud’s theory. Enright divided the process into four broad phases.⁹⁰

- “Uncovering”, involves identifying obstacles to change. These are the kinds of factors that serve as obstacles to resolving traumatic grief: avoiding reminders, avoiding painful emotions and focusing on negative thoughts about the experience in a way that keeps it alive but does not resolve anything (Freud’s repeating)
- “Decision”, individuals are invited to consider forgiveness as an option, to recognise that it will be of benefit to themselves to make a commitment to work towards forgiving (i.e. acceptance)

⁸⁷ Ricoeur, Paul (1995), p. 15.

⁸⁸ Field, Sean (2006), p. 34.

⁸⁹ Ricoeur, Paul (1995), *ibidem*.

⁹⁰ Edwards, D. (2009), p. 63.

- “Work”, the actual action of forgiving. Participants are invited to develop compassion, to try to see the offender in the context of his or her own life story and to look at the situation from the offender’s point of view (Freud’s working through)
- “Outcome”, participants are encouraged to find meaning in the forgiveness process, to recognise that they have also wronged others in the past and needed forgiveness, and to find new purpose in life because of the harm that was done to them. The ultimate goal: letting go of bitterness.

Forgiveness involves a series of identifiable psychological steps which anyone can take, whether or not they are affiliated to a particular religion. Forgiving a person who has acted unjustly and inflicted hurt involves trying to understand what was done from the perpetrator’s perspective and seeing the perpetrator in a new, more positive light. However, this does not imply that the person extending forgiveness condones the injustice or wishes to have further dealings with the person being forgiven.⁹¹ The most important notion is: the past should not be forgotten, but it has to be regarded as past. The manner in which such a memory can be constructed is illustrated in this observation from a Rwandan government official in 1995 when asked by Priscilla Hayner 'Do you want to remember or to forget?': 'We must remember what happened in order to keep it from happening again. But we must forget the feelings, the emotions, that go with it. It is only by forgetting that we are able to go on.'⁹²

⁹¹ Edwards, D. (2009), p. 62.

⁹² Rigby, A. (2002), <http://www.c-r.org/ccts/ccts18/3apprch.htm>, checked on 31-3-2010.

2.4. Political perspective on forgiveness

In the end, forgiveness is the decision of the individual. Some will forgive unconditionally, moved by a deep faith or other moral resource, others will demand certain conditions such as a show of contrition, and yet others will refuse to forgive under any circumstances. Many survivors of political conflict will not forgive but rather seek recognition, truth, and (often) retributive justice, if not outright revenge.⁹³ This is where I come to the political perspective on forgiveness. In peacebuilding processes, Truth and Reconciliation Commissions become more and more naturalized.

It should be clear by now that in order to come to forgiveness, the past should be laid to rest. Basically, one could say that there are three different points a TRC should bear in mind in order to lay the past to rest:⁹⁴

- Peace/security: a precondition for people to ‘move on’ is the experience of a clear break with the past. A key element is the end of violence. The past should be a memory, not a lived experience in the here-and-now.
- Justice; people need some degree and form of justice being implemented in order to experience a break with the past. notions of justice are usually the combination of punishment of perpetrators and the compensation of victims.
- Truth; according to the literature, unveiling and acknowledging the truth is significant for people to ‘move on’ individually and collectively.

2.4.1. Peacebuilding

To sketch the broader meaning of forgiveness after violent conflict, I will shortly focus on the role of forgiveness in peacebuilding processes. I discussed reconciliation in the philosophical perspective. For all that, this will be about reconciliation in peacebuilding and therefore in political context. Reconciliation after a conflict is necessary for sustaining peace.

Reconciliation is a process of gradually (re)building broad social relationships between communities alienated by sustained and widespread violence, so that over time they can

⁹³ Verdeja, E. (2009), p. 167.

⁹⁴ Rigby, A. (2002), <http://www.c-r.org/ccts/ccts18/3apprch.htm>, checked on 31-3-2010.

negotiate the realities and compromises of a new, shared socio-political reality. It has four main instruments, which are all tightly interlinked, cross-cutting and interdependent ⁹⁵:

- A justice process that punishes past violence and deters future repetition; and justice reform that is built on human rights principles, democratic practice, and international legal norms, and that promises fairness in the future
- A process of acknowledging experiences, uncovering unknown events, giving voice to the previously unheard, and addressing interpretations of history: often referred to as truth-seeking or truth-telling
- A process of healing, whereby victims repair their lives by coming to terms with their suffering
- A process of reparation, through real and/or symbolic compensation for loss

The four instruments (1) are reconciliation's main constituent parts; (2) thus have the potential to work in parallel co-ordination in the same direction; (3) depend fundamentally on each other, and complement each other; and (4) contribute together to the over-arching relationship-building process that is essential for progress towards the (perhaps idealistic) goal of a reconciled society.⁹⁶

Reconciliation after violent social conflict is a long, broad and deep intercommunal relationship-building process, whose constituent instruments include justice, truth, healing and reparations.⁹⁷ I will discuss justice, truth and reparations. I consider healing to be a psychological consequence of forgiveness and therefore not a political aspect.

2.4.2. Truth and Reconciliation Commission South Africa

Truth commissions and the associated concept of reconciliation have brought renewed attention to the role of forgiveness in political life. The South African TRC is used (internationally) as the exemplar of a reconciliation process, just as the ending of apartheid is used as an exemplar of peaceful conflict transformation. In the TRC the emphasis falls on

⁹⁵ Bloomberg, David (2006), p. 12.

⁹⁶ Ibidem, p. 13.

⁹⁷ Ibidem.

forgiveness (which is obviously no coincidence, given the subject of my thesis). The TRC has, despite its undoubted strengths, been criticized a lot on this point.⁹⁸

The South African experience raised forgiveness to a central position which, some would argue, causes real problems. Certainly in the early stages of a reconciliation process, few victims are keen to forgive. Furthermore, they often perceive, rightly or wrongly, a pressure on them to offer forgiveness (see the part on use of language in the TRC). This seems rather back-to-front. Forgiveness is something (often one of few things) that remains in the power of victims to give or withhold. A reconciliation process aims to make that forgiveness possible. But a fair reconciliation process should not achieve the bestowing of forgiveness through pressure on the victims. Reconciliation as a *process* works towards the (idealistic) goal of an *end-state* of reconciliation where forgiveness may happen *at the discretion of victims*; if it happens earlier during the process, that is a prerogative of the unpressurised victim. Some argue that the focus here should be on the offenders: forgiveness is something offenders should earn, not something that victims should give away.⁹⁹ And, moreover, forgiveness must be a later-stage component of reconciliation that may come at a victim-defined point where coexistence is shifting towards a more positive emanation.

One of the debates is on the question whether reconciliation is independent from forgiveness. One could argue that reconciliation (peacefully living together) is not the same as forgiving your perpetrator (i.e., not holding a grudge). As the next example illustrates.¹⁰⁰ Colin Parry is a British man whose 11-year-old son was killed by an IRA bomb in England in 1994. Bloomberg asked him recently where forgiveness fitted in his view. “I will never forgive the people who killed my son,” he told him. “But I am completely committed to the process of reconciliation.” Bloomberg draw the conclusion that Parry asserts the right not to forgive, something apparently distinct from the right not to reconcile.¹⁰¹

If the TRC’s interest in truth was only linked to amnesty and compensation, one could say that the commission interest was not truth, but justice. If it saw truth as the widest possible compilation of people’s perceptions, stories, myths, and experiences, it would have chosen to

⁹⁸ Bloomberg, David (2006), p. 23.

⁹⁹ Rigby, Andrew (2001).

¹⁰⁰ Bloomberg, David (2006), *ibidem*, p. 25.

¹⁰¹ *Ibidem*.

restore memory and foster a new humanity, and according to Krog, this is justice in its deepest sense.¹⁰²

2.4.3. Justice

Who talks about forgiveness, talks about justice. Classical justice contributes to a system that reassures its society that, 'Those who do wrong will be punished.'¹⁰³ And to be honest, this is how the system should work in order to avoid impunity. Moreover, most see justice as an essential element of a peaceful state, such as Joseph Montville, who sees justice as "the most fundamental element of peace," since: "In its most general sense, justice implies order and morality... the basic rules governing right and wrong behaviour."¹⁰⁴

Justice is important in the transition from an authoritarian state to a democratic state, or in the South African context: in the transition from the Apartheid regime to a democratic regime. This is one aspect where South Africa differs from many other post-conflict situations. In South Africa occurred an absolute rupture with the past: the Apartheid regime was condemned by all parties. All parties, including the ANC (African National Congress, i.e. Mandela's party) and the NP (National Party, the former white party), were pleading for truth finding, to clear up violations in their own group. All parts of the population were involved in the transition; the conflict was clear; there were no in between positions. In the aftermath of conflict or authoritarian rule, people who have been victimised often demand justice. The notion that there cannot be peace without justice emerges forcefully in many communities.

Does forgiveness run counter justice? Justice can be based on retribution (punishment and corrective action for wrongdoings) or on restoration (emphasising the construction of relationships between the individuals and communities). Tutu said: "There are different kinds of justice. Retributive justice is largely Western. The African understanding is far more restorative - not so much to punish as to redress or restore a balance that has been knocked askew. The justice we hope for is restorative of the dignity of the people."¹⁰⁵ This is once again a reference to the African philosophy Ubuntu.

¹⁰² Krog, Antjie (1998), p. 21.

¹⁰³ Bloomberg, David (2006), p. 19.

¹⁰⁴ Montville, Joseph V (2001), p. 129.

¹⁰⁵ Bell, Richard (2002), p. 90.

In South Africa it was simply not an option to raise all violators of human rights to the bench, let alone all wrongdoers in general.¹⁰⁶ First, there were too many wrongdoers on all sides. Second, there was not really a matter of one winning party. In the delicate process to democracy, justice and respect for human rights, all parties had to cooperate. Negotiating can only function on the basis of mutual respect. As the South African judge Mahomed said: “In order to have a successful transition, the results of the negotiations should not only be accepted by victims, but also by the one’s for whom the transition was threatening.”¹⁰⁷ Furthermore, keeping perpetrators from the society does not help peace building either. It makes no sense to single out a group and say that they are incapable of moral change. This will only nourish bitterness on all sides.

Despite the support of two much-beloved figures, namely former President Mandela and Archbishop Tutu, there was (and is) a lot of critique on the TRC. One aspects in particular drew intense fire. This was the commission’s ability to grant amnesties. As mentioned before, the parties had to compromise in order to have successful negotiations. The amnesty regulation is one of these compromises.¹⁰⁸ Not everybody could get amnesty, obviously, there were strict rules attached. The South African TRC introduced the element of *conditional* amnesty into their model.¹⁰⁹ To be free from the fear of prosecution perpetrators were required to confess their crimes and convince the Amnesty Committee that these had been 'political' in nature and were not committed out of personal malice or for private gain.

One could say that lay at the heart of the TRC’s project: truth for justice. Of the three conditions in order to lay the past to rest, the emphasis of the South African TRC lay on truth (and not on peace/security or justice). Arguments in favour of this emphasis are: criminals who made full disclosure would evade retribution, and victims would be vindicated by having their stories publicly confirmed (closely linked to recognition). Families would finally find out what had happened to their vanished relatives and the country as a whole would learn the exact details of what South Africa’s security apparatus had been doing but denying for so long. However, not everyone accepted the TRC’s focus on truth. Some say that it leads to

¹⁰⁶ Tutu, Desmond (1999), p. 25.

¹⁰⁷ Ibidem, p. 28.

¹⁰⁸ Tepperman, J. (2002), p. 134.

¹⁰⁹ Rigby, A. (2002), <http://www.c-r.org/ccts/ccts18/3apprch.htm>, checked on 31-3-2010.

impunity, and that there where victims need to live forever with their trauma and loss, perpetrators simply tell the truth and can live happily ever after.

On the question whether the act of forgiving is immoral and leads to impunity, I believe that this is a misunderstanding. Forgiveness does not, indeed cannot, wipe out the fact of wrong having been done. Nor is it a matter of simply giving up one's right to punish (although this decision may in fact be a result of one's forgiveness of another person). Nor does it mean that the victim excuses the wrongdoer in forgiving him. Forgiveness is not incompatible with punishment. Forgiveness can follow punishment. In fact, it may be as a result of punishment that an offender is led to acknowledge and feel remorse for his wrongdoing.¹¹⁰

2.4.4. Truth: the road to reconciliation?

What is the link between forgiveness and truth? The dictionary says about truth: 'an obvious or accepted fact.'¹¹¹ The difficulty with this statement is that even a fact is not always obvious or generally accepted. What is presented as a fact is not always a fact. A so-called factual description of an event is seldom really factual. Another definition the dictionary gives: 'the true or actual state of a matter.'¹¹² But as I proved in the part on psychological perspective, every person has another way of looking at and conceiving a certain happening. Is historical truth a reasonable goal? The value of revealing the truth is not abstract. After Nine Eleven, for example, the most important thing for many of the victim's families was to find out what exactly had happened to their loved ones. Only once the truth was discovered could the healing finally begin. By the same token, it is argued, an honest accounting of past injustices is essential before shattered societies can start to rebuild. Yet truth turns out to be a surprisingly elusive goal. Historical narratives are after all partly constructed rather than merely discovered.

How the TRC handled this notion of truth? The commission's report lists four different kinds of truth that it pursued: "factual or forensic," "personal or narrative," "social or dialogue," and "healing or restorative" varieties.¹¹³ Because only the first of these is recognizable as the sort of objective, verifiable phenomenon most people think of when they think of truth, however,

¹¹⁰ Govier, Trudy (1999), p. 60.

¹¹¹ Dictionary: <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/truth>, checked at 17-12-09.

¹¹² Ibidem.

¹¹³ Du Toit, A. (2005), p. 439.

the list only seemed to heighten confusion and scepticism about the TRC's ability to produce a single authoritative story of what had transpired under apartheid.¹¹⁴ In contexts of transitional justice, the concern with truth is focused especially on disclosing the political atrocities of the prior regime and past conflicts. However, this is a complex matter: it is not only about establishing factual truth and knowledge of past atrocities, but it is more about finding appropriate ways to acknowledge these.¹¹⁵

Characteristically victims, or their relatives, insist that they need to *know* what had happened to their loved ones before they can forgive or engage in any process of reconciliation.¹¹⁶ Without knowing the truth, they are unable to let it go. Moreover, they also want to tell the truth. Both are closely connected to recognition. In many cases, victims are more likely to forgive when they get recognition in any form for their loss and pain.

2.4.5. Reparation

During one of the hearings, the mother of a victim explained: 'It is easy for Mandela and Tutu to forgive ... they lead vindicated lives. In my life nothing, not a single thing, has changed since my son was burnt by barbarians ... therefore, I cannot forgive.'¹¹⁷ Hence, the question of reparation rises. Will people forgive when their situation does not change? One of the commissions of the TRC is the Reparation and Rehabilitation Commission. The final report on the TRC says:¹¹⁸

The South African conflict produced casualties. Many people were killed, tortured, abducted and subjected to various forms of severe ill treatment. This not only destroyed individual lives, but also affected families, communities and the nation as a whole. As a result, the new South Africa has inherited thousands of people whose lives have been severely affected. If we are to transcend the past and build national unity and reconciliation, we must ensure that those whose rights have been violated are acknowledged through access to reparation and rehabilitation. While such measures can never bring back the dead, nor adequately compensate

¹¹⁴ Tepperman, J. (2002), p. 140.

¹¹⁵ Nagel, T. (1988), p. 4.

¹¹⁶ Du Toit, A. (2005), p. 442.

¹¹⁷ Krog, Antjie (1998), p. 146.

¹¹⁸ Final Report SATRC, <http://www.justice.gov.za/trc/report/finalreport/Volume%205.pdf>, Volume 5, Chapter 5, Reparation and Rehabilitation Policy, p. 174.

for pain and suffering, they can and must improve the quality of life of the victims of human rights violations and/or their dependants.

‘If people don’t get reparation, they won’t forgive. If people are not forgiven, they won’t offer reparation,’ Antjie Krog wrote.¹¹⁹ It is certainly easier to forgive someone who sincerely apologizes and makes amends. As Tutu says, it is impossible to compensate people for rape, torture or the loss of a beloved person. Yet, the report of the commission said: ‘Without adequate reparation and rehabilitation measures, there can be no healing and reconciliation, either at an individual or a community level. Comprehensive forms of reparation should also be implemented to restore the physical and mental well being of victims.’¹²⁰ This is justice: it can only be fair that victims, although there is no possible compensation for violations, get something in return for their loss. However, justice - which may include acknowledgment of the wrong, apologies, punishment, restitution, or compensation - is separate from forgiveness.¹²¹ Forgiveness is and remains an highly individual and sensitive matter. But what consists reparation? Volume 5 of the finale report of the TRC defines reparation as including: ‘any form of compensation, ex gratia payment, restitution, rehabilitation or recognition.’ More precisely, this means: urgent reparation, such as medical care; financial grants, money to be paid over a period of six years; symbolic reparation, like memorials, monuments and museums; community rehabilitation programs, like community based services and activities; institutional reform, to prevent the recurrence of human rights violations.¹²² All this measures are meant to stimulate forgiveness.

The financial grant (a pittance, in lack of more money available) made over to some of the victims is a symbolic way to say: we recognize the injustice done to you, let this money be a balsam to stimulate the healing.¹²³ Except for the amount of money, the distribution does not go very fast. This means that victims waited for their money much longer than perpetrators waited for their amnesty- and so-called freedom. Considering the consequences of the Apartheid system, it would definitely be easier for black people to let go of grudge when the

¹¹⁹ Krog, Antjie (1998), p. 130.

¹²⁰ Final Report SATRC, <http://www.justice.gov.za/trc/report/finalreport/Volume%205.pdf>, Volume 5, Chapter 5, Reparation and Rehabilitation Policy, p. 175.

¹²¹ Lyubomirsky, Sonja (2009), <http://www.pbs.org/thisemotionallife/topic/forgiveness/understanding-forgiveness>, checked on 20-01-2010.

¹²² Final Report SATRC, *ibidem*.

¹²³ Tutu, Desmond (1999), p. 64.

situation for blacks and whites would not be this unequal. Unfortunately, it will take dozens of years, if not generations, to equalize the wealth of all South Africans.¹²⁴

¹²⁴ Tutu, Desmond (1999), chapter 11.

2.5. Conclusion

There are many different approaches to and perspectives on forgiveness. While there are some differences among them, all of these approaches share several key points.¹²⁵ First, they conceive of forgiveness as the abandonment of hatred towards one's perpetrator. Second, forgiveness becomes the primary way for achieving a fundamental transformation of both victim as perpetrator, allowing for the emergence of a new relationship between the two that is no longer anchored by the past. Finally, all of these thinkers emphasize the practicality of forgiveness. Rather than placing it solely in the corner of the theologians, forgiveness should play a central role in political and personal life, especially following mass violence.¹²⁶

Nevertheless, many truth commissions did not succeed to bring former enemies together and involve the population. May be South Africa is an exceptional case. There are at least two aspects which made South Africa successful. First, the importance of attractive leadership: Nelson Mandela was able to convince not only the black population but also most whites. He also enjoyed great fame and respect internationally. Secondly, the elites of both parts of the population encouraged reconciliation. On both sides leaders stressed inclusiveness and recognition of victims. In particular the following conditions seem to have stimulated the reconciliation process.

Desmond Tutu wrote: 'Forgiveness is an absolute necessity for continued human existence.'¹²⁷ Although forgiveness is not necessary for reconciliation, I believe people do need to forgive and to leave the past behind. In this sense, I am a maximalist. On the other side, I am not a fan of how the TRC urged victims to forgive. I do think that forgiveness is for the victim to decide whether to do it or not (though I don't think it is purely a matter of the consciousness).

¹²⁵ Verdeja, E. (2009), p. 166.

¹²⁶ Ibidem.

¹²⁷ Enright, R. and J. North eds. (1998), p. xiii.

Chapter 3. Research Methods

Finding forgiveness in the narrative

3.1. Methods

To find forgiveness in Coetzee's novels, I will use the methods of close reading and text analysis. These are the methods used in literary studies and cultural studies for analysing a specific text. With these methods, I will try to establish where and how forgiveness plays a role in the novel and whether the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, that focussed on forgiveness, influenced that role.

In my analysis I will pay attention to the subjects mentioned in Chapter 2, such as Ubuntu and the question of religion, justice, truth, the different accounts of forgiveness and the psychological aspect. Are these subjects part of the story? What is their role in the novel and how is this put into words? Is there a development to be found in Coetzee's oeuvre?

Novels have different functions: they function as a mirror of the state of affairs, which I will use to do my research. Novels also function as a therapeutic way of telling one's story, or reading one's story.¹²⁸ The novel, much like social and political theory, deals with human affairs. However, unlike theories which use general abstractions, the novel uses the power of example. It does so via detailed expressions of daily experiences of particular situations. It speaks of and to individuals in an accessible fashion. The novel also presents us with many contradictions: within the hero's character, between the hero and other characters, between the characters and the narrator, between the author and the reader, between the background of the plot and actions of the characters, etc. These contradictions are helpful in simulating the many aspects of reality. Although the characters and places of the novel are factitious, the way we experience them is not. As such, novels are sites of knowledge which may help us to examine the possibilities of a given situation, concepts and emotions. In other words, novels look beyond ourselves and present the lives of others that, with insignificant differences, could have been our own.¹²⁹

¹²⁸ Cohen, Noar (2010), p. 3.

¹²⁹ Keren, Michael (2003); Gaut, Berys and Jerrold Levinson (2003), pp. 436-450; Nussbaum (1986); Zuckert, Catherine H (1990).

So the outcome is twofold: it can help people to work through the past and trauma, and it shows what the state of things is. There are a couple of red flags: the people reading books are probably the more educated and therefore richer people. Especially black people in South Africa cannot read and cannot afford a book. On the other hand, since stories are such an important part of the South African culture, there are many projects to stimulate reading, such as reading to children and free libraries. Another red flag is that the people writing books themselves are probably higher educated. For people outside South Africa, like myself, the best-known South African books are written in English (Nadine Gordimer, J.M. Coetzee) or Afrikaans (Antjie Krog, André Brink) and mainly by white authors. Furthermore, I am white and will take another position towards my research objects than a black person might do. The same goes for my gender, my level of education and background. This aspect leads me to the subject of ‘whiteness.’

3.1.2. Whiteness

When we study differences and identity, the emphasis usually lays on the ‘Other’: the strange, the marginal and the different, like homosexuality, the female or the non-white. Because this subordinate has not been given enough attention, it is useful to study these identities.¹³⁰ Moreover, the way in which the ‘Other’ is represented says something about the identity of the dominant (white, heterosexual, male). In contrast, study of the ‘Other’ preserves the binary opposition between the normal and the deviated. The dominant is once again the criterion. That is why some scientists argue that the *dominant* should be the subject of examination, not the subordinate. For example, in gender studies it is the position of men which is investigated, instead of the position of women, in homo-studies heterosexuality is the subject of investigation, and in post colonialism the focus is on the former oppressor instead of the oppressed, especially to get more understanding of the balance of power.

Since the abolition of Apartheid, also South Africa yields to a study of ‘whiteness.’ During a seminar on race and identity in Cape Town, Wandile Goozen Kasibe, cultural scientist and writer for the South African website on literature Litnet, states that ‘one major question among other questions that seem to haunt our “post-apartheid” discourse is the question of the

¹³⁰ Krijnen, Eke (2009).

invisibility, apparent neutrality and normalisation of “whiteness.”¹³¹ The problem of post-Apartheid South Africa is that the norm and the standard are still associated with being white, while the relations are changed. The goal of a study to ‘whiteness’, according to Kasibe, should therefore be to question norm and standard.¹³²

This is also the aim of Melissa Steyn in her study of white identity in a changed South Africa, described in her book *Whiteness Just Isn't What It Used To Be*. This book tries to expose the ‘invisible’ white identity. Steyn emphasizes the necessity to speak of different kinds of ‘whiteness.’ There are several white identities, depending on different specific contexts.¹³³ In her work Steyn examines how changing political circumstances in South Africa influence the white identity and tries to establish the identities which are created by these circumstances.¹³⁴

On the other side are the academicians. As a researcher, it is important to be aware of the position you take with regard to the research project. Especially with a subject as South Africa, where colour played and still plays a huge role, it is significant to notice that I am white. Since I am white, my own position cannot be neutral. But as race is imagined, the values attributed to colour are obviously constructed. The positive evaluation of the self happens by (d)evaluating the other. The colour white (taken as a colour) is still unmarked and normative. It is important to this keep in mind.

3.2. Selection of novels

Taking my decision on which novels to read, there were many factors to take into account. Obviously, there are many contemporary South African novels in which forgiveness plays a role. However, the selection and justification of my selection were harder than I thought. Therefore, I chose to read and analyse the novels of J.M. Coetzee that take place in South Africa. This way, I can see whether there is a progression to notice, or a development on how forgiveness is represented by one of South Africa’s most read novelists.

¹³¹ Kasibe, Wandile Goozen (2006), <http://www.litnet.co.za/cgi-bin/giga.cgi?cmd=cause_dir_news_item&cause_id=1270&news_id=17766&cat_id=201>, checked on 19-06-2010.

¹³² Ibidem.

¹³³ Steyn, Melissa (2001), p. xxx.

¹³⁴ Krijnen, Eke (2009).

3.2.1. The author

John Maxwell Coetzee was born in Cape Town, South Africa, on 9 February 1940, the elder of two children.¹³⁵ His mother was a primary school teacher. His father was trained as an attorney, but practiced as such only intermittently; during the years 1941–45 he served with the South African forces in North Africa and Italy. Though Coetzee's parents were not of British descent, the language spoken at home was English.

Coetzee entered the University of Cape Town in 1957, and in 1960 and 1961 graduated successively with honours degrees in English and mathematics. For three years (1968–71) he was assistant professor of English at the State University of New York in Buffalo. From 1972 until 2000 he held a series of positions at the University of Cape Town, the last of them as Distinguished Professor of Literature. Between 1984 and 2003 he also taught frequently in the United States: at the State University of New York, Johns Hopkins University, Harvard University, Stanford University, and the University of Chicago, where for six years he was a member of the Committee on Social Thought. In 2002 Coetzee emigrated to Australia.¹³⁶

Coetzee began writing fiction in 1969. His first book, *Dusklands*, was published in South Africa in 1974. *In the Heart of the Country* (1977) won South Africa's then principal literary award, the CNA Prize, and was published in Britain and the USA. *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) received international notice. His reputation was confirmed by *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983), which won Britain's Booker Prize. It was followed by *Foe* (1986), *Age of Iron* (1990), *The Master of Petersburg* (1994), and *Disgrace* (1999), which again won the Booker Prize. The Nobel Prize in Literature 2003 was awarded to J. M. Coetzee 'who in innumerable guises portrays the surprising involvement of the outsider.'¹³⁷

Coetzee also wrote three fictionalized memoirs, *Boyhood* (1997), *Youth* (2002) and *Summertime* (2009). *The Lives of Animals* (1999) is a fictionalized lecture, later absorbed into *Elizabeth Costello* (2003). *White Writing* (1988) is a set of essays on South African literature and culture. *Doubling the Point* (1992) consists of essays and interviews with David Attwell. *Giving Offense* (1996) is a study of literary censorship. *Stranger Shores* (2001) is a collection

¹³⁵ http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2003/coetzee-bio.html, checked on 28-05-2010.

¹³⁶ Ibidem.

¹³⁷ Ibidem.

of his later literary essays. Following novels are: *Slow Man* (2005) and *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007). Coetzee is one of the most read South African writers.¹³⁸

3.2.2. The novels

Since I decided to read and analyse Coetzee's stories which take place in South Africa, I read the next novels: *Dusklands* (1974), *In the Heart of the Country* (1977), *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), *Life and Times of Michael K* (1983), *Age of Iron* (1990), *Youth* (1997), *Disgrace* (1999), *Boyhood* (2002) and *Summertime* (2009). I deliberately decided not to analyse his essays or lectures, such as *Elizabeth Costello*, though one could argue whether this book is a novel or not. It is my opinion that *Elizabeth Costello* is not telling a narrative and should therefore not be considered a novel.

3.3. Validity

Forgiveness is one of South Africa's most important discussion themes. As Coetzee is one of South Africans most important writers, it is interesting to see how Coetzee depicts forgiveness. Furthermore, political forgiveness needs to be evaluated and this text analysis might be another way to do it.

¹³⁸ Ibidem.

Chapter 4. Results: analysis of the novels

His ignorance, his innocence...¹³⁹

It is important to notice that forgiveness is not the foremost theme of Coetzee's oeuvre. Nevertheless, it definitely does appear in his books – the word as well as the concept. In some books more than in others, for example in *Waiting for the Barbarians* a lot more than in *Life and Times of Michael K*.

The most important returning keywords in Coetzee novels are humiliation, disgrace, shame and guilt.¹⁴⁰ These words are all closely connected to forgiveness. An interesting theme is the body, and the connection between the body and the mind. About the body Coetzee says in *Doubling the Point*: 'Not grace, then, but at least the body. Let me put it baldly: in South Africa it is not possible to deny the authority of suffering and therefore of the body. It is not possible, not for logical reasons, not for ethical reasons (I would not assert the ethical superiority of pain over pleasure), but for political reasons, for reasons of power. And let me again be unambiguous: it is not that one grants the authority of the suffering body: the suffering body takes this authority: that is its power. To use other words: its power is undeniable.'¹⁴¹ Other returning themes are the alienation of the key character, and the need to confess, in one way or another. All of these subjects will come back in my analysis of the novels. The most noticeable might be the return of the theme of the silent observer.

I decided to analyse the novels one by one, starting by Coetzee's debut, *Dusklands*, and to consider the trilogy fictionalized autobiography as one work, ending with Coetzee's newest novel *Summertime*. I will take a close look at the appearance of forgiveness and how this can be connected to the four different perspectives on forgiveness. This will be the link with chapter 2, the theory. After the one-by-one analysis, I will draw a broader conclusion on whether or not we can discover development of forgiveness throughout the books, running from 1974 till 2009. Incidentally, I might involve another book in the analysis of a particular novel. I end with a short analysis of one covering theme, the confession.

¹³⁹ Coetzee, J.M. (1990), p. 193.

¹⁴⁰ Achterhuis, Grunberg, Hemmerechts et al. (2010), p. 18.

¹⁴¹ Coetzee, J.M. (1992), ed. David Attwell, p. 248.

4.1 *Dusklands*, 1974: 'The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee'

Have faith, be comforted, like the sparrow you are not forgotten...

Content and context 'The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee' is set in the 1760s, during the Dutch colonisation of South Africa. The narrator-protagonist is a remote ancestor of the author (for clarity, I shall refer to the author as Coetzee and to his character as Jacobus). Narratives of colonial exploration and adventure, description of landscape and manners and customs, and frontier or pioneer history deepen and localize Coetzee's evident critique, revealing the legacy of key colonial discourses in the ideological management of Southern Africa.¹⁴² Most notable of this story is the colonial and therefore arrogant attitude of the protagonist, Jacobus Coetzee, in relation to the original South African inhabitants.

Analysis

Humiliation and the body

Already in this first book, humiliation and the decline of the body is an important subject. When the protagonist becomes ill during an expedition, the Hottentots (Khoikhoi¹⁴³) take care of him. Jacobus gets angry after an unfortunate event in which he gets humiliated by the abuse of his body: 'Ants, ants raped from their nest, enraged and bewildered, their little pincers scything and their bodies bulging with acid, descended between my spread buttocks, on to my tender anus, on to my weeping rose, my nobly laden testicles. I screamed with pain and shame. "I want to go home," I screamed, "Let me go home, I want to go home, I want to go home!" I ground away pitifully with the never hitherto exerted muscles of my perineum and achieved nothing.'¹⁴⁴ Since Jacobus is proud and feels elevated above the Hottentots, this humiliation is unbearable. He wonders whether the Hottentots take him seriously enough.¹⁴⁵ The Hottentots let him go, and it is his pride and his honour that make him return to kill his deserted slaves and the Hottentots. 'We do not require of God that he be good, I told them, all we ask is that He never forgets us. Those of us who may momentarily doubt that we are included in the great system of dividends and penalties may take comfort in Our Lord's observation on the fall of the sparrow: the sparrow is cheap but he is not forgotten. (...) There

¹⁴² Attwell, David (1993), p. 40.

¹⁴³ The whites called the Khoikhoi people 'Hottentots.' Since Jacobus calls them Hottentots, I will use this name.

¹⁴⁴ Coetzee, J.M. (1974), p. 91.

¹⁴⁵ Ibidem.

are acts of justice, I tell them (I told them), and acts of injustice, and all bear their place in the economy of the whole. Have faith, be comforted, like the sparrow you are not forgotten.’¹⁴⁶

Forgiveness

Pride and feelings of underestimated honour could be in the way of forgiveness. But in this case, who has to forgive who? It feels like Jacobus needs to kill the deserters and the Hottentots because they humiliated him, because that is the way to save his honour, not because he cannot forgive them. On the other side, Jacobus has been looking forward to this day for months, and obviously harboured a grudge against them. The motives for the murder are slight (defiant servants), and even ridiculous (ants on the scrotum).¹⁴⁷ The killing of the Hottentots seems just the proceeding of a necessary process, they are just as humble as a sparrow. It is not the death of the Hottentots which moves him, it is the ‘desolate infinity’ of his power: undergoing ‘a failure of imagination before the void,’ he feels ‘sick at heart.’¹⁴⁸ One moment the reader could think Jacobus is sorry for killing them, he does not seem to enjoy it, but two pages later he says: ‘I tried to listen to them as one listens to the belling of frogs, as pure pattern; but the pattern here was without interest. I wished the screams would go away.’¹⁴⁹ Jacobus turns out to be indifferent. It shows how the relations were between the Dutch settlers and the Khoikhoi. Narcism and solipsism¹⁵⁰, the pitfalls of philosophical idealism, are seen explicitly in terms of the colonist’s failure to engage in reciprocal relationships.¹⁵¹

Harder to kill is Tamboer, one of the deserted slaves, who shows remorse. Tamboer wants Jacobus to forgive him. Jacobus does not save his life, but at the same time he does not want the deserters or the Hottentots to suffer too much either. He does not torture them and makes the killing go fast. When Tamboer is bleeding to death, Jacobus says: ‘No, I don’t want this. Shoot him to death, finish it.’¹⁵² All of this is a sign of the idea that this job just needed to be done. They humiliated him, so he had to kill them, and that is it. Therefore, I am not sure whether one can speak of forgiveness. At one point Jacobus says: ‘No more than any other

¹⁴⁶ Coetzee, J.M. (1974), p. 101.

¹⁴⁷ Knox-Shaw, Peter (1996), p. 115.

¹⁴⁸ Coetzee, J.M. (1974), pp. 108-109.

¹⁴⁹ Coetzee, J.M. (1974), *ibidem*, p. 103.

¹⁵⁰ The meaning of solipsism: extreme preoccupation with and indulgence of one's feelings, desires, etc. <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/solipsism>

¹⁵¹ Attwell, David (1993), p. 36.

¹⁵² Coetzee, J.M. (1974), pp. 113-114.

man do I enjoy killing; but I have taken it upon myself to be the one to pull the trigger, performing the sacrifice for myself and my countrymen, who exist, and committing upon the dark folk the murders we have all wished. All are guilty, without exception. I include the Hottentots. Who knows for what unimaginable crimes of the spirit they died, through me? God's judgment is just, irreprehensible, and incomprehensible. His mercy pays need to merit. I am a tool in the hands of history.¹⁵³ At the time of writing, 1974, the Apartheid regime is still in power. This last sentence, which is repeated a couple of times, is a lesson to all white South Africans: there might be one executioner, or one president, but everybody who does nothing against it, is just as guilty¹⁵⁴ (if you aren't against them, you're with them). So also beneficiaries of the Apartheid system are guilty.

Forgiveness asks for a position of human to human, on equal grounds. One should see his perpetrator as a human being (again) to be able to forgive. And according to Ubuntu, to be able to be fully human self again. That is what Coetzee wanted to stress: the biggest problem with the apartheid system was that white people, originally, did not consider black people as people. Actually, in my opinion, that is still the most dangerous: the dehumanizing of specific groups of people.

4.2 *In the Heart of the Country, 1978*

To explain is to forgive...

Content and context The narrator, Magda, a white South African spinster who lives with her father on an isolated farm, provides an account made up of 266 numbered sections in which she gives versions of events that are often contradictory – for example, she twice describes killing her father, once with an axe and once with a gun. She also describes an unsuccessful attempt, after her father's burial, to form a new relationship with the black servants, Hendrik and Anna; her rape by Hendrik and her desertion by both servants; and her final revival of her father. The novel can be read as an allegory of the whole South African position in the 1970s, as white South Africans made increasingly desperate attempts to alter or escape from a situation that was growing more and more violent; it also raises the question of how to write about South Africa in this moment of transition. To a certain extent, the novel invokes and

¹⁵³ Coetzee, J.M. (1974), p. 106.

¹⁵⁴ This comes close to what Hannah Arendt wrote in *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*.

subverts the tradition of the *plaasroman*, the lyrical, idealized Afrikaner novel of country life.¹⁵⁵ The drama of this novel lies in Magda's attempts to find and speak about a life for herself under such conditions, a life in which usual forms of exchange or relationship – from ordinary family bonding and sociability to marriage into colonial structures of kinship – seem either unauthentic or simply unavailable.¹⁵⁶ The loneliness and solitude appears on every page of the novel.

Analysis Remarkable is how little actually happens in *In the Heart of the Country*. Despite the paragraphs in which Magda shoots and buries her father, or in which the servant Hendrik rapes her, at the end of the novel Magda is still serving her father weak tea and changing his napkins. For the most part, what happens is an act of consciousness and an act of language. Magda's mother died in childbirth, following the father's relentless sexual demands (from Magda's perspective). At the same time, the absence of a mother throws Magda and her father into a relationship which – from Magda's point of view – has Oedipal implications. 'Wooded when we were little by our masterful fathers, we are bitter vestals, spoiled for life. The childhood rape: someone should study the kernel of truth in this fancy.'¹⁵⁷ This could mean that Magda had been raped by her father or, and I think that is more plausible, that the childhood rape refers to the dominance/submission roles played out by father and daughter, respectively.¹⁵⁸

Although it is not clear what is 'true' and what is not, what is made up by Magda in order to fight boredom, the novel seems to be a reflection on colonial influence. The second sequence (sections 38-162) brings out the pathological underside of the colonial family, the relationships of intimacy and exclusivity between masters and servants.¹⁵⁹ Is it the father or the servant who brings home his new bride? And is it the colonizer (father) who takes the colonized (Klein-Anna) or is it the colonized (servant Hendrik) who takes the colonizer (Magda)? Or is Magda traumatized by incest and is that why she is obsessed by sex? Is she so lonely that she imagines that Hendrik would have sex with her? One of the aspects of this

¹⁵⁵ Treddel, Nicholas, <http://biography.jrank.org/pages/4226/Coetzee-J-ohn-M-ichael.html>, checked on 8-6-2010.

¹⁵⁶ Attwell, David (1993), p. 58.

¹⁵⁷ J.M. Coetzee, *In the Heart of the Country* on: <http://www.scribd.com/doc/13714439/JM-Coetzee-In-the-Heart-of-the-Country>, checked on 5-7-2010.

¹⁵⁸ Penner, Dick (1989), p. 59.

¹⁵⁹ Attwell, David (1993), p. 62.

book is the role of language: there is not truth and 'it is a world of words that creates a world of things.'¹⁶⁰

Critical thinkers see *In the Heart of the Country* as an allegory of modern South Africa at that time. Sheila Roberts, for example, observes that the 'splintered, contra dictionary, miserable'¹⁶¹ Magda reflects the fragmented consciousness of South Africa. Roberts interprets the stone farm as 'South Africa itself, the father as the Afrikaner *baas*, and Magda as the ineffectual, dreaming liberal.'¹⁶² A similarity with *Dusklands* is one of the messages Coetzee brings across: the message of the people who do not join, but do nothing against the cruel system either. Magda's plea of innocence falls on deaf ears: 'I am not simply one of the whites, I am I! I am I, not a people. Why do I have to pay for other people's sins?'¹⁶³ as Watson suggests, even the 'colonizer who refuses' shares responsibility as a member of the oppressor group.¹⁶⁴ In a way, Magda asks forgiveness for being part of the system, for being white.

Forgiveness

All the former has to do with forgiveness. Magda mentions forgiveness a couple of times. 'To explain is to forgive, to be explained is to be forgiven, but I, I hope and fear, am inexplicable, unforgivable.'¹⁶⁵ Magda, neither master nor slave, parent nor child, but part of the system, feels that she cannot be forgiven. Magda longs to escape the entrapped state of the master (which she associates with her father), but does not succeed. She hates herself and others, and calls herself throughout the book: 'a zero, a null, a vacuum', 'the grim widow-daughter of the dark father', 'a miserable black virgin', 'a cultist of pain', 'a witch-woman', 'a straw woman, a scarecrow', and 'an O'. The name Magda might be a reference to Mary Magdalene, the repentant prostitute depicted by Luke who washed Jesus' feet with her tears, received forgiveness, and was healed of evil spirits. Coetzee's Magda anticipated an alien destiny: 'God has forgotten us and we have forgotten God. (...) We are the castaways of God as we

¹⁶⁰ Coetzee uses one of Lacan's utterances.

¹⁶¹ Roberts, Sheila (1980), p. 21.

¹⁶² Ibidem.

¹⁶³ Coetzee, J.M. (1978), p. 118.

¹⁶⁴ Watson, Stephen, (n.y.), p. 378.

¹⁶⁵ J.M. Coetzee, <http://www.scribd.com/doc/13714439/JM-Coetzee-In-the-Heart-of-the-Country>, checked on 5-7-2010.

are the castaways of history. That is the origin of our feeling of solitude.’¹⁶⁶ This refers among other things to the move of South Africa away from Europe (or the other way around).

The ending of *In the Heart of the Country* is not quite hopeful. The death of the father stands for the death of the old Afrikaner order, a concept of which time has passed. Coetzee wrote: ‘Wittingly or unwittingly, the whites wait for something, anything to happen. They are caught in the peculiar, the paralytic, time of waiting... Waiting – the South African experience – must be appreciated in all its banality. Therein lies its pity – and its humanity.’¹⁶⁷ This quote leads me to the next book: *Waiting for the Barbarians*.

4.3 Waiting for the Barbarians, 1980

The distance between myself and her tortures, I realize, is negligible; I shudder...

Content and context *Waiting for the Barbarians* is narrated by the long-serving, liberal-minded magistrate in a frontier settlement in a vaguely specified ‘Empire’ where the ruthless Colonel Joll is torturing supposed barbarians. The magistrate, observing Joll's activities, is forced to conduct an agonizing analysis of his own unavoidable complicity in oppression and to undergo torture himself after rescuing a ‘barbarian’ girl. Finally, Joll's forces, and many inhabitants, abandon the settlement, leaving a remnant ‘waiting for the barbarians.’ The novel can certainly be interpreted as a powerful image of the painful position of the South African white liberal under a violent and paranoid Apartheid regime; but it also takes on a more general significance, as a fictional dramatization of one of the ways in which imperial regimes—not only in South Africa—can end.¹⁶⁸

Analysis Forgiveness sure is a theme in *Waiting for the Barbarians*. The story is set in an indeterminate time and place, and the story has been called the most allegorical stories of Coetzee. At the heart of Coetzee’s allegory is a dialectic concerning the relationships between empire and colony, master and slave-rebel, man and woman, blindness and sight, law and

¹⁶⁶ Coetzee, J.M. (1978), p. 135.

¹⁶⁷ Crapanzano, Vincent (1985), p. 3. <http://evenhandeddems.blogspot.com/2007/01/end-of-zionism.html>, checked on 10-7-2010.

¹⁶⁸ Treddel, Nicholas, <http://biography.jrank.org/pages/4226/Coetzee-J-ohn-M-ichael.html>, checked on 8-6-2010.

barbarism, and expediency and ethics.¹⁶⁹ It is not clear who the Barbarians of the title are: the uncivilized ‘wild’ people (in the racist apartheid language, the term ‘barbarians’ was only used for black people), or the Empire. In the absence of imminent domination or annihilation by the barbarians, the Empire must face its decadence alone. It has lost the means by which it defined itself as a superior, civilized culture. Soon the reader discovers that the real barbarians are the employees of the Third Empire. Colonel Joll embodies the consciousness of master/Empire. Colonel Joll is a cruel man, looking for an enemy, whose actions reveal his barbarian character: ‘First I get lies, you see – this is what happens – first lies, then pressure, then more lies, then more pressure, then the break, then more pressure, then the truth.’¹⁷⁰

The magistrate, man of law, is as an official of the Third Empire inevitably linked to Colonel Joll, man of war. The magistrate lived a serene and relaxed life, administering the law, visiting prostitutes, anticipating a peaceful retirement until Colonel Joll came to the small town to fight against the invisible enemy. The magistrate acknowledges his alliance with the Empire, which he starts to resist and resent. He picks up a crippled and begging girl, one of Joll's captives, who has been questioned, tortured, and left to die or survive. He offers her a position as a domestic in his house and she has no alternative than to take it. She is productive as a domestic and later encourages the reluctant magistrate to make love to her. Most of the magistrate's early thoughts about the girl are attempts to untangle his ambivalent feelings about her and the barbarian culture she represents. Remarkable is the free spirit of the girl: although she has no choice but to serve her master, although she has been tortured and irreversibly mutilated, she is not subservient in spirit. Penner says about her: ‘Clearly, in her partial physical blindness, she retains her manner of seeing: she is direct, uncomplaining, independent even in servitude, productive, social, convivial, and above all, accepting of things as they are – tortures, and lovers, pain and pleasure, without judgment.’¹⁷¹ This makes me wonder about the concept of forgiveness. The magistrate asks several times what the tortures did to her, but at first she does not want to answer. The question is whether she does not want to talk about it because she is traumatized, or because she does not want the magistrate to know. Did this girl forgive her torturers, or did she not have to (because she takes things how they are)? Did she become stoical because she is traumatized or is this just the way she perceives the world? The magistrate asks himself the same questions. ‘While I have not

¹⁶⁹ Penner, Dick (1989), p. 76.

¹⁷⁰ Ibidem, p. 77.

¹⁷¹ Ibidem, p. 79.

ceased to see her as a body maimed, scarred, harmed, she has perhaps by now grown into and become that new deficient body, feeling no more deformed than a cat feels deformed for having claws instead of fingers. I would do well to take these thoughts seriously. More ordinary than I like to think, she may have ways of finding me ordinary too.’¹⁷² One thing is certain: the girl is incredibly strong. ‘She yields to everything without yielding herself.’¹⁷³

Forgiveness of the self and identity

The person who really has to forgive and be forgiven is the magistrate. He needs to forgive himself, and to do that, he needs to break free of his old world and of the Empire. Taking the barbarian girl as a domestic is the first step, although he recognizes this as an act of compassion as well as coercion: ‘The distance between myself and her tortures, I realize, is negligible; I shudder.’¹⁷⁴ His first act with her – one that he repeats time after time – is in its outward form sacramental: he bathes, massages, and oils her feet and broken ankles, much as Mary Magdalene anointed the feet of Jesus.¹⁷⁵ As it is in *In the Heart of the Country*, this is a way of asking forgiveness. Nevertheless, his motives are doubtful: who is enjoying the bathing and oiling? ‘I wanted to do what was right, I wanted to make reparation: I will not deny this decent impulse, however mixed with more questionable motives: there must always be place for penance and reparation.’¹⁷⁶ Later on he is deliberately trying to forget the girl. He does not remember how she looks like. The only thing he remembers clearly is his hands oiling her legs. The last quote is therefore very important: he wanted to make reparation, not only to her and her father for the torture, but also to all the ‘barbarians’, and not just for his own crimes, or his reluctance until he took the girl in his home, but also for the crimes of the Empire. He is asking forgiveness for his background. We can consider this as a reference to history, to the collective guilt of the white South Africans. This theme is returning in Coetzee’s novels, as will become clear.

This is in the core of the story: the struggle of the magistrate with his identity: who/what is he and who does he want to be? On which side will he stand? Can he escape history? He has many moments of self-worthlessness. He identifies with the tortures: ‘I behave in some ways like a lover – I undress her, I bathe her, I stroke her, I sleep beside her – but I might equally

¹⁷² Coetzee, J.M. (2007), 1980, p. 67.

¹⁷³ Kramer, Jane (1982), p. 8-12.

¹⁷⁴ Coetzee, J.M. (1980), p. 27.

¹⁷⁵ Bible, John 13:4-5. This is similar to *Magda in In the Heart of the Country*.

¹⁷⁶ Coetzee, J.M. (2007), p. 94.

tie her to a chair and beat her, it would be no less intimate.’¹⁷⁷ In one of these moments he shouts: ‘No! No! No! I cry to myself. It is I who am seducing myself, out of vanity, into these meanings and correspondences. What depravity is it that is creeping upon me? (...) There is nothing to link me with torturers, people who sit waiting like beetles in dark cellars. How can I believe that a bed is anything but a bed, a woman’s body anything but a site of joy? I must assert my distance from Colonel Joll! I will not suffer for his crimes!’¹⁷⁸ This utterance is comparable with the exclamation done by Magda in *In the Heart of the Country*, in which she pleads innocence.¹⁷⁹

When he is arrested after bringing the barbarian girl back to her people, stripped of his magistrates’ powers and cast into prison, he feels a tremendous sense of elation at being a ‘free man’. Being free, he decides that he does not belong to any of the barbarians and rebels against public torture by saying that the future should be left at least ‘one man who in his heart was not a barbarian.’¹⁸⁰ During his imprisonment, Joll accuses him of being friends with the enemy and therefore an enemy of the Empire. He gets tortured a lot, which is a significant part of the book, probably because of Coetzee’s opinion about the body in South Africa, which I quoted in the introduction of this chapter.

When rest has returned to the village, the magistrate makes an attempt to write a history of settlement, but does not get any further than repeating some facts and the disingenuous formulas of colonial pastoralism.¹⁸¹ He quickly abandons the project, however, describing this beginning as a ‘plea’ for forgiveness and conciliation; its implicit evasion of the brutality of imperialism is a trace of the critique of settler-colonial pastoralism in the earlier fiction.¹⁸²

Justice

Justice plays a role in the book too. The magistrate is a man of the law: to maintain the law was one of his foremost jobs in his position as magistrate. When he cuts himself loose of the Empire, he is the only one who protests against the inhuman way Colonel Joll treats the prisoners, with their hands pierced to their cheeks. Although I would say it is great that he

¹⁷⁷ Coetzee, J.M. (2007), p. 52.

¹⁷⁸ Coetzee, J.M. (2007 - 1980), p. 44.

¹⁷⁹ See J.M. Coetzee (1978), p. 118.

¹⁸⁰ Coetzee, J.M. (2007 - 1980), p. 104.

¹⁸¹ With other words: he describes the beauty of the country and the peace and quietness of rural life.

¹⁸² Attwell, David (1993), <http://ark.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/ft5k4006q3>, checked on 10-7-2010.

protests, he asks himself: 'Would I have dared to face the crowd to demand justice for these ridiculous barbarian prisoners with their backsides in the air? *Justice*: once that word is uttered, where will it all end? Easier to shout *No!* Easier to be beaten and made a martyr. Easier to lay my head on a block than to defend the cause of justice for the barbarians: for where can that argument lead but to laying down our arms and opening the Gates of the town to the people whose land we have raped?'¹⁸³ This is a reference to the colonisation and the collective guilt of the whites.

His strongest moment of protest is when Colonel Joll asks him to explain the slips of white poplar wood, which he found in the ancient ruins he discovered. Though the magistrate did not find out what the symbols on the slips mean, he 'translates' them, pretending that they describe the atrocities that Joll has committed. As Joll comes to realize that his inquiry is being mocked, the magistrate holds up another slip and suggests that the single character means 'war' but that it can also mean 'vengeance', or, if turned upside down, 'justice', suggesting the perverse interpretation Joll has given to the concepts of truth and justice.¹⁸⁴

In one part the magistrate remembers a lecture he once gave to a prisoner: "'You feel that it is unjust, I know, that you should be punished for having the feelings of a good son. You think you know what is just and what is not. I understand. We all think we know.'" (...) "But we live in a world of laws," I said to my poor prisoner, "a world of the second-best. There is nothing we can do about that. We are fallen creatures. All we can do is to uphold the laws, all of us, without allowing the memory of justice fade." (...) I remember the uneasy shame I felt on days like that.'¹⁸⁵ The magistrate is extremely aware of the unjust the empire does. This has a climax in the end: 'I think: "I wanted to live outside history. I wanted to live outside the history that Empire imposes on its subjects, even its lost subjects. I never wished it for the barbarians that they should have the history of Empire laid upon them. How can I believe that that is cause for shame?"'¹⁸⁶ This is the answer to the returning theme of the protagonist who does not want to be involved in what the government does: this person wants to escape the history of the shameful colonization of his ancestors. Unfortunately, there is no way to escape this shame.

¹⁸³ Coetzee, J.M. (2007), p. 125.

¹⁸⁴ Penner, Dick (1989), p. 85.

¹⁸⁵ Coetzee, J.M. (2007), pp. 159-160.

¹⁸⁶ Coetzee, J.M. (2007), p. 177.

Religion and Ubuntu

When the magistrate is released from prison and left to beg, he asks his tyrant Mandel how he can eat, how he can live with what he does for the Empire. ‘I have imagined that one would want to wash one’s hands. But no ordinary washing would be enough, one would require priestly intervention, a ceremonial cleansing, don’t you think? Some kind of purging of one’s soul to – that is how I have imagined it. Otherwise how would it be possible to return to everyday life – to sit down at the table, for instance, and break bread with one’s family or one’s comrades?’¹⁸⁷ It is interesting that Coetzee uses religion quite often in his books,¹⁸⁸ though he does not believe in God. Religion is incredibly important in South Africa of course, and it played a huge role in South Africa’s history.

Since believe seems to play a role in this novel, there is also an account of Ubuntu: ‘They exposed her father to her naked and made him gibber with pain; they hurt her and he could not stop them (on a day I spent occupied with the ledgers in my office). Thereafter she was no longer fully human, sister to all of us. Certain sympathies died, certain movements of the heart became no longer possible to her. I too, if I live long enough in this cell with its ghosts not only of the father and the daughter but of the man who even by lamplight did not remove the black discs from its eyes and the subordinate whose work it was to keep the brazier fed, will be touched with the contagion and turned into a creature that believes in nothing.’¹⁸⁹

Forgiveness

In the last part of the book, Joll and the magistrate meet again. The magistrate regained a sense of dignity and got back his position as administrator of law, and Joll turns back, his troops routed and slaughtered by the barbarians, in a state of desperation. After all the horrible things Joll did to the magistrate, the torture, the humility, the magistrate feels anger. ‘An urge runs through me to smash the glass, to reach in and drag the man out through the jagged hole, to feel his flesh catch and tear on the edges, to hurl him to the ground and kick his body to pulp.’¹⁹⁰ But then he overcomes his hatred by envisioning in Joll the child that became the murderer. ‘Memories of his mother’s soft breast, of the tug in his hand of the first kite he ever

¹⁸⁷ Coetzee, J.M. (2007), p. 145.

¹⁸⁸ The believe in God of Jacobus, Mary Magdalene in *Heart of the Darkness*; the oiling and bathing of the barbarian girl and now this.

¹⁸⁹ Coetzee, J.M. (2007), p. 95.

¹⁹⁰ Coetzee, J.M. (2007 - 1980), p. 146.

flew, as well as of those intimate cruelties for I abhor him, shelter in that beehive.¹⁹¹ The magistrate makes his last attempt to bring Joll his message: ““The crime that is latent in us we must inflict on ourselves,” I say. I nod and nod, driving the message home. “Not on others,” I say: I repeat the words, pointing at my chest, pointing at his. He watches my lips, his thin lips move in imitation, or perhaps in derision, I do not know.”¹⁹²

The magistrate forgave Joll by picturing him as a child. Maybe this is the message Coetzee wants to send about forgiveness, as he said in *In the Heart of the Country*: ‘To explain is to forgive, to be explained is to be forgiven.’ Nevertheless, Coetzee nor the magistrate is optimistic about the future: ‘To the last we will have learned nothing. In all of us, deep down, there seems to be something granite and unteachable. No one truly believes, despite the hysteria in the streets, that the world of tranquil certainties we were born into is about to be extinguished.’¹⁹³

4.4. Life and Times of Michael K (1983)

Everywhere was evidence of neglect...

Content en context If *Waiting for the Barbarians* was, for some critics, too general in its significance, *The Life and Times of Michael K* was more specific, at least in its setting: modern South Africa in an era of armed struggle. Michael K is a non-white South African who apparently lives on the margins of politics and society. He leaves his post as a gardener in Cape Town to return his sick mother to the farm where she grew up. She dies on the way, but he continues the journey with her ashes. He finds what may be the farm of which his mother told him, now deserted by the white man, buries her ashes, and starts to cultivate the land. The grandson of the proprietor returns and drives K off, but, after a spell in hospital and in an internment camp, he escapes and goes back to the farm to grow pumpkins and melons. Arrested as a collaborator by South African soldiers who are pursuing guerrillas, K is interned in another camp, and the brief second section of the novel is supposedly by the camp doctor, who tries to understand K. But K escapes once more, and the last section of the novel rises to

¹⁹¹ Ibidem, p. 146

¹⁹² Ibidem, pp. 146-147.

¹⁹³ Ibidem, p. 143.

a powerfully lyrical close in which K imagines himself using a teaspoon on a long string to draw water from the shaft of a sabotaged pump.¹⁹⁴

Coetzee has said that *Life and Times of Michael K* is 'about a time when it is too late for politics.'¹⁹⁵ Major Noël, commander of the Kenilworth rehabilitation camp where Michael is put in at the end of the first part, is the only one who actually says something political: 'Also,' I said, 'can you remind me why we are fighting this war? I was told once, but that was long ago and I seem to have forgotten.' 'We are fighting this war,' Noël said, 'so that minorities will have a say in their destinies.' We exchanged empty looks. Whatever my mood was, I could not get him to share it.'¹⁹⁶ To place the novel into context, being published in 1983, *Life and Times of Michael K* is presented against the grain of official policy formulation. Multi-nationalism was at the heart of the discussions and the new 'twelve point plan' of Botha in 1979 considered the 'acknowledgment and acceptance of multinationalism and minorities of South Africa.' Most striking is the stupidity of the government to believe that they could actually achieve greater legitimacy without taking into account the black leaders. This is what *Life and Times of Michael K* also reflects: the unreality of the state's efforts at constitutional reform.¹⁹⁷

Analysis There are a couple of things that set *Life and Times of Michael K* apart from the earlier works of Coetzee. It is the first and only one to have as its protagonist one of the so-called 'Coloureds'; the first one to be specifically set in contemporary South Africa; the first one to avoid overt reference to racial self-conscious reference to the act of narrating. *Life and Times of Michael K* shows conditions that exist in many of the war-torn areas of South Africa in the past, specifically the concentration camps for unemployed people. David Attwell comments on *Michael K*: 'a novel about a subject who, miraculously, lives through the trauma of South Africa in a state of civil war without being touched by it.' Michael K can be compared with the girl from *Waiting for the Barbarians*: both crippled and different by looks from other people (K has a disfiguring harelip and a gaping left nostril), but holding on to who they are. On the other hand, it is not sure K has a choice, since his mental capacities might be limited. Nevertheless, K could be admired for his perseverance, and be mocked for

¹⁹⁴ Treddel, Nicholas, <http://biography.jrank.org/pages/4226/Coetzee-J-ohn-M-ichael.html>, checked on 8-6-2010.

¹⁹⁵ Attwell, David (1993), p. 89.

¹⁹⁶ Coetzee, J.M. (1983), p. 215.

¹⁹⁷ Attwell, David (1993), p. 91.

his lack of engagement. It is important to notice that Coetzee once again pays attention to the role of the silent observer (which he does again in *The Age of Iron*).

Forgiveness does not play a big role in *Life and Times of Michael K*. Michael does not think about things like that. Still, Michael does undergo some major changes in awareness. His mind is slow, he does not speak too much and is not even the narrator of the story (in the first and last part, there is an omniscient narrator, and in the second part, the narrator is a doctor). In the beginning of the story, he ‘accepted without question the wisdom of her plan for them.’¹⁹⁸ Later on, he proves that when he must choose a path of action within a specific circumstance, he can act deliberately. Moreover, he does have self-conscious reflections: ‘Always, when he tried to explain himself to himself there remained a gap, a hole, a darkness before which his understanding balked, into which it was useless to pour more words.’¹⁹⁹ This is something that develops during the book. He is simple and clear: just to be is enough for him, he does not need to become (becoming in this context means acting). In that sense, he does not need to forgive either. He is not somebody who holds a grudge, because things just are as they are. One event which shows that he is a quite simple person is when he is in the hospital with his critically ill mother and a coincidental visitor offers him a patty. He listens to the birds in the trees and tries to remember when he was this happy.²⁰⁰

Forgetting

Another important note on this page is that Michael is aware of his inability to see the whole, he only seems to remember the details.²⁰¹ One who cannot see the whole, cannot be actively against the system. The ability to forget plays a role in *Life and Times of Michael K*. When Michael meets the grandson of the owner of the farm where Michael lives temporarily, the grandson considers him to be a servant (probably also because of Michael’s skin colour). The defenceless way Michael responds to other people, a result of the children’s home he lived in, is a leitmotiv in the book. But Michael is not stupid: he easily leaves the farm and claims he will forget the grandson ‘in a day or two.’²⁰² Although Michael remains defenceless vis-à-vis other people, he does find a way to resist them: he just leaves, just forgets or just does not respond. Other people, such as the doctor in the second part of the book, try to help him. The

¹⁹⁸ Coetzee, J.M. (1983), pp. 8-9.

¹⁹⁹ Ibidem, p. 110.

²⁰⁰ Coetzee, J.M. (1983 Dutch), p. 41.

²⁰¹ Ibidem, p. 64.

²⁰² Ibidem, p. 83.

doctor even offers Michael a corrective surgery for his harelip. Michael would be treated differently if he did not have this harelip, but he simply answers: 'I am what I am. I was never a great one for the girls.'²⁰³ It is the contradiction within Michael which makes the story not only interesting, but also politically engaged. Michael is aware and not aware; is backwards and is revolutionary; wants to live and almost starves himself to death; loves the land South Africa, but hates the people; is defenceless towards people and does resist them anyhow; declares he is not in war, but makes people (the doctor and the camp guard) aware of their role in this war. Does one have to live a life of total awareness? And if so, does this mean that one should be engaged?

Forgiveness

Did Michael forgive his mother for abandoning him? Did Michael forgive Huis Norensius, which he calls his father? As I said before, I am not sure that Michael is a person who is not able to, nor feels the urge to forgive. Nonetheless, his mother and 'father' made him the way he is, and they both play a big role in his life, especially in his interpersonal relations. The doctor definitely thinks that Michael made a mistake by taking care of his mother, bringing her and later her ashes to the farm she grew up in. The doctor thinks Michael should not have forgiven her.²⁰⁴ So I conclude that Michael takes the world as it comes, and therefore does not have to forgive. This is what other people despise and admire in Michael: he is untouched by the trauma of South Africa.

4.5. Age of Iron, 1990

What I give he does not forgive me for giving...

Content and context *Age of Iron* takes the form of a long letter by Mrs. Curren to her daughter in the United States. Mrs. Curren is dying of bone cancer, and her physical disintegration is matched by her abandonment of her identification with the old South Africa as she registers the contrast between the country that the media portray and the violent reality of the 'age of iron' around her that is exemplified, above all, by the deaths of the fifteen-year old son of her maid and his friend, shot by the police. The novel is a kind of confession of

²⁰³ Ibidem, p. 161.

²⁰⁴ Ibidem, p. 182.

complicity in Apartheid with no one present to offer absolution – only the drunken down-and-out Vercueil, who does not even respond to Mrs. Curren's words. But this lack of response, Coetzee implies, may make her confession and renunciation less self-justifying, more complete.²⁰⁵

In 1990 President F.W. de Klerk scraped Apartheid and stated that Nelson Mandela would be released. Written between 1986 and 1989, the novel is set in that turbulent period of South Africa's history: years to witness the violence of cataclysmic proportions, the deaths of thousands of blacks in the cities and townships of the embattled Republic.²⁰⁶

Analysis *Age of Iron* is an elegy: an attempt, through narrative, to come to terms with the grief of personal loss while mourning the collective losses of a war-torn society. Mrs. Curren's letter to her daughter in America – a tortured confession in which we, invasive readers, are made complicit – recounts in graphic details both the horrors of living under Apartheid and the shame of living with it. Forgiveness is a theme of the book, and especially forgiveness of the self.

The body

That the narrator of the story has cancer does not just mean that she is dying. Coetzee chose bone cancer because of the parallel with the country: the cancer is burning her, eating her from the inside, as is the war eating South Africa, and is the country literally on fire. The body is a metaphor for the country. Mrs. Curren refers a couple of times to the cancer as pregnancy: the country is pregnant of dead people. Her house and her car are an extension of her body, and fall apart earlier. The house is also an allegory for the country: who do you let in, who is expelled? Who can do what and who is in power? Who is the owner, and does it even matter? The people coming into her house, and especially the police when they try to shoot a boy who is hiding in her home, are violating her privacy. All this refers to the transition the country is in. Who will govern the country? Who will pass on the power to whom? Mrs. Curren does hold on to her stuff, she does not want to give up her home or car, although she is willing to share her garden with Vercueil, the wanderer.

²⁰⁵ Treddel, Nicholas, <http://biography.jrank.org/pages/4226/Coetzee-J-ohn-M-ichael.html>, checked on 8-6-2010.

²⁰⁶ Huggan, Graham (1996), p. 191.

The silent observer

The relationship between Curren en Vercueil is interesting. Vercueil is a name of the Huguenots and might well be a French or a Dutch name, originally. One might suppose that Vercueil is a colored person. One hint for that are his green eyes. The black consciousness movement was always worried about blacks and coloreds drinking too much. That Vercueil is a drunk, is not good, that he is not contributing to the strive is considered to be bad. On the other side is Curren: white, educated, British and liberal. It seems that British South Africans had a more relaxed attitude towards Apartheid than Afrikaner South Africans, because their community relied on business and Apartheid was not that great to business (not in the least because the international community opposed the regressive regime). During the narrative, there is still a white government, with black consciousness getting stronger and stronger. Curren is not a fan of Apartheid because she thinks you should treat everybody the same (which she does or tries to do). Vercueil is apolitical. Both of them are in the middle. To give the country to one of the extremes, the question is: would there still be place for people in the middle?

So here we get again to the subject of the ones in the middle, which I called the silent observers before. This is the central theme of *Age of Iron*. Is it enough to be nice to everybody? Coetzee mentions Marcus Aurelius in the novel, which was an emperor, writer and stoic philosopher. The stoic philosophy stands for the focus on yourself, and the idea that you should not be happy or unhappy because of the times / political feature / pleasures / etc. One should be completely independent of outward circumstances. The focus on private life is essential. Curren lives according to this philosophy, with the focus on her daughter. During the narrative, she changes. One of the policemen says: 'Nothing is private anymore.' The believe to treat everybody the same and good makes you a good person, is out of date. In this age of iron is it however necessary to be a hero. As Paul Franssen said it: 'Curren does not like it, but niceness doesn't do the trick, heroism might be needed.'

As in *Waiting for the Barbarians* a dream plays an important role in the novel. Curren dreams of herself as being a doll. This doll is hollow, which is parallel to the cancer, eating her hollow. The hollow doll refers to the disengagement and fills her with shame. 'From the cradle a theft took place: a child was taken and a doll left in its place to be nursed and reared, and that doll is what I call I. A doll? A doll's life? Is that what I have lived? Is it given to a

doll to conceive such a thought? Or does the thought come and go as another intimation, a flash of an angel's intelligence? Can a doll recognize a doll? Can a doll know death? No: dolls grow, they acquire speech and gait, they perambulate the world; they age, they wither, they perish; they are wheeled into the fire or buried in the earth; but they do not die.²⁰⁷ And she wonders: 'Have I ever been awake? I might as well ask: Do the dead know they are dead? No: to the dead it is not given to know anything.'²⁰⁸ This is just one of the many hints that she cannot longer close her eyes for the inequality between blacks and white. She is forced to act and she feels guilty that she did not open her eyes earlier. The hardest is that she really does want to be good and to help everybody around her (and that's it), but that they do not recognize or appreciate it. For example Vercueil, who she feeds and gives a place to stay. 'Easy to give alms to the orphaned, the destitute, the hungry. Harder to give alms to the bitter-hearted (I think of Florence). But the alms I give Vercueil are hardest of all. What I give he does not forgive me for giving. No charity in him, no forgiveness. (*Charity?* says Vercueil. *Forgiveness?*) Without his forgiveness I give without charity, serve without love. Rain falling on barren soil.'²⁰⁹ I can imagine, in the age of iron, white people giving is considered to be neo-colonization and a matter of power. It is humiliating to blacks and Coloured. Therefore, when a white person gives something to a black person before they are forgiven, it is not charity, but self interest. One needs to be forgiven for a peaceful state of mind. It is great that Mrs. Curren realizes that she has been living with her eyes closed all these years. But because it is the end of her life, it is more in favor of her own state of mind than of something else. Therefore, people do not respond the way she wants them to respond. She will not be forgiven.

Confession

This novel in many ways reads like a confession. But it is a very problematic confession. Curren's crime is not easily articulated, not only because she has trouble seeing it, but also because she has trouble finding the language to describe it. "'I have no answer,' I said. 'It is terrible.' 'It is not just terrible,' he said, 'it is a crime. When you see a crime being committed in front of your eyes, what do you say? Do you say, 'I have seen enough, I didn't come to see sights, I want to go home'?"²¹⁰ She writes to her daughter, 'As far as I can confess, to you I

²⁰⁷ Coetzee, J.M. (1990), p. 136.

²⁰⁸ Ibidem, p. 109.

²⁰⁹ Ibidem, p. 131.

²¹⁰ Ibidem, p. 96.

confess. What is my error, you ask? ... it is like a fog, everywhere and nowhere. I cannot touch it, trap it, put a name to it.²¹¹ Confession might demand the naming of a crime, as well as some sort of public acknowledgment of it. But what if neither is possible? Mrs. Curren's complicity is intangible both legally and morally—not only is there no legal context for her confession, but there is also no moral framework for it within her society. Yet, like a fog, her complicity permeates everything.²¹²

Although Mrs. Curren writes this confession to her daughter and speaks at least part of it to the homeless Mr. Vercueil, it is not clear whether either of them hears it. Mrs. Curren implies that the letter she composes may never be mailed, and Mr. Vercueil turns out to be asleep during much of her confession. Is a confession still valid if it is not heard? The novel does not provide a definitive answer to this question. The role of the listener or witness is also unclear. The witness may be meant to pass judgment or merely to allow Elizabeth Curren to express her shame. And while Curren seeks some sort of salvation through her words, she may or may not be ultimately redeemed by them. Mr. Vercueil's final embrace seems to be a gesture of deliverance, but Curren also acknowledges to her daughter that she is 'having a death without illumination.'²¹³ Thus Coetzee raises doubts about the possibility of redemption and renewal in a society where true confession and acknowledgment of guilt may be impossible.²¹⁴ Curren's Angel of Death, the derelict Vercueil, seems to represent the promise of absolution as the novel develops. On Attwell's question²¹⁵ whether this does not come close to the principle of grace, Coetzee answers: 'As for your question about absolution for Elizabeth, the end of the novel seems to me more troubled (in the sense that the sea can be troubled) than you imply. But here I am stepping onto precarious ground, or precarious water; I had better stop. As for grace, no, regrettably no: I am not a Christian, or not yet.'²¹⁶

There is another point in the story where Curren confesses, in a way. This takes place when she takes her servant Florence to find her son in a township. The township is burning and violence and death are everywhere. Mr. Thabane, the cousin of Florence, is stimulating her to tell him and a crowd what she sees. She has trouble finding the words. 'This woman talks

²¹¹ Ibidem, p. 136.

²¹² http://us.penguinroup.com/static/rguides/us/age_of_iron.html, checked on 14-6-2010.

²¹³ Coetzee, J.M. (1990), p. 195.

²¹⁴ http://us.penguinroup.com/static/rguides/us/age_of_iron.html, checked on 14-6-2010.

²¹⁵ Coetzee, J.M. (1985), p. 250.

²¹⁶ Ibidem.

shit,’ said a man in the crowd. He looked around. ‘Shit,’ he said. No one contradicted him, already some were drifting away. ‘Yes,’ I said, speaking directly to him. ‘You are right, what you say is true.’ He gave me a look as if I were mad. ‘But what do you expect?’ I went on. ‘To speak of this’ – I waved a hand over the bush, the smoke, the filth littering the path – ‘you would need the tongue of a god.’ ‘Shit,’ he said again, challenging me.’²¹⁷ Finally they find the lost son. ‘I thought of the boy’s open eyes. I thought: What did he see as his last sight on earth? I thought: This is the worst thing I have witnessed in my life. And I thought: Now my eyes are open and I can never close them again. (...) ‘Who did it?’ said Mr. Thabane. ‘If you want to dig the bullets out of their bodies, you are welcome. But I will tell you in advance what you will find. ‘Made in South Africa. SABS Approved.’ That is what you will find.’ ‘Please listen to me,’ I said. ‘I am not indifferent to this ... This war. How can I be? No bars are thick enough to keep it out.’ I felt like crying; but here, beside Florence, what right had I? ‘It lives inside me and I live inside it,’ I whispered. Mr. Thabane shrugged impatiently.’²¹⁸ What Thabane means is that the killers could either be black or white (1986-1989 was the time in which blacks turned against blacks), but that it is the country who did this to them. Since Mrs. Curren is part of the ones governing the country, she is accessory to this state of emergency.

The confession plays an important role in Coetzee’s novels. Since this novel has been written before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was installed, it does not refer to that. However, it does refer to the human desire to confess, to closure. I shall go into this further under the paragraph Confession.

Forgiveness

I am afraid that there is no forgiveness for Mrs. Curren. The last sentences: ‘He took me in his arms and held me with mighty force, so that the breath went out of me in a rush. From that embrace there was no warmth to be had.’²¹⁹ Vercueil is not a person who forgives: ‘Vercueil and his dog, sleeping so calmly beside these torrents of grief. Fulfilling their charge, waiting for the soul to emerge. The soul, neophyte, wet, blind, ignorant.’²²⁰ The daughter the letter is addressed to, does not come to say a last goodbye. Mrs. Curren blames her daughter for

²¹⁷ Coetzee, J.M. (1990), p. 99.

²¹⁸ Ibidem, p. 103.

²¹⁹ Ibidem, p. 198.

²²⁰ Ibidem, p. 186.

leaving South Africa and letting her grandchildren grow up in America. So what Curren is blamed for, she blames on her daughter: running away, closing her eyes. Curren does not forgive her daughter, the daughter, although we cannot be sure, does not forgive her mother (nor South Africa. Maybe that is the same?). The daughter is iron in her will never to return to the country she was born in. Does Mrs. Curren forgive herself? When her death is close, she thinks she is rubbish and worth nothing. She wants to show Verduyn her ugly face, her ugly death. Therefore, I think she has not forgiven herself. If Mrs. Curren stands for the country of South Africa, this is a very negative picture of the country. Coetzee wrote this book during the blackest pages of South Africans modern history, during the shift of power. The question was: will there be salvation?

4.6. *Disgrace*, 1999

Because of the disgrace. Because of the shame.

Content and context *Disgrace* is the first novel to be set in post-Apartheid South Africa. Its protagonist is a fifty-two year old Professor of ‘Communications’ and modern languages who ironically has problems with communicating with the people closest to him. He falls into disgrace and loses his university post as a result of a brief affair with a Coloured female student. He goes to the Eastern Cape to stay with his lesbian daughter, who gets raped by three Africans who attack their home. His daughter does not report the rape and, finding herself pregnant as a result, decides to go ahead and have the child, despite the disgrace involved. *Disgrace* is a complex, compact, immensely resonant novel about coming to terms with disgrace, transgression, guilt, and punishment in radically changing times. According to some, it alludes to the ways in which white South Africans have to come to terms with their guilt at their complicity in the Apartheid regime; at the same time it raises the issue of how black South Africans, in the post-Apartheid world, will deal with their own transgressions.²²¹ *Disgrace* deals with forgiveness, with good and bad, where colour is only explicitly mentioned once: ‘(t)hey are the only Whites.’²²²

Since this novel was published in 1999, Coetzee probably wrote it just during or after the TRC hearings took place. *Disgrace* has often been considered Coetzee’s masterpiece,

²²¹ Treddel, Nicholas, <http://biography.jrank.org/pages/4226/Coetzee-J-ohn-M-ichael.html>, checked on 8-6-2010.

²²² Coetzee, J.M. (1999), p. 128.

especially in view of the author's accomplishment of having been awarded the Man Booker Prize twice – for *Life and Times of Michael K* (1983) and *Disgrace* (1999) – and the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2003.

Analysis 'I do not believe that any form of lasting community can exist where people do not share the same sense of what is just and what is not just,' Coetzee said in a 1991 interview. *Disgrace* holds out little hope for a community among the current inhabitants of South Africa. Seeing

that the novel depicts the rape of a presumably non-white woman by a white man, and the gang rape of a white woman by three black men, one could argue that it implicitly criticises post-Apartheid South Africa, in suggesting that race relations are still problematic.

Disgrace is a novel about humiliation and the nature of punishment and justice and forgiveness and redemption in a country in which the strands of race and history are revealed beyond untangling. 'What will make up for the wrongs of the past in South Africa?' is the question we can extract from the story. The answer Coetzee presents is not an encouraging one. Towards the end of the story, the daughter tells her father how she feels about the situation. 'Perhaps that is what I must learn to accept. To start at ground level. With nothing. Not with nothing but. With nothing. No cards, no weapons, no property, no rights, no dignity ... like a dog.'²²³

TRC

Coetzee's first post-Apartheid novel, to some extent reflects upon South Africa's TRC. Considering that Coetzee's fiction is anchored in history and politics, one could to some extent regard *Disgrace* as a political allegory. Hence, Jane Poyner proposes a reading of *Disgrace* as 'an allegory of the troubled Truth and Reconciliation Commission within the context of a nation in transition.'²²⁴ In addition, she believes that 'Lurie's sense of guilt for his exploitative attitude towards women symbolically configures a sense of collective responsibility of oppressors generally – and of the white writer in particular – for a history of abuse.'²²⁵ Poyner evidently suggests that Coetzee's narrative expresses a collective sense of

²²³ Ibidem, p. 205.

²²⁴ Poyner, Jane (2000), p. 67.

²²⁵ Poyner, Jane (2000), p. 67.

guilt for the white man's participation in Apartheid.²²⁶ Moreover, Sue Kossew argues that *Disgrace* 'resonates with the national public spectacle of shame, confession, and forgiveness that was the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.'²²⁷

David Lurie is attracted to one of his students, Melanie ('the dark one'). They have sexual intercourse three times, from at least one Lurie describes as: 'not rape, not quite that, but undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core.' On account of Melanie's complaint, David receives a memorandum from the office of the Vice-Rector and is asked to appear before the University's Committee of Inquiry. Although this academic committee has no power and merely examines Melanie's complaint in order to make a recommendation, one could argue that it bears some resemblance to the South African TRC. Rosemarie Buikema claims that it is even 'difficult not to read this long opening scene as a commentary on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and on the debate that was being conducted about this process in South African society, and that is still ongoing.'²²⁸

David does not want to spill everything about his affair with Melanie. Because he had feelings for the girl, I don't think he considered the sex as rape. It is however nasty that he blames Eros for his acts. He regards himself as a 'servant of Eros' and appears to blame his uncontrollable lust for the young woman: 'It is not a defence. You want a confession, I give you a confession. As for the impulse, it was far from ungovernable. I have denied similar impulses many times in the past, I am ashamed to say.'²²⁹ By contrast, the angry Farodia Rassool, female commission member, does not acknowledge his impulse as a justification of his immoral behaviour. Hence, she strongly doubts his sincerity. Nevertheless, David compares his desire to that of a dog; he suggests that disallowing a dog to follow its instincts, is more cruel than shooting it. Under these circumstances a dog would rather be shot: 'It might have preferred that to the options it was offered: on the one hand, to deny its nature, on the other, to spend the rest of its days padding about the living-room, sighing and sniffing the cat and getting portly.'²³⁰ This is among others what makes the novel almost an insult to women. What if every guy would argue the above? And what about this: 'Because a woman's

²²⁶ Igitur archive library UU (2010), p. 29, checked on 15-06-2010.

²²⁷ Kossew, Sue (2003), p. 155.

²²⁸ Buikema, Rosemarie (2006), p. 190.

²²⁹ Coetzee, J.M. (1999), p. 52.

²³⁰ Ibidem, p. 90.

beauty does not belong to her alone. It is part of the bounty she brings into the world. She has a duty to share it.²³¹

The suggestion of one of the commission members is that Lurie was racially motivated. Consequently, she alludes to South Africa's history of Apartheid and associates his abuse with the white exploitation of the black and Coloured: 'We are again going round in circles, Mr Chair. Yes, he says, he is guilty; but when we try to get specificity, all of a sudden it is not abuse of a young woman he is confessing to, just an impulse he could not resist, with no mention of the pain he has caused, no mention of the long history of exploitation of which this is part.'²³² Bearing in mind that she strongly wishes him to acknowledge his guilt, one might again argue that this episode echoes 'the frustrations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, faced with the admissions of those who confessed but who failed to acknowledge their guilt, those who seemed to remain in their hearts unrepentant.' Lurie refuses to do what the commission wants from him: confess, tell the whole truth, apologize and show regret. He says he was 'enriched' by the experience and when they ask him whether he would do it again he answers: 'I don't think I will have another chance.' Obviously, they discharge him.

Although there is much more to say about the trial in the novel, it should be clear that the trial is at least a reflection of the TRC, and at most critic on the TRC. David does not want to commit to the trial because he feels it is one big show. Furthermore, he refuses to humiliate himself.

Religion

Moreover, there is the religious character of both the University's Committee and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.²³³ Whereas David's inquiry is chaired by Manas Mathabane, Professor of Religious Studies, the hearings of the TRC were led by Archbishop Desmond Tutu. The TRC appeared to rely on Christianity, because Tutu's Christian values strongly influenced its hearings. For instance, he 'opened, closed, and punctuated sessions with prayer, hymns, candles, and olive branches.'²³⁴ In addition, the TRC embraced a philosophy of

²³¹ Ibidem, p. 16.

²³² Ibidem, p. 53.

²³³ Igitur archive library UU (2010), checked on 16-06-2010.

²³⁴ Meiring, Piet (2003), p. 105.

Ubuntu which appeared to fuse with Christianity. Whilst Tutu presided over the TRC, he reformulated this ancient African concept by declaring ‘that humans are all part of one community, and that by creating a space within which the perpetrators of abuses might rejoin the community, they can be helped to regain something of their lost humanity, thus enriching everyone.’²³⁵ Hence, perpetrators who fully confessed to their crimes were often forgiven in the spirit of Ubuntu, because many South Africans believed that their community would have no future without forgiveness. Similarly, Mathabane wishes that David publicly acknowledges his sins, because he hopes that a public statement will eventually enable David to return to the University. Despite being a member of a secular tribunal, Mathabane’s religion teaches him to forgive. But David does not share Mathabane’s beliefs: ‘Repentance is neither here nor there. Repentance belongs to another world, another universe of discourse.’²³⁶ However, Mathabane does not really seem to care whether David is sincere because he does not consider it his job to forgive him: ‘The criteria is not whether you are sincere. That is a matter, as I say, for your own conscience.’²³⁷ In other words, David should be the one who should forgive himself, or Melanie, the community, or God, maybe. In that sense, the commission of the university is highly spiritual, as was the TRC.

Coetzee only explicitly refers to colour once. This is after the rape, when Lucy and David are invited to Petrus party, to celebrate the transfer of Lucy’s land to Petrus. The narrator informs the reader that ‘[t]hey are the only Whites.’²³⁸ This point is worth mentioning since it is the only place in the novel in which Coetzee makes explicit reference to colour. The reference to colour, or rather the absence of such reference, is vital to the novel’s political message. By leaving the question of racial affiliation ambiguous, *Disgrace* bypasses our psycho-political biases toward this race or another. In so doing, it forces us, as readers, to aim our moral judgements toward mankind itself, and not Black, White or Coloured people. This ambiguity is important since it emphasizes the collective responsibility of all South Africans for the country’s moral disgrace.²³⁹

²³⁵ Laakso, Jen (2003), p. 50.

²³⁶ Coetzee, J.M. (1999), p. 58.

²³⁷ Ibidem, p. 58.

²³⁸ Ibidem, p. 128.

²³⁹ Cohen, Noar (2010), p. 9.

It has been suggested that the South African philosophy Ubuntu, 'I am because we are,' which I spoke about in Chapter 2, has been replaced: 'Desire, revenge and retribution have supplanted the old African Ubuntu values.'²⁴⁰ Nevertheless, despite Coetzee's mainly negative and hopeless representation of the new South Africa, he does seem to promote Ubuntu-based views of humanity, being interdependence and mutual accountability, they move to overcome the individualistic ideologies inherent in the European tradition they are often associated with.²⁴¹ For instance, the novel closes on David Lurie's best personal sacrifice: he hands over a dog he admits he has grown to love to Bev Shaw to be put to sleep even though he could have waited another week. "Bearing him in his arms like lamb, he re-enters, the surgery. "I thought you would save him for another week," says Bev Shaw. "Are you giving him up?" "Yes, I am giving him up."²⁴² The fact that David lets go of his own emotions and drives, and this sacrifice and responsibility changes David. He thus not only learns but begins to live in his way the principles necessary to improving the strained human relationships in South Africa.²⁴³

Forgiveness

David was standing up for freedom of speech and freedom to remain silent, he tells Lucy later.²⁴⁴ Hence, as for his relationship with Melanie, David clearly considers both silence and articulation amongst his rights. Consequently, it is especially ironic that David later on fails to grasp why Lucy cannot reveal the truth about being raped.²⁴⁵ The relationship between David and his (also ironically) lesbian daughter rapidly deteriorates to the point that the 'two of them are like strangers in the same house.'²⁴⁶ Lucy tells David that he can never understand what she has been going through, and David feels powerless and humiliated that he was not able to protect his daughter. The fact that he first (assumable) raped a girl and then his own girl gets raped, means, in the words of Derrida, that society becomes captive in a circle of predators and victims, and in a society in which the predators and victims change roles constantly; everyone is a victim.²⁴⁷

²⁴⁰ Buikema, Rosemarie (2006), p. 193.

²⁴¹ Smith, Colin (2005), <http://www.frontiersjournal.com/documents/Smith2Frontiersvolxiv.pdf>, checked 18-06-2010.

²⁴² Coetzee, J.M. (1999), p. 220.

²⁴³ Smith, Colin, *ibidem*.

²⁴⁴ Coetzee, J.M. (1999), p. 188.

²⁴⁵ Igitur archive library UU (2010), *ibidem*.

²⁴⁶ Coetzee, J.M. (1999), p. 124.

²⁴⁷ Derrida, Jacques, and Anne Dufourmantelle (2000).

Even more incomprehensible to David is Lucy's decision to keep silent and not bring charges against the rapists (as David kept silent about him 'raping' Melanie, Lucy keeps silent about her being raped). His beliefs go beyond anything because it is not fair, they should be punished. 'Am I wrong? Am I wrong to want justice?'²⁴⁸ Here, *Disgrace* appears to resonate with the TRC's desire to restore justice. Although the country's transition from Apartheid was characterised 'by remarkably little bloodshed, retribution, and vengeance,'²⁴⁹ Tutu's message of forgiveness and reconciliation was nonetheless highly controversial. The question regarding the pain remains: why does Lucy decide not to prosecute her rapists? Why does she not determine to restore justice? And is this the way to go? One could argue that she considers her rape atonement for crimes that have been carried out in the past. David does not support this idea and urges her to stand up for herself: 'Lucy, Lucy, I plead with you! You want to make up for the wrongs of the past, but this is not the way to do it. If you fail to stand up for yourself at this moment, you will never be able to hold your head up again.'²⁵⁰ With this, Coetzee refers to the victims of perpetrators who got amnesty. Will these victims, who will probably suffer their whole life, hold their head up now their perpetrators are unpunished? David represents the old generation, Lucy forms a bridge to the new South Africa. Her child will be a mixture of white and black, which will be part of the new generation of South Africans. Though David wonders how this child must grow up, beget in hate and violence, which is not a hopeful thought.

Lucy's opinion of how whites should ask for forgiveness is highly interesting. She appears to suggest that post-Apartheid South Africa is a country where a white woman's rape is to some extent justifiable because of the country's history of apartheid.²⁵¹ 'The reason is that, as far as I am concerned, what happened to me is a purely private matter. In another time, in another place it might be held to be a public matter. But in this place, at this time, it is not. It is my business, mine alone.' 'This place being what?' 'This place being South Africa.'²⁵² David seems to disagree with her and argues that this is not how vengeance works: 'Vengeance is like a fire. The more it devours, the hungrier it gets.'²⁵³ David does not agree with her way of

²⁴⁸ Coetzee, J.M. (1999), p. 119.

²⁴⁹ Gibson, James L. (2006), p. 410.

²⁵⁰ Coetzee, J.M. (1999), p. 133.

²⁵¹ Igitur archive library UU (2010), *ibidem*.

²⁵² Coetzee, J.M. (1999), p. 112.

²⁵³ *Ibidem*.

finding forgiveness: ‘Do you think that what happened here was an exam: if you come through, you get a diploma and safe conduct into the future, or a sign to paint o the door-lintel that will make the plague pass you by ... Is it some form of private salvation you are trying to work out? Do you hope you can expiate the crimes of the past by suffering in the present?’²⁵⁴ But finally David submits to Lucy’s decision.

During David’s stay at the farm, he started working with Bev in an animal clinic, where he helps to put down diseased and unwanted dogs. When he leaves Salem, we wonder whether he will ever be forgiven for abandoning the dogs when he leaves: ‘As for the dogs, he does not want to think about them. From Monday onward the dogs released from life within the walls of the clinic will be tossed into the fire unmarked, unmourned. For that betrayal, will he ever be forgiven?’²⁵⁵ On his way back to Cape Town, he decides to pay a visit to Melanie’s family. Until now he did not really show remorse, or even acknowledge did he did something wrong. David initially tells Melanie’s father that he mainly stepped by in order to ask how Melanie is doing. However, I would argue that he suddenly wishes to apologise and hopes to find redemption. It might be the case that the unselfish sacrifice of his daughter changed him.

According to Kimberley Segall, *Disgrace* ‘is a mirror to the fate of a country locked into required rituals of self-examination, but unable to find true repentance or comfort in the process.’²⁵⁶ Not surprisingly, David seems unable to find redemption when he visits the Isaacs family. Although he previously refused to apologise to anyone, he now does to Melanie’s relatives. However, Melanie’s father does not consider regret to be a solution. He does not want David to apologise but he wishes that he acts upon his misdeeds: ‘But I say to myself, we are all sorry when we are found out. Then we are very sorry. The question is not, are we sorry? The question is, what lesson have we learned. The question is, what are we going to do now that we are sorry?’²⁵⁷ One could argue that Melanie’s father wishes to convert David to Christianity. Here, *Disgrace* once again seems to allude to the religious character of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.²⁵⁸ I on the other hand would argue that it is again criticism on the TRC: it is not whether one says he is sorry, what matters is whether this person learned and how he is going to move on. What Isaacs wishes is in contradiction with what the

²⁵⁴ Ibidem.

²⁵⁵ Ibidem, p. 178.

²⁵⁶ Segall, Kimberfly Wedeven, (2005), p. 49.

²⁵⁷ Coetzee, J.M. (1999), p. 172.

²⁵⁸ Igitur archive library UU (2010), ibidem.

commission at the university asked from David (namely: show remorse). Despite all, whilst he kisses the floor before Melanie's mother and Desiree and apologizes for his sins, he most ironically longs for Melanie's younger sister Desire(e).

4.7. *Boyhood. Scenes from Provincial Life (1997), Youth (2002) and Summertime. Scenes from Provincial Life (2009)*

What I am telling you may not be true to the letter, but it is true to the spirit...

I decided to analyse this trilogy fictionalized autobiography – or is it autobiographic fiction? – as one work. One may wonder whether an autobiography belongs in this analysis. This is what the biographer Vincent in *Summertime. Scenes from Provincial Life* (in short *Summertime*), says about this: 'I have been through the letters and diaries. What Coetzee writes there cannot be trusted, not as a factual record – not because he was a liar but because he was a fictioneer. In his letters he is making up a fiction of himself for his correspondents; in his diaries he is doing the same for his own eyes, or perhaps posterity.'²⁵⁹ Therefore, I think it is necessary to analyse the trilogy as if a novel.

Content and context In *Boyhood. Scenes from Provincial Life* (in short *Boyhood*), Coetzee revisits the South Africa of more than half a century ago, to write about his childhood up to the age of thirteen, and interior life. *Boyhood's* young narrator grew up in a small country town. With a father he imitated but could not respect, and a mother he both adored and resented, he picked his way through a world that refused to explain its rules, but whose rules he knew he must obey. Steering between these contradictions, *Boyhood* evokes the tensions, delights and terrors of childhood with startling, haunting immediacy.²⁶⁰

Youth covers the period from 1959, when Coetzee was a nineteen-year-old student in South Africa, through to 1964 when he was working in England, having left South Africa for London in 1962, in the wake of the Sharpeville massacre (1960). According to the blurb, to become a famous poet, Coetzee had to leave South Africa. In his time in England Coetzee worked as a computer programmer (then a new profession), first for International Business

²⁵⁹ Coetzee, J.M. (2009), p. 225.

²⁶⁰ Coetzee, J.M. (1997), blurb.

Machines (IBM), and then for the British firm International Computers. He also researched and wrote his Master's thesis on Ford Madox Ford.²⁶¹ He sure is not living the adventurous life of a poet, and therefore goes looking for a muse. The women he meets do not inspire him to poems. *Youth* is a portrait of a young man that barely survives in a country which is not his motherland.²⁶²

Summertime is subtitled 'Scenes from Provincial Life', which aligns it with Coetzee's earlier books *Boyhood* and *Youth*. *Summertime* follows them as fictionalised memoirs of Coetzee's life, and the title is a mordant joke from an author not famed for his wit. The joke is: 'If this is the prime of his life...', because Coetzee gives us a ruthless self-portrait. He does this by stepping aside and reimagining his life in the 1970s from the viewpoints of five people – a relative, a colleague, the mother of one of his students, two lovers – all interviewed after Coetzee's death by a prospective biographer named Vincent.²⁶³ John Coetzee – as he is called in the book – is not flatteringly depicted. 'He looked out of place, like a bird, one of those flightless birds; or like an abstracted scientist who had wandered by mistake out of his laboratory. There was an air of seediness about him too, an air of failure.' Even for his lover, Julia, 'he had no sexual presence whatsoever.'

Analysis The themes running through all Coetzee's novels, such as humiliation, shame, disgrace, the body and alienation, can already be discovered in *Boyhood*, in Coetzee's childhood. For instance, in the first chapter of *Boyhood* the protagonist, John, speaks about the body, shame and humiliation.

The body, shame and humiliation

John does anything to avoid to be hit by one of the teachers at school: 'The idea of being beaten makes him squirm with shame. (...) Nevertheless, he knows that pain is not the most important consideration. If the other boys can bear the pain, then so can he, whose willpower

²⁶¹ Head, Dominique (2009), p. 9.

²⁶² It is interesting to note that the blurb of *Youth* does not say anything about autobiography. Indeed, the literariness of the work is signalled in the publisher's categorization of the work as 'fiction', and by the blurb that, in contrast to the dust jacket of *Boyhood*, makes no reference to Coetzee's own life. Opportunistic marketing is one explanation for this playing down of the autobiographical element: this was Coetzee's first book since the phenomenally successful *Disgrace*, so there was a good publishing reason to *Youth* as a new novel. Technically, it is a companion piece to *Boyhood*, tracing a series of formative vignettes in the life of a South African student (plainly based on Coetzee's experiences) narrated from the central character's perspective, but in the third person using the present tense.

²⁶³ Self, John, <http://www.theblurb.com.au/Issue106/Summertime.htm>, checked on 30-06-2010.

is so much greater. What he will not be able to endure will be the shame. So bad will be the shame, he fears, so daunting, that he will hold tight to his desk and refuse to come when he is called out. And that will be a greater shame: it will set him apart, and set the other boys against him too. If it ever happens that he is called out to be beaten, there will be so humiliating a scene that he will never again be able to go back to school; in the end there will be no way out but to kill himself.²⁶⁴ Even more important is the alienation of the protagonist: ‘He is never been beaten and is deeply ashamed of it.’²⁶⁵ John feels like he is different from other kids and blames his parents, and especially his mother, for setting him apart. That is probably where the problems between John and his mother started: he loves her more than life, but despises her for loving him and for making him stand out (by not beating him, or keeping him from school when he has blisters on his feet). ‘All of the sudden he is isolated- he and, behind him, his mother.’²⁶⁶ Since I am not a psychotherapist or whatsoever, I will not try to draw conclusions from this. I do want to note that the isolation and alienation of the protagonists of almost every novel of Coetzee might be born here – assuming Coetzee is telling the truth.

John’s flight in *Youth* from South Africa parallels his flight from his family. Both escapes are responses to anxiety and dispossession. As a result of the historical shame and violence of Apartheid, he loses his connection to the land and the history of his family home. He identifies the brutality of the Sharpeville massacre and he describes a tremendous throng of PAC marchers as defining a moment when South Africa’s ‘history is being unmade’.²⁶⁷

Another moment when the historical shame and guilt of Apartheid comes forward is in *Boyhood*, when John sees a beautiful Coloured boy: ‘Always it is he who sets the train of thinking in motion; always it is the thinking that slips out of his control and returns to accuse him. Beauty is innocence; innocence is ignorance; ignorance is ignorance of pleasure; pleasure is guilty; he is guilty. (...) [T]his boy, who is a living reproof to him, is nevertheless subjected to him in ways that embarrass him so much that he squirms and wriggles his shoulders and does not want to look at him any longer, despite his beauty.’²⁶⁸

²⁶⁴ Coetzee, J.M. (1997), pp. 6-7.

²⁶⁵ Ibidem, p. 9.

²⁶⁶ Ibidem, p. 11.

²⁶⁷ Coetzee, J.M. (2002), p. 39.

²⁶⁸ Coetzee, J.M. (1997), pp. 60-61.

The most powerful reference to shame in *Youth* is this quote: ‘And how long do you plan to be here?’ says the man. ‘Just till the end of the month.’ ‘No, I mean how long in this country?’ ‘Oh, indefinitely. I’ve left South Africa.’ ‘Things are pretty bad there, are they?’ ‘Yes.’ ‘Even for whites?’ How does one respond to a question like that? *If you don’t want to perish of shame? If you want to escape the cataclysm to come?* Why do big words sound so out of place in this country? ‘Yes,’ he says. ‘At least I think so.’²⁶⁹ Shame and guilt seem inherent to the white South Africans (or at least to Coetzee).

Alienation and relationships

In *Boyhood* and, especially, *Youth*, the John presented to the reader is an alienated and alienating figure. In *Boyhood* John has friends and family, in *Youth* he is even more isolated. He barely keeps in touch with his parents or brother when he goes to the university, let alone when he moves to the UK. Moreover, he finds it difficult to make friends there, he even gives up his job with the argument that his colleagues did not become his friends. In *Summertime* we find out that his father has no friends either – and in *Youth* John considers his father to be a failure. ‘Yet he does not want to abandon it. Giving up undertakings is his father’s way. He is not going to be like his father.’²⁷⁰

Love affairs described in the narrative have a recurring bleak emptiness and lack of passion. In both countries John is troubled finding a girl he likes; most of them irritate him. John does not really treat girls well, since he has no feeling attached to them. In *Summertime*, two of his lovers speak about their relationship with John. It appears that he remains, also after his time in the UK, awkward with women. In a love affair after moving from his parents’ home, for example, his relationship with volatile Jacqueline collapses after she reads his diary and finds a variety of critical comments upon herself and upon their living together. John is not certain whether he left his diary around so that she would find it or if she has invaded his creative privacy, but her outraged departure leads him to reflect upon the issue of truthfulness in his diary.²⁷¹ The question of what should be permitted to go into his diary and what should be kept forever shrouded from language goes to the heart of his concerns as a writer: ‘If he is to censor . . . ignoble emotions – resentment at having his flat invaded, or shame at his own

²⁶⁹ Coetzee, J.M. (2002), p. 124.

²⁷⁰ Ibidem, p. 136.

²⁷¹ Vanouse, Donald (2003), <http://www.clas.ufl.edu/ipasa/2003/vanouse.html>, checked on 2-7-2010.

failures as a lover – how will those emotions ever be transfigured and turned into poetry? Besides, who is to say that the feelings that he writes in his diary are his true feelings?’²⁷² Such questions concerning the uncensored revelations in his journal are pertinent to the memoir itself. His relationships with women are almost entirely reported as selfish, unfulfilling, and even dishonourable. Lee says that he treats all the women he makes love to with cruelty, contempt or resentment (presumably to be revenged on his mother's unbearable devotion . . .).²⁷³ This callousness is particularly apparent in his seduction and subsequent neglect of Marianne, a South African college student who tours London with his cousin, Ilse. After sleeping with Marianne, he is disgusted by the sheets and mattress bloodied by her ruptured hymen, and he is thoughtless in sending her home in a cab and then neglecting to call her. When his cousin writes to him about Marianne, she addresses him in the formal language used to a stranger. John recognizes this voice as one of the homiletic ‘home truths’ from South Africa. In answering the question, ‘Do you want to know the truth about yourself’²⁷⁴, he confronts his coldness and heartlessness, and discovers another dimension of his disinheritance.²⁷⁵

Using startling imagery, Coetzee writes that the boy ‘would rather be blind and deaf than know what [his mother] thinks of him.’ He would prefer ‘to live like a tortoise inside its shell’.²⁷⁶ This preference for a life in a shell leads him into an isolation which is threatened by any woman who shows affection toward him or attraction him in his *Youth*. It seems likely that his inability to feel passion toward these women reflects the fear of loss that he experiences in any intimacy.²⁷⁷ Except for this fear, it might also be the obligations attached to love and the loss of yourself which might hold him back to love. ‘Her [his mother] blinding, overwhelming, self-sacrificial love, for both him and his brother but for him in particular, disturbs him. He wishes she did not love him so much. She loves him absolutely, therefore he must love her absolutely: that is the logic she compels upon him.’²⁷⁸

²⁷² Coetzee, J.M. (2002), p. 9-10.

²⁷³ Vanouse, Donald (2003).

²⁷⁴ Coetzee, J.M. (2002), p. 132.

²⁷⁵ Vanouse, Donald (2003).

²⁷⁶ Coetzee, J.M. (1997), p. 162.

²⁷⁷ Vanouse, Donald (2003).

²⁷⁸ Coetzee, J.M. (1997), p. 47.

Obviously, he has problems with interpersonal relationships: friends, women and family. In *Summertime*, John lives together with his father (who he despised so much in *Boyhood*) and goes to a family weekend on the farm. It turns out that his family does not really like him and thinks he is odd. Even Margot, his niece, who does like him, he disappoints, and when she sends him a devoted letter, he responds rather formal and cool.

Another aspect why John always felt different, is the language issue. Coetzee is originally Afrikaans, but his parents raised him in English and with English interests (like cricket). He feels more English as well, but neither group considers him to be either Afrikaner nor English. I won't go into this any further because alienation, although important in Coetzee's oeuvre, might be least connected to the theme of forgiveness.

Forgiveness

There is one part in *Boyhood* in which forgiveness plays a more explicit role. This is when Eddie, a seven year old Coloured boy appears. In return for washing dishes and other work, he would live with John's family and be given meals, while his mother would be sent a postal order for two pounds ten shillings. Eddie and John become friends, more or less. When John gets a bicycle, it is Eddie who pushes him till he mastered the art of balancing. Then Eddie runs away and when returned by the police gets beaten, John's father watching, and John peeking. Eddie is sent back to Ida's Valley, 'in disgrace'.²⁷⁹ John's mother tells John that "People like that always end up in a reformatory, and then in jail." He does not understand her bitterness against Eddie.²⁸⁰ John feels (again) the guilt of history: 'He is ten and Eddie, in Ida's Valley, is ten. For a while, Eddie will be eleven while he is still ten; then he will be eleven too. Always he will be pulling level, staying with Eddie for a while, then getting left behind. How long will it go on? Will he ever escape from Eddie? If they passed each other in the street one day, would Eddie, despite all the drinking and dagga-smoking, despite all the jail and all the hardening, recognize him and stop and shout "*Jou moer!*" At this moment, in the leaky house in Ida's Valley, curled under a smelly blanket, still wearing his blazer, he knows that Eddie is thinking of him. In the dark Eddie's eyes are two yellow slits. One thing he knows for sure: Eddie will have no pity on him.'²⁸¹ Although John did nothing wrong to

²⁷⁹ Coetzee, J.M. (1997), p. 76.

²⁸⁰ Ibidem.

²⁸¹ Ibidem.

Eddie, he is sure Eddie will not forgive him. For what? For being just a silent observer, for not standing up against the beating? Or for his historical guilt?

Youth does not explicitly speak about forgiveness besides John's troubled relationships with women. The parts most connected to forgiveness are those in which John refers to South Africa. Although John tries to escape from South Africa and does not like his mother to tell him news about the family or the country, he feels as if 'South Africa is like an albatross around his neck. He wants it removed, he does not care how, so that he can begin to breathe,'²⁸² but the newspapers report about South Africa. Every now and then John refers to South Africa. At one point it becomes really clear how his generation thinks compared with the generation before them. 'He knows his mother's opinions. She thinks South Africa is misunderstood by the world. Blacks in South Africa are better off than anywhere else in Africa. The strikes and protests are fomented by communist agitators. As for the farm labourers who are paid their wages in the form of a meal and have to dress their children in jute bags against the winter cold, his mother concedes that that is a disgrace. But such things happen only in the Transvaal, she says. It is the Afrikaners of the Transvaal, with their sullen hatreds and their hard hearts, who give the country such a bad name. His own opinion '(...) [is that] they should land paratroops in Pretoria, take Verwoerd and his cronies captive, line them up against a wall, and shoot them.'²⁸³ John wants to forget South Africa but it is impossible: he will always be considered as a South African, and even worse, as a beneficiary of apartheid. This collective guilt keeps coming back.

In *Summertime*, the first speaker is Julia, a married woman John had a short erotic relationship with. She certainly was not in love with him, and cannot forgive John for leaving her in the middle of the night after she left her husband and baby (not to be with John though). At the end of the interview the biographer comments: 'You are being a little hard on him, if I may say so.' And Julia answers: 'No, I am not. I am just telling you the truth. Without the truth, no matter how hard, there can be no healing. That's all. That's the end of my offering to your book.'²⁸⁴ It is hard not to read this part as a reference to the TRC. The healing refers to Desmond Tutu's *No Healing without Forgiveness*. Julia is the prototype of a bitter person because she is unable to forgive. The whole story long, she speaks quite degrading about

²⁸² Coetzee, J.M. (2002), p. 101.

²⁸³ Ibidem, p. 100.

²⁸⁴ Coetzee, J.M. (2009), p. 84.

John. At one point she says: ‘What is the one theme that keeps recurring from book to book? It is that the woman doesn’t fall in love with the man. The man may or may not love the woman; but the woman never loves the man.’²⁸⁵ In *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Disgrace* one could say that there is a woman who does not fall in love with the man. In *Age of Iron* and *Heart of Darkness*, on the other hand, the man does not fall in love with the woman. In *Youth* John is incapable of falling in love himself. It is important that this is not the general theme of the novel (except possibly *Summertime*). Therefore, the statement of Julia is untrue. I assume that her whole story is coloured by her disappointment in John, and by her inability to forgive.

4.8. Confession

A theme that touches upon many aspects connected to forgiveness, is confession. As should be clear by now, confession was an important part of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and is of course part of Catholicism. In many of Coetzee’s novels²⁸⁶, the confession plays a part: often the protagonist confesses at some point. Therefore, I like to elaborate on this theme a little.

First of all, what is a confession, and what is it compared with memoir and apology? In an essay on autobiography²⁸⁷ Francis Hart describes confession as ‘personal history that seeks to communicate or express the essential nature, the truth, of the self,’ apology as ‘personal history that seeks to demonstrate or realize the integrity of the self,’ and memoir as ‘personal history that seeks to articulate or repossess the historicity of the self.’ Thus ‘confession is ontological; apology ethical; memoir historical or cultural.’²⁸⁸

In his essay on confession, ‘Confession and Double Thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoevsky,’²⁸⁹ Coetzee connects to the theory of Hart with the remark that ‘we can demarcate a mode of autobiographical writing that we can call the confession, as distinct from the *memoir* and the *apology*, on the basis of an underlying motive to tell an essential truth about the self.’ Confession is one component in a sequence of transgression, confession,

²⁸⁵ Coetzee, J.M. (2009), p. 81.

²⁸⁶ At least in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, *Age of Iron*, *Disgrace* and in a way, an autobiography is a confession in itself.

²⁸⁷ Hart, Francis R. (1974).

²⁸⁸ Ibidem, p. 227.

²⁸⁹ Coetzee, J.M. (1985), p. 251.

penitence, and absolution. Absolution means the end of the episode, the closing of the chapter, liberation from, the oppression of the memory. Absolution in this sense is therefore the indispensable goal of all confession, sacramental or secular.²⁹⁰

What goes without saying is the question how we should categorize *Boyhood*, *Youth* and *Summertime*. I would argue that these novels are not an apology, because Coetzee is definitely not trying to demonstrate or realize the integrity of the self. The novels are a mixture between confession and memoir. How does this contribute to my thesis on forgiveness? Well, I think that it not coincidental that Coetzee wrote his own confession after all the confessions and truth-telling in South Africa. From his novels we understand that he does feel the urge to confess at some point. From his essay we can conclude that he might be looking for a secular equivalent of absolution.²⁹¹ The question whether Coetzee is telling much of the truth in his ‘autobiography’ remains dubious. Honestly, I don’t think so, but maybe it is not even a question we would like to answer. Who knows what is true? After all, we are all fictioneers.

4.9. Discussion

So now we have results. What do they mean? They mean that forgiveness is an important theme in Coetzee’s novels. My theoretical framework can almost completely be found in the novels. This confirms the idea that novels, and art in general, reflect the state of things. Do these results show new insights? The novels of Coetzee especially emphasize the feelings of guilt and shame of the white South African. This obviously influences the identity of the white South African. Furthermore, the role of the silent observers, the beneficiaries, has not been studied much. Especially this last theme is difficult to study in other sources than literature. The novels of Coetzee point out that according to him, beneficiaries are also guilty. The odds are that they reflect what the majority thinks. Coetzee tries to open the eyes of the non-engaged people and asks the question: is it bad to be a-political?

Measuring forgiveness remains hard. By studying contemporary South African novels, one could find out how several authors think about the subject and draw a general conclusion from that. The significance of the present results is that we know what Coetzee thinks of forgiveness in South Africa. He is engaged and well known and therefore not unimportant to the debate, as a mirror of other South Africans. On the other hand: he might represent a small

²⁹⁰ Ibidem, p. 252.

²⁹¹ Ibidem.

group of people: the white, English, liberal South Africans. This is how he comes across in his autobiography. One needs further research to see whether he is representing other groups as well.

Obviously, there is much more to be said about either forgiveness or the novels of Coetzee, or even about forgiveness in Coetzee's novels. Nevertheless, I concentrated on forgiveness and some aspects close to forgiveness to come to a coherent whole. Since forgiveness touches upon so many aspects, it is hard not to be distracted by all these other interesting themes (justice, truth, memory, confession, politics, psychology, theology, philosophy etcetera).

I regret that Coetzee did not write more political novels set in South Africa after the TRC.²⁹² His trilogy is interesting, especially for background information, a reflection of another time and for research to autobiographical writing, but it is not the most engaged and therefore not the most important to my research. One more political novel set in South Africa just makes my conclusion stronger.

²⁹² Coetzee wrote several novels after the TRC except for *Disgrace* and the trilogy, such as *Slow man*, *Elisabeth Costello* and *Diary of a Bad Year*. These novels are political but not set in South Africa and therefore not relevant to my research.

Chapter 5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Before answering my general question, at the end of my thesis I wonder: so what is forgiveness? I wonder whether man will ever be able to answer the question of what forgiveness is. Although there is much theorization on forgiveness, this does not mean that we really understand what it is or how it works. Forgiveness differs from person to person. Forgiveness differs from situation to situation. Forgiveness might be an artificial term for ‘learning to cope with,’ and nothing more than that. In my theoretical framework I came to the closest definition of ‘forgiveness’ on the basis of a couple of key points:

- First, the shared notion of forgiveness as the abandonment of hatred towards one’s perpetrator.
- Second, forgiveness becomes the primary way for achieving a fundamental transformation of both victim and perpetrator, allowing for the emergence of a new relationship between the two that is no longer anchored by the shared past.
- Finally, all of the thinkers mentioned above emphasize the practicality of forgiveness. Rather than placing it solely in the quarter of the theologians, forgiveness should play a central role in political and personal life, especially following mass violence.

What became clear is that there are many, many different aspects to study and to understand or to redefine forgiveness. Forgiveness turns out to be a theme attached to many other themes. The philosophical perspective shows how people think about forgiveness. The psychological perspective shows how it works in people’s minds. These two perspectives are universal to people. The religious perspective and political perspective are more relevant to the case of South Africa. Religion played an important role in the way to forgive in South Africa. On the other hand, the term ‘forgiveness’ always has had a religious connotation, since it seems a highly spiritual emotion. The political perspective is not necessarily unique to South Africa (see other Truth and Reconciliation Commissions). All the aspects together give a wide and complete overview of forgiveness in general and especially in South Africa.

Now I will answer the next sub-question:

- What is the role of the TRC in stimulating forgiveness? What do the novels of J.M. Coetzee point out about that?

As I argued in Chapter 2, the emphasis of the TRC South Africa was on forgiveness, more than on anything else. The literature agrees on the fact that reconciliation is necessary to live in peace together. There is a debate on whether forgiveness is a condition for reconciliation. Since the powerful Desmond Tutu believed that there is no future without forgiveness, forgiveness was the main goal of the TRC. Without forgiving, one cannot be fully human, nor can the one not forgiven become fully human again (which actually is Ubuntu). Although the emphasis did not have to be bad, according to the transcriptions of the hearings, the TRC imposed forgiveness a couple of times on the victims. This is not only immoral, it is worthless. People cannot be forced to forgive.

To go short, there are many signs of condemnable behaviour of the TRC, trying to impose forgiveness on the victims. On the other side: the TRC did many good things too, and is generally considered successful. It was a fair process with the emphasis on the victims (not on the perpetrators). Everything was focused on human beings being human – that cannot be bad.

To see what Coetzee's novels say about the TRC, we need to take a look at *Disgrace*. *Disgrace* is the only novel in which we can find direct reference to the TRC (also because it is the only not autobiographical novel written after the TRC took place). In an allegory on the TRC, the protagonist Lurie refuses to do what the commission wants from him: confess, tell the whole truth, apologize and show regret. Clearly, Coetzee is very critical towards the practises of the TRC.

In the chapter where the hearing takes place, the criticism becomes quite clear. When Lurie needs to appear before the commission, he does not want to hear nor read the statement of Melanie, who charges him for rape. 'I do not wish to read Ms Isaacs's statement. I accept it. I know of no reason why Ms Isaacs should lie.'²⁹³ The commission is angry because he confesses, but does not know to what he confesses to. Furthermore, he does not apologize or even really take responsibility for his deeds because he says it was an instinct he could not resist (so he blames Eros instead of himself). He refuses to tell exactly what happened,

²⁹³ Coetzee, J.M. (1999), p. 49.

because he just accepts the charges. This part echoes the frustration of the TRC, faced with the admission of who confessed but who failed to acknowledge their guilt, those who seemed to remain in their hearts unrepentant. One cannot force a person to forgive, but one cannot force a person to be truly sorry either. Nor can one always tell whether a person is really sorry or not, whether he is unrepentant, whether he forgave or is forgiven. This is also what the head of the commission says: ‘You are not being instructed to repent. What goes on in your soul is dark to us, as members of what you call a secular tribunal if not as fellow human being.’²⁹⁴ ‘The criteria is not whether you are sincere. This is a matter as I say, for your own consciousness. The criterion is whether you are prepared to acknowledge your fault in a public manner and take steps to remedy it.’²⁹⁵ In other words: I don’t care whether you are sincere as long as you do what we ask you to do: apologise and show remorse in public.

In the end, when Lurie apologizes to the family of Melanie, Melanie’s father does not consider regret to be a solution. He does not want David to apologise but he wishes that he acts upon his misdeeds: ‘But I say to myself, we are all sorry when we are found out. Then we are very sorry. The question is not, are we sorry? The question is, what lesson have we learned. The question is, what are we going to do now that we are sorry?’²⁹⁶ Coetzee believes that it is not whether one says he is sorry, what matters is whether this person learned and how he is going to move on. The critique is that the TRC concentrated more on the outside than on the inside. David Lurie does not want to take the trial seriously because he feels it is one big show: ‘Confession, apologies: what is this thirst for abasement?’²⁹⁷. This reflects criticism on the TRC. The former leads to the conclusion that Coetzee definitely criticises the TRC on different grounds and that he too feels that people were forced to say that they were more or less forced to apologise or to forgive, whether or not they did feel it in their heart.

- Did forgiveness take place in South Africa according to the novels of J.M. Coetzee?

On this point, there are two most noticeable arguments in Coetzee’s novels. First, the references to a collective feeling of guilt of the white South Africans. Second, most of the

²⁹⁴ Coetzee, J.M. (1999), p. 58.

²⁹⁵ Ibidem.

²⁹⁶ Ibidem, p. 172.

²⁹⁷ Ibidem, p. 56.

protagonists do not find redemption and are not forgiven at the end of the novel. Most novels do not end really hopeful (see next sub-question).

History and the escape of history play a role in all of Coetzee's novels. As the analysis made clear, the guilt of the white men still carries a lot of weight. Of course this is Coetzee's interpretation – I am sure that there are white South Africans who do not feel that weight. Nevertheless, it sure is a theme in the South African literature, and since this is a mirror of the state of things, we can be sure that the guilt is carried on many white shoulders.²⁹⁸

Unfortunately, it is hard, if not impossible, to repair what has been done since 1652 (Jan van Riebeeck established the first settlement in South Africa). In *Dusklands* Jacobus blames his need to murder the Khoikhoi and his deserting servants to history: 'I am a tool in the hands of history.'²⁹⁹ Magda in *In the Heart of the Country* says: 'We are the castaways of God as we are the castaways of history.'³⁰⁰ Moreover, she says: 'To explain is to forgive, to be explained is to be forgiven, but I, I hope and fear, am inexplicable, unforgivable.'³⁰¹ She asks forgiveness for being part of the system: 'I am I, not a people. Why do I have to pay for other people's sins?'³⁰² The magistrate of *Waiting for the Barbarians* does the same: 'I will not suffer for his crimes!'³⁰³

The magistrate is looking for identity: he has to find out what he belongs to, who he is, what he should do. His opinion is that 'there must always be place for penance and reparation.'³⁰⁴ Later he asks: '(...) for where can that argument lead but to laying down our arms and opening the Gates of the town to the people whose land we have raped?'³⁰⁵ and the climax: 'I think: "I wanted to live outside history. I wanted to live outside the history that Empire imposes on its subjects, even its lost subjects. I never wished it for the barbarians that they should have the history of Empire laid upon them. How can I believe that that is cause for shame?"'³⁰⁶ This is the answer to the returning theme of the protagonist who does not want to

²⁹⁸ Krijnen, Eke (2009).

²⁹⁹ Coetzee, J.M. (1974), p. 106.

³⁰⁰ Coetzee, J.M. (1978), p. 135.

³⁰¹ J.M. Coetzee, <http://www.scribd.com/doc/13714439/JM-Coetzee-In-the-Heart-of-the-Country>, checked on 5-7-2010.

³⁰² Coetzee, J.M. (1978), p. 118.

³⁰³ Coetzee, J.M. (2007 - 1980), p. 44.

³⁰⁴ Coetzee, J.M. (2007), p. 94.

³⁰⁵ Ibidem, p. 125.

³⁰⁶ Ibidem, p. 177.

be involved in what the government does: this person wants to escape the history of the shameful colonization of his ancestors.

In *Age of Iron* Ms Curren asks who killed the son of her servant. ‘Who did it?’ said Mr. Thabane. ‘If you want to dig the bullets out of their bodies, you are welcome. But I will tell you in advance what you will find. “Made in South Africa. SABS Approved.”’³⁰⁷ Either way, the state of South Africa did this to them. Since Mrs. Curren belongs to the people governing the country, she is accessory to this state of emergency. The whole novel is a confession of her membership to the whites by doing nothing against the government. In *Disgrace* Lurie is not only charged for the rape of Melanie, but also symbolically for the ‘long history of exploitation of which this is part.’³⁰⁸ Shocking is the attitude of Lucy towards history: she appears to suggest that post-Apartheid South Africa is a country where a white woman’s rape is to some extent justifiable because of the country’s history of Apartheid.³⁰⁹ ‘The reason is that, as far as I am concerned, what happened to me is a purely private matter. In another time, in another place it might be held to be a public matter. But in this place, at this time, it is not. It is my business, mine alone.’ ‘This place being what?’ ‘This place being South Africa.’³¹⁰

Also in the trilogy the shame and guilt of the white South Africans is formulated. Especially the Afrikaners are not spared. Because the country is governed by Afrikaners, English Africans feel like they are more neutral, less guilty, despite their colour. John, therefore, despises the language Afrikaans and is happy that he has been raised in English. He feels more English too. John feels extremely alienated from his country and leaves it right after university in *Youth*. Furthermore, Coetzee is currently living in Australia. All of this information are hints that he could not bear to live in South Africa anymore.

In *Boyhood* John feels that: ‘Beauty is innocence; innocence is ignorance; ignorance is ignorance of pleasure; pleasure is guilty; he is guilty. (...) this boy, who is a living reproof to him, is nevertheless subjected to him in ways that embarrass him so much that he squirms and

³⁰⁷ Coetzee, J.M. (1990), p. 103.

³⁰⁸ Coetzee, J.M. (1999), p. 53.

³⁰⁹ Igitur archive library UU (2010).

³¹⁰ Coetzee, J.M. (1999), p. 112.

wiggles his shoulders and does not want to look at him any longer, despite his beauty.³¹¹ As I quoted in the analysis: ‘Things are pretty bad there, are they?’ ‘Yes.’ ‘Even for whites?’ How does one respond to a question like that? ‘*If you don’t want to perish of shame? If you want to escape the cataclysm to come?*’³¹² For Coetzee, shame is inherent to the white South African.

Concluding: whites cannot be forgiven that they are white, that they are part of the oppressor group. Therefore, complete forgiveness cannot not take place. History is a spoiler. Maybe it is Coetzee’s opinion that it is the turn of the black people now: he identifies the brutality of the Sharpeville massacre and he describes a tremendous throng of PAC marchers as defining a moment when South Africa’s ‘history is being unmade’.³¹³ But do the novels stress that there has not been forgiveness at all? Well, it is a matter of consciousness. Most protagonists at least learn to open their eyes somewhere in the narrative (when it is too late, if it is not always too late).

- Is the author hopeful for the future?

This answer is short and clear: no. It seems that he is very negative towards the future of South Africa. The clearest answer on the question is formulated in my analysis of *Disgrace*. Coetzee asks: ‘What will make up for the wrongs of the past in South Africa?’ As I analysed, towards the end of the story, the daughter tells her father how she feels about the consequences of the rape. ‘Perhaps that is what I must learn to accept. To start at ground level. With nothing. Not with nothing but. With nothing. No cards, no weapons, no property, no rights, no dignity... like a dog.’ This is not an encouraging answer.

Lucy in *Disgrace* represents the new generation. Of course, the fact that she sacrifices herself is neither good nor hopeful. On the other hand: one could wonder whether this is the way to more equality (as Coetzee seems to do with his notation of ‘history unmade’ after the throng after the massacre of Sharpeville). She will give birth to a mixed child, black and white. If this is the generation of the future, Lurie wonders how this child must grow up, beget in hate and violence. If that is the future, that is not hopeful at all.

³¹¹ Coetzee, J.M. (1997), pp. 60-61.

³¹² Coetzee, J.M. (2002), p. 124.

³¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 39.

His novels turn out to be quite pessimistic. Especially the novels written during or after the transition period do not paint a positive picture for the future: see for instance Elizabeth Curren, who dies lonely, sick, in pain and not forgiven. But also Magda in *In the Heart of the Country* feels that she cannot be forgiven, and in the end of the novel the most horrible things happened, but she remains lonely and unhappy.

Waiting for the Barbarians has the most positive ending. The magistrate is back on his position, but now he knows on which side he stands and he has grown. He forgives himself and the one who tortured him (and is a symbol for the government). ““The crime that is latent in us we must inflict on ourselves,” I say. I nod and nod, driving the message home. “Not on others,” I say; I repeat the words, pointing at my chest, pointing at his. He watches my lips, his thin lips move in imitation, or perhaps in derision, I do not know.”³¹⁴ The way he forgives is with the help of Ubuntu.

Finally, I will answer my research question: How do the novels written by J.M. Coetzee reflect the discourse on forgiveness in South Africa?

To start with, many of the aspects of the discourse on forgiveness in South Africa come across in the novels of J.M. Coetzee. The novels in which forgiveness is prominent, are *Age of Iron*, written during the transition, and *Disgrace*, written after the TRC. Therefore, we could conclude that the series of novels reflects the discourse on forgiveness in South Africa. Also, there is development to discover from the first to the last novel. On the other hand, *In the Heart of the Country* and *Waiting for the Barbarians* have forgiveness as theme as well. There is a difference though: *In the Heart of the Country* and *Waiting for the Barbarians* are about forgiveness, but mainly about self forgiveness and the role of the white government. *Age of Iron* and *Disgrace* do reflect the time and the context they are written in, and are more politically relevant. The trilogy also shows a slight story of forgiveness, but offers mainly background information.

So how do the novels of Coetzee reflect the discourse on forgiveness? By showing the doubts and thoughts about all aspects of forgiveness. The criticism, the fear, the hopelessness:

³¹⁴ Coetzee, J.M. (2007 - 1980), p. 146-147.

everything can be found in the novels. The novels reflect the discourse and the time frame in which the discourse took place. Therefore, the novels are quite an important historical source for research on forgiveness in South Africa.

Coetzee considered as spokesman of the white, liberal, English South African – because this is how he comes across in his autobiography –, makes clear that this group of people does not think it is useful to focus on and incite forgiveness. Coetzee is critical towards the TRC, as we have seen, and his novels reflect much of the critique we can find in the literature on political forgiveness. In practise, this would have relevance for future Truth and Reconciliation Commissions: let forgiveness come natural, don't try to force people. Furthermore, the most important conclusion is that novels are a good source to study history and the opinion of one person at least, and a specific group of persons at most.

5.1. Recommendations

My thesis concentrates on one author only. Coetzee might show one perspective, his, but since his novels are very popular, it is very plausible that he represents many South Africans, and more importantly, the political state of South Africa. Unfortunately, Coetzee does not like to give interviews, let alone to speak about political aspects in his books. Therefore, I could not use many of his own thoughts about forgiveness in South Africa or his novels. Another point of consideration is that forgiveness as such is not a theme in Coetzee's novels. It are the related topics mentioned frequently which play a big role, and which make the specific topic of forgiveness clear.

Since Coetzee's novels do reflect the discourse on forgiveness in South Africa, I do think it would be really interesting to do more research on forgiveness in contemporary South African novels. The novels of Coetzee are not enough to draw a conclusion on whether forgiveness took place in South Africa. If I would like to find that out, reading a hundred books would not be enough. It could be interesting to investigate whether there are differences in approaches to forgiveness between black, white and coloured writers, or between male and female writers. Another interesting research could be to compare accounts of forgiveness before and after the end of Apartheid. Nevertheless, this would demand a doctoral thesis – not a master thesis.

Furthermore, it would be interesting to do more research into autobiography or confessional fiction in South Africa. Confession played a great role in South Africa, so I wonder whether this is reflected in the literature (or other forms of art).

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