Embracing Disgrace: Writing from the Dark Side

***DISGRACE* AS ANINTERTEXTUAL PALIMPSEST**

JM Coetzee’s *Disgrace* has been hailed as ‘the greatest novel of the last 25 years written in English’ (McCrum 2006), and ‘a novel with which it is almost impossible to find fault’ (Wood 2005).At the University of the Sunshine Coast, *Disgrace* sits in a third year Creative Writing course called *Novel Ideas*, where students analyse and write innovative texts. What better novel to use as an exemplar in a Creative Writing programme, if we wish to become better writers?[[1]](#footnote-1)

The first piece of advice I tell students when teaching this novel is the obvious one that good writing emerges from good reading, not only in the sense that it is imitative, and that students should apprentice themselves to established writers, but that it is intertextual. Kristeva acknowledges that ‘a literary work is not simply the product of a single author, but of its relationship to other texts and to the structures of language itself’, that ‘any text is constructed of a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another’ (Kristeva 1980: 66), or in Roland Barthes’s words, ‘any text is a new tissue of past citations’ (‘Theory of the Text’ 39). 'Books,’ says Martin Amis, ‘are partly about life, and partly about other books’ (Bilmes 2011).

Approaching writing from the understanding that writers need to be aware of the ‘encyclopaedia of literature’ and ‘a network of previously read texts on the basis of which readers ascribe meaning to what they read,’ reinforces the notion that writers write on top of other texts (Mertens 1990). And if all writing takes place in the presence of other writings, then we need to acknowledge that we do not write original works but palimpsests.

Put another way, all writing is derivative, and innovation is the result of an awareness of our sources.

Students often ask me why, instead of courses in narrative craft, the program at our university is literature-based (we offer courses in Chaucer, Shakespeare, Dickens, Eliot and Coetzee). Are we reading these texts to glean narrative techniques from these novelists? If so, then why not teach the techniques directly? Or are these thinly disguised literature courses we have sneaked back into the programme for the sake of some lecturer’s nostalgic lost love? Literature performs, or should perform a different function in creative writing courses to that of simple imitation of what we ‘should’ be writing.

*Disgrace* offers a clue as to how literary works can be positioned in a creative writing curriculum:

One of the teasing characteristics of novels soused in literariness, like J.M. Coetzee’s, is their tendency to leak, to bleed, into vast inchoate terrains of intertextuality. Trails of significance proliferate seemingly without end. The reader is constantly challenged to measure and assess their implications within or against the frail containing form of the story. (Wright 2005)

A quick archaeological dig will show us how *Disgrace* is written on top of Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* with its characters nursing red badges of shame because of sexual misconduct, (Lurie) going on trial for that crime of sexual passion, and Lucy bearing a child out of that shame. There is Dostoevsky, Flaubert (*Madame Bovary*), Nabokov (who can read a story about an older man and younger ‘girl’ without thinking of *Lolita*?). Kafka’s *The Trial* is evoked, and Lurie directly compares himself to the Byron, Wordsworth, Blake, and Marlowe’s *Faust*. There are even direct quotes (‘the menny’ from Hardy’s *Jude the Obscure; ‘*like a dog’ from Kafka’s *The Trial)* which alerts us to the fact that this novel is quilted from patches of canonical works of literature.

Writers need to be literary experts, to know their field, and to let this knowledge percolate in their own writing. We cannot write a novel unless we know what a novel is, and we cannot be innovative unless we build on the work of others.

The effect of such ‘sampling’ of other texts then provides a way in which creative writing students can approach works of literature, not simply to lift narrative strategies and craft techniques, or to cannibalise ideas, or even to understand their (and our) historical and literary contexts, but to participate in an ongoing narrative stream of ideas. To achieve a literary depth of field, our writing needs to marinate in the writing of others in order to know itself.

But this does not mean, as some of my students suggest, that we simply implant intertextual references in our writing. Intertextuality is an unwitting, unconscious narrative practice, one of the dark arts. *Disgrace*’s dark intertextual meaning is hidden, and has been encoded in its allusions. We have to scratch the surface of this palimpsest to get to the underlying novel underneath. Coetzee’s intertextual references may look to some students contrived, planted to lure readers into a literary game, but this may be because of the way it is taught in university lecture halls. Intertextuality is the indicator that writers cannot write about the world of their own and others’ experience except through the experience of other books. Intertextuality then is a skill acquired through deep reading, a measure of our depth as writers.

**WRITING FROM THE DARK SIDE**

In *Boyhood*, JM Coetzee’s fictional autobiography, the young writer confesses his literary ambitions, and by implication, the author behind the protagonist outlines his artistic manifesto for his writing career:

What he would write if he could…would be something darker, something that, once it began to flow from his pen, would spread across the page out of control, like spilt ink. Like spilt ink, like shadows racing across the face of still water, like lightning crackling across the sky. (Coetzee 1997, *Boyhood,* p. 140)

Students who take ‘Novel Ideas’ are invited to ‘write from the dark side’, and by the ‘dark side’ I mean to go somewhere forbidden, taboo, unconventional, somewhere not apparent on the surface.

The darkness of *Disgrace* begins with its title, and this novel promises to explore the shadow, the spilt ink, the negative of ‘grace’. The main protagonist is David Lurie, academic of the old school, Romantic, hedonist, Byronesque in his image of himself. Lurie is God’s fallen angel who models himself on Lucifer. And his fall into disgrace pulls along a chain of others with him: first his *enamorata*, Melanie (the dark one) and then his daughter Lucy (short for Lucifer), who has been forced into a state of unmerited disgrace.

When teaching students this novel, my first piece of advice is this: a great book cannot come from a trivial concept. Write about something deep, profound disturbing, and rich. Be honest. Undermine surface. ‘Some works,’ J.M. Coetzee says, ‘reinforce the myths of our culture, others dissect these myths. In our time and place, it is the latter kind of work that seems to me more urgent’ (Olsen 1985). Are we going to perpetuate the status quo, and lull our readers into complacent acceptance of their received notions of culture, or are we going to dissect these myths and disturb the deep waters of our culture? For our writing to have gravitas, we must wrestle with the dark shadows of our civilisation. And this can be achieved by a technique Coetzee articulates--engaging with the counter voices of our culture, of our dark selves, and of our literary history.

**COUNTERVOICES**

It may be tempting to observe that both Lurie and his creator, JM Coetzee at the time of writing *Disgrace*, are both professors of Literature at the University of Cape Town, both in their early fifties, both white, and both highly literate, steeped in Romantic poetry, and both divorced. This may simply be a question of writing what you know, but Coetzee gives us a clue as to his technique in an interview:

To write is to awaken counter-voices within oneself, and to dare enter into dialogue with them. As consciousnesses trapped in bodies, communicating with the imperfect tool of language, we often use stories to convey information—to reach toward some sort of truth—and yet because we have no objective access to other consciousnesses, what we are left communicating are stories about ourselves. We are all one self full of countervoices telling stories and seeking truths. (Attwell 1992: 65)

Lurie is a counter voice, a parallel Coetzee in a parallel fictional universe, a test tube case where problems are posed, hypotheses tested, and counter selves allowed to roam freely and explore their dark sides.

Herein lies the liberation for writers: it is OK to be selves we would never be in public. In fiction, we are given licence to explore our counter voices, and we can only do this by letting down our guard, even our narrative control:

Writers are used to being in control of the text and don’t resign it easily. But my resistance is not only a matter of protecting a phantasmatic omnipotence. Writing is not free expression. There is a true sense in which writing is dialogic: a matter of awakening the countervoices in oneself and embarking upon speech with them. It is some measure of a writer’s seriousness whether he does evoke/invoke those countervoices in himself, that is, step down from the position of what Lacan calls “the subject supposed to know.” (Attwell 1992: 65)

In my writing classes, I encourage students to let down their guard, and to write their ‘counter selves’. Go where you would not dare go in real life. Explore all possibilities. What do you ache for? What do you desire? What gives you pain? What are your obsessions? What secrets do you have? What, in other words, are your ‘counter voices’?

One way to enter into a counter universe is to ask the question: ‘what if?’ What if you had had an affair with that married man? What if you act on your desires? Or don’t act on those desires? What does our society hold sacred or taboo or will not question? Where are the blind spots? What if we dissect those myths, question those assumptions? The following, if I may presume to guess, are some of the ‘what if’ questions for *Disgrace*: What if a professor has an affair with a student, gets found out, and loses his job? What if his daughter is raped in her own house and he is powerless to stop it or to seek justice? What if I take an extreme position on male sexuality (All male sex is rape/ violence)? How do I solve the ‘problem’ of male sexuality? What if I am treated like a ‘dog’?

This again sounds self-conscious and manipulative. For writing dark countervoices, by its very definition, is often inadvertent. The discontents of our civilisation rear their heads unwittingly. One student of mine writes of her dictator son who is tyrant in her life and how she wants to strangle him, and then is horrified to see what she has written. Often we do not know what we are writing until we have written it. We don’t know we are articulating a problem until we have articulated it, and with horror, we see our secret selves exposed on the page, shamed, in disgrace. That is when we know we have succeeded in writing our dark selves.

**FIRST LINES**

*Disgrace* offers a simple way into this dark side—its first line. As writers we spend a lot of agonising time on our first lines. First sentences are (as Hemingway says) the first cut of the vein: they start the story flowing. Here is Coetzee’s first line from *Disgrace*:

For a man his age, fifty-two, divorced, he has, to his mind, solved the problem of sex rather well. (Coetzee 1999: *Disgrace* 1)

It is an amazing first line, because it sums up David Lurie’s character, sets him up for failure, and establishes the wry distance of narrative voice (‘to his mind’). It is, as Melinda Harvey has also pointed out, a feat of grammatical invention: ‘Not since the late novels of Henry James has a cartel of well-positioned commas and clauses done so much connotative work.’ (Harvey 2005: 95). But most remarkably it sets up a ‘problem to be solved.’ Some readers may find it odd that sex is posed as problem, but Lurie, and the narrator behind him, is examining a peculiarly interesting knotty issue: the problem of postcolonial, masculine sexuality. The first line is an arrow that points in the direction our novel wants to go.

**NOVEL AS PROBLEM**The novel then becomes the means to solve this problem, or at least articulate it through constructed characters (entering into dialogic conversation with our counter voices). David Lurie has solved the problem of sex by following his dark impulses and rationalising his impulses in terms of a Romantic (Byronic, Blakean, Wordsworthian) ideology. The men who rape Lucy have also, in a horrific way (but one that parallels Lurie’s exploitation of the women he has sex with) ‘solved’ the problem of sex too. Lucy herself comes to a solution to the problem too; Lurie’s ex-wife articulates the problem as male sexuality, yoking it to violence, rape and murder: Here is the dark centre of the novel, the split ink, the ‘problem of male’ sexuality bared and exposed:

When it comes to men and sex, David, nothing surprises me anymore. 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 afterwards, leaving the body behind covered in blood – doesn't it feel like murder, like getting away with murder? (Coetzee *Disgrace* 1999: 158)

When Lurie thinks about his daughter’s lesbian relationship, he begins to wonder if the problem of sex is solved by escaping male sexuality altogether:

Not for the first time, he wonders whether women would not be happier living in

communities of women, accepting visits from men only when they choose. Perhaps he is wrong to think of Lucy as homosexual. Perhaps she simply prefers female company. Or perhaps that is all that lesbians are: women who have no need of men (Coetzee *Disgrace* 1999: 104)

Ultimately, it seems, Lurie’s problem is solved by learning empathy:

You don't understand, you weren't there," says Bev Shaw. Well, she is mistaken. Lucy's intuition is right after all: he does understand; he can, if he concentrates, if he loses himself, be there, be the men inhabit them, fill them with the ghost of himself. The question is, does he have it in him to be the woman? (Coetzee *Disgrace* 1999: 160)

A novel does not have to neatly ‘solve’ a problem, however. If we offer hypotheses in too mechanical a way, a novel becomes contrived and the ‘solutions’ too propagandistic. But it should at least consider and tackle a problem. These are questions asked of student work, especially at post-graduate level: what problem is your story or novel posing? How do you intend to investigate this problem? Is any resolution possible, or even necessary? And when students apply for the Masters and Doctoral program at this university, their proposal has to articulate a Research question: what are you attempting to discover through the writing of this novel?

Although Coetzee does seem to plot novels that have problems and solutions,[[2]](#footnote-2) he suggests that it is not as simple as putting forward a hypothesis and then investigating it, but rather feeling your way blindly towards an answer, or a possibility:

‘We do not write out of plenty,’ says a character in an earlier novel, ‘— we write out of anguish, out of lack. The feel of writing fiction is one of freedom, of irresponsibility, or better, of responsibility toward something that has not yet emerged, that lies somewhere at the end of the road.’ (J.M. Coetzee *The Master of Petersburg* 1994:152)

**NERVE POINTS**

For a dentist, touching a nerve is bad thing, but apparently, for a novelist, it is a good thing: Gordimer says of Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians:* ‘J.M. Coetzee’s vision goes to the nerve-centre of being. What he finds there is more than most people will ever know about themselves’ (Gordimer 1980). Surprisingly, J.M. Coetzee’s novel *Disgrace* was not well received in his home country. Reactions to *Disgrace* show how close to the bone (another surgical metaphor) its subject matter is. It deals with (amongst other things) intellectual emasculation, old age, animal rights, land repossession, gang rape, and male sexuality. You do not write about gang rape by blacks on whites in a country where such racial stereotyping is provocative, and where rape is statistically the highest in the world. You do not write about land farm invasions and land repossession in a land next to one that has recently collapsed economically because of land repossession. And if you do, you should expect this type of response:

Coetzee represents “as brutally as he can the white people’s perception of the post-apartheid black man, implying that in the new regime whites would lose their cards, their weapons, their property, their rights, their dignity, while the white women will have to sleep with the barbaric black men… the novelist cares more about animal rights than human rights. (Donadio 2007)

Students in my courses are asked to stir the surface of political waters. Write a novel that will cause outrage, one that will disturb the complacent truths of society. Challenge preconceptions, touch nerves. Deconstruct and demystify subjects, challenge assumed positions and received opinions. In this way, writing can crackle across the sky like forked lightning.

**NARRATIVE STYLE: MENTORS**

All very well. But how can students specifically and practically write this way without their writing looking contrived, mechanistic and self-conscious? *Disgrace* is much more than a formulaic, intertextual novel written to solve a problem and to ‘dissect the myths’ of its society.

Critics have admired the novel for its style more than anything else: ‘It may be that 200 pages have never worked so hard as they do in Coetzee's hands. He's a novelist of stunning precision and efficiency.  This is a novel of almost frightening perception from a writer of brutally clear prose’ (Charles 1999). And if we want to achieve similar ‘brutally clear prose’, it is to Coetzee’s writing mentor we must turn. For it is the cadence of Flaubert’s ‘*indirect libre*’ that permeates this novel. The use of free indirect discourse in Coetzee’s prose merges the perspective of author and character and loosens the hold of narrative judgment, creating an eerie complicity of reader and writer.

Achieving free indirect discourse is tricky, especially as it tends to blur into sloppy omniscient perspective. The advice I give is to write the passage in third person and then flip it into first person to demonstrate how conscious the invisible narrative voice is, and to measure the distance between character and narrative *personum*:

Consider the following extract from the novel:

He continues to teach because it provides him with a livelihood; also because it teaches him humility, brings it home to him who he is in the world. The irony does not escape him: that the one who comes to teach learns the keenest of lessons, while those who come to learn, learn nothing. (Coetzee, *Disgrace* 1999:5)

…and how it differs, and cannot work when rendered in first person:

I continue to teach because it provides me with a livelihood; also because it teaches me humility, brings it home to me who I am in the world. The irony does not escape me: that the one who comes to teach learns the keenest of lessons, while those who come to learn, learn nothing.

There is a wry distance in the first instance, and an impossible combination of self-deprecation and smugness in the second.

Similarly, the present tense serves to establish a seemingly direct, unmediated link with a character's mind, in the sense that an action reported by the narrator in the present tense may be taken to be internally focalized by the character performing the action. Damsteegt (2005) calls this Internal Focalization of Awareness, a narrative device that expresses awareness on the character's part of the action being performed. The present tense is tricky too because it can become bland and banal, and far from what Roland Barthes calls ‘writing degree zero’ Writing in the present tense for many has become an emptying of history rather than an act of focalisation. Consider the same extract from the novel in past tense:

He continued to teach because it provided him with a livelihood; also because it taught him humility, brought it home to him who he was in the world. The irony did not escape him: that the one who came to teach learned the keenest of lessons, while those who came to learn learned nothing.

The difference is again subtle: the present excludes a future resolution. The narrator is not looking back in hindsight, is not offering a resolution, and is in the dark as much as David Lurie is as to his future prospects.

JM Coetzee makes no secret of declaring Gustave Flaubert as his mentor when it comes to tight, sparse prose. Writing, according to Flaubert should be *'lisse comme un marbre et furieux comme un tigre'* as well as *'chaud en dessous et splendide à la surface*' (Byatt 2002).[[3]](#footnote-3)

*Disgrace*, like all great art, looks easy, simple. It is cool and smooth as glass on the surface. But underneath it crackles with lightning, and its issues are hot and tigerish. The better we become at writing, the simpler our writing appears to be, and the greater the tension between the appearance and subterranean depths of our prose. How is this achieved? According to Flaubert, by meticulous, obsessive, rigorous attention to detail, in order to arrive at ‘*le mot juste*’.

When I discover a disagreeable assonance or a repetition in one of my sentences, I can be sure that I'm floundering around in something false. By dint of searching, I find the right expression, which was the only one all along, and at the same time the harmonious one. (Flaubert, 1876 qtd. in Mertens & Beekman1990)

**OUTLANGUAGE**

It may be too that the dark side is better left unsaid. As in all good minimalist prose, what is left out is more powerful than what is stated. For example, there is much we do not know about the events that occur in *Disgrace*: The scene where David’s daughter is raped is not described, leaving David and the reader to imagine, or rather try not to imagine what happened. Melanie’s inexplicable behaviour when she stays over at David’s house, and her subtle encouragement of his sexual penetration at one point contradicts or at least disrupts the smooth narrative of sexual harassment that is the surface of the story. The story becomes a dark void around which we circle. And it is the absence of language which becomes a narrative technique.

Alain Geoffroy (1994) coins the term ‘out-language’ when discussing JM Coetzee’s work, suggesting that when it comes to subjects like pain, death, deprivation and terror, language cannot suffice to capture the ‘ineffable realness of the world’ and words become ‘quick-silver between fingers’:

Coetzee outlines a theory of writing which links together the fictional discourse and the hole(s) of the real it both conceals and fills up. According to him, writing is an attempt to make the silent world speak, a world which is “out-language,” as one says “out-law,” a world which throws Magda into a panic when she is suddenly deprived of the powers of speech, and “from [her] throat comes something which is not a cry, not a groan, not a voice, but a wind that blows from the stars and over the polar wastes and through [her].The wind is white, the wind is black, it says nothing.” (*Heart*, 55) That very same breath, come from a realm in which neither symbols nor language reign, escapes from Friday’s mouth like “the roar of the waves in a seashell; and over that, as if once or twice a violin-string were touched, the whine of the wind and the cry of a bird” (*Foe*, 154). (Geoffroy 1994.)

If we wish to get to the dark space of the novel and the dark matter of our own writing, then perhaps we need to acknowledge the absences, the holes, the inadequacies of language and reason in the very discourse or medium we are using to communicate. Here are two of David Lurie’s observations when he tries to communicate with Petrus:

English is an unfit medium for the truth of South Africa. Stretches of English code whole sentences long have thickened, lost their articulations, their articulateness, their articulatedness. Like a dinosaur expiring and settling in the mud, the language has stiffened. Pressed into a mould of English, Petrus’s story would come out arthritic, bygone. (J.M.Coetzee, *Disgrace* 1999:117)

Benefactor: a distasteful word, it seems to him, double edged, souring the moment….The language… is tired, friable, eaten from the inside as if by termites. Only the monosyllables can still be relied on, and not even all of them. What is to be done?... Nothing short of starting all over again with the ABC. (J.M.Coetzee, *Disgrace* 1999:129)

Neither David nor the narrator or the reader knows what happens outside David’s thoughts. Melanie’s and Soroya’s realities are dark to us. The words of the novel are not clear signifiers to meaning, but rather indicators of absence. Underneath the shiny surface of the prose, dark spaces appear and pool like spilt ink.

J.M. Coetzee’s sparse prose inspires students to write ‘outlanguage’, to circle the black hole of dark selves that cannot be expressed in language. What is left out is not only significant but it is what we ache for, another story untold, a promise left hanging. And it is this which allows our narrative to shine.

**THE UNIMAGINABLE**

Although Flaubert’s methods are painfully exact, split ink is ‘out of control’. Lightning ‘crackling across the sky’ is unexpected. And from a writer as tightly controlled, as rational, as intellectual as JM Coetzee is, the following statement may come as surprise: but it provides the final necessary ingredient for writing dark prose:

I am someone who has intimations of freedom (as every chained prisoner has) and constructs representations— which are shadows themselves—of people slipping their chains and turning their faces to the light. I do not imagine freedom, freedom *an sich*; I do not represent it. Freedom isanother name for the unimaginable. (Attwell 1992:341)

Writing is then a gesture towards the unwriteable, to the unimaginable, to something that has ‘not yet emerged’. In this way the weight of dark matter is felt through encircling and stitching the void with words that do not signify but gesture towards.

**CONCLUSION**

In order to give our writing depth, we need to immerse ourselves in, and acknowledge the intertextuality of our writing, in the awareness that we are indeed writing palimpsests, and that our writing is always referential and deferential to other texts. The novel we write is a problem we are posing, and our intention is to dissect myths rather than reinforce them, to ‘go to the nerve centre of being’. We need to give ourselves license to explore our counter selves, and encircle the dark centre of being, mindful of the inadequacy of our language in our attempts to do so, through prose that is *'lisse comme un marbre et furieux comme un tigre' 'chaud en dessous et splendide à la surface,*' that allows dark spaces in our text through the cracks of an out-language.

*Disgrace* thus provides students with an array of techniques, methods and devices to play with and learn from, and further, challenges them to embrace the contradiction of writing tightly controlled prose while abandoning themselves to the counter voices of their darker selves. In this way *Disgrace* pushes students towards writing of significance, gravitas and resonance.

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1. The Creative Writing programme at the University of the Sunshine Coast offers a series of reading/literature based courses (*Chaucer to the Romantics, Victorians to the Moderns, Paperback Hero, Novel Ideas)* which enable students to situate their writing in the unfolding history and future of their genre. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Disgrace* is premised on the idea that the ‘problem; of sex’ has been ‘solved’, and an earlier work, Waiting for the Barbarians is premised on a poem by Cavafy which sees the barbarians as a ‘kind of solution’ (Cavafy 1904) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. ‘Smooth as marble and furious as a tiger; hot underneath and cool on the surface’ [↑](#footnote-ref-3)