J.M. Coetzee’s Austerities

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Chapter 5
Disgrace as an Uncanny Revision of Gordimer’s None to Accompany Me
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This essay responds to Derek Attridge’s discussion of Coetzee and allegory in J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading.¹ In this book, Attridge offers strong illuminating descriptions of the experience of reading J.M. Coetzee’s eight novels (through Elizabeth Costello) and his two memoirs – descriptions that occasionally take up the particular claims of other interpreters of Coetzee (most consistently those of David Attwell), but that also take a gentle categorical exception to the tendency of Coetzee’s critics to read him as an allegorist. In doing this, the book also offers a general account of Coetzee’s writing as exemplary of what Attridge calls the singularity of literature. In discussing Coetzee under this rubric, Attridge stresses the special ethical importance of the power of literature to express the particular apprehensions and intimations of situated human consciousness. In this, quite intentionally, Attridge takes on the strong tendency of much contemporary literary criticism to see the point of literature as some form of allegory of politics or philosophy – something that can lead either to praxis or to some general truth-claim. Attridge believes, by contrast, that “impulses and acts that shape our lives as ethical beings … cannot be represented in the discourses of philosophy, politics, or theology, but are in their natural element in literature” (xi). He develops this intriguing general idea about literature quite concisely alongside his readings of Coetzee’s novels, though he does not quite say that he arrived at these views through reading Coetzee’s works. Indeed, he seems to have arrived at them in part through reading the works of Derrida and other theorists of engagement with the other, in part through his own long distinguished engagement with modernist literature, and in part through a special interest he has taken in lyric, as well as through his readings of Coetzee novels as they have appeared. It is clear, however, that he thinks one might well arrive at such views purely through experiencing Coetzee’s writing in the way he has experienced it. Thus Attridge argues that allegorical reading in general, and allegorical reading of Coetzee in particular, are in a way misleading by being unliterary.

¹ Derek Attridge, J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004). Page numbers will be given parenthetically in what follows.
Attridge’s second chapter, “Against Allegory: Waiting for the Barbarians and Life & Times of Michael K”, develops the anti-allegorical method of reading Coetzee’s texts (and literary texts generally) that is at the heart of Attridge’s idea of literary singularity. Noting the obvious ways in which both of these novels—the novels that gave Coetzee an international readership—seem to invite interpretation in which they are allegories of particular or general aspects of historicized human life, Attridge asks, “what happens if we resist the allegorical reading that the novels seem half to solicit, half to problematize …? [W]ould we have emptied them of whatever political or ethical significance they might possess?” (35). This is a hugely consequential question, and not merely for readers of J.M. Coetzee. Attridge knows this, and he compares what he is proposing about reading to what might be thought of as common ground between two famous essays, Susan Sontag’s complaint about the predictable reduction of literature to banal generalizations in Against Interpretation (1966) and Donald Davidson’s claim, in “What Metaphors Mean” (1978), that the meaning of a metaphor cannot be thought of as the predictable Venn-diagram-like intersection of previously known semantic fields, or as something beyond ordinary meaning that floats above it, but must rather be thought of as words working in an entirely normal way to do something very new. Basically, Attridge claims, and supports by admirably precise readings of brilliant passages from Coetzee’s novels, that the general historical or ethical claims one can support by allegorizing aspects of the novels are far less interesting, precise and close to the experience of reading than the particular kinds of ethical investigation and puzzlement involved in the event of reading Coetzee. He calls this “literal reading”, and he ends by saying that in his view “literal reading” and “literary reading” are inseparable. While Attridge connects this practice with such early and mid-twentieth-century exemplars as Richards, Leavis, Wimsatt and Burke, among others, he believes that his way of discussing literary singularity is more attentive to a variety of elements in reading that have been highlighted by the philosophically and culturally oriented criticism of recent decades: Attridge is thus, at least in his own view, not advocating a return to New Criticism, exactly (62). (He includes Empson on the list of twentieth-century critics he only in some ways resembles, but in many ways Attridge’s set of attitudes does seem to me a return to what is remarkable in Empson’s first two books of criticism—the simultaneous focus on the extraordinarily rich and unpredictable experience of reading, and the new and undetermined angles on social experience that free intense reading opens up.2)

Obviously Attridge’s general claims will not persuade unless his descriptions of particular passages can reveal something rich and particular in the experience of

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reading that gets glossed over in allegorical readings. Fortunately he consistently does this, and it is clear that Coetzee provides many opportunities to make such discoveries. Moreover, to the extent that Coetzee makes pronouncements about reading, Coetzee appears to agree with Attridge: Attridge quotes Coetzee’s comment that in reading a novel as “playing the game you call Class Conflict or the game called Male Domination ... you may have missed not just something, you may have missed everything. Because ... a story is not a message with a covering.” Attridge concludes his chapter with the following summary comment:

I am not against allegory ... in spite of the chapter’s title; allegorical readings of many kinds have been and will continue to be of the greatest significance, ranging from allegories of actual history (where a novel is read as if it were about real people, places, and events) to universal allegory (where the novel is read as if [it] were about abstractions). But I am for reading as an event, for restraining the urge to leave the text, or rather the experience of the text, behind (an urge that becomes especially powerful when we have to produce words about it), for opening oneself to the text’s forays beyond the doxa. If Coetzee’s novels and memoirs exemplify anything, it is the value (but also the risk) of openness to the moment and to the future, of the perhaps and the wherever. Allegory, we might say, deals with the already known, whereas literature opens a space for the other. Allegory announces a moral code, literature invites an ethical response. (63–4)

What, then, is Attridge urging us to do? To continually open ourselves to surprise; not to create an allegory out of what we expect a text to say and select details to support that allegory; perhaps to chasten our own propensities to prophetic portentousness in the name of the exhilaration of reading. Critics would need humility if they were to confine themselves to “literal reading”. And Coetzee is a propitious author to invoke while making a case for literal writing because the experience of reading Coetzee is (among other things) humbling. So much intelligence, so much concision, so much learning, so many surprises – what, besides our own desire to sound bigger than we are, tempts us to move toward reductive generalization?

That said, however, I believe that there is an aspect of the literariness of Disgrace that may both justify critics in reading it somewhat allegorically and explain some of the tendencies or hints toward allegorical writing I find in the novel. That aspect emerges as one explores its allusiveness to other texts, and several essays in this collection map this allusiveness – the fact that they overlap as little as they do points to the depth and breadth of Coetzee’s intertextuality.³

³ J.M. Coetzee, “The Novel Today” Upstream 6.1 (1988); 2–5, at 4, quoted in Attridge, Ethics of Reading, 36–7. See David Attwell’s essay in this volume for a similar use of this comment (Chapter 8, p. 164).

⁴ For example, Laurence Wright, “David Lurie’s learning and the meaning of J.M. Coetzee’s Disgrace” (Chapter 7); Derek Attridge, “Coetzee’s Artists; Coetzee’s Art” (Chapter 1).
My particular argument in this essay is that there is a good deal of revisionary allusion in *Disgrace* to Nadine Gordimer’s 1994 novel *None to Accompany Me*, and that reading *Disgrace* as taking up issues about allegory from Gordimer is a way of seeing a certain kind of allegorization – a kind that interrogates allegory in ways Attridge has attuned us to – as part of the book’s literary singularity.

Any great social change, however longed-for and prospectively imagined, creates a crisis for writers; a crisis of representation which is also a crisis of prediction, an attempt to find what will be the great shaping issues for a new period. The end of apartheid has evoked several outstanding novels already, novels that not only represent a rapidly reforming world but also try to find within the substantial symbolic resources of realist fiction evocative formulations of new situations and new relations. I will suggest below that J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace* – a novel which shows signs of standing, for international readers, in relation to the end of apartheid as *Cry, the Beloved Country* stood to apartheid’s beginning – in some ways rewrites Nadine Gordimer’s end-of-apartheid novel, *None to Accompany Me*.\(^5\) (It would, I think, be a miscategorization to call these *post* apartheid novels.) Gordimer’s book offered readers compelling images of new South African possibility in what was on the whole a hopeful emotional register, and I will argue that Coetzee’s novel rewrites Gordimer’s in particular by noticing her somewhat schematic allegories of new possibility and suggesting that they might as realized be full of pain. Toward the end I focus on differences within similarities and meditate briefly on what this revision might mean in terms of the literary relations between South Africa’s best-known (and, I think, best) contemporary novelists. But I should begin, obviously, by trying to persuade you that the similarities in fact exist. Coetzee’s novel is more recent, more widely-discussed, and more controversial. Moreover, this volume addresses readers of Coetzee who may not be readers of Gordimer. So I’m going to assume your familiarity with the plot of Coetzee’s *Disgrace*; let me, however, refresh your memories with a selective summary of events in *None to Accompany Me*. Since I believe Coetzee shows particular interest in the ways *None to Accompany Me* offers, within a realist frame, touches of politically prophetic allegory, I will stress such aspects in my summary.

*None to Accompany Me* is set in the period between 1990 and 1994 in which it was written. It incorporates extensive flashbacks from earlier in the lives of its major characters, and one of its aims is to present the rhythms of engagement and detachment through an adult lifetime in love and work. Vera Stark, the protagonist, seems to be exactly Gordimer’s age: she was first married at 17 at the beginning of World War II (which would give her Gordimer’s birth year of 1923), and is thus in her late 60s, divorced and remarried since just after the war to Bennet Stark. She and Bennet live in the house she received in the divorce settlement from her first marriage (her nameless first husband has emigrated to Australia). Bennet and

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Vera have two children (unless the eldest, her son Ivan, was in fact conceived in an impulsive coupling with her first husband – betraying Bennet, for whom she had betrayed the first husband – after his return from Egypt): Ivan, a banker in London who divorces in the course of the novel and has a teenaged son Adam; and Annick, Vera and Ben’s daughter, who, having come out as a lesbian to her parents in the course of the novel, adopts an African child with her partner Lou at the novel’s end. Vera is a lawyer who works for the Legal Foundation, which under apartheid helped or tried to help Africans resist expropriation and is now handling the claims of displaced Africans for return of expropriated lands. Bennet, who began as a sculptor and university English lecturer, joined an advertising firm, and in the 1980s founded a company called Promotional Luggage which manufactures and sells upscale suitcases bearing company logos. He did this to provide for his and Vera’s old age, but Promotional Luggage goes bankrupt in the 1990s. Vera had a love affair in the 1960s with a German filmmaker, Otto Aabarbanel – a man she imagines as a Jew (Bennet recognizes his last name as Sephardic), but who turns out to be a Hitler baby, bred as part of a Nazi eugenics project.

The lives of Vera and Bennet are cross-cut with the lives of African friends from the 1950s who have been in exile with the ANC: Didymus and Sibongile Maqomo. They return when the general amnesty is declared (Didymus, a lawyer, has been an important figure in Umkhonto we Sizwe, the ANC guerrilla force, and has been underground in South Africa part of the time), and they bring back with them Mpho, their teenage daughter (they also have older sons who do not appear, but who used to play with Ivan). Sibongile gets involved with the repatriation of exiles and with the ANC women’s movement; Didymus serves the ANC executive in a variety of roles, but is not elected to the National Executive Committee at the party congress; Sibongile is. This places some strain on their marriage, as she is swept more and more fully into public life and he left more and more at home, where he is supposedly writing a history of the ANC in exile. Moreover, it becomes clear that he at one point during the 1970s or ‘80s conducted interrogations, probably involving torture, at the ANC camp for political prisoners or infiltrators in Tanzania: while not someone whom the party disavows, he takes part in a process of self-criticism that may seal off possibilities of a further political career for him.

Vera also has two important connections with African men through her work: with Oupa Sejake and with Zeph Rapulana. Oupa Sejake, a clerk in his 20s at the Legal Foundation who is studying at night to be a lawyer, by novelistic accident moves into the very flat in which Vera conducted her long and passionate affair with Otto Aabarbanel a decade before – an affair to which, with breathtaking parental and heterosexual presumption, Vera attributes her daughter’s lesbianism. Zeph Rapulana, a man in his 50s, meets her in the 1980s as the representative of a group of squatters filing a residency claim and becomes a black capitalist in the 1990s, buying a house in the white suburbs with an annexe Vera rents after she sells her own house. Oupa has an affair with Mpho, Didymus and Sibongile’s daughter, who becomes pregnant and has an abortion that Vera arranges. Bennet’s father has a stroke, comes to stay with Ben and Vera, has another stroke, and dies.
Oupa and Vera are both shot and wounded in a carjacking during a side trip to visit Oupa’s wife and children during a Legal Foundation research tour. Oupa, shot in the chest, dies of septicaemia; Vera, shot in the leg, recovers.

Toward the end of the novel, Ivan’s son Adam, getting in trouble in England after his parents’ divorce, is sent to live with Ben and Vera in South Africa, where Vera successfully warns him off a budding affair with Mpho. Vera is offered, and after some hesitation accepts, a position on the Technical Committee to draft the new South African constitution. At the end of the novel, Bennet Stark has moved to England to live with Ivan; Adam has moved into an apartment of his own in Johannesburg; Vera, without consulting Ben, has sold the family home and moved to Zeph Rapulana’s annexe. Sibongile is poised to become a government minister after the elections. Mpho goes to NYU to study drama.

So much for the plot. It sounds like a soap opera in this kind of summary, but then so does War and Peace: both novels, in fact, foreground characters who enjoy a charismatic closeness to centres of social power and negotiation – in this they differ from Disgrace and indeed from most of Coetzee’s novels, with Elizabeth Costello and Waiting for the Barbarians as partial exceptions. None to Accompany Me reads austere, despite this relative density of event. Since, no doubt like many readers of this essay, I have for many years steadily inscribed “avoid plot summary” in the margins of student papers, I summarize here with particular relish, given that tendentious recounting of plots turns out in fact to be one my favorite critical modes. Now let me try to expound the novel’s allegorical dimension, which is fairly prominent in the novel on my reading of it.

Vera Stark (stark truth – the truth about her own life and the life of South Africa – “Nobody can con Vera” [V 12]) begins in the house she inherits from her divorce from a soldier of the British Empire. She ends in the servants’ quarters of a house owned by a black capitalist. The allegory of a possible trajectory of white South Africans, from inheritors of empire to dependants of black enterprise, is clear enough. The gradual diminution of Vera’s relation with Bennet can also been seen as a kind of allegory of the possibilities and limits of private life, a long-term theme of Gordimer’s. Bennet begins as an artist, a sculptor deeply interested in representing sexual feeling concretely: his triumphs as a sculptor are headless torsos of his wife’s body – torsos which end up as “household gods” of feminine sexuality in his daughter’s lesbian household (V 228). He also works early on as a university teacher of literature. These are both ways of making something public out of love (the first more honourable in the book’s terms than the second). Bennet could never sculpt Vera’s head successfully, nor can he keep up with her life; Vera wants to insist on the diffusion of her life into the public life she is part of and the variety of new relations she has taken on, Bennet

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wants to hold on to what he had, and to serve capitalist mobility (advertising, designer luggage) in order to maintain what he has. Vera’s affectionate dismissal of him is a judgment on decent private life given significance by love (something the novel in general as a form has always been thought to cherish and support): for Vera, as for Gordimer, it is not enough, or does not remain enough, to sustain a life-long course. Is her eye a cold one? Perhaps yes, but at the same time that it makes demands that relatively few of us could be confident we meet, it attractively displays the possibility of a life of multifarious movement and evolving commitment. Few novels I know are so clear and persuasive in such short space about relations between outward engagement and marriage, taking up Bennet and Vera, on one hand, and Didymus and Sibongile, on the other. The Maqomo marriage, which threatens to sink under Didymus’s depression at being passed over by the ANC leadership (“I’m beginning to find it disgusting,” says Sibongile with the terrifying frankness of female conversation in this book [N 132]) is rescued by external difficulties: Didymus is called back from inactivity by Mpho’s unwanted pregnancy and then by the assassination of Chris Hani and the publication of a hit list with Sibongile’s name on it. Even though his role in the new government is less than he would like, he accepts that he has one and soldiers on – literally in uniform as a pallbearer for Hani, and armed as a bodyguard for Sibongile. It seems possible that packing a pistol to protect his wife will reconcile him to life as an historian, oddly enough.

In other ways, the novel allegorizes the vertiginous shifts in perspective on the self and on what their political lives mean in altered contexts which events have made available to South Africans. Vera’s affair with Otto Abarbanel, in which she thinks he is a Jew orphaned in the concentration camps but discovers that he is the child of a Nazi and an Aryan bathroom attendant adopted by Jews after the war, provides an example. In None to Accompany Me, as this minor example hints, adoptive affinities are at least as strong as genetic ones – to put it another way, the novel shows the sexual and familial bond to be less central than the bond of shared social purposes. Moreover, these shared social purposes get expressed partly in dealing with possible or actual babies: for example, Sibongile and Didymus protect their daughter by aborting her unborn child; Annick and Lou affiliate themselves with a new South African future by adopting a Xhosa daughter; the Nazi authorities a generation ago tried to breed good Aryans only to have them adopted and raised by Jewish survivors of the Holocaust. Ben ends up in the house of Ivan, who is probably not his son in genetic terms. And Vera ends up in the annexe of Zeph Rapulana’s house.

The adoptive bond this represents – between adults – is a kind of non-sexual cross-racial partnership that Gordimer seems to be offering as an optimistic possibility in a new social order, also as a meditation on aging and developing beyond the sexual phase of one’s life. Through her growing intimacy with Zeph, Vera realizes both the limitations on the sexual bond and the possibility of new bonds outside sex. Early in the novel, visiting the wounded Rapulana in his squatter encampment after it has been raided by a commando of white farmers – nine killed, fourteen injured – Vera reflects:
To whom could she pose the very *inappropriateness* of any personal preoccupation arising from a situation where all individuality was in dissolution in terror and despair. Not the lover-husband to whom she used to tell – or thought she had – everything. Only to herself ... [F]inally, the bliss of placing the burden of self on the beloved turns out to be undeliverable. The beloved is unknown at any address, a self, unlike a bed, cannot be shared, and cannot be shed. (N 121)

Vera recognizes her alliance with Rapulana as “the beginning of some new capability in her, something in the chemistry of human contact that she was only now ready for”(N 122).

Vera had never before felt – it was more than drawn to – involved in the being of a man to whom she knew no sexual pull. And it was not that she did not find him physically attractive; from the first ... [he] brought her reassurance she had not known she no longer found elsewhere with anyone. It was as if, in the commonplace nature of their continuing contact through the Foundation, they belonged together as a single sex, a reconciliation of all each had experienced, he as a man, she as a woman. (N 123)

As the capitalized word “Foundation” shows in this passage, the language of the novel itself approaches allegory: institutions have names designed for resonance. The ANC is called “the Movement”, with a capital M. Vera works for “the Legal Foundation” with capital L and F and works on the legal foundation of a new South Africa when she serves on the technical committee to draft the new constitution. Sentences like the following underscore the pull toward allegorical generalization: “Now that the Act that put the Idea into practice has been abolished by the beginning of political defeat of that power, the Foundation has not, as might be expected, become redundant” (N 13).

One might then, illustrating the reductive brutality of allegorical interpretation in a way that risks buttressing Attridge’s anti-allegorical stance, summarize the message of *None to Accompany Me* as follows:

South Africans, and especially white South Africans, must find a relation to the national and personal future which does not involve reproducing the relations of the past, even when those relations have (as in the sexual and genetic bonds uniting nuclear families) not in any evident way been wrong in themselves. The heterosexual, genetically united family, like racially homogenous patterns of land ownership, indeed all traditional dependencies with their attendant resentments and hostilities, must be loosened and at times cast off: new links, new forms of association, must be formed. Just as Vera in the final passage of *None to Accompany Me* takes pleasure in using her technical competence to staunch a flood in Zeph’s house, while renouncing any sexual aspect to their relationship, Gordimer seems to signal her joy in using her own novelistic tools in this book to clear ground for a black-led South African future. The novel shows Gordimer’s willingness to be as it were a draftsperson on the Technical Committee for the future. It is
in this sense that *None to Accompany Me* seems a novel full of optimism and satisfaction. The committed political novelist may choose an allegorical mode deliberately. Indeed, if one accepts this way of summarizing the novel as message, Gordimer’s willingness to subjugate a realist’s focus on the particularities of situated individual consciousness to an allegory of collective optimism in itself bespeaks her eagerness to embrace new possibilities.

At the same time, *None to Accompany Me* records (in ways that prefigure *Disgrace*) the violence and vengefulness of this historical passage. Vera and Ben listen to the radio early in the morning:

Some mornings, attacks on farms; a white farmer shot, the wife raped or killed, money and car missing. Taken. ‘Taken’ to mean the motive is robbery; as if robbery has a single meaning in every country at every period. Take cars, take money, take life. These mornings robbery means taking everything you haven’t got from those who appear to have everything: money, a car to sell for money, a way of life with house and land and cattle. Otherwise, why kill as well as rob? Why rape some farmer’s ugly old wife? No violence is more frightening than the violence of revenge, because it is something that what the victim stands for brings upon him. It is seldom retribution for a personal deed, of which innocence can be claimed. The rape has nothing to do with desire; the penis is a gun like the gun held to a head, its discharge is a discharge of bullets. (*N* 110–11)

It is my hope that, if your memories of *Disgrace* are relatively fresh, already you will be noting some general affinities in plot between the two novels. Each features an aging protagonist moving with reflective reluctance away from a life centred on eros and personal relationships toward a life centered on something else. In each, an aging parent sees in a child’s lesbianism a possible reaction to the parent’s heterosexuality. (It should be said that Coetzee, having David Lurie simply wonder on this score – Lucy is “[a]tractive, he is thinking, yet lost to men. Need he reproach himself, or would it have worked out like that anyway?” [*D* 76] – handles the theme a lot more delicately than Gordimer does, perhaps having encountered lesbian reaction to Gordimer’s treatment of it). Each features a new household, emblematic of new South African fates or possibilities, in which the idea of a nuclear family centred on a passionate heterosexual relationship and blood kinship is set aside in favour of a multiracial, partly adoptive family. In Gordimer, the new families are based on elective affinities: Annick and her partner Lou in Cape Town with their Xhosa daughter, and Vera’s comradely tenancy in Zeph’s servants’ quarters in Johannesburg. In Coetzee, the new family is constituted out of mutual protection and opportunism: Petrus proposes to make Lucy his third polygamous wife, to protect her, provide a quasi-father for the mixed-race child who will be born as a result of her rape, and gain legal ownership of her farm, leaving Lucy as a tenant with possession of practically nothing, “like a dog” (*D* 205).

The Zeph-Petrus parallel here is key, because both are figures of black enterprise and uplift whose strategies are only gradually understood by their white associates.
When David Lurie agrees with Lucy’s proposal that he occupy himself on the farm by helping Petrus, David remarks, “Give Petrus a hand. I like that. I like the historical piquancy. Will he give me a wage for my labor, do you think?” (D 77). Both Zeph and Petrus are non-violent, at times comforting, yet appropriative figures; both are people whose progress from dispossession to possession can, guardedly, be celebrated as what the New South Africa is supposed to be all about. Zeph gains membership on the boards of major Johannesburg companies and becomes a national economic advisor, while Petrus gains part-ownership of a small farm in the Eastern Cape, so if Coetzee is revising Zeph Rapulana he is also generalizing an elite case which is in many ways unrepresentative because so spectacular – schoolmaster-activist from rural location becomes urbane plutocrat shaping economic policy – into what could realistically be hoped to become a relatively common phenomenon: rural labourer/tenant becomes landholder and small-scale farmer, gains access to agricultural technology, and begins to acquire capital. And there are a number of passages in Disgrace where Coetzee seems to be simply heeding and exploring a concrete instance of Vera Stark’s claim that land possession and land redistribution must be the key issues under a new regime.

Petrus has borrowed a tractor, from where he has no idea, to which he has coupled the old rotary plough that has lain rusting behind the stable since before Lucy’s time. In a matter of hours he has ploughed the whole of his land. All very swift and businesslike; all very unlike Africa. In olden times, that is to say ten years ago, it would have taken him days with a hand-plough and oxen. (D 151)

But in another way Petrus’s rise also parallels Zeph’s: in its awareness of the utility of threats and instances of racial violence. Here Coetzee has taken a fairly minor and fairly benign moment in Gordimer’s novel and turned it into something large (perhaps taking a hint from Gordimer’s discussion of rape, vengeance, and redistribution in the passage I quoted above). Relatively early in None to Accompany Me, Vera meets Zeph in a confrontation with the Afrikaner farmer who plans to make a profit from the thousands of black squatters living on one of his fields by getting the government to declare it a rural location and charge rent. Odendaal contemptuously dismisses Vera, speaking a mixture of Afrikaans and English. Zeph replies softly in Afrikaans: “Meneer Odendaal, don’t be afraid. We won’t harm you. Not you or your wife and children” (N 25). Vera thinks first of “the gift of the squatter leader’s tolerance, forgiveness – whichever it was – was something the farmer didn’t deserve” (N 26). Only later does she realize that

she had not heard them aight on the stoep that day. The farmer heard [the three statements] and Rapulana the Odensville man heard them the way she did not, they understood what was being said. The words of tolerance and forgiveness so strangely coming from the Odensville squatter dweller, shaming her for the crude aggression of the farmer, were not tolerance and forgiveness but a threat. Remember, Meneer Odendaal, we are thousands on Portion 19, our Odensville.
We are there across the veld from you, every night. You have dogs, you have a gun, but we are thousands, and we can come across the veld to this house, this house where you and your wife and your children are asleep, and, as you said about us if we don’t go from Portion 19, that’ll be your funeral. (N 31–2)

In Disgrace Lucy has dogs, she has a gun, and her rapists use her gun to kill her dogs. Petrus, before and after the incident, which David comes to regard as in some way happening with Petrus’s permission – particularly when it emerges that one of the rapists is Petrus’s second wife’s younger brother – has insisted that, though times are dangerous, Lucy is safe with him. At the end of the novel, Petrus offers Lucy his protection in a deliberately patriarchal conversation with David, the father whose incapacity to protect Lucy in the new South Africa has been so graphically demonstrated in her rape:

‘I will marry.’
‘You will marry whom?’
‘I will marry Lucy.’

He cannot believe his ears...

‘You will marry Lucy,’ he says carefully. ‘Explain to me what you mean. No, wait, rather don’t explain. This is not something I want to hear. This is not how we do things.’

_We_: he is on the point of saying, _We Westerners._

‘Yes, I can see, I can see,’ says Petrus. He is positively chuckling. ‘But I tell you, then you tell Lucy. Then it is over, all this badness.’

‘Lucy does not want to marry. Does not want to marry a man. It is not an option she will consider. I can’t make myself clearer than that. She wants to live her own life.’

‘Yes, I know,’ says Petrus. And perhaps he does indeed know. He would be a fool to underestimate Petrus. ‘But here,’ says Petrus, ‘it is dangerous, too dangerous. A woman must be marry.’ (D 202)

To summarize, then. As I read it, None to Accompany Me suggests allegorically that the lifting of apartheid may, and perhaps needs to, promote new kinds of adoptive social relationship, involving new patterns of living and child-rearing, and new patterns of work. In this transformation, people like Vera and Zeph make use of and in a way exploit a violence they individually deplore. Gordimer locates hope specifically in the white lesbian raising a black child and in the white woman locating herself as a tenant of the newly successful black man. Coetzee, I believe, noticed this, and something very close to the same pattern returns, uncannily transformed, in precisely that aspect of Disgrace that readers find most politically disturbing: the independent lesbian Lucy’s decision that perhaps it is her historical duty to accept, dog-like, her rape by black men and the increasingly strange familial arrangement that develops as she, pregnant after the rape, is assimilated.
into the growing Petrus household as a bywoner/concubine/wife/daughter and her biological father David is reduced to the status of a visitor.

It is typical, too, of the relations between the novels that David Lurie in *Disgrace* cannot rest with *None to Accompany Me*’s claim that the rape of white women on farms by black men unknown to them is simply revenge, that “the penis is a gun like the gun held to the head, its discharge is a discharge of bullets” (*N 111*). In what might be a somewhat more artful version of Gordimer’s bald paragraph, David meditates on Lucy’s belief that “they do rape ... They see me as owing something. They see themselves as debt collectors, tax collectors” (*D 158*).

*They do rape.* He thinks of the three visitors driving away in the not-too-old Toyota, the back seat piled with household goods, their penises, their weapons, tucked warm and satisfied between their legs – *purring* is the word that comes to him. They must have had every reason to be pleased with their afternoon’s work; they must have felt happy in their vocation. (*D 159*)

The “not-too-old Toyota” might even be thought to echo Gordimer’s harsh question “why rape some farmer’s ugly old wife”: Lucy, too, is not young but is “not-too-old”.

But, again, as David continues to think of the issue after he sees Melanie acting at the Dock Theatre, revisits his own history of sexual encounters, and learns of Lucy’s pregnancy, he revises his view: “They were not raping, they were mating” (*D 199*). *Disgrace* insists, in contrast to *None to Accompany Me*, on the emotional importance of biological parenthood.

Let me sketch, before closing, a couple of further ways, somewhat less specific perhaps, in which *Disgrace* seems to me to respond with guarded pessimism to the optimism of *None to Accompany Me*. Allegorically, the fate of David Lurie is a far more graphic reminder than that of Bennet Stark that the new South Africa is no country for old white men (in a passage I quote below, David paraphrases Yeats’s “Sailing to Byzantium,” which begins “That is no country for old men”). David receives public disgrace for the kind of crime white men have always gotten away with – exploiting his cultural authority to have sex with a younger darker woman. At the same time, the archetypally over-punished colonial crime, the rape of a white woman by black men, goes unpunished. Now the crimes, failures, uglinesses of white men will be held to a most strict account, while the time for leniency for the crimes of blacks has arrived. Some of the pathos, and some of the power to disturb, in *Disgrace* stems from the uncomfortable awareness of readers that they come to care about David even as they recognize the wrongness of what he has done: that is, I think, one effect of the opening Cape Town segment of *Disgrace*. But throughout, Coetzee’s treatment of the sexual offers a programmatic contrast to the relative buoyancy and grace with which Vera moves aside from and frees herself from the sexual, as opposed to the very explicit disgrace with which David Lurie makes the same transition. As I have suggested, David offers an uncanny revision of *None to Accompany Me*’s portrait of Bennet, the man committed to
love who cannot shed that commitment as times change, whose sensibility is shaped by literature and art rather than politics, who cannot move with grace into a post-erotic existence. And, of course, Lurie’s relation to his creator resembles Vera’s to hers: both characters have roughly their authors’ lifespans and aspects of their authors’ lives without the novel-writing. This resemblance and others come into focus if we look at the last page of None to Accompany Me alongside Disgrace. The end of None to Accompany Me, like its beginning, shows us that in the rest of the rather drably written novel Gordimer has set aside rather than lost her capacity for extraordinarily detailed and evocative realist description – for writing, in Attridge’s terms, that calls for literal reading:

One winter night in that year a pipe burst, flooding outside Vera’s annexe, and she put her leather jacket over pyjamas and went to turn off the main water control in the yard. The tap was tight with chlorine deposits and would not budge in hands that became clumsy with cold. She quietly entered the house. Vera always had access, with a second set of keys Zeph had given her; she kept an eye on the house while he was away on business trips or spent a few days with his family in Odenville.

So far, we notice again how Vera has taken on many of the roles of the trusted servant (in South African tradition, a “trust” that crosses racial lines, has clear limits, and plays a suspect role in mitigating a general racist order – these being issues Gordimer ventilates thoroughly in July’s People). But there is also a gendered aspect to this relation, as the passage continues:

The keys were also a precaution Zeph insisted on for her safety; if anything or anyone threatened her, a woman alone, she could come to him. The disposition of rooms in his house was familiar under her hands in the dark. She would not disturb him by turning on lights. She was making her way without a creak of floor-boards or any contact with objects to the cupboard in the passage between his bedroom and the bathroom where she knew she would find pliers.

Without any awareness of a shape darker than the darkness she came in contact with a warm soft body.

Breathing, heartbeats.

Once she had picked up an injured bird and felt a living substance like that.

Through her open jacket this one was against her, breasts against breasts, belly against belly; each was afraid to draw away because this would confirm to the other that there really had been a presence, not an illusion out of the old unknown of darkness that takes over even in the protection of a locked house. Vera was conscious of the metal tool in her hand, as if she really were some intruder ready to strike. For a few seconds, maybe, she and the girl were tenderly fused in the sap-scent of semen that came from her. Then Vera backed away, and
the girl turned and ran on bare feet to his bedroom where the unlatched door let her return without a sound. (N 322–3)

Vera the tenant enters the master’s house in the dark to borrow a tool. She encounters, partly fuses with, another female body, nameless, headless, all breasts and belly and smells of sex. Vera here encounters the version of her past self, the lesbian household god, that Bennet sculpted, perfumed by the sexual relation with Zeph Rapulana that a younger, not yet post-sexual Vera might well have had. The new Vera fuses momentarily with the old Vera. But the new Vera now has a purpose that trumps, and in this moment literally separates itself from, sex: to handle a flood caused by a burst container. There is potential allegory here for her work with the Technical Commission, as well as the obvious relation to her move away from sexual life with Bennet and Otto to her essentially political adoptive relation with Zeph. And after she exits the house she appears, in the book’s final sentences, to celebrate her new freedom:

Vera came out into the biting ebony-blue of winter air as if she dived into the delicious shock of it. She turned off the tap with the satisfaction of a woman performing a workman-like task. Instead of at once entering her annex she went into the garden, the jacket zipped closed over live warmth. Cold seared her lips and eyelids; frosted the arrangement of two chairs and table; everything stripped. Not a leaf on the scoured smooth limbs of the trees, and the bushes like tangled wire; dried palm fronds stiff as her fingers. A thick trail of smashed ice crackling light, stars blinded her as she let her head dip back; under the swing of the sky she stood, feet planted, on the axis of the night world. Vera walked there, for a while. And then took up her way, breath scrolling out, a signature behind her. (N 323–4)

What is her profit from this encounter? It sounds like exhilaration: “she came out into the biting ebony-blue … as if she dived into the delicious shock of it”. She seems exhilarated by her own age, her dry wintry freedom from the sap of sexuality which hangs on the girl, with the leafless trees and dried fronds “stiff as her fingers”. It is also a sense of intimacy with the underlying forms and essences, rather than the lushelessness and growth points, of her world.

David Lurie’s disengagement from and recollection of his own erotic past is similar in structure but different in mood, governed as so much is in Disgrace by David’s literariness. He sees himself as a Yeats without a Byzantium to sail to: “He sighs. The young in one another’s arms, heedless, engrossed in the sensual music. No country, this, for old men. He seems to be spending a lot of time sighing. Regret: a regrettable note on which to go out” (D 190). But immediately the sight of Melanie on stage sparks a moment of erotic vision for David, “images of women he has known on two continents … Like leaves blown on the wind, pell-mell, they pass before him. A fair field full of folk: hundreds of lives all tangled with his” (D 192). The explicit quotation from Langland, suggesting that life is a pilgrimage
seeking grace, follows the covert quotation from the Paolo and Francesco episode in Dante, suggesting that erotic preoccupation is a damnable error. But David is grateful: "Like a flower blooming in his breast, his heart floods with thankfulness" (D 192). Then spitballs begin to hit him in the back of the head, and Melanie’s boyfriend comes bearing a repetition of the same message David gave himself on the previous page via Yeats: "‘Find yourself another life, prof. Believe me’" (D 194).

One could expand on the ways literary tradition functions in this section. "Until two years ago the Dock Theatre was a cold storage plant where the carcasses of pigs and oxen hung waiting to be transported across the seas" (D 190–91). So David has this encounter in a converted afterworld. He wishes to see in it an affirmation of lost passion, but Melanie does not oblige, and, if Ryan is right, Melanie would turn away from him as the shade of Dido turns away from Aeneas in his underworld visit, just as the unembraceable shades of David’s past lovers recall Odysseus’s vain attempt to clasp his mother’s shade in the Odyssey. Rosalind misremembers Lucy’s ex-lover Helen’s name as Grace – a fascinating fact that Attridge makes much of; David is unable to see in Helen, "a large, sad-looking woman with a deep voice and bad skin" (D 60), a proper object of affection or of sexual desire for Lucy. He is, of course, utterly revolted by Pollux, Petrus’s mentally defective brother-in-law, one of the three men who rape Lucy. But in classical myth Helen was the daughter of Zeus and Leda, the sister of the Dioscuri, Castor and Pollux, and while David cannot see grace in either, Lucy has obviously found grace in Helen and plans to accept her kinship with Pollux. These are literary allusions David does not seem to see, attentive as he is in general to literary allusion. But Coetzee surely intends us to think about them, and such thought will inevitably tend toward allegory, especially if we continue to pursue it (as in general I have been) along lines suggested by similarities between Disgrace and None to Accompany Me.

One might go further along these lines. Though David is himself a fount of literary allusion and himself a would-be allusive artist, there are zones of literary allusion in the novel unconnected with David’s consciousness – for instance, the rich enigmatic evocation of books 24 of the Iliad and the Odyssey in the concluding chapter 24 of Disgrace. There David attends to the death and burial of Driepoot, the twenty-fourth dog to be sacrificed, having visited his daughter in a field of flowers, at first unseen by her, and reflected on life as a visiting grandfather, and having at the beginning of the chapter attempted to summon the frustrated shade of Teresa by his art. In Odyssey 24 the psychopomp Hermes leads the souls of the slaughtered suitors to the underworld, where the shades of Agamemnon and Achilles discuss the difficulties of accepting death when leaving duties of violent revenge unfulfilled; in the final panel of Odyssey 24 Laertes Odysseus and Telemachus confront the suitors’ relatives as three generations united. Petrus is Lucy’s suitor; he encroaches on her house; David, unlike Odysseus, cannot expel him or even expel Pollux (though he does violently attack Pollux); at the end David settles for grandfatherly visitation toward Lucy, the evocation of an undignified and forgotten passion in his Byron chamber opera, and dignified death
and burial for dogs in what has become his central participation in new South African political life. In *Iliad* 24, aged Priam, led by Hermes, comes to ransom the corpse of Hector from Achilles, who has attempted to dishonour it and prevent its decent burial. In the course of their conversation Priam kisses and weeps over the hands of Achilles, saying

> “Respect the gods, Achilles,
> Think of your own father, and pity me.
> I am more pitiable. I have borne what no man
> Who has walked this earth has ever yet borne.
> I have kissed the hand of the man who killed my son.” (24:539–543)

Driepoot, in David’s arms, going toward the operating table, “sniffs [David’s] face, licks his cheeks, his lips, his ears” (*D* 220). Like Achilles, then, David accepts the caress of the being to whom he brings destruction; like Priam, he will deal decently with a corpse that others would dishonour – something David projects before coming to the decision that this must be Driepoot’s day:

> He can save the young dog, if he wishes, for another week. But a time must come, it cannot be evaded, when he will have to bring him to Bev Shaw in her operating room (perhaps he will carry him in his arms, perhaps he will do that for him) and caress him and brush back the fur so that the needle can find the vein, and whisper to him and support him in the moment when, bewilderingly, his legs buckle; and then, when the soul is out, fold him up and pack him away in his bag, and the next day wheel the bag into the flames and see that it is burnt, burnt up. (*D* 219–20).

Achilles lifts Hector’s body onto the wagon; Priam, led again by Hermes, wheels it back to Troy; and on the tenth day of the armistice Achilles grants, Hector is burnt: “Hector’s brothers and friends collected / His white bones” (24: 849–50). While these literary connections are less direct than many that I and others in this volume have pointed out, they strike me as real; moreover, they strike me as exemplary of the mysteriousness of Coetzee’s art. Is he mocking David, or himself, by offering in his chapter 24 diminished re-enactments of the ends of the original epic narratives in the history of Western literature? I do not think so, though I can see that a possible allegorical reading could be present in these re-enactments as part of lacerating self-irony. Rather, I would say that *Disgrace*, like *None to Accompany Me*, has undertaken a somewhat epic task, and that these hints toward Homer express both homage and recognition of a kind of kinship. Sheila Murnaghan, introducing *The Iliad*, comments that epic “recounts events with far-reaching historical significance, sums up the values and achievements of an entire

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culture, and documents the fullness and variety of the world.” One might say that None to Accompany Me is Odyssey-like in its presentation of a transformed home and family marking the successful passage through a traumatic historical transition, while Disgrace is Iliad-like in closing on a note of decency about burial amid a holocaust of death and destruction and a recognition of the necessity of loss. But this is the kind of allegorical reading that I think Attridge is right to warn us against: a kind of whistling in the literary dark. It would be better to say that, for me, the literary event in chapter 24 of Disgrace involves recognizing that books 24 of the Iliad and the Odyssey are somewhere in the startling mix of responses evoked by pregnant Lucy amid her field of flowers, forsaken Teresa crying for her Byron, delighted Driepoot licking David while being carried towards the needle.

Disgrace is full of this kind of ironic movement, suggesting allegorical possibility but leaving the reader unsure how (or whether) to proceed with an allegorical reading. This feature of the novel enforces a question that, I am suggesting, Coetzee’s reading of None to Accompany Me might plausibly have raised for him as a provocation: the question whether to read one’s own experience in allegorical terms. “For a man of his age,” the novel begins, then continues “fifty-two, divorced, he has, to his mind, solved the problem of sex rather well” (D 1). Like “it is a truth universally acknowledged”, the beginning of this opening sentence seems headed toward something more general and sweeping than where it actually goes. But as the novel continues, David Lurie turns out to be, in many ways, a self-conscious, even self-dramatizing representative of an age, his age, which is no longer the age he can fittingly inhabit. A romanticist in a communication department. A libertine under a moralizing regime. His conversation with Lucy about his affair with Melanie Isaacs illustrates Lurie’s tendency toward this kind of reading of his actions, and also Lurie’s awareness that seeing oneself as standing for something larger than oneself can be dangerous:

‘These are puritanical times. Private life is public business. Prurience is respectable, prurience and sentiment. They wanted a spectacle: breast-beating, remorse, tears if possible. A TV show, in fact. I wouldn’t oblige.’

He was going to add, ‘The truth is, they wanted me castrated,’ but he cannot say the words, not to his daughter. In fact, now that he hears it through another’s ears, his whole tirade sounds melodramatic, excessive. (D 66)

The same sort of thing happens when he and Lucy discuss the later, in some ways parallel crime committed by the three African men who rape Lucy, burn David, and steal his car (parallel in that one of the sexual encounters Lurie has with Melanie involves his pushing his way into her flat and forcing himself upon her). Lucy comments, “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”

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Lucy repeatedly cautions David against trying to make her life mean something more than what it is, just a life in a particular place under particular conditions — the kind of life, *Disgrace* suggests, that animals live. We are more than animals in that we live in a construction of allegorical understandings of ourselves, but, *Disgrace* in part suggests, coming near death should mean leaving that construction, accepting its ramshackle contingency and indignity, submitting ourselves to a lack of control, not the wintry mastery Gordimer attributes to Vera at the end of *None to Accompany Me*.

In making a case for these similarities between these two novels as intentional revisions by Coetzee, I enter on fairly delicate ground. Without Coetzee’s own commentary, which we are unlikely ever to get, it would be hard to be sure, and presumptuous to claim, that he was thinking about Gordimer’s work when he wrote his own. Gordimer herself does not seem aware of similarities to her own work in *Disgrace*, or at least does not mention such similarities in the twofold reaction to *Disgrace* that Ronald Suresh Roberts quotes in his deauthorized biography, *No Cold Kitchen*. After *Disgrace* was published, she wrote to Coetzee describing David Lurie as “a wholly truthful, non-judgmental (you leave that to the reader) intuition of the present time”. Six months later, however, she wrote to Philip Roth, praising his novel *The Human Stain* for its evocation of passion and contrasting it to *Disgrace*: in *Disgrace*, “this elegantly and powerfully written novel, there is no deep feeling (except, maybe, ... self-disgust) no love, until there is the need to put down a stray dog, the feeling for which is the sole life-affirmative emotion for anyone or anything in the professor”. Obviously the way I have described relations between the two novels explains why Gordimer might not like *Disgrace*, even if she did not see those relations herself. *Disgrace* is a very different sort of novel from *None to Accompany Me*, and acceptance of the case I am making for a connection between the two works should not entail a diminution of either (in the way, say, a comparative reading of André Brink’s fine novel *Rumours of Rain* alongside Gordimer’s great novel *The Conservationist* may incline one to think slightly less of the former). Yet it is very tempting to approach some of the plot elements in *Disgrace* that lend themselves to political allegorization as revisionary allusions to allegorical elements of *None to Accompany Me*, a book that embraces its own political message-bearing. This would not rob these elements of *Disgrace*,

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9 Ronald Suresh Roberts, *No Cold Kitchen: A Biography of Nadine Gordimer* (Johannesburg: STE, 2005), 550–51. The ellipsis is Roberts’s. Given the extremely hostile attitude Roberts takes toward Gordimer by this point in the biography, it seems possible that what is left out might mitigate the conclusion he wishes to draw, which is that Gordimer “addressed Coetzee with forked tongue” (551). Surely, however, voicing to Coetzee the view that his book is a profound statement on the times and voicing to Roth that it strikes her as (by comparison with *The Human Stain*) loveless does not mark Gordimer as a snake or a hypocrite. Given that, as I have been arguing, *Disgrace* rather systematically offers a chilly minimalist reprise of plot elements of *None to Accompany Me*, one can understand why Gordimer would find the novel a cold “intuition of the present time”.
I think, of the force as literary event they have for me – and, I believe, for many other readers – but it would create another layer of complexity to the life/art juxtapositions that are so lively and so strange in Disgrace. One of the strangest and deepest aspects of the end of Disgrace – David’s characteristically wry and literary acceptance of the role of transracial grandfather to the child to be raised by Lucy as Petrus’s bywoner – is both deeply idiosyncratic and original and also a revisionary rewriting of an admired rival’s allegorically prophetic optimism. One could summarize the interaction I am speculating about allegorically as an exchange of famous literary aphorisms, in which Gordimer quotes Lawrence: “The novel can teach us how to live”; and Coetzee paraphrases Keats on Milton: “life to her is death to me”. But in this case reading literally is a better idea than reading allegorically, particularly since Coetzee’s way of evoking Gordimer’s novel in no way dismisses the validity of Gordimer’s projections for the South African future in hinting that they may be fraught with a lot of pain. Recognizing None to Accompany Me as a relevant subtext in Disgrace, and treating it as a subtext that stands for self-confident self-allegorization and optimistic political prophecy, adds one more layer of literary complexity to Coetzee’s strange and beautiful work.
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