

## 8: Clerk in a Post-Religious Age: Reading Lurie's Remnant Romantic Temperament in *Disgrace*

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NO, THIS CHRONICLE OF A FALL is not written to enlighten. Nor is Schadenfreude sufficient to compel a modern reader's descent into the unraveling life of a middle-aged man who will show little inclination to stave off his own disgrace nor much ability to mend its collateral effects — a young woman, his student and his lover, chief among the dire complications. Instead, J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* draws us into unyielding witness of a man's pathetic fall via Coetzee's unwavering gaze.<sup>1</sup> Within this perspective David Lurie is repeatedly exposed: as a professor of Romantic literature marooned in a post-Romantic age — then as an exile from even that reconstituted academy; as a pale intellect in harsh rural post-apartheid South Africa; as a father consigned to the role of roommate; as an amateur composing opera on a banjo. In every case, Lurie presents a quaint and lonely figure who is set upon a vast Modern plain — and who holds little hope of rescue or even self-preservation. At times the prospect is unbearable. I would rather close the covers of the book on him than face an exposed and vacant Lurie dangling the props of Romanticism — its poetry, its promises of transcendence — as lures in his parlor seductions. I would much rather hear his bloodied confession confirm my prejudices than watch him defend the contents of his heart at the secular tribunal assembled to judge his indiscretion.

But *Disgrace* itself operates not in judgment but in inquiry. To conduct its inquiry the book follows a man emerging late from the time capsule of apartheid, dragging his European literatures and colonial proclivities into a post-apocalyptic landscape of upheaved cultural realities: post-apartheid, post-structural, post-Romantic, post-modern. Seen as a story of this man responding to this predicament by modulating between his Romantic ideals and his world of arranged efficiencies, *Disgrace* seems fraught with opposing questions. Is Romanticism under critique for its self-delusion? Or is the post-Romantic world under critique for its inability to find that “glimpse of the invisible” which Lurie still seeks (22)? Coming to terms with fallen ideals, particularly the Romantic, may seem the old news of Modernist literature, yet *Disgrace* asks us to consider this as a

persistent postmodern predicament.<sup>2</sup> Lurie's thickened skin and ironic distance — by which he first shrugs off archaic pursuits of transcendence like love or atonement — may align him in the pews of common dissent that line our present age of doubt. But even in his rigidity and refusal, his temperament, which he professes to be “fixed,” still moves occasionally to seek a transcendent light, only to have his refusal of ideals harden again around him (2). If we track the core of his disgrace into a fallen Romanticism and witness it most profoundly in his failing romance with his student Melanie Isaacs — as I intend to do — then we are also likely to locate, amid the ruins of this temperament, Lurie's remnant Romantic belief that there is more to this world than petty pleasures and more to it than earthly marks of success (or failure). This news flickers only briefly into his present view, and when the flame dwindles he proceeds freely (and too often immorally). In navigating Lurie's troubled descent and questioning his attempts to right himself, *Disgrace* takes seriously the dilemmas of a post-religious age. It asks what gestures — if any — are sufficient or legitimate strokes of meaning; and it shows, via a most disgraced citizen, the persistent and desperate human impulse to make such gestures.

In charting David Lurie's unwillingness to fully yield his collapsed idealism to cynicism, Coetzee provides a means to consider an alternative to the flattening skepticism that remains a primary intellectual posture of the post-colonial age. To achieve this alternative David Lurie will not undergo a dramatic transformation: he will not retreat to atavistic Romantic ideals nor will his final gesture of “offering up” the lame dog constitute an emblem of some new order. Rather, viewed through the lens of his Romantic temperament, the figure of David Lurie — still no less pathetic as his heart leaps up toward Melanie — becomes tinged with trouble and tragedy. In Wordsworthian terms that might still describe a contemporary fallen world, Lurie at his lowest with Melanie inhabits that complex state of dejection where to inhabit loss means to be near an upward presence of hope, however brief and where any glimpse of invisibility is fleeting and suspect. Or, as Wordsworth concludes his “Elegiac Stanzas,” claiming the uncomfortable complexity that Lurie could also proclaim: “not without hope we suffer and we mourn” (60).

Indeed, transformation is not an arc that Coetzee would ever allow. At his hands any clear lines of genre or history fissure into intricacies where a character will act on competing motives and react contradictorily. Yet significantly, much debate on the novel critiques the extent to which this is a narrative of *Bildung*, and this debate tends to assume that the novel follows contours of development even though the novel's many readers will follow the premise of “education” in the book to starkly different conclusions.<sup>3</sup> In tracking change in this way, most commentators at least implicitly acknowledge the bipartite structure of the book: from urban Cape Town to the rural Eastern Cape; from Lurie's marginally intact professional life before

the Board of Inquiry to his professional disgrace after; from his seductions and transgressions with Melanie, which are racially marked and likely conclude in rape,<sup>4</sup> to the aggressions and rape which he and his daughter Lucy later suffer on the farm. In taking seriously the novel's depiction of David Lurie as a Romantic, I, too, will see the book as a journey (a romance) and Lurie as a changed character through it — but his trajectory will be indefinite and his change far from unambiguous.<sup>5</sup> My primary interest will be the start of this journey and particularly the circumlocutions of his relationship with Melanie which extend into the latter part of the book. Through this focus I'll have the means to present a complex and unruly David Lurie, a man finally arriving in a troubled place of fallen ideals and persistent dreams.<sup>6</sup>

Part one introduces David Lurie in all his duplicities. We witness his peculiarly willful ability to moderate his experiences into discrete compartments, a practice that runs simultaneously with and counter to his remnant Romantic desires for transcendence and bliss. For instance, the opening paragraph orchestrates Lurie's perennial "pleasant-smelling and softly lit" romantic rendezvous at the regal-sounding Windsor Mansions where his contracted mate, Soraya, is perfectly placed, "waiting for him at the door," and their commerce is afforded the highest recommendation: "they make love" (1). But this description of the encounter cuts both ways when necessarily read in the context of the novel's first line: "For a man of his age, fifty-two, divorced, he has, to his mind, solved the problem of sex rather well."<sup>7</sup> Having assigned this logic to Lurie and "his mind," the deadening impact of this initial declaration suffuses the claimed tranquility that follows. Framed between "the problem of sex" and "mak[ing] love" this first paragraph initiates the novel's ambivalence. Their tryst includes all the trappings of romance, including the appropriate sensuous atmosphere and script of vacancy and fulfillment ("Have you missed me?" she asks; "I miss you all the time," he replies), but when cast as the solution to a "problem," these trappings arrange as the simulacra of romance (2). Indeed, these scenes may be more remarkable for what they show Lurie to be missing than for what they show him to contain.

Love is also glimpsed only through the cracks of this presentation of the affair (and often suggested by Lurie's refinements of what this *isn't* with Soraya), and love remains a conception which he continues to recognize and to sanctify as a higher ideal, even when it is absent. So his self-correction that this "may not be love" saves "love" from his present inauthenticities. Yet if this is a sign that he has not calcified to cynicism, he soon initiates a complicated inquiry in which he will dissect the body of non-love in a calculation that will ultimately serve his self-deception. Lurie decides that if this is not love then his experience may be "at least its cousin," namely "affection" (2). For Lurie, affection seems to be rooted in a surfeit of pleasure and when this pleasure is reciprocal, a relationship

ascends to “affinity” (3). And as moderator his calculations with his escort fail to take into account (even though he acknowledges that “no doubt with other men she becomes another woman”) how all of Soraya’s own actions are calculated to respond to him. What he calls “affinity” is the nature of the transaction of the prostitute. He gets what he pays for and then elevates it to an epistemology of a new kind of bliss. In a blissful afternoon with an escort, he pockets the sublime like a souvenir, a purchased postcard of Mont Blanc.

In constraining the vast and turbulent realm of human relationships into a “problem” that he has “solved” with arranged afternoons, Lurie has parceled out affection as a portion of love, a portion which seems to offer a low and reachable horizon. So even if love evades his mastery he has arranged the world so that he can at least complete one of its minor transactions. Thus, even as the catastrophes of the novel unfold, Lurie is shown to be a man who actively creates his life *within* a set of defined lines — “he lives within his income, within his temperament, within his emotional means” (2). If this were all there was to Lurie we likely wouldn’t give him much more thought. Even written into the charged cultural and political landscape of the late twentieth century, a merely low-horizoned and manipulative Lurie would be little more than a traumatized artifact of the past. But this man still looks upward, still aspires, still holds some expectation of the heights. And his upward vision is not mere nostalgia — Coetzee promises to open it up into a visionary light.

So the guidance of temperament need not be rigid even if it is “fixed.” If the dictum, “follow your temperament” charges Lurie’s life, he is careful not to ascribe it the level of “a philosophy,” but rather, he will forward this as “a rule, like the Rule of St Benedict” (2). In adopting a rule rather than a philosophy here Lurie minimizes its jurisdiction over him. And in opting for a comparison to the Rule, Lurie does not necessarily align himself with the regimen of monks, but he evokes St Benedict’s strategy by which laymen, too, might live a life according to the Gospels, a social life of work and prayer, a life more moderate than ascetic. That a life of “moderate bliss” with prostitutes — and with faculty wives, department secretaries — might be at all consummate with St Benedict’s moderation is among the several moments of slapstick flatly observed by the novel. Yet the irony also reveals Lurie’s troublesome self-positioning: he wants to ascribe limits to his life; at the same time the novel hints that such a life might still afford contact with God.

But Lurie is more likely to conduct his worship in the classroom than in church; and Wordsworth is more his saint than Benedict. So the hobbled vision quest he conducts with Soraya on Thursday afternoons will be better understood in terms of how it remarkably maps to his often truncated visionary pursuits in teaching Romantic literature, an avocation which Lurie would like to equate to a kind of ministry. With its calls for

work, material self-denial, and daily prayer, the Rule of St Benedict instills diffidence by submitting a parishioner to a consistent recognition of his place beneath a higher power. David Lurie credits his work as a teacher with similar correction. He believes that his teaching “teaches him humility, brings it home to him who he is in the world” (5). Moreover, the scholarship which still forms “the core of him” and which can still bring him closest to ecstasy is Wordsworth’s chronicle of The Poet humbled beneath the sublime. “For as long as he can remember,” he admits, “the harmonies of *The Prelude* have echoed within him” (15). Yet lately David Lurie’s full-blown Romantic temperament is largely under duress because the re-forming world finds little space for visionary pursuits. His home institution has been constrained from its previous liberal identity of Cape Town University College to become the procedural Cape Technical University. At CTU he teaches within the gutted interior of the former academy as a result of South Africa’s “great rationalization,” which dismantled the department of Classics and Modern Languages and left him an adjunct professor teaching “communication skills” (4). Opting for necessity over idealism, a docile, protected, and aging Lurie accepts the change and patiently “earns his living” according to this technical curriculum. He adapts — too easily it seems. He adapts in a way that shows neither conviction toward the new order nor any fighting commitment toward older ideals. Were this, again, our final depiction of David Lurie — without future vision or even a whiff of nostalgia for the old ideals — his merely moderate willingness would seal our distaste and assure our disinterest in him.

Yet what compels about *Disgrace* is its refusal to be contained. Much as we might want to do so, David Lurie cannot be dismissed because this would be our own act of containment, a participation in one of the epistemologies the book critiques. The state of disgrace, the book contends — even this early and rather benign sort of nostalgic pedagogical idealism — has no palliative. Rather, disgrace forms a postmodern pathology, a severe and persistent discomfort as experienced by Lurie in his painful betweenness: on the one hand too skeptical and too aware of the world as construct, and on the other hand, desperately in search of the world’s secrets, for flashes of its design. Some sparks of revelation yet leap, briefly, in front of Lurie. Yes, his contempt for the tenets of his newly assigned field of Communications zeroes in on a “preposterous” statement in a departmental handbook which ascribes language the quotidian duties of “communicat[ing] our thoughts, feelings, and intentions to each other.” But Lurie counters this with a theory of language that is more transcendent, if also more abject. For him “the origins of speech lie in song, and the origins of song in the need to fill out with sound the overlarge and rather empty human soul” (4). Unfortunately, this opinion Lurie “does not air,” as his notion of a mechanistic temperament seems to have trumped the

presumption of a soul. Or, if he does allow the possibility of a soul, his Romantic aspirations to fill it lie collapsed.

If Lurie does not assert the worth of song within the politics of his department, there are some signs of his faith and his vision — even evidence of this teacher's past glory — within the classroom when he lectures on the Romantic poets. One Wednesday he is reciting from Book VI of *The Prelude*, the poet finally coming upon Mont Blanc only to face the disappointment of the actual sight of the mountain:

From a bare ridge we also first beheld  
Unveiled the summit of Mont Blanc, and grieved  
To have a soulless image on the eye  
That had usurped upon a living thought  
That never more could be. (1850: VI.523–529)

For Lurie, the profundity of the Mont Blanc moment turns on the recognition of an unusual verb form. “Usurped upon,” the imperfective, meaning “to intrude or encroach upon,” an action hinting toward but not yet reaching the complete, perfective usurpation of imagined idea by sense image; and this, Lurie exalts to his class, “is one of the deeper themes in the Alps sequence” (22–23). This Wordsworthian theme seems easily to be a Lurian theme as well. Although details of the low slopes of Lurie's life are sketchy, we meet him on the far side of several completed ascents, each of which has left a palpable grief upon this traveler. We can imagine that as a young scholar Lurie once stood like Wordsworth in the valleys, out of view of the summits of the alps of intellectual discourse, yet still their imagined “mighty forms, seizing a youthful fancy, / Had given a charter to irregular hopes” (1850: VI.334–5). But after early hope that his criticism, including one “critical opus” on *Wordsworth and the Burden of the Past*, might reconcile, like Wordsworth, “the truth of young and old” (1850: VI.476), Lurie has instead been wearied by the failure of this work to elicit “a stir or even a ripple” among fellow scholars, and he has grown “tired of prose measured by the yard” (4). Referred to in this way, the scholar's quest of creating new theses becomes a distancing activity to fill one's days in the academy (and one's CV), and when the status-seekers surpass the truth seekers, Lurie is discharged from both ranks. In a similar way, we can begin to imagine Lurie the young wanderer in love who once took the “mighty forms” of “a wife, a home, a marriage” as summits of kind assurance but now finds a reunion with his ex-wife like a gathering of “war veterans” (5, 43). But if we read on in *The Prelude*, past the passage covered by Lurie in his class, we recall that Wordsworth's Mont Blanc episode does not terminate in grief. Instead, as the “soulless image” usurps upon his own “living thought,” Wordsworth experiences a sense of perfect fittedness with his loss — he sees how the sense image itself is in part crafted

by his original hopes, which themselves persist and constitute our truth, however fictive:

Whate'er in this wide circuit we beheld,  
Or heard, was fitted to our unripe state  
Of intellect and heart. With such a book  
Before our eyes, we could not choose but read  
Lessons of genuine brotherhood, the plan  
And universal reason of mankind,  
The truths of young and old . . . (1850: VI.541–547)

We have no choice, concludes Wordsworth, but to “abound / In dreams and fictions” (1850: VI.550). What’s more, coming to terms with our creations, as the poet does here, even given the discomforts incumbent in such revelations, is a gift. We cannot ignore our fictions, Wordsworth argues; but neither should we use them as cause to dismiss transcendence. Rather, we must cultivate the troubling middle ground of “dejection taken up for pleasure’s sake” (1850: VI.551).<sup>8</sup>

Right now, at this troubled but rarified moment in the classroom, Professor Lurie, who has surely internalized the whole passage, allows his hopes to rekindle at the prospect that his students might experience some of Wordsworth’s truths and breathe dejection infused with pleasure. Moreover, in asking them to understand that they live inevitably in fictions, he wants them to cultivate the uncertainty of an imperfective state. Only here will they have a chance to grasp Wordsworth; only in bringing them here will Lurie have his chance to claim victory of transcendent literature over skilled communication. All this may be too much to expect of his students. But in a dedicated attempt to help them to access this state, Lurie asks his students to hover here, at one of Wordsworth’s famed “spots of time,” a moment when the duration of the poet’s “living thought” is waning while that “soulless image” threatens — but does not yet eclipse — his imagined ideal of the peak. Lurie’s joy in this small lecture erupts from the revelation which a minor but precise attention to language has the power to reveal. In the grammar of the imperfective, Wordsworth’s poem fills out with complexity in a way that exceeds any technical transaction or mere “communication . . . of feelings and intentions.” His maneuvering to bring his students into contact with grammar of a different sort has been a valiant attempt but one that falls short. He has, perhaps, been too technical in leading them toward transcendence. On the heels of his best attempt to lift his students into this revelation, Lurie fixes on the vacancy of their lack of response. Now, the silence and vapidness of undergraduates are not by themselves wholly indicative of the lowered stock of Romantic tropes. Even an unjaded professor knows that. But this behavior strikes Lurie severely. Within a growing sense of isolation, he takes respon-

sibility for failing to stir them with his own words; the effect of his lecture he describes as both deathly and domestic: “the very air into which he speaks hangs listless as a sheet” (21). Still, faced with his students’ persistent silence he continues to search for a way to reaffirm the greater value of what they are missing, both that pleasure of revelation that Wordsworth recounts and the pleasure of revelation he wants them to find in Wordsworth. Where his workaday teaching at Cape Technical University has become a mechanized duty in which “month after month he sets, collects, reads, and annotates their assignments,” here his students’ dull awareness of Romantic pleasure sparks a pedagogical inspiration in Lurie that exceeds any mere uplift of faculty “morale” (4). More conspicuously, his initial response to their listlessness is sympathy. He kneels down from his seniority to meet them at their ages and to meet them in their Ironic Age by asking himself their questions: “A man looking at a mountain: Why does it have to be so complicated?” (21). He takes their skepticism to heart, takes seriously their call to relevance. “What answer can [I] give them?” he further asks himself. In his desire to provide a relevant answer he still holds Romantic ideals within reach.

But for Lurie the Romantic, the potential for a Wordsworthian flash of revelation has been largely replaced by the flicker of desire, which he further mistakes for romance. In tracking the way that he shunts his Romantic ascendancies into romantic ones we are witness to the charge of those former high beliefs grounding into lust. Yet if we transpose Romantic trajectories onto Lurie’s next romantic encounter, we may discover his spark is more than mere lust. With Melanie Isaacs, desire forms the vector by which Lurie manages the business of his residual Romantic might. And in recognizing that this work includes cultivating not only pleasure but also dejection, we may find that his enthrallment also leads him toward the visionary. In this, the encounter with Melanie is not only the most recent in a string of romantic indiscretions but also a signal departure from them. Indeed, at the moment of his classroom inspiration his thoughts turn to Melanie, lured to his house a few nights before with his seductions of wine and Wordsworth. Through this plot we have been made to follow Lurie’s willful and moderate seduction of Melanie. We have watched from the conspicuous beginning when Lurie overtakes his student walking in a campus garden. We have watched him conflate lazy interpretations of Wordsworth with the hopeful machinations of his latest parlor romance. And there, within his parlor and faced with Melanie’s lukewarm response to the poet who for Lurie remains “one of my masters,” the professor has extracted a lesson, a gesture designed more to force sexual tension in the room than to allow entrance to the poetry: “. . . in my experience poetry speaks to you either at first sight or not at all. A flash of revelation and a flash of response. Like lightning. Like falling in love” (13). Awkwardly, distastefully, he has conflated poetic revelation with the thrill of desire. Just



so, now in the classroom, he ostensibly aims to elicit that literary “flash of revelation” to help his students identify the prospect of being thrilled by Wordsworth. But in fact Melanie alone becomes the subject of his lecture. Asking himself broadly, “Where is the flash of revelation in this room?” Lurie overlooks the room to focus on Melanie and finds “her head is bowed[;] she is absorbed in the text or seems to be” (22).

Just as his afternoon trysts with Soraya followed a script, this seduction of Melanie has shown Lurie steering the young woman into her part. Inviting her to stay for an impromptu supper, he commands, “say yes”; after supper he “takes her by the hand and leads her to the sofa” where he plays a tape of modern dance and “wills the girl to be captivated” (13, 15). Here in class he wants to cast Melanie as a dutiful student searching for the flash of inspiration in lines from *The Prelude*, and he reads her bowed head as absorption rather than distance or shame. If it were sufficient to his purposes to steer her toward the poetry while privately thrilling at the prospect that the sensation of being thrilled by Wordsworth might transfer onto him, Lurie might at this point be inspired to continue leading the class through the intricacies of Wordsworth and the “far different dejection” at Simplon Pass. Or he might likewise take his own pleasure from the dejection that must come once he realizes the rift between what he wants of Melanie and what she is capable of giving. But this is where this one of Lurie’s seductions differs from all the rest. The script Lurie employs here is less the cinematic (and, frankly, pornographic) fairy tale he used with Soraya and more the one that seems to direct his own life. A life which has moved to the “harmonies of *The Prelude*” moves along a Romantic plot. Thus Lurie casts himself as The Poet who eagerly seeks a summit by marching himself — and Melanie — along his chosen route. All along he is no stranger to the fact that upon sight of the “top” (which is an acme, the poet knows, that is not often recognizable as such) he (and Melanie) will grieve to have this pathetic affair matched to any “living thought” of love. So, too, he may hold out the hope that they might survive this dejection. He surely also has the next Alpine scene in Wordsworth in mind, and just as the poet crossing Simplon Pass only realizes his accomplishment while making his descent, so the Romantic script may play out unexpectedly. Even the plot he creates might lift him to another state.

Given Melanie’s proximity to his Romantic interest as a student in his class, Lurie hopes to elevate his romantic activities to those of Romantic poetry, but instead those actions fall so much more flat. He cannot survive the parallel with Wordsworth.<sup>9</sup> And even if Melanie doesn’t recognize as much, he knows it. Still, to his own personal, professional, and poetic disgrace, he persists. Just now he responds to Melanie’s bowed head with even greater attempts to have her recognize the parallel between Wordsworth’s moment in the Alps, the poet wedded to Nature, and the

moments he has staged between the two of them, David Lurie “wedded to” Melanie Isaacs. The class becomes an attempt to get Melanie to notice him — not the soulless image of an aging man momentarily thrilled by youthful desire but the sustained “living thought” of her Prince Charming arrived behind her in the college gardens. Going off book and into an analogy which he admits is “hardly in Wordsworth,” Lurie proposes that the dilemma of *The Prelude* is “like being in love,” and suggests that any lover does not wish to see the “cold clarity” of his paramour but would rather “throw a veil over the gaze, so as to keep her alive in her archetypal, goddesslike form” (22). Lurie’s operations here are impossible to defend. Is his awkward advocacy of veiled affection meant to justify their clandestine rendezvous? Is his entire not-in-Wordsworth argument a circuitous means to self-justification rather than love’s transformation? These questions are unanswerable, even when consulting a Romantic paradigm. In fact, Lurie is less approaching a state of transcendental Romantic rapture and more devolving into fantasy; his own classroom analogy — and the calculated need “to bring her” to him — leads him to think now of that night on the floor of his living room, his hands up the shirt of his “goddess.” And if Melanie reacts to any of this and finally looks up so that “her eyes meet his and in a flash see all,” the “all” that she absorbs can only be the private ecstasy of a man enrolled in fantasy. Rather than erupt in revelation or even recoil in disappointment, she stares back merely “confused” and simply “drops her glance” again (23). He has gained her neither as his student nor as his lover. Worse, the whole episode is transparent to Lurie. Melanie’s newly downcast eyes form their own soulless image for Lurie, now seemingly more aware of how caught up in displaced desire he has become. He quickly shuts down: “Enough! He is sick of the sound of his own voice, and sorry for her too, having to listen to these covert intimacies.” But the very worst, perhaps, is that Melanie has exceeded the bounds of Lurie’s script. “A week ago,” he reflects, “she was just another pretty face in the class.” Now she is a “breathing presence” in his life, a “living thought” made flesh, although we can hardly accept this elevation of her stature considering the fact that at no point in these episodes are we given access to Melanie’s inner life. Lurie’s indiscretions, committed against Melanie’s rising subjectivity, disgrace the Romantic by confining it to a script and disgrace Melanie by inflicting similar constraints on her transcendent possibilities.

In fact, the novel’s early narratives of desire rise along the development of scripted characters and Lurie’s dictatorial practice of confining them there using a variety of sources in addition to his Romantic favorites. In this way any analysis of the affair with Melanie is impacted by our initial introduction to Lurie, his temperament, and his behavior with Soraya. Indeed, early in his time with Melanie, while waiting for her to come to the phone, he decides that Melanie is “not a good name for her” and pro-

poses instead to “shift the accent” and name her “Meláni: the dark one” (18). He recasts her as his next exotic. Likewise, our memory of his behavior with Soraya leaves us highly attuned to the evident calculations that are central in Lurie’s seduction of Melanie and to suspect that his turns of desire with her are little different from the “moderated bliss” he managed with his escort. Chief among these suspicious moments — moments in which he claims an earnest and uncontrollable desire but when we are more likely to suspect him of continued calculation — is his reading of Shakespeare for his own benefit. That first evening in the living room with Melanie, Lurie remains self-conscious of the “ritual that men and women play out with each other” as he progresses the evening — easily it seems for him — from wine to music; the recitation of Shakespeare inevitably follows (12). Indeed, the early sonnets are expert, often ruthless, arguments of seduction, and Lurie cannot afford to pull any punches at the moment that he asks Melanie to “do something reckless” and stay the night with him. When Melanie asks “why” she should, he crafts the obligation, “because you ought.” And to further explain this obligation against her doubt, Lurie asserts: “a woman’s beauty does not belong to her alone. It is part of the bounty she brings into the world”; and then, increasing the stakes, he adds, “It is her duty to share it” (16). Always self-aware, Lurie recognizes these “smooth words” of seduction, but he finds that “at this moment he believes in them.” If Lurie already has Shakespeare in mind, we might take his argument to parallel Sonnet 1, which accuses the beloved addressee of holding within himself, “making a famine where abundance lies”; and the poet must “pity the world” for this loss of beauty. But where Shakespeare expects the pitiful state of the world to subtly rouse his beloved, Lurie has opted for a more aggressive call to “duty.” Moreover, beneath these “smooth words,” his internal dialog shifts from an emphasis on sharing her bounty to a more imbalanced and aggressive commerce: “She does not own herself. Beauty does not own itself.” In Lurie’s recent experience beauty can be purchased in segments of one afternoon a week; and in his mind he is again on his way to situating Melanie as his next discrete beauty. Her bounty has become a price he is willing to pay to get to her. These base notes of duty and ownership infect the authenticity of the lines of Shakespeare that Lurie quotes at the end of this exchange: “From fairest creatures we desire increase / that thereby beauty’s rose might never die.” The sonnet is, he realizes, “not a good move” and their conversation immediately breaks off; Melanie quickly gathers her things, he embraces her, and then he tempers her evasion, noting how she merely “slips his embrace and is gone” (17). In Lurie’s final analysis, the recited Shakespeare estranged her by revealing him as bookish, as “a teacher again,” but he may also have just been revealed as an opportunist, using whatever words might afford him his selfish desires (16). And again he sets up a twofold fall in this affair: he will disgrace a young charge by oppor-

tunistically employing his poetic expertise, and in doing so he'll leave poetry — and the Bard himself — in disgrace.

Later in the affair Lurie will overlay Melanie with yet another genre, this time marking his scripts during her dramatic pursuits.<sup>10</sup> Following his botched Wordsworth class, Lurie attends a rehearsal of the contemporary social comedy *Sunset at the Globe Salon* in which Melanie plays a bungling, inelegant Kaaps-speaking woman forced to seek a job as a hairdresser's assistant, a role which essentially makes her a gay hairdresser's maid.<sup>11</sup> For the larger audience, this play operates by displaying stock characters and "coarse old prejudices" to be "washed away in gales of laughter" (23). For David Lurie, this is what he has fantasized before with Melanie as "reversals: the stuff of bourgeois comedy" (14). Only now, rather than giggling over reversed gender roles, he gets to witness a young woman playing the dark servant, a titillating prospect following the demise of his arrangement with Soraya, the "exotic." On stage in a first run-through, Melanie's entrance falls flat, but she is a quick study who nails the slapstick in her next attempt, tangling a broom in an electrical cord to create "a bang, a flash, screams of alarm" and the scripted subservient lament, "It's not my fault" (24). Such pyrotechnic special effects provide meta-commentary against those flashes — both Romantic and romantic — which Lurie has worked so hard to get Melanie to practice. Lurie's whole Romantic "flash of revelation" subplot is illuminated as a painful farce. But even with these transparencies, Melanie's comedic but still transgressive role-playing is sufficient to arouse this spectator. The very next afternoon, "astonished by the feeling she evokes . . . the apparition on the stage," he unleashes another scripted encounter with her, this time a violent and abbreviated version of his Windsor Mansions trysts (and, it is worth noting, the abbreviated "plot" here echoes the transparent plots of pornography). He surprises her at her front door, carries her into her flat, and, as "her limbs crumple like a marionette's," he takes her on her bed and then makes a quick exit to his car outside. Meanwhile back in the auditorium, too aware that his posture of "sitting in the dark spying on a girl" puts his activity in the category of "letching," Lurie re-casts himself (and all "the old men whose company he seems to be on the point of joining") as men who were "once upon a time children of God." This forced re-application of Wordsworth's "blessed be the infant babe" argument allows Lurie to reinterpret lechery as an act of "clinging to the last to [one's] place at the sweet banquet of the senses," for which none can be blamed. If he can't contain the unruly give-and-take of the classroom, he can still moderate in monologue from the back of a dark auditorium.

Seen in these ways to be overpowering Melanie, even overpowering our conception of her via the novel's confinement to his view, David Lurie deserves our harsh assessment. But is having an affair with a student — surely a violation of the academy's valid codes of ethical conduct — the full

basis of the level of disgrace to which Lurie ultimately sinks with Melanie? And what does the context of the Romantic do to complicate our judgment of Lurie and of the book's post-Romantic propositions? A quiet thread in the book, rarely glimpsed and only barely defended by Lurie, reaffirms the presence of a greater force driving his attraction to Melanie and rendering his behavior beyond his control. Lurie points most often to this force as "desire." This desire often wells up and overcomes him, drawing him to a brief insight in the afterglow of sensual luxury — there might, he thinks, be more to it with Melanie than only quick sex on the floor, "there might, despite all, be a future" (29). This more profound vector of desire arrives with Melanie one Sunday night. Following the incident at her flat, he largely expects "a scene" but instead decides that Melanie is merely "strained" and, dressed all in black, she asks to stay the night. Her immediate motive is not sex but sleep — and perhaps comfort. Still, Lurie suspects that she is preying on his more base desires to get the safety and comfort that she needs. Or is she learning her part — not the preferred version of "a quick little affair" as Lurie would try to contain it, but rather is she playing her full part as desire must have it, "trailing complications behind her" (27)? Even with complications he still "feels a tingle of desire" at her presence and at the prospect of her "stay[ing] for a while." These feelings of desire no level of suspicion can erase. At this moment it is impossible to tell who is playing whom. Lurie's speculations — for instance, "Does she know what she is up to, at this moment?" — trail off unanswered. And her pressing against his belly reflects an intimacy that cannot be easily dismissed as coerced. Still, Lurie is "vexed, irritated" by what he diagnoses as her "behaving badly, getting away with too much." He pauses to put the scene into perspective:

She is behaving badly, getting away with too much; she is learning to exploit him and will probably exploit him further. But if she has got away with much, he has got away with more; if she is behaving badly, he has behaved worse. To the extent that they are together, if they are together, he is the one who leads, she the one who follows. Let him not forget that. (28)

But he quickly forgets and instead, in his thinking about Melanie, he falls into his own Romantic analogy and returns to terms he used for Wordsworth in the Alps. In describing the sublime experience to the class, he had paraphrased later lines of Wordsworth for his own purposes. He had pointed to the moment when the senses of the poet reach their limit of perception and finally "a light leaps up one last time like a candle-flame, giving us a glimpse of the invisible" (22). Now, stretched out on the guest bed next to her, Lurie experiences "the last leap of the flame sense" as he focuses on the larger prospect of having her "take up residence with him" (27). Yet if this moment in the guest room reflects a transcendence of their

relationship — perhaps lifting it into the realm of “relationship” for the first time in the novel — it falls short of the sublime. And rather than taking a leap to a higher realm, Lurie at the very end of the scene is poised mostly for a last hurrah, a proposition of “intoxicating” earthly delights: “Every night she will be here; every night he can slip into bed like this, slip into her.”

At times, his surfeit of desire terminates merely in “blank oblivion,” a post-coital blackout that garners no heightened perception and from which Lurie wakes to the hard facts of his desire: Melanie is beneath him, “her eyes closed, her hands slack above her head, a slight frown on her face” (19). Immediacies outpace transcendences, and if these are the slopes rising to something larger, the terrain between these lovers is uneven. At other times this imbalance is more precipitous and any insight afforded by desire arrives more darkly in the aftershocks of his desirous misbehavior. It can even take the form of a recognizable downward plunge into a state of dejection, that realm of the imagination’s decrepitude which drew the aging Wordsworth to lament, “Whither is fled the visionary gleam?” Back in his car outside Melanie’s flat after he has overtaken her in a fury of his own desire and found his advances “undesired to the core,” David Lurie collapses, naming his state as “such dejection, such dullness,” such a failure of sensation (25). If desire is in part a superior and euphoric energizing of the body, even to the effect of existing purely as body, without rationality or self-conception, then dejection is the body as dead weight. Here, Lurie “sits slumped over the wheel unable to move.” Unfilled desire, such as that he cultivated on his third (and rainy) day with Melanie, led him to tepid questioning (“What am I doing?” he asked himself while giving Melanie a ride home from campus) (20). Yet that was easily offset by desire’s potential (his line of self-questioning cuts off when “his heart lurches with desire”). Now, having claimed and acted upon his desire, his dejection leads him to a kind of brute assessment. His act was, he now tells himself, “a mistake, a huge mistake,” underscoring it in repeating it and facing one of the few moments of such certainty (25). The most revealing and complicating effect of his dejection, however, is the rare vision it births of Melanie acting on her own. As a part of his brutal self-assessment, he conjures the image of Melanie still back in her flat “trying to cleanse herself of it, of him,” and in doing so he judges his actions as rape by conjuring the clinical and ritual bathing that often follow such an event. But within a plot solely at Lurie’s direction, this vision affords Melanie a degree of subjectivity. Significantly, her activity in the vision asserts herself free of him. And this limited gesture of liberation heralds a later and substantial vision in which Lurie breaks a bit more free of his moderating and dominating, in which he will break into an affirmative Romantic position. Just now we can use this moment to assess Lurie’s journey. In his earliest desirous aspirations (with Soraya and even with Melanie), Lurie sought to capture in a

quasi-visionary ecstasy something like Wordsworth's "serene and blessed mood," a bulwark of feeling in a muted world of postmodern contingencies. At the same time, his pursuit of such serenity was revealed as a more base acquisition, a simplification of love that was also all he could expect to obtain. In his later relationship with Melanie, David Lurie has come to inhabit both critiques. His gestures at transcendent states are failures; and in the midst of failure, his perceptions loosen to insight.<sup>12</sup> In my final analysis I'll consider how he exists beyond critique, as a figure of the book's guarded advocacy.

But first, we must wade through serious duplicities in the overlapping and simultaneous critiques that make it considerably difficult to read David Lurie at the Inquiry Hearing. Ostensibly a situation in which he is called to face an assembly of colleagues to address the nature of his relationship with "Ms Isaacs," this event is largely a showdown around the book's main inquiry, pitting radical skepticism against belief in inner truth (34). Lurie himself begins to take both sides; he no longer exists (comfortably or uncomfortably) between but rather shifts radically across the extremes. The result is a farce that seems to take seriously neither critique nor belief. And for the duration of this uncertainty the novel seems to have lost its arc: David Lurie neither triumphs nor falls apart. On his entrance to the hearing, Lurie seems poised to manipulate the proceedings. He has, he confirms to himself, "slept well," and his confidence rises to the point of "vanity" as he steps into the room, sure that he will be able to deliver to the committee the plea he thinks it wants so that they all can quickly "get on with our lives" (47–48). As he sees it, this bureaucracy (a "secular tribunal" he calls it) can only hope to address the facts of the case which are succinct to him and deserve a succinct reply: "I am guilty" (58, 49). But for the committee the situation is not so simple. They repeatedly press Lurie for more than a plain admission of guilt, asking him to "state his position," to clarify "what it is exactly that [he] acknowledges" in his guilt, and are adamant in their pursuit of clarity (49–50). The chair of the committee frames the dilemma this way: "In our own minds I believe we are crystal clear . . . The question is whether Professor Lurie is crystal clear in his mind" (51). That any statement — any words — could penetrate the depths of a mind could not be more absurd to Lurie. That anyone could call out for "crystal clarity" in this day and age can be nothing but Coetzee's comedy. And indeed with deadpan calls for clarity like this Coetzee means to stage the Inquiry as another social farce, a comedy of stereotypes, *Sunset at the Great University Salon*. Assembled here are: the feminist evoking a panic of "overtones" and "abuse"; the junior faculty member asking Lurie if he would "be prepared to undergo counselling?"; the Dean of Engineering advocating the tool of a public statement by which Lurie could "work out a compromise"; and the silent student observer (49–54). In all this, Lurie, too, seems to have abandoned his

Romantic energies to follow the stereotype of the postmodern academic who can only scoff at the prospect of a “verifiable” confession. Pushed to add to his one brief admission of a mistake (“I regret it”) by Professor Rassool who asks, “Does [this] reflect your sincere beliefs?” Lurie retreats and dismissively “shakes his head” (54–55). His confidence devolves to defensiveness and he retorts, “What goes on in my mind is my business, not yours” (51). But this is also a devolution of transcendent belief. In his adamancy against their repeated requests, it seems that Lurie will see no further than the bare facts, that there is — for all intents and purposes — nothing more to consider. When pressed to present a more probing statement which would address the “overtones” in the case, Lurie is direct: “There are no overtones in this case” (50). There is nothing to see except what is right in front of them. Confusingly, he yields slightly to offer a contained confession, telling the story of crossing paths with Melanie in the college gardens and the point at which “something happened,” although the specifics of this he begs off: “not being a poet, I will not try to describe” (52). What happened between them exceeded his control; he confesses, “I became a servant of Eros.” Lurie, who entered the inquiry seemingly divorced from further beliefs in invisible truths, who seemed positioned against the potential of revelation, now has a different argument. Revelation might be possible and there might be something behind the facts — and his heart might contain them — but he cannot trust this venue or these people to plumb those depths. Oddly, the greatest faith that there are overtones or other hidden intricacies comes from his judges — those who would neglect Lurie’s half-hearted evocation of Eros as an inadequate excuse of “ungovernable impulse” still hold out hope that they will arrive at the bottom of Lurie’s soul. A member of the committee follows her pursuit of the “crystal clear” by proposing: “The statement should come from him, in his own words. Then we can see if it comes from his heart” (54). But this is the farce, that authenticity could be verified by committee. Here Lurie returns to his own brand of skepticism. He sneers and calls this proposal on its face: “And you trust yourself to divine that, from the words I use — to divine whether it comes from my heart.” Still, if the depths of the heart have no place in these proceedings, they have not been dismissed from the realm of *Disgrace*. But it will take more than a committee — it will take something with more access to the divine — to plumb them. Lurie will never claim the divinity of the poet himself; he is a student and scholar of poets. Worse, he is, by his own self-description, the “disgraced disciple” of Wordsworth at this point. Unable to see into the life of things by himself, his journey, seemingly stalled or circling through the course of the inquiry, will require a different vector. David Lurie will undergo further confusion before stumbling along one of his perverse habits of desire to come to his tentative reckoning.



The inquiry points to David Lurie's exhaustion, a low point in a novel of low points: his weariness of age and his retiring physical appeal; his withering prowess and trailing glory. Where have they fled? His tedium peaks with a final reconciliation attempt by the Chair which Lurie dismisses as "splitting hairs" (58). The pre-drafted statement which Mathabane promises would allow Lurie to maintain the dark recesses of his soul and still allow him to "acknowledge [his] fault in public and take steps to remedy it" is untenable at best and more likely absurd, even for Lurie who has navigated much of the novel on the razor's edge between belief and its critique. Thus the Inquiry that largely creates the division between the first and second parts of the novel marks that transitional space with a flatness in Lurie's fate. It is unclear where he can go from here. Moreover, a reader through the Inquiry is left with no gauge of the novel's trends. All points of view from the Romantic to the anti-Romantic — theatrically represented by the various members of the committee as well as Lurie — are equally farcical. And yet this failure of bureaucratic means cannot table the novel's larger themes; they are yet to unfold as the book explores other avenues of inquiry.

After the calculated attempts of the committee of inquiry to create the terms by which David Lurie might properly reveal his inner truths in the case of Melanie Isaacs, those later scenes when Lurie visits the Isaacs family in George offer intriguing counterpoint. Significantly, the scenes are remarkable for the way in which they compile a series of gestures of meaning (not strictly Romantic and ranging from explanation to atonement) that Lurie seems compelled to make as follow-up to the vacant result of the Inquiry itself. Yet despite their number and Lurie's apparent compulsion to engage in them, these gestures, both Lurie's and the reciprocations from Isaacs himself, repeatedly and patently ring empty. The meal which Mr. Isaacs wants to present as an occasion to "break bread with us" must be muscled through (167). When Lurie attempts to leave, realizing he is "causing upset in your home," Isaacs commands him: "Sit down, sit down! We'll be all right! We will do it! . . . You have to be strong!" (169). Later, actually moving toward his exit, Lurie enters a room where Mrs. Isaacs and her daughter Desiree have retreated and conducts what he terms a "careful ceremony" of lowering to his knees in front of them and touching his forehead to the floor — a tragicomic prostration in a suburban bedroom (173). Even Isaacs's evocation of God raises mostly doubts. Lurie's response is confusingly both that of the academic agnostic and the God-fearing believer. And if the character of Isaacs is meant to function as witness of deeply held belief, his call to Lurie's hotel room later that night in which he wishes Lurie "strength" along "the path . . . that God has ordained" mostly aligns him with stock-phrased televangelists (174).

After the formal inquiry and then these further inquiries we are left ever more torn by the tenor of the book. On one hand these episodes

constitute further questions into the legitimacy of making claims for understanding. On the other hand, *Disgrace* at this point makes the result of such persistent questioning look pretty bleak. We might be inclined to ask repeatedly what Lurie asks himself while getting up off the floor following his “ceremony”: “Is that enough? he thinks. Will that do? If not, what more?” (173). Repeatedly, our answers would have to point to insufficiency. These gestures are not enough; they will not do; and we seem to have lost access to anything more. Not only are these individual gestures of meaning each called into question, but they are the hollow inventory of a structurally significant event in Lurie’s journey. Here where the script of a romance would have the disgraced man contritely seek forgiveness, we are given only the shell of that act. This emptiness can in fact be witnessed with a re-reading of the premise of Lurie’s visit to the Isaacs. For a reader the encounter is inspired and unexpected. At the end of chapter eighteen, Lurie is contemplating his departure from the farm to return directly to Cape Town; chapter nineteen begins abruptly at the front door of the Isaacs home in George. Lurie’s initial narrative confirms the visit as an inspired detour, the result of having been “at a loose end” ever since the Inquiry (163). Later Lurie confesses the untruth of this. He visited George by design. Even the story of being spontaneously inspired to stop in is only Lurie’s latest calculation. In this, Lurie first claims to “drop in” primarily in order to “say what is on my heart” (165). Having scoffed at the attempts of the committee to ascertain the contents of his heart, Lurie now returns to offer those secrets himself. Still, his abilities to plumb the depths are suspect and limited. He questions himself: “That much is true. He does want to speak his heart. The question is, what is on his heart?” (165). In truth, his heart still eludes him. It evades even his calculated efforts. He begins the story of himself and Melanie, which he affirms “began without premeditation on my part.” But quickly this explanation is consumed by an overwrought metaphor in which Melanie is a spark that “struck up a fire” in him, a fire that he felt obliged to kindle the way the ancients worshipped a “flame-god” (166). Soon, Lurie admits that his story-making here is not driven by some higher cause but consists mostly of “self-defence.”

Before dismissing every gesture Lurie makes in George, we should look at one hopeful portion of those scenes, his most pointed (and Romantic) confession. After supper, Lurie, finally alone with Isaacs, feels “he can prevaricate no longer” and delivers this speech:

“It could have turned out different, I believe, between the two of us, despite our ages. But there was something I failed to supply, something” — he hunts for the word — “lyrical. I lack the lyrical. I manage love too well. Even when I burn I don’t sing, if you understand me. For which I am sorry.” (171)

Juridically, Lurie conspicuously does not apologize for what he might have done to Melanie; rather, he claims what he failed to do. Lurie's argument again is that he is not the poet: he lacks the lyrical. The lyrical aspect of poetry comes in its unmanageable leaps. In the lyric, through song that is not restrained by the plodding prose of speech, the poet can rise past earthly concerns, past the simple experiences of the senses to leap — yes, past that candle flame again — toward the invisible, the lost, the apocryphal. The disgraced disciple of Wordsworth knows what it is to be lyrical — he has poured over the leaps in the poems, he has fallen for many women, in acts he takes to be equivalent — but the full trajectory eludes him. Is this because he is not a poet? If so, must the failures of all second-class citizens of this sort merit the fate of disgrace? No, David Lurie is as much poet as any of us. But being a poet guarantees nothing, least of all consistent access to lyric heights. Lurie may be inclined to dream of Wordsworth only for his accomplishments. *Disgrace* reminds us of a Romantic truth: the penalty for striving higher is consistent ruin. Lurie's dark heroism emerges at not resisting that fate but in attempting to recognize this double-state. As he names his fate: "I am . . . trying to accept disgrace as my state of being" (172).

Finally, David Lurie returns to Cape Town, to an overgrown garden and a ransacked house, and to an unsettling sense that "there is something unfinished in the business with Melanie" (190). Whether Lurie as character can be said to be conscious of creating a parallel experience, the book offers to finish the business with Melanie via a scene that parallels that earlier theater moment: Lurie in the audience and Melanie back on stage. Her play, *Sunset at the Globe Salon*, has been revived at the Dock Theater, a new and, according to Lurie, "fashionable entertainment spot" where "the set is more stylish, the direction more professional," but the play's base humor and obvious politics are still, especially for him, "hard to endure" (191). Yet endurance is the theme of Lurie's return. He assures himself that Melanie — especially the crude intimacy of "the smell of her" — endures "deep inside him," and he wonders, should they meet again, "Will there be a flash of feeling, a sign that the affair has not run its course?" (190). Unwilling to leave such a question entirely up to chance, one night he buys a ticket and takes his seat just as the curtain is rising. Though he finds her lines themselves are "predictable," her performance is superior. Indeed, Lurie, in a moment of authentic praise that would have been highly rare early in their affair, pronounces her "positively gifted" and ascribes her improvement to her perseverance through their shared trial. "*Whatever does not kill me makes me stronger*," he affirms, congratulating both Melanie and himself with the status of veterans. But as usual, Lurie is not content to merely perceive sympathies between himself and others in the world, not content to allow things to take their course. Here in the dark of the theater he wills Melanie, wills the world to move in response

to his desires: "He wishes he could have a sign." And lacking a sign, he imagines one. He imagines the "absurd clothes" Melanie wears for her costume "burn[ing] off her body in a cold, private flame" where, exposed, the girl stands "in a revelation secret to him alone, as naked and as perfect as on that last night in Lucy's old room." In this vision, the comedy of Lurie's vaunted "flash of revelation" literalized into a pyrotechnic wardrobe malfunction signals Lurie's pornographic tragedy — a girl's immolation and exposure all for his "private" glory. If his "business" with Melanie were to end here then we could safely assign him the status of socially disgraced "imposter" that he already feels in the midst of all his fat, self-congratulatory, fellow theatergoers, his "countrymen." And what follows this vision — an unbidden memory of another seduction, a single night with a German hitchhiker in a hotel room — serves mostly to further implicate Lurie by confirming what Rosalind had earlier accused him of when she called Melanie "another of your quick flings, your peccadilloes" (189). Lurie returned to his old position in the back of a theater is a man once again on the prowl. Yet this memory of an old lover is more catalyst to Lurie's second auditorium vision:

In a sudden and soundless eruption, as if he has fallen into waking dream, a stream of images pours down, images of women he has known on two continents, some from so far away in time that he barely recognizes them. 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. (192)

Initially extending the catalog of his inconsequential flings, the vision transforms into something more profound (albeit no less painful). In this "stream of images," the women are distinct; they are subjects (even if he "barely recognizes them," he registers their differences as distinction, enough to know he does not know them). But at the same time there is little delineation between the beginning and the end of each of his affairs. This love is not discrete. This love is a tangle — not a dramatic arc from seduction to climax to denouement of avoidance and hurt looks. It is something altogether less neat. And as Lurie exits this vision, he comes again to a rare moment of sympathy. Rather than fix exclusively within his own perspective, his own desires and desires for signs, he wonders if any of these women ever experiences a parallel vision — which would not focus exclusively on Lurie but place him, too, within what he sees as an "ocean of memory" (192).

The tides of memory are, of course, Wordsworth's central theme in *The Prelude*. And while Lurie, in his teaching of Book VI, focused on the climactic present-tense Mont Blanc episode and its immediate experience of "dejection taken up for pleasure's sake," Wordsworth next recalls an earlier experience in the Alps which (in the 1805 edition) the poet introduces by claiming that "far different dejection once was mine" (1805: VI.491). Understanding this differently dejected state will help us come to

terms with the final position Coetzee posits for David Lurie, which reconstitutes the Romantic to become a fitting vision for the late-twentieth-century condition. In this later Simplon Pass episode Wordsworth and his hiking party, in great anticipation of marking the moment when they finally cross the Alpine divide, set out after lunch “up a lofty mountain” to achieve it (1805: VI.506). But when they become aware during their short and unremarkable journey that the route they are on is not the main track over the pass, they stop a peasant to ask the way to the top. From him they learn the painful truth: “that we had crossed the Alps” (1805: VI.524). That is, they had already crossed them and “thenceforth all [their] course was downwards” (1805: 518–19). Upon this realization, Wordsworth exclaims:

Imagination! lifting up itself  
 Before the eye and progress of my song  
 Like an unfathered vapour, here that power,  
 In all the might of its endowments, came  
 Athwart me. I was lost as in a cloud,  
 Halted without a struggle to break through,  
 And now, recovering, to my soul I say  
 “I recognize thy glory.” (1805: VI.525–32)

In his script of mountain accomplishment, Wordsworth had anticipated his triumphant achievement of the summit. Instead, the actual summit has become tangled in the “eye and progress” of the course of his life, the script of his epic “song.” Remembering the event he faces the confluence of the discrete narrative he anticipates and the sensory experience that refuses to fulfill that narrative. And the moment of contact between the two — the moment the imperfective passes into the perfective “usurpation” — he anoints as “imagination” — a tangle of vision and life, an unruly response to rules (1805: VI.533, 525).<sup>13</sup> This exalted moment Wordsworth further describes as “when the light of sense / Goes out in flashes that have shewn to us / The invisible world” (1805: VI.534–6). The continued anticipation of such a summit has sustained David Lurie in both academic and amorous pursuits. Unfortunately, his attempts to achieve the flash of the invisible world have, to this point, been all too directed. His temperament, prone to containment, has tightened the shutters on the unruly work of imagination and cut off its potential to enlighten. Just so, we could see his opera as stalled; it is “going nowhere” and it will never arrive anywhere by the end of the book. Teresa sings and sings for rescue, and Byron groans impossibility. Lurie laments that “the lyric impulse in [me] may not be dead, but after decades of starvation it can crawl forth from its cave only pinched, stunted, deformed . . . [becoming] the kind of work a sleepwalker might write” (214). Coetzee’s

critique of Romanticism throughout *Disgrace* is clear: there is no place for mere dreamers in our current world. Nor can we allow the hope of pending lyric perfections to blunt our perception of atrocities. *Disgrace* does not declare the death of lyric, nor the death of love — nor of transcendence. And David Lurie, then, is never the victim of this change but is often portrayed as its outlaw, alternating between skepticism and vision at will, and too often employing whatever serves his secular pursuits in a kind of supernatural naturalism. But for all his dark strength of will, there is a contrary and revitalizing image of this man, a brief but indelible image of him that cannot be dismissed simply because it operates within what is in many cases an outmoded Romantic paradigm. Here in the theater he has finally lost control; he is lost in a sea of memories, a vision, and he fights not for shore, not for air, but “holds his breath, willing the vision to continue” (192). Extensive participation in the world of sense is not Lurie’s crime. Nor do his previous false attempts toward vision shut down the curative realm of the visionary now. *Disgrace* insists on an imperfective Lurie, an intractable man only briefly set free. To be put to sleep, at someone else’s hand, as the novel’s final scene seems to say, is an option only for animals. For the rest, such as Lurie coming out of his theater reverie, the book offers no promises and substantial grief. Desire, which can flower to recognition — an uplift of hundreds of intermingled lives — can quickly erode to sexual desire, which Lurie cultivates solitarily in another prostitute. Even in asserting vision, *Disgrace* offers little solace from grief and no bulwark against error. Our disgrace, as witnessed by David Lurie, befalls us not through some one grave act but in our shuffling through the middle of the world, tepidly refashioning mere pleasures into falsely imaginative pursuits.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In the ANC’s view, Coetzee unflinchingly “reported on” the conditions on the ground in South Africa to become a witness who “represents as brutally as he can the white people’s perception of the post-Apartheid black man” (qtd. in McDonald 323–24).

<sup>2</sup> Leading with a litany of references to Rorty which caution against those who have become “immune to romantic enthusiasm” and ask us to “put a moratorium on theory,” Ortwin de Graef begins an analysis of the “familiar friction” between the Wordsworthian sympathetic imagination which forms Lurie’s roots and theory (311, 314). Noting Lurie’s background in English studies, Graef locates a conspicuous use of the term “theory” as turning point late in the novel and will proceed to conduct his investigation of these “incommensurable universes of discourses . . . beyond propriety, and at the expense of an actual reading of *Disgrace*” (314).

<sup>3</sup> As a cross-section of the criticism on the novel, the special *Disgrace* issue of *Interventions* (2002) remains a good representation of the range of critical views. Here we find David Attwell speaking to the “ethical turn” in the racial aspects novel that he pinpoints in Lurie’s relationship with Bev Shaw who “extend[s] his ethical horizon” and precipitates a “metonymic chain of immolations” that reach “fulfillment” in Lurie’s treatment of the dogs (339). In his Introduction to this issue, Derek Attridge recalls his own earlier article which concerns Lurie’s “growing involvement with animals,” but for Attridge this growth must be very carefully construed (318). He finesses his reading of Lurie at the end of the book: “These activities of Lurie’s are not presented, I would argue, as the achievement of redemption or as a prescription for ethical behaviour, but rather as an instance of a commitment that signals, in its very irrelevance to larger programmes and practices, its integrity in a world of calculation and accumulation” (318). Elleke Boehmer’s important feminist reading of *Disgrace* also outlines the book’s “structural symmetries” and the implications of these which so many other critics follow (344). Noting the many “silent parallels” that divide the book into two “halves of the narrative,” with Lurie’s seduction of Melanie organizing the first and the gang rape of Lucy the second, Boehmer sees the novel as a “diptych” (344). And though this structure works “largely by implication,” it leads us to “the question of Lurie’s achievement of kindness and redemption” which will be weighed by a comparison of his behaviors in the two halves of the book (344, 347). Each of these readings ultimately — and understandably — devotes the bulk of its argument to the “second half” of the novel. In doing so, these articles find unexpected company in the immediate responses of the ANC and South African intellectuals (such as Jakes Gerwel) writing in the popular press, which, as Peter McDonald notes, focused on the incidents of rape and race relations in the second half to assert an allegorical reading of *Disgrace* as “a powerful witness to contemporary realities” (324). At the same time, it is important to note that many of these commentators — especially McDonald and Boehmer — as well as many important others beyond the *Interventions* issue rely on this two-part developmental schematic while still asserting a subtle reading of Lurie’s final state. For McDonald, Lurie’s “understanding of redress remains partial at best, even at the end”; Boehmer asserts Lurie’s accomplishment as a questionable and complex “secular atonement”; Mike Marais (“Ethical Action”) follows his strong claim of a “development from monadic subjectivity to self-substituting responsibility in the course of the novel” with the caveat that any such claim of development will “require fuller exposition”; and Attridge’s subtly reads the end as noted above. Elsewhere, Marais (“Task of the Imagination”) calls the book an “anti-*Bildungsroman*, a novel which involves the forfeiture rather than the consolidation of the protagonist’s sense of self” (79).

<sup>4</sup> Boehmer speaks of how “significant verbal resonances bring the novel’s two acts of violation into chillingly close parallel” but stops short of calling Lurie’s overtaking of Melanie a rape (344). Lucy Graham is unequivocal: “Lurie’s relationship with Melanie in *Disgrace* is depicted as a betrayal of ethical responsibility, as he violates and will not take responsibility for her as an embodied human being.

Although Lurie protests to the contrary, the act that he commits is rape, it is 'undesired' by the girl and involves an abuse of her self" (438).

<sup>5</sup> Likewise, Marais insists: "the ethical trajectory of *Disgrace* is by no means clear-cut. If anything, its movement is chiasmic and involves a doubling back on itself that disputes what it seems to assert even as it is asserted" (79).

<sup>6</sup> Elleke Boehmer's belief that Lurie's gestures constitute a "secular atonement" is a unique argument of the "personal political ramifications of refusing to make a confession," but her description of the condition of that atonement emphasizes its troubled state (342). For Boehmer, Lurie undergoes "the far more painful process of enduring rather than transcending the degraded present . . . [a] flawed, highly subjectivized, and also gendered process of coming to terms" (343).

<sup>7</sup> In his syntactical analysis of the novel in *Interventions*, Mark Sanders scrutinizes this first sentence to determine its ambivalent effects. In parsing the sentence, Sanders first points to the "transcendent aspect" within the perfective "has solved" which he believes "secures the narrative present"; in consistently harnessing that present, Lurie pitches toward perfect. But at the same time, this syntax of the perfective is conspicuously interrupted by Lurie's willful subjectivity — "to his mind" — which renders his perfective state "premature" (364).

<sup>8</sup> Although his avenue into Romanticism in *Disgrace* is primarily via Wordsworth's Lucy poems, Marais also reaches "the ambiguity at the heart of Romanticism" (85). "The Romantic project," Marais reminds us, "celebrates the power of imagination [and] its ability to grasp" transcendence; and at the same time "[the Lucy poems] evince a fine sense of the possibility of failure of this faculty's" power (85).

<sup>9</sup> McDonald tracks the fall of Lurie's "male Romantic literary heroes," particularly his lowered estimation of Byron (328).

<sup>10</sup> Michael Holland considers the incident of the play at some length as part of his argument of Coetzee's "total commitment to that aesthetic imperative" in which the play draws Lurie's attention to Melanie's unexpected aesthetic beauty as Gloria (395). What is remarkable to Holland is that although Lurie's reaction to her beauty is parodied (in the slapstick and malfunction of the rehearsal) and also "unsynchronized" (to the extent that he "becomes uneasy" and leaves the theater), the delayed result is that "seeing the play has transformed Lurie's perception of Melanie" (a truth which Holland is aware results in Lurie advancing on Melanie "more or less against her will") (396).

<sup>11</sup> Kaaps is an Apartheid-era designation of the dialect of Afrikaans spoken by "coloured" Cape Town residents, often Muslim, including those known as Cape Malay.

<sup>12</sup> For Holland, the incident of the play remains the crux that creates Lurie's "in-between position": as "a seducer" he has experienced "a division which renders him powerless" and leaves him with "two entirely opposed responses": ecstasy and dejection (396–97).

<sup>13</sup> Marais's reading of Coetzee's Romanticism works to merge Wordsworth and Coleridge. First, he affirms the reciprocal act of imagination as Wordsworth puts it in *Tintern Abbey*: the combination of "what they half create, / And what perceive" (ll. 106–7). But next Marais emphasizes his view of the Coleridgean Coetzee. In



Marais's view, Coetzee "would add that the Primary Imagination is located in the self who is in the world and, accordingly, that the imaginative expression of this self is worldly, rather than a repetition of the transcendent 'eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM' (Coleridge, *Biographia* 167)" (2006, 81).