

## Article

# Spectacles of Disgrace: Nietzsche, Coetzee, and Life after the Death of God

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**Abstract:** My aim in this essay is to explore the complementarities that obtain between Nietzsche's account (or teaching) of the "death of God" and J. M. Coetzee's characterization of David Lurie in his 1999 novel *Disgrace*. I am particularly concerned to investigate the responses of Nietzsche's Madman and Coetzee's protagonist to their respective insights into (or experiences of) the "death of God." Both respondents, I offer, may be seen and understood to create public spectacles in which they acquire (what they take to be) permanent, meaning-conferring identities that are meant, if not destined, to withstand the dislocations and calamities to come. In both cases, moreover, the point of the spectacle is to secure the conditions under which its architect may escape any responsibility for navigating the uncertainties that are bound to arise in the aftermath of the "death of God." Whereas Nietzsche is primarily concerned to anticipate (and diagnose) the distress that leads to the creation of responsibility-deferring spectacles, Coetzee provides an instructive treatment of life *after* the death of God, as David Lurie is compelled to confront the emerging post-theistic order he had hoped to avoid.

**Keywords:** disgrace; madness; scandal; spectacle



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The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his eyes. "Whither is God?" he cried; "I will tell you. *We have killed him—you and I.* All of us are his murderers. But how did we do this? . . . "

—Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Section 125

At long last the horizon appears free to us again, even if it should not be bright; at long last our ships may venture out again, venture out to face any danger; all the daring of the lover of knowledge is permitted again; the sea, *our* sea, lies open again; perhaps there has never yet been such an "open sea."—

—Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Section 343

## 1. Keeping Secrets

The novel *Disgrace* is, among many other things, a book of secrets. There are, of course, the familiar deceptions, half-truths, white lies, and calculated omissions that punctuate the relationships and intimacies that are explored in the novel. But these garden-variety secrets are not Coetzee's primary concern. Instead, the secrets at the center of the novel are those that structure and preserve the relationships that Coetzee undertakes to observe. And although he focuses his attention on relationships that appear to be unhealthy or dysfunctional, his guiding hypothesis is that these secrets are now (and perhaps always have been) a permanent feature of ethical life. That is, the secrets that most interest him are those that preserve (and in fact make possible) the diminished ethical life that is uneasily shared and haltingly negotiated by the characters he depicts.

These secrets persist as such with the tacit consent of both or all parties, each of whom agrees not to press the other(s) for full disclosure. And although these unspoken agreements may express an element of respect for the privacy of the other party, this is

not their primary function or *raison d'être*. Indeed, the secrets that most interest Coetzee are those that in different settings, or different relationships, might be deemed intolerable by one party or the other. In these alternative settings and relationships, presumably, the individuals involved would pursue or demand disclosure, even at the risk of shredding the intimacies that hang in the balance. In the setting depicted in *Disgrace*, however, these secrets are tolerable in part because no one involved is willing to challenge the *status quo*, even as the *status quo* is revealed to be far less stable and enduring than the characters are inclined to believe. The parties to this desultory social contract may complain and carry on, bicker and sulk, but no one stays focused for very long on what the other withholds. It is as if the point of these secrets, what we might identify as their (minimal) normative social function, is to allow individuals to reside at a desirable distance from one another, while accommodating harmless expenditures of transient passion and affect.<sup>1</sup>

Rather than enter into or demand relationships of genuine intimacy, the main characters in the novel *Disgrace* tend to negotiate staged relationships, in which their expressions of passion, loyalty, resolve, and intimacy are always to some extent inauthentic. This is most obviously true of Coetzee's protagonist, David Lurie, whose unchained narcissism sets the tone, as well as the ground rules, for his relationships with others. As we shall see in the next section, in fact, David has mastered the art of drawing unwitting accomplices into spectacles of his own design. But Coetzee's other characters are not obviously better off in this respect. With very few exceptions, they too inhabit their lives tentatively, cautiously, and only occasionally may be said to experience themselves as fully activated (and fully responsible) agents. Indeed, there is no denying the generally frayed condition of the ethical life that Coetzee dispassionately describes in the first half of the novel.

It is not simply the case, moreover, that Coetzee's characters are risk-averse in their pursuits of intimacy. They also are aware at some level that the volitional and affective resources available to them are in short supply. This means that they simply cannot afford to follow up on any demand for full disclosure that they otherwise might be inclined to lodge. As a result, they must content themselves with relationships and alliances embedded and textured with secrets, even though they know, or suspect, that they ought to want more for themselves. Their dissatisfactions, which, admittedly, are diffuse and inconstant, thus furnish the novel with a (suitably unstable) internal critical standpoint. Their lives are judged to be lacking not by appeal to a set of ideal, external criteria, but by appeal to their own discontents with a *status quo* they dare not challenge. Of course, this also means that relationships of avowed significance may end abruptly and mysteriously. This is often the case with David, who is serially incurious about the departures of "Soraya," Rosalind, Melanie, and Bev, respectively, despite their real and imagined importance for him. Reflexively reduced to extras in his self-indulgent passion play, they recede from the reader's view as quickly and unceremoniously as they were introduced. Finally, it is difficult to resist the conclusion that these secrets are at least partially compensatory in nature, inasmuch as they shore up a structure and shape that were formerly secured by other means and other forces.

The decay of their shared ethical life is sufficiently advanced that almost no one turns, overtly or covertly, to religion, which, in other times and places, might have been a default resource for those who lack meaning, direction, purpose, or connection. In the secular, post-theistic world described by Coetzee, religion almost never arises as an option to be considered and/or rejected, and it certainly holds no appeal for David himself. Throughout the novel, religion is not so much dismissed or ridiculed as it is ignored, forgotten, or consigned to a past to which no measurable nostalgia is attached. The only overtly religious character in the novel is Melanie's father, who recommends that David consider what God wants of and for him (Coetzee 1999, pp. 172–74). He does so, however, not out of Christ-like concern for David's soul, but in order to express, politely, his passive-aggressive disdain for the once "high and mighty" professor who preyed upon his daughter (Coetzee 1999, p. 38). And although it is possible to discern the rudiments of a post-theistic spirituality in the earthy, creaturely life favored by Lucy, Bev, and others on the Eastern Cape, their

proto-religious existence remains, like everything else in the new order, a work very much in progress. In the immediate aftermath of the “death of God,” in other words, religion is not acknowledged as a viable resource for the lost and wayward souls whom Coetzee is keen to track.

As a book of secrets, the novel *Disgrace* draws productively on a tradition of philosophical considerations of the ethical status and potentially ethical value of secrecy, lies, and silences. We are reminded here, for example of Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, in which the central character struggles to disseminate the secret teaching of eternal recurrence while simultaneously attempting to wrest from Life the secret of her affections. We are also reminded of Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling*, in which the pseudonymous narrator, he who is named for silence, struggles and largely fails to disclose the secret of Abraham’s terrifying, extra-ethical faith. Beckett’s influence is also evident, especially inasmuch as his protagonists, Vladimir and Estragon, are simultaneously vexed and buoyed by the secret—about which they are noticeably reluctant to inquire—pertaining to the unexplained delays of Godot’s anticipated arrival. We are also reminded, finally, of Kafka, whose beleaguered protagonists find themselves answerable for charges and allegations secretly lodged against them by shadowy juridical agencies, but who do not find within themselves the resolve needed to mount a sustained challenge. Like Josef K., who is distracted easily and often from his quest for justice (or exoneration), the main characters in the novel *Disgrace* are surprisingly pliant in their accommodation of the secrets that embed their social networks and intimate relationships. Moved only occasionally and artificially to expressions of outrage, these characters are mostly content to abide by, and navigate around, the secrets that allow them to live with others in the diminished capacity to which they are now accustomed.

Coetzee also joins these predecessors in adopting a broadly descriptive, or observational, approach to the practice of keeping secrets. Rather than simply stipulate or assert that this practice is unsavory, immoral, or otherwise ruinous, he is concerned to disclose this practice as a permanent, non-negotiable feature of ethical life in late modernity. Disinclined to motivate judgments of his characters or to guide his whiplashed readers toward a concluding lesson or insight, Coetzee silently accepts the burdens associated with witnessing the fraught condition of contemporary ethical life. The guiding insight here is not so much that everyone keeps secrets, but that everyone *must* keep secrets, in part to compensate for the depletion of their passions and the degradation of their vitality. As Coetzee’s narrator wishfully observes on David’s behalf, “Affection may not be love, but it is at least its cousin” (Coetzee 1999, p. 2), suggesting thereby that David’s capacity for affection places him sufficiently close to genuine *eros* to warrant his ongoing efforts in this all-important arena.<sup>2</sup>

Coetzee thus treats the practice of keeping secrets as an index not of pervasive immorality, but of a nearly desperate attempt to preserve the structure and rhythms of something resembling a shared ethical existence. We keep secrets, that is, as a way of remaining close (enough) to those for whom we cannot muster the prescribed expressions of love, affection, and attachment and, so, to maintain a baseline feeling of vitality in our admittedly diminished condition. In short, these secrets serve to root us in those relationships that we can afford neither to improve nor renounce. As a permanent feature of the landscape of ethical life in late modernity, the practice of keeping secrets both represents and constitutes the new normal.

Coetzee is particularly adept at mapping the irregular, ill-defined networks of routines, patterns, habits, and conventions that lend structure to ethical life and mediate the relationships of individuals striving, ambivalently, for contact and connection. He is also adept at probing these relationships for the dead zones that arise, inevitably, from the evacuation or dearth of affect that characterizes the condition of ethical life in late modernity. Indeed, Coetzee maintains an impressively disciplined resistance to gestures of unwarranted sentimentality, simplistic assumptions, and premature moralizations. He defers indefinitely the prescriptive moment in which an author (or reader) is called to deliver a distinctly ethical evaluation. Rather than stand in summary judgment of the os-

tensibly failed relationships he describes, Coetzee is concerned to discover the unexpected and underappreciated ways in which these relationships continue to shape the ethical life shared by the characters in question. Time and again, he shows or reminds us that the moral and psychological categories we are most confidently inclined to wield are as yet hopelessly blunt (and increasingly obsolete) instruments of analysis.

## 2. From Scandal to Spectacle

As is his wont, David Lurie personalizes the crisis at hand, placing his waning potency at the center of a dusky cosmos. Having perfected the routine of cycling through the motions associated with teaching, courtship, and romantic love, manufacturing on cue the prescribed outward expressions of passionate engagement, he is suddenly aware of a decline in his powers of attraction. Subtly but surely, he has become a performer who is no longer worthy of his signature performances. If he were more reflective, of course, he might wonder about his habit of goading seemingly consensual and physically pleasurable relationships into something else, something more, than he claims to need. Despite avowing his satisfaction with his arrangement with "Soraya," for example, he cannot leave things as they are. Seemingly unable to help himself, he violates their tacit agreement and effectively chases her away. As the end of their arrangement suggests, in fact, he is now compelled to expose the secrets of others in a self-destructive pursuit of excitement, vitality, and relevance.<sup>3</sup> In his decline, David appears to be haunted by the ghostly residue of human longing. He cannot make himself happy, and he cannot quit his quest for the happiness he cannot have. He senses that the end is near for the way of life to which he has become accustomed, and he is not yet sure how to respond.

David initiates a disastrous, unwanted affair with a young student, whom he works very hard to reinvent as a woman whom any real man (or any real poet) would risk everything to possess. But Melanie Isaacs was not about to be possessed, and certainly not by David Lurie. Hoping to be rid of him and the suffocating role in which he had cast her, Melanie withdraws from his class and refuses to return his calls. She does not say why, and he is predictably incurious about her apparent change of heart.

The emerging details of this affair confirm that David has lost his bearings in the only arena that currently interests him. We are told that he has pursued (many) other women in the past, luring them into the fantasy narratives he has concocted for his own enjoyment. According to Coetzee's narrator, moreover, at least some of these women have found something worthwhile in their consensual encounters with David. In the case of his idealization of Melanie Isaacs, however, he has crossed a line. His heavy-handed efforts at seduction exceeded the familiar bounds of courtship and were in fact coercive. Despite warning signs aplenty, he misread the situation and subjected an unwilling recipient to his unwanted affections.<sup>4</sup> Although David judges himself to have stopped short of rape, other evaluations of his behavior are not so sanguine.<sup>5</sup> As one member of the committee of inquiry insists, he is guilty of, and ought to be made to confess to, "abuse of a young woman," which, the inquisitor insists, belongs to a "long history of exploitation" (Coetzee 1999, p. 53).

Compounding his liability, he falsifies some grade and attendance forms, which predictably draws the attention of university administrators. These and related missteps prompt David's ex-wife, Rosalind, to declare what others are likely to have concluded as well: David "should have known" that the affair would turn out badly (Coetzee 1999, p. 45). That he did not know, or did not care, only heightens the concern that he has become a threat to himself and others.

As the scandal escalates, the typical complaints are lodged and the typical accommodations are proposed. Rather than accept the mildly embarrassing slap on the wrist prescribed by the chair of the committee of inquiry, David flatly refuses to comply. Pretending to be outraged by their treatment of him, he presents himself as an aggrieved romantic hero, brought low by a meddling, resentful mob touting the iron discipline of bourgeois norms and conventions (Kossew 2003, pp. 151–69).

What Coetzee understands, of course, is that David's narcissism is also his most effective resource for managing (and, ultimately, for leveraging) the scandal surrounding his affair with Melanie Isaacs. Rather than allow himself to become a casualty of the process, David creates a *spectacle*—a *Schauspiel* in Nietzsche's sense of that term—at the center of which he installs himself. As the scandal escalates into full-blown disgrace, David's narcissism furnishes his colleagues and peers with the titillating distraction they all seek. His account of the affair with Melanie, in which he casts himself as an involuntary (and unrepentant) "servant of Eros" (Coetzee 1999, p. 52), is both ludicrous and melodramatic, but it suffices to secure the advantage he seeks.

As the administrative inquiry proceeds, David assents unconditionally to Melanie's written account of his bad behavior. He does so, moreover, without even hearing or reading her statement, much less objecting to it or offering an alternative account of the relevant facts. And although his willingness to take full, unqualified responsibility for the scandal takes the members of the review board by surprise, it also invites them to focus their enmity and blame entirely on him. His narcissism has the effect, in short, of recruiting them into the spectacle he has orchestrated. Although they formally preside over the administrative inquiry, holding his reputation and career in their hands, he is in full control of the spectacle he has staged. Catching them off guard, he prompts them to perform the lines and emotions that will elicit from him the response he wishes to produce. As if on cue, they eagerly play the roles assigned to them, in part because doing so allows them, if only for the moment, to dispel the fog of their own malaise. Predictably, Melanie Isaacs is soon forgotten by all parties, virtually erased from the inquiry conducted, supposedly, on her behalf. This administrative hearing is all about them.

How does David draw them into his spectacle? First of all, it must be said that he puts on a good show. As Nietzsche brazenly opined of Richard Wagner, David may be a decadent, but he knows how to *throw* an audience (Nietzsche 1967, pp. 167–69). The spectacle he creates is sufficiently riveting, in fact, that we may be inclined to revise our assessment of the creative aspirations that will occupy him, or so he anticipates, in his post-scandal afterlife. His staging of the administrative review spectacle suggests that the opera he envisions as his final testament, devoted to Byron's mournful lover Teresa Guiccioli, may not lie beyond his reach after all. Second, he gives them exactly what they want: He inflates the tawdry scandal surrounding him into a spectacle of disgrace. He thereby provides his willing spectators with an apt target for their wrath and indignation, a target whose unrepentant fall imbues them with a sense of relative moral superiority. They in turn provide him with the opportunity he seeks to put an end to the silent agony of his slow decline. Rather than continue to stumble through his remaindered existence, he prompts them to pronounce the academic equivalent of the death penalty. In a sense, that is, he fakes his own death, falling precipitously from the state of grace that was never his to claim.

Third, his narcissism grants them temporary relief from their own share in the discontents of the decaying ethical life they share. Predictably, they are transformed and revitalized in the process. When they hear his account of the scandal, which none of them actually believes, they quickly morph from dispirited administrative drones into ferocious guardians of justice and propriety. As he debases himself, they relish their rise in relative moral standing. Even as he defies their authority to stand in judgment of him—which is itself a response to their eager relocation to the moral high ground—they look down on him with contempt.

One member of the committee, Farodia Rassool, goes so far as to refuse David's unconditional allocution, insisting that the sincerity of his statement is suspect, as evidenced by his failure to acknowledge his "abuse of a young woman" (Coetzee 1999, p. 53). While she is certainly entitled to question his sincerity, the inner life of David Lurie is not (supposed to be) the business of this committee. Overplaying the winning hand she has been dealt, Farodia apparently wishes to compound his disgrace with an additional dollop of public humiliation. Although the larger inquiry she seeks is perhaps warranted, especially



if additional victims are prepared to come forward, she has mistaken the committee of inquiry for a more powerful office in the juridical apparatus. Her apparent interest in extracting an expression of contrition, as if David were a sinner seeking absolution, also speaks to a more general wish to imbue the committee of inquiry with a religious (or crypto-religious) authority. In the aftermath of the death of God, Nietzsche cautioned, we should expect His “shadows” to flicker and play on the walls of those “caves” that desperate human beings create for themselves as they search for adequate meaning and direction (Nietzsche 1974, p. 167).

As David later explains to Lucy, by way of a labored, elliptical analogy, he was compelled to stake out an uncompromising position at the hearing because his inquisitors, and Farodia in particular, were not content simply to investigate the allegations and recommend an appropriate punishment. According to David, they also were determined to “punish [him] for following [his] instincts,” precisely so that he might “hate [his] own nature” and, eventually, undertake to punish himself (Coetzee 1999, p. 90).<sup>6</sup> While he was perfectly willing to concede that he had crossed a line with Melanie (in addition to falsifying the attendance and grade forms), he refused to despise himself for having been a fool for love. Hence, his insistence on being known and punished not as the serial predator Farodia made him out to be, but as a captive “servant of Eros.” That he concludes this analogy by admitting to Lucy “that desire is a burden we could well do without” (Coetzee 1999, p. 90) would seem to confirm that his resolve in the face of Farodia’s (supposed) demand for sincere contrition was artificially amplified in the moment.

As drawn by Coetzee, we should note, David lands somewhere between believing that he was a “servant of Eros” and wishing that it were so. As is often the case with David, the issue here is that his understanding of himself is dependent upon the intensity of the vitality at his disposal in any given moment. On various occasions throughout the novel, he is aware not only of his efforts to amplify his animal vitality as he aspires to a higher erotic station, but also of the increasingly frequent failure of these efforts. When dining with Rosalind, as we shall see, he makes no mention of his service to Eros, and he in fact declines, when asked, to say that he loved Melanie. Having incited the righteous indignation of his inquisitors, however, he responds in turn with his own display of outrage at what he correctly interprets as their administrative over-reach. Flush with a righteous indignation of his own, he very well may believe *in this moment* that he had been pressed into service by Eros. No longer familiar on a consistent basis with the kind of robust, meaning-conferring, identity-defining beliefs to which he boldly lays claim, he judges himself to have been sufficiently erotic to merit the *nom de scene* he has chosen for himself. As the intensity of the moment fades, of course, so will the confidence he invests in the defense he has presented of himself.

Fourth, David’s performance invites his inquisitors to inhabit more fully the allegiances and commitments they are inclined, if not entitled, to claim for themselves. At least for the moment, the administrative network in which they are embedded may be said to function properly, at least in the (limited) sense that it delivers procedural justice. For now, they actually may believe that the crisis at hand is limited to David’s narcissistic response to the scandal he has created. As such, they may take pride in the institution they serve and their own roles in delivering justice to an aggrieved party. Having taken the bait he dangled before them, they have become willing participants in the spectacle he has staged. By dint of his performance, David has given them *hope*, which rallies them to a passionate existence of commitment and integrity. To be sure, however, the passion he has stirred in them is born of an artificially enhanced feeling of power and control, which will fade in due course, as will the hope it has temporarily buoyed. For the moment, however, David has given them what they want and need, and they have complied in turn, albeit unwittingly, with his wish to be disgraced.

This is not to suggest, of course, that they do not have a point in condemning him, or that Melanie was not harmed by his careless, unwanted intrusions. Coetzee’s insight here pertains to the amplification of the scandal and the willingness of his inquisitors to

participate in the ensuing spectacle. As a result of David's orchestration of the spectacle, they may discharge their obligation to protect his victim *while also* heaping their scorn upon a disgraced colleague. As we have seen, doing so provides them with a welcome distraction from the void at the center of their lives.

As we are now in a position to understand, the spectacle in question is an artificial construct, which produces in its architect the surge of vitality (or passion) he needs in order to believe about himself—and, so, to make others believe about him—what he ordinarily would understand to lie (well) beyond the reach of his volitional resources (Conway 2019, pp. 337–42). What this means, in the context of *Disgrace*, is that David cannot muster a credible claim to the status (and related defense) he wishes to assert—namely, that he was seized as a “servant of Eros”—without the antagonistic prompting of his appointed inquisitors. He needs their help to talk himself into a belief to which he is not ordinarily entitled. The spectacle he constructs is thus designed to seize control of the administrative hearing, to bait the committee of inquiry into judging him, and to goad the committee members into the kind of bureaucratic over-reach that will elicit from him the display of righteous indignation that he cannot manufacture on his own.

Had David agreed to offer the proper apologies and issue the prescribed statements of contrition, disappearing for a while on an unscheduled (but hastily arranged) leave of absence from his teaching duties, he might have saved his career. What his inquisitors do not understand, however, is that David does not want to save his career. He wants to end his career and to do so in a way that absolves him of all further responsibility. He believes that his disgrace—even though it is staged—will confer upon him the status and privileges of a kind of afterlife, in which no one will ever expect anything more of him. He will be free to come and go as he pleases without interruption or attachment. He will be free, or so he imagines, to complete the opera that he envisions as a fitting final testament for a disciple of Wordsworth and an admirer of Byron. As we shall see in the following section, this plan evinces a madness that others largely fail to identify, much less address, as such.

### 3. The Genesis of the Spectacle

His fading potency notwithstanding, David still possesses a modicum of charm, which some women may choose to enjoy. In the particular case of his ex-wife, Rosalind, his appeal arises from his willingness to serve as a defenseless recipient of her mockery and scorn. Their conversation over dinner, wherein she berates him for his various lapses and excesses, suggests that there may be limits to his predation, confinements in which he may be rendered harmless or pathetic or even entertaining.

The key here, I take it, is that Rosalind is in a position to identify and deflect his predatory impulses. She knows that David still seeks her attention, even at the cost of the insults she hurls his way, and she eagerly exploits this weakness in him. (We do not know Rosalind's last name, but she appears to be “lury” in her own right.) Communicating across the distance on which she insists, they consent to the mutual deceit and manipulation that sustain the vitality of their post-marital relationship. In his conversation over dinner with Rosalind, in fact, we may find the origins of his decision to cast himself as an involuntary “servant of Eros,” which is the precise indiscretion to which he proudly admits his guilt.

Let us examine the relevant passage in detail. Just prior to the public phase of David's scandal, he dines with Rosalind. The narrator describes them as having become “friends again, of a sort” (Coetzee 1999, p. 45). Of what sort? “War veterans,” the narrator immediately clarifies (Coetzee 1999, p. 45). (The common auto-correct of *marital* to *martial* is welcome in this instance.) In this most recent version of their evolving post-marital relationship, David craves the familiarity of Rosalind's attention and companionship, while understanding that she must (and will) maintain a healthy distance from his ruinous affections. In order to accommodate her need for emotional distance, he willingly plays the fool, allowing her to respond in “passionate recrimination” to his public humiliation (Coetzee 1999, p. 45). She is cruel to him, but her cruelty is also the balm that renews their wounded intimacy. She is the

first to describe his scandal as *disgraceful* (Coetzee 1999, p. 45), which is important for reasons we will consider in due course:

*She ignores the question. "Was she in love with you? Did you jilt her?"*

*"No. Neither."*

*"Then why this complaint?"*

*"Who knows? She didn't confide in me. There was a battle of some kind going on behind the scenes that I wasn't privy to. There was a jealous boyfriend. There were indignant parents. She must have crumpled in the end. I was taken completely by surprise."*

*"You should have known, David. You are too old to be meddling with other people's children. You really should have expected the worst. Anyway, it's all very demeaning. Really."*

*"You haven't asked whether I love her. Aren't you supposed to ask that as well?"*

*"Very well. Are you in love with this young woman who is dragging your name through the mud?"*

*"She isn't responsible. Don't blame her."*

*"Don't blame her! Whose side are you on? Of course I blame her! I blame you and I blame her. The whole thing is disgraceful from beginning to end. Disgraceful and vulgar too. And I'm not sorry for saying so."*

*In the old days he would, at this point, have stormed out. But tonight he does not. They have grown thick skins, he and Rosalind, against each other. (Coetzee 1999, p. 45)*

When asked by Rosalind about the scandal, David initially insisted that he "was taken completely by surprise" by the complaint filed on Melanie's behalf. Refusing to accept this familiar bit of nonsense, Rosalind countered that he "should have known" that the affair would end badly, and that he in fact "really should have expected the worst" (Coetzee 1999, p. 45). Abandoning his disingenuous effort to plead ignorance, David tries another tack, steering the conversation toward his favorite topic: himself. By prompting Rosalind to ask if he loves Melanie, he succeeds in eliciting her negative opinion of his *inamorata*. When he immediately rushes to Melanie's defense, insisting that "she isn't responsible" and thus deserves no blame, Rosalind apportions blame to both of them for their "disgraceful" and "vulgar" affair.

Several elements of this exchange bear noting. First of all, David displays his eponymous knack for luring others into discussions and situations that he may leverage to his advantage. And although Rosalind proves herself his equal in this arena, there is much more at stake here for David. Second, it is Rosalind who insists on treating Melanie as a responsible adult and, so, as a blameworthy party to the affair and contributor to the subsequent scandal. Although David defends Melanie, he does so, characteristically, by denying her agency, as if she were but a helpless waif in the grip of an erotic vortex (McDunnah 2009, pp. 223–24). What David learns from this exchange is that his insistence on Melanie's innocence is likely to elicit from an interlocutor—in this case, Rosalind—a forceful assertion of Melanie's share in the blame to be assigned. Third, David does not answer the question he prompted Rosalind to pose to him, which perhaps confirms his ulterior motive in goading her. In any event, his answer is no longer relevant, if it ever was, for he now spies an intriguing path forward. Rosalind has gifted him with a representative outsider's view of him and of Melanie, and she has inadvertently named the strategy that may yet extricate him from the mess he has made. This exchange is also noteworthy, finally, for what David does *not* say to Rosalind: he does not yet insist, as he does at his administrative hearing, that he was acting as a "servant of Eros".

Whether he considered himself "disgraceful" prior to this conversation is not known, but from this point forward he endeavors to earn more generally the judgment Rosalind has volunteered. In his newly pronounced state of disgrace, after all, he has stirred in her a passion, revelatory of connection and concern, which excites and pleases him. His account of his affair with Melanie, though patently manipulative, has succeeded not only in rallying Rosalind to his "side," as she puts it, but also in confirming the strength of her



attachment to him. According to Rosalind, moreover, what is “disgraceful” here it not simply his decline—as confirmed by his exceedingly poor judgment and subsequent bad behavior—but “the whole thing,” responsibility for which she apportions to both parties. By claiming to take full responsibility for the scandal, David has elicited in return a partial exoneration, a passionate defense, and an unsympathetic response to the victim of his predation. With his ex-wife suspended in what he hopes is a permanent orbit around him, readily accessible but permanently unavailable, David sets out to make his conjectured disgrace a reality.

He does so, it bears noting, at the subsequent prompting of none other than Rosalind, who phones him the next morning to alert him to the appearance of a newspaper article in which he is identified as under investigation “on [a] sex charge” (Coetzee 1999, p. 46). “Read it for yourself,” she demands (Coetzee 1999, p. 46), which he does, taking note in particular of the paper’s passing (and incongruous) reference to his book on Wordsworth. It is from Wordsworth—and, so, from Rosalind—that he derives the defense he will present at his administrative hearing: “Blest be the infant babe. No outcast he. Blest be the babe” (Coetzee 1999, p. 46). At the suggestion of these borrowed lines, David resolves to parlay his disgrace into the blessed (=graced) state of a newborn babe. He has decided, in other words, to arrange for himself a second innocence, a clean slate, a mulligan and do-over so thorough that he eventually may assert his paternal claim—albeit unconvincingly—upon the daughter he has neglected. In order to do so, however, he must double down on his disgrace, shedding all expectations and responsibilities along the way. Before he can be born again as an “infant babe,” he must descend to hell. Having already gathered significant momentum in this direction, he seizes the reins of his decline.

#### 4. Nietzsche’s Madman

Nietzsche’s most influential treatment of “the death of God” appears in the original 1882 edition of *The Gay Science*. In Section 125 of this book, his readers are introduced to the manic figure of “the Madman” [*der tolle Mensch*], who was modeled loosely on the Cynic philosopher Diogenes of Sinope (c. 404–323 BCE).

According to an unnamed narrator, who repeats an unconfirmed rumor or story, the Madman entered the marketplace, lantern in hand, ostensibly in search of God. We are put in mind here of Diogenes, who was said to have similarly searched by the superfluous light of a lantern for either a virtuous man or someone who would fit the definition of a man (Laertius 1931, p. 43). The Madman thereby initiates a confidence game: Having claimed to have lost someone important to him, he succeeds in provoking his audience to respond with an intimation of their own—namely, that they do not believe (or wish not to believe) in God. (This is important, as we shall see, for unbelievers are not likely to see themselves as the murderers of God.) To the Madman’s (feigned) surprise, they respond by mocking the God whom he pretends to seek: “Has he got lost? asked one. Did he lose his way like a child? asked another” (Nietzsche 1974, p. 181).

After initially enduring the mockery directed toward him, the Madman suddenly turns on his unsuspecting audience:

*Whither is God? . . . I will tell you. We have killed him—you and I. All of us are his murderers [Mörder] . . . God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him.*  
(Nietzsche 1974, p. 181)

Having succeeded in claiming the attention of his surprised auditors, the Madman proceeds to regale them with a harrowing preview of their post-theistic future. First, he levels against them (and himself) the allegation that they have committed a crime to which they are not equal. In murdering God, he explains, they (and he) have asserted an illegitimate, unearned claim to independence and sovereignty. Second, he declares that they (and he) are collectively responsible for the grim aftermath of their impetuous deed, even if they are as yet unprepared to accept this responsibility.

As we shall see, in fact, the Madman’s jeremiad is meant to establish an ingenious division of post-theistic labor: Although he holds his co-conspirators responsible for

cleaning up the mess he and they (allegedly) have made of the recently decentered cosmos, he holds himself responsible *only* for apprising his accomplices of the new obligations they have unwittingly acquired as a result. Having arrogated to himself the role of the doomsaying prophet, he is responsible only for detecting and naming the source of the distress that now imperils humanity. Beyond and independent of this limited role, he makes no effort to propose or enact a practical response to the death of God.

In response to the Madman's jeremiad, the onlookers he has harangued predictably recoil from the scene. Sensing that his allegation is not simply part of his shtick, they disengage from the Madman, moving on (perhaps) to sample the less disturbing curiosities available to them in the marketplace. Having failed to persuade his audience to accept responsibility for their share in the supposed crime, the Madman smashes his lantern to bits, insisting that he is unable as yet to complete his prescribed share of the post-theistic labor that now must take place: "I have come too early," he concludes. "This deed is still more distant from them than the most distant stars—and yet they have done it themselves" (Nietzsche 1974, p. 182; Owen 2007, pp. 51–52).

Here, we should note, however, that the Madman has arrived "too early" only if we are prepared to accept *his* determination of the aforementioned division of post-theistic labor. That his role is restricted to alerting others to their share in the alleged crime is by no means obvious or even coherent by any determination other than his own. He is free, after all, to modify his marketplace performance (*à la* Zarathustra) or even to initiate the compensatory measures that he insists are now incumbent upon the murderers of God. He is free, in fact, to begin the process of elevating humankind (or its highest exemplars) to a level commensurate with the deed he and the others supposedly have committed. But he does nothing of the sort.

As I wish to suggest, this is in fact the point of his marketplace performance and the confidence game in which he has enrolled his audience. Although he appears to take responsibility for the crime, volunteering his share of the guilt in (what he insists is) a collective offense, he does so in order to arrange for himself an extremely limited role in the post-theistic labor that he acknowledges as his (and their) acquired responsibility. Indeed, if he has arrived "too early" to discharge the sole obligation he has assigned to himself, nothing more can or should be expected of him until his accomplices are prepared to accept responsibility—as determined by him—for their role in the crime.

Hence, his exaggerated pique of resignation as he theatrically hurls his lantern and extinguishes its once-promising flame. Protesting (too much) the obtuseness (or oblivion) of his supposed accomplices, he pretends to be perturbed by the time it will take for this heinous "deed" to land on the doorstep of their consciousness. In fact, however, he is relieved by their response to his jeremiad and grateful for the reprieve his confidence game has granted him. As he sees (=rationalizes) it, there is nothing for him to do until his accomplices are prepared to hear the truth and accept their apportioned share of the responsibility. Inasmuch as they are not the murderers of God, of course, they are not likely ever to satisfy this (carefully selected) criterion—unless, of course, they succumb to the madness he so insistently peddles.

As he awaits a reckoning that is likely never to arrive, how does the Madman occupy himself? Rather than attempt to atone for his supposed crime, or to prepare himself and humanity in general for life after the death of God, the Madman turns his attention to those who still believe in God and continue to visit His houses of worship. In vivid contrast to his performance in the marketplace, the Madman subjects this very different audience to an intentionally disruptive *requiem aeternum deo*. When called to account for his intrusions, he explains himself by suggesting that the churches in question are nothing more than the "tombs and sepulchers of God" (Nietzsche 1974, p. 182). Apparently convinced that his initial message-*cum*-confession would be wasted on these devout believers, he makes no mention either of murder, accomplices, his own guilt, or the chaos he and his co-conspirators supposedly have unleashed. For all this audience knows, in fact, he is nothing more than an unstable, petty troublemaker. It would not occur to them that he

might dare (or have dared) to murder anyone, much less the God whose houses he, too, continues to visit. Indeed, his tiresome antics would hardly put them (or us) in mind of a brazen criminal.

As this contrast is perhaps meant to suggest, the Madman's marketplace performance was intended (and, at least initially, received) as a *spectacle* [*Schauspiel*]. He put on a show for the assembled crowd, assuming (and subsequently confirming) that his onlookers were inclined (and in fact proud) to identify themselves as "non-believers" (Nietzsche 1974, p. 181). Pretending to be mad, by dint of his clever homage to Diogenes, whom Plato dismissed as a "Socrates gone mad" (Laertius 1931, p. 55), he enrolled them in the unfolding spectacle and named them as his accomplices. The recoil he provoked was precisely what he wanted from them, for it confirmed what he needed most of all to believe about himself—namely, that he had arrived "too early" to persuade them of the guilt they shared with him. As a result, he was free to confess his own share in the crime without accepting any responsibility for its aftermath. His duty was (and forever would remain) to inform others of their complicity in the murder of God. Having tried and failed to do so in the marketplace, he treated his (contrived) respite as an opportunity to revert in good conscience to his old routines, which included his juvenile efforts to harass true believers. Even though everything had changed, as he asserted in his jeremiad, everything remained the same for him. He would gladly spring into action, or so he promised, but he could do so effectively only when receptive audiences were willing to admit their complicity in the murder of God (Conway 2013, pp. 59–66).

As we are now in a position to understand, the Madman's performance in the marketplace serves as a useful precedent to (and model for) the spectacle created by David Lurie. Much as the Madman preys upon "non-believers" who were simply "standing around together" (Nietzsche 1974, p. 181), so David performs for his University colleagues in a predictably dreary administrative setting. In both cases, moreover, individuals seeking entertainment and/or distraction—the Madman's audience and the members of the committee of inquiry—reveal themselves to be hungry for a spectacle and ripe for the confidence game it would sponsor. (That the late modern University has become a marketplace of sorts, frequented by the "flies" identified (and loathed) by Zarathustra (Nietzsche 1982, pp. 163–66), is a canny insight on the part of Coetzee and his wily protagonist.) Like the onlookers who heckle the Madman as he searches in vain for the missing God, David's inquisitors appear to be, and certainly feel themselves to be, in full control of the situation. As it turns out, however, they are mistaken. They are playing roles scripted for them by their seemingly hapless antagonist, and they are already enrolled in the confidence game he has initiated.

I do not mean to suggest here that "the Madman" is simply the *nom de scene* of the unnamed *Schauspieler* whom we encounter in GS 125. Although it is true that he pretends to be mad while performing in the marketplace, his antics subsequent to his theatrical toss of the lantern indicate that he is in fact mad, whether he knows it or not. In other words, the madness to which he pretends in the marketplace is itself symptomatic of the madness that he neither chooses, controls, performs, nor recognizes as such. By way of acknowledging his *nom de scene*, I shall refer to this more basic, as-yet-undiagnosed madness as the *insanity* to which he has been driven by his untimely insight into "the death of God." He is sufficiently discombobulated by what he believes the "death of God" will (or must) entail that he pre-emptively confesses to a world-historical crime that he did not commit (Heidegger 1977, pp. 95–98).

What he gains in return is the (relative) peace of mind that attends his understanding of himself as having forfeited any chance of forgiveness or redemption. As far as the Madman is concerned, it is better to be known (and reviled) as the murderer of God than to face up to (what he understands to be) the grave implications of the death of God. In Nietzschean terms, the Madman secures his optimal experience of freedom and power by transforming himself into the self-confessed murderer of God. Rather than suffer the

identity-voiding dislocations he believes are in the offing, the Madman doubles down on a contrived identity which, he believes, will brook no revision even amid the chaos to come.

The Madman thus instantiates an extreme case of the psychological distress that is familiar to Nietzsche's faithful readers. In his masterful account of the origins of the "bad conscience" and "guilt," for example, Nietzsche offers the following sketch of a soul turned against itself as it searches desperately for a sense of identity that would deliver the desired experience of freedom and power:

*In this psychical cruelty there resides an insanity of the will [Willens-Wahnsinn] which is absolutely unexampled: the will of man to find himself guilty and reprehensible to a degree that can never be atoned for . . . Oh this insane [wahnsinnige], pathetic beast—man! What ideas he has, what unnaturalness, what paroxysms of nonsense, what bestiality of thought erupts as soon as he is prevented just a little from being a beast in deed! . . .* (Nietzsche 1989b, p. 93)

That the "insanity" in question is identified as an affliction of the "will" confirms that the Madman has, of necessity, elected a self-destructive—but temporarily vivifying—strategy for claiming an identity and securing a robust experience of agency. Unable to galvanize his will by pursuing projects, goals, aims, or tasks that would oblige him to navigate a godless cosmos, he attains the optimal experience of freedom and power that is available to him by finding himself guilty of an unforgivable crime. Fearful that he cannot muster a will for the post-theistic future he has prophesied, he chains himself to the present—and, so, to the past that produced it—before it slips away (Pippin 2021, pp. 35–40). He thus plants himself on the threshold of what Nietzsche calls the "will to nothingness," which is the will never to will again (Nietzsche 1989b, pp. 162–63; Conway 2008, pp. 100–2, 147–52).

In addition to exhibiting the "insanity of the will" diagnosed above, the Madman also puts us in mind of a related type of psychological distress, which is expertly diagnosed by Zarathustra in his speech "On the Pale Criminal":

*An image [Bild] made this pale man pale. He was equal to his deed when he did it; but he could not bear its image after it was done. Now he always saw himself as the doer of one deed. Madness [Wahnsinn] I call this: the exception now became the essence for him. A chalk streak stops a hen; the stroke that he himself struck stopped his poor reason: madness after the deed I call this.* (Nietzsche 1982, p. 150)

As we have seen, the Madman presents (but does not name) himself as a "pale criminal." On the one hand, or so he claims, he and his unconfessed accomplices dared not only to raise their fists to God, but also to follow through on their wish to be rid of His incessant surveillance. As the single defining deed for which the Madman would forever be known, his supposed role in the murder of God thus describes the chalk circle in which he would allow himself to be imprisoned. On the other hand, he has since paled before the enormity of what he claims to have done. As his jeremiad confirms, the aftershocks of his supposed "deed" outstrip the volitional resources at his disposal. According to him, it now falls to unnamed others, whom he improbably identifies as his co-conspirators, to take responsibility for the aftermath of his (and, supposedly, their) impetuous "deed." As a self-confessed "pale criminal," that is, the Madman cannot be expected to bear any share of the responsibility for responding to the crises his defining "deed" has allegedly triggered.

The devastating flash of insight that drove the Madman into the insanity that his marketplace performance temporarily masks is conveyed by the teaching of the "death of God," with which Nietzsche is both closely associated and popularly identified. Although this teaching is widely understood as a provocative endorsement of radical atheism, Nietzsche is more centrally concerned to document the incipient and systemic disintegration of a formerly regnant (i.e., meaning-conferring) network of interlocking beliefs and values.<sup>7</sup> According to Nietzsche, the "event" of the "death of God" may be traced to the historical and cultural developments that presided over the rise and success of modern science in late modern European culture (Nietzsche 1974, pp. 279–80). As the seat of cultural authority has shifted from religion to science, late modern humanity (or European culture as its

proxy) has eagerly prepared itself to “sacrifice God for the nothing” (Nietzsche 1989a, p. 67).<sup>8</sup> Emboldened by the impressive explanatory power of modern science and weary of the diminished state of contemporary theism, late modern humanity has embarked upon a withdrawal of its familiar allegiance to God while attempting to derive its meaning, purpose, and identity exclusively from the progress of modern science.

The problem, as Nietzsche proceeds to explain (and as the Madman correctly intuit), is that modern science finds nothing remarkable or extraordinary either in humanity itself or in its extra-scientific achievements. Nothing in which humanity has traditionally taken pride—e.g., its freedom, creativity, will, ensoulment, virtue, piety, divine favor, etc.—is now believed to pass scientific muster. Hence, the (previously undiagnosed) existential crisis suffered by the Madman: he realizes that the inevitable “sacrifice [of] God for the nothing” is likely to deprive humanity of its only remaining sources of pride and self-respect. Indeed, if the God whose unmerited love has sustained us is summarily dismissed, exchanged for the “nothing” (Nietzsche 1989a, p. 67), what sources and residues of meaning are we likely to retain? Rather than endure his existential crisis—which, according to Nietzsche, may prove to be a successful strategy for *some* late modern human beings (Nietzsche 1989a, p. 68)—the Madman admits his guilt and clings to it as a drowning man clutches a life preserver.

His insistence on being known as the “murderer of God” thus speaks to the depth of his distress and despair. Rather than assess his prospects for securing meaning in a godless cosmos, experimenting if necessary with novel sources of value and identity, he memorializes his share in divine love by presenting himself as—and believing himself to be—the murderer of the God who loved him. The status he thereby secures for himself is meant to prove that he was at one time a worthy recipient of divine love. The prospect of navigating a godless cosmos has driven him insane, which is why he orchestrates the disgrace he has arranged for himself as a marketplace performer.

## 5. Diagnosing the Madness of the Madman

That the Madman is not entirely credible in the role to which readers typically assign him—namely, as a reliable spokesman or mouthpiece for Nietzsche—has been noted by several scholars. As Robert Pippin observes, for example,

*It would seem that Nietzsche is trying most of all to draw critical attention to, rather than express or identify with, the “melancholic” tone, both of the announcement and perhaps of the coming modernist culture of melancholy, the tone appropriate to the belief that a kind of death has occurred, that we were responsible, and that this death results only in some unbearable, frightening absence. (Pippin 2010, pp. 49–50)*

In a similar vein, David Owen maintains that

*The Gay Science 125 presents a parable of (a failure of) enlightenment [by means of which Nietzsche] calls for an enlightening of the Enlightenment . . . The madman has moved his audience from the comfort of laughter to an astonished state of silence—and this is not nothing—but he has not elicited the response of recognition of the need for reorientation that he sought and seeks. His activity as Aufklärer is a failure . . . that, as Aufklärer, the madman is constrained to explain. (Owen 2007, pp. 54–55)*

In Nietzsche’s expanded 1886 edition of *The Gay Science*, wherein he revisits the teaching of the “death of God,” he appears to endorse a similarly skeptical reception of the Madman. While acknowledging the “long plenitude and sequence of breakdown, destruction, ruin, and cataclysm that is now impending,” Nietzsche wonders

*[W]ho could guess enough of it today to be compelled to play the teacher and advance proclaimer of this monstrous logic of terror, the prophet of a gloom and an eclipse of the sun whose like has probably never yet occurred on earth . . . (Nietzsche 1974, p. 279)*

The Madman ventured just such a guess, as we are now in a position to understand, because playing this particular role allowed him to postpone indefinitely the difficult work involved in formulating his own response to the death of God. Rather than determine in real time what this unprecedented “event” means for him, perhaps even surprising himself



in the process, he settles instinctively on the meaning that will ensure for him a familiar (if limited) experience of freedom and power. Although the meaning he thereby claims for himself is an index of his insanity, it is preferable in his fevered estimation to the uncertainty that he foresees for all those whose ties to the dead God are less permanent than his own.

As Nietzsche proceeds to make clear, he and his fellow “firstlings and premature births of the coming century” are advantageously situated to “guess at” what the Madman claims to know (Nietzsche 1974, p. 279), but they are not tempted to present themselves as teachers or prophets of gloom. Having grasped that the “death of God” comprises a slowly unfolding “event,” the meaning of which remains unknown to them, they realize that any “guess” they might hazard would be uninformed and premature. Unlike the Madman, moreover, they have no interest either in holding forth in the marketplace or in volunteering to teach the intractable “multitude.” That they refuse the recognition available to them in the marketplace (or from the “multitude”) is in fact evidence of their sanity.

Unlike the Madman, moreover, they cannot pretend to tremble before the “approaching gloom,” for they find themselves “without any worry and fear for [themselves]” (Nietzsche 1974, pp. 279–80). Indeed, the “meaning of [their] cheerfulness [Heiterkeit]” lies in their hopeful anticipation of the opportunities that might arise in the aftermath of the “death of God,” which, to this point, they find tolerable and even exciting (Nietzsche 1974, p. 279).<sup>9</sup> Unlike the Madman, that is, they find within themselves a robust will for the post-theistic future they expect to face. As Nietzsche explains in *Beyond Good and Evil*, the “sacrifice [of] God for the nothing” may in fact allow for the rise of *another* ideal, that of

*the most high-spirited, alive, and world-affirming human being who has not only come to terms and learned to get along with whatever was and is, but who wants to have what was and is repeated into all eternity, shouting insatiably da capo . . .*

(Nietzsche 1989a, p. 68)

Granted, the alternative ideal described here is not for everyone. As the example of the Madman confirms, some/most human beings would (or will) prefer a life of self-orchestrated disgrace to the affirmative ideal that Nietzsche has so optimistically sketched in this passage (Conway 2010, pp. 125–32).

It may be clear by now that I do not regard the Madman as speaking, simply and straightforwardly, for Nietzsche (Conway 2010, pp. 122–25). Like Nietzsche, to be sure, the Madman anticipates the inevitable “death of God” and foresees the calamities that are likely to follow in the aftermath of this “event.” And although the Madman is not entirely wrong to claim responsibility for resolving to “sacrifice God for the nothing,” he characteristically inflates the volitional intensity of the “deed” in question (and of himself as its “doer”). He does so, as we have seen, to recuperate his crippled will and to secure thereby a transient experience of freedom and power. Whereas the Madman convicts himself of “murder,” for example, Nietzsche accounts for the “death of God” as the inevitable result of “sacrifice,” the posture of which he identifies as constitutive of the acquired identity (or second nature) of late modern Europeans (Nietzsche 1989a, pp. 60–61). His claim, simply put, is that late modern Europeans have become what they are under the influence of a “religious neurosis” (Nietzsche 1989a, pp. 60–62), which obliges them to sacrifice (and thereby deprive themselves of) whatever is dearest (Nietzsche 1989a, p. 60). Having initially sacrificed loved ones and items of value, and having subsequently sacrificed the noblest elements of their progressively denuded souls, late modern Europeans find themselves (or soon will do so) with nothing of value to sacrifice except for their God (Nietzsche 1989a, p. 67).

The important point of contrast here involves the character and intensity of the agency involved in the proposed effort “to sacrifice God for the nothing.” What Nietzsche calls “sacrifice” in this context is meant to designate an acquired compulsion that has succeeded thus far in conferring meaning and granting a sense of identity. Under the influence of the “religious neurosis,” European humanity has acquired a reflexive tendency to alienate and dismiss whatever is best and most distinctive about it (Nietzsche 1989a, pp. 60–62). Although we late moderns have learned to take and dispense credit for the sacrifices we perform, our default predilection for sacrifice is more accurately understood as an index of

the extent to which our agency is limited and even compromised. As such, the “sacrifice [of] God for the nothing” cannot be credibly construed as a heroic act of titanic will. It is not an act of “murder,” and it hardly counts as a proper act or deed at all. That humanity eventually would wish for and participate in the “death of God” was actually ordained by the primitive logic of sacrifice that launched Christianity itself (Nietzsche 1989a, p. 60).

We thus see that the “death of God” that Nietzsche foresees is *not* the Promethean “deed” to which the Madman self-servingly confesses. Rather, the “death of God” is the inevitable culmination of a process of self-overcoming [*Selbstüberwindung*], on the strength of which individuals have created for themselves a meaningful existence. Whereas the Madman insists that he (and others) summoned the upsurge of will needed to murder God, asserting themselves thereby as responsible (and powerful) agents, Nietzsche understands that the formerly regnant network of interlocking beliefs and values (aka “God”) will, like “all great things” (Nietzsche 1989b, p. 161), perish of natural causes, having exhausted its capacity to confer and guarantee the meaning of human existence.

As we have seen, Nietzsche does not hold his readers responsible for the death of God. He *does* hold them responsible, however, for navigating the aftermath of this event. On this point, in fact, he departs most decisively from the Madman, who convicts himself of the most heinous crime precisely so that he will not be held responsible for its consequences. The Madman’s preoccupation with the supposed murder of God (and with the alleged perpetrators of this deed) is actually meant to ensure that he will never take responsibility for the aftermath. In fact, Nietzsche believes, we now owe it to ourselves to disown all such irresponsible imputations of responsibility, especially inasmuch as they impede our preparations for an honest, truthful appraisal of our capacity for response. His emphasis on determining as best we can the *meaning* of the “death of God” thus reflects his wish to shift the focus of the question of responsibility. What matters now is that we address the “death of God” in a manner that enables us to pursue a meaningful post-theistic existence, while resisting the temptation to determine the meaning of this “event” prior to its full manifestation.

## 6. Diagnosing the Madness of David Lurie

Nietzsche’s general diagnosis of the “insanity of the will” is particularly useful in understanding David Lurie’s behavior at the administrative inquiry into his mistreatment of Melanie Isaacs. Like the Madman, David is a *Schauspieler*, i.e., a performer who lures unsuspecting others into the spectacle he has staged. He does so, as we have seen in the case of the Madman, in order to bait these others into displaying (alleged) inadequacies that compel him to seize from them the moral high ground while staking out for himself an extreme position. To wit: Much as the Madman voluntarily convicted himself of the murder of God, so David claims full responsibility for the affair and its aftermath. As if following the Madman’s script, in fact, David voluntarily adopts an unflattering *nom de scene* in order to secure what he believes will be a reprieve from all future assignments of responsibility.

In both cases, moreover, an assertion of full responsibility in fact yields a *refusal* of responsibility, inasmuch as the authors of these assertions voluntarily place themselves beyond the pale of redemption. According to them, their respective crimes are so great that nothing more should ever be expected of them. Rather than assume the risks involved in navigating the new order taking shape around them, they claim for themselves fixed identities that absolve them—or so they wish to believe—of any further expectations of growth, agency, self-improvement, or self-perfection. Both are sufficiently frightened by the future that they are content to chain themselves to a rapidly vanishing past, in which they never actually earned the grace they now claim for themselves. Once again channeling the Madman, David explains to Lucy that this old dog will learn no new tricks: “After a certain age one . . . just has to buckle down and live out the rest of one’s life. Serve one’s time” (Coetzee 1999, p. 67). Doubling down on this profession of bad faith, he later adds,

“All right, I’ll do it. But only so long as I don’t have to become a better person. I am not prepared to be reformed. I want to go on being myself” (Coetzee 1999, p. 67).

At his administrative hearing, we know, David maintains that Melanie is in no way responsible, which is what he had insisted to Rosalind over dinner. As it now turns out, however, *he* is not responsible either, despite his repeated and unconditional pleas of guilt. After leading his former friends and soon-to-be-former colleagues through a wearying semantic maze, he succeeds in exhausting their patience and goading them into the resolution he has sought all along. (On this point, it is difficult to resist comparing David to the Socrates of Plato’s *Apology*, who similarly manipulated his accusers and critics into voting for a punishment in excess of what they believed to be reasonable and just.) David will leave the University, as he had planned all along to do, but now he will do so on the terms that *he* prefers—namely, as a banished, unappreciated “servant of Eros” (Coetzee 1999, p. 52).

By orchestrating his own disgrace as a spectacle, David secures three desired outcomes: First of all, he suffers his disgrace as a heroic lover, whom Eros has selected and seized. Sensing the decline of his animal vitality, he ensures that he will be forever remembered for his untimely dalliance with a much younger *inamorata*, to borrow his ex-wife’s favored designation for Melanie Isaacs. As we are now in a position to understand, in fact, the point of the spectacle he staged was to provide him with the pretext he would need in order to believe that Eros had seized him. He accomplished this objective by inciting in his inquisitors the righteous indignation that in turn produced in him the requisite surge of affect and vitality. Much as the Madman tricked his astonished onlookers into confirming his preferred narrative about himself—namely, that he had arrived on the scene “too soon” to perform the post-theistic labor he had assigned to himself—so David goads his inquisitors into eliciting from him the amplified vitality that funds—albeit temporarily—the defense he wishes to mount. Having succeeded in recruiting them into his narcissistic fantasy, David manipulates them into drawing from him the righteous indignation that he cannot muster on his own. The spectacle he has staged thus delivers the conditions under which he actually believes what he claimed in his own defense.

Second, by suffering such a public disgrace, he implants in the minds and memories of all involved the notion that he *formerly* earned and maintained a state of grace. In order to suffer disgrace, after all, one must at one time have attained an acknowledged state of grace, from which one has unceremoniously fallen. Those who remember or hear of his disgrace will reflexively infer that he was *at one time* a great man, even though he was not. (Upon meeting David for a second time, Melanie’s father unwittingly confirms the success of this gambit: “So . . . how are the mighty fallen!” (Coetzee 1999, p. 167).) On the strength of his disgrace, in short, David manages to arrange for himself a retrospective status that was never his to claim. To his way of thinking, being known for a fall from grace is preferable to being known (or ignored) for never having been graced at all. (He prefers the former, one suspects, because he fears that the latter is closer to the truth.)

Third, he claims full responsibility for the scandal not because he actually holds himself exclusively blameworthy, but because doing so frees him from all responsibility from this point forward. Having suffered a public fall from grace, he will be forever identified with his confessed offense. As a result, no one will ever again expect him to amount to anything. Rather than stumble across the insecure, uncertain terrain of his physical decline, he will enjoy the sure (if insignificant) footing afforded him, or so he imagines, by disgrace. He thus looks forward to the anonymity and voided expectations of death without going to the trouble of actually dying. To this inveterate performer and pathological short-cutter, cheating death comes naturally.

“Disgrace” thus names the movement, imperceptibly guided by David himself, from scandal to spectacle. Although he was responsible for the scandal, it was not entirely under his control, which he found both humiliating and unacceptable (McDunnah 2009, pp. 30–31). By inflating the scandal into a spectacle, however, he regained control of the

narrative and the situation. Let us turn now to Nietzsche for a diagnosis of the madness that grips David *and* of the madness he performs for his (former) friends and colleagues.

### 7. David Lurie Goes to Hell

Nietzsche's sketch of the Madman concludes with an all-too-brief glimpse of life after the death of God (Nietzsche 1974, p. 280). As the Madman awaits his opportunity to speak at the right time to an appropriate audience of knowing accomplices, he reverts to his familiar routines, e.g., harassing church-goers and implying (if not stating outright) that God is dead. Until his supposed co-conspirators acknowledge their participation in the murder of God, he is content to bide his time and to amuse himself with juvenile antics and pointless declarations of the truth of atheism. As we have seen, he is in no event inclined to take concrete steps to address (and perhaps remediate) the incipient crises that he has predicted for the aftermath of the "death of God." Notwithstanding the harrowing future he prophesied in his jeremiad, the Madman grants himself the freedom to proceed as if nothing has changed.

Can he (or anyone who suffers from a similar affliction) continue indefinitely in this temporizing posture? His supposed accomplices are not likely to admit their share in a "deed" that never took place—unless, of course, they contract the madness he manifests—and there are only so many churches he can vandalize. If he is correct in his assessment of the calamities to come, moreover, something important is certain to change on the ground, in real time, for him. Is he prepared to face the challenges that are certain to arise as the new, post-theistic social order takes shape?

One kind of answer emerges in the second half of Coetzee's *Disgrace*. Having succeeded in transforming his unfolding scandal into a spectacle under his control, David Lurie resigns his position at the University and decamps for the Eastern Cape, where his daughter Lucy resides. Like his hero, Byron, who fled England to escape scandals of his own, David seeks the fresh start that awaits him, or so he thinks, worlds away from Cape Town. Unlike Byron, whose residencies in Italy were nearly as boisterous and scandal-ridden as his time in England, David attempts (and fails) to arrange for himself a ghostly, uninvolved afterlife. He predictably struggles to find his footing, and his poetic allegiance soon shifts from Byron to Teresa, the lover he left behind when he sailed for Greece.<sup>10</sup> As David's half-baked plan of escape quickly unravels, he is obliged to confront the alien landscape of a setting in which he has no clout, no authority, no standing, and no purpose. The world he is obliged to encounter is not so much inverted—which would suggest a logic that he at least could fathom—as it is structured in accordance with laws, forces, principles, and agencies that he finds both vaguely familiar and yet jarringly unfamiliar. He cannot make sense of his new surroundings, and he fails to find a suitable place for himself in the new, post-theistic order.

David's migration from the city to the country, from a life in decline to an afterlife (he envisions as) unencumbered by cares and responsibilities, thus suggests his attempt at a kind of *katabasis*, i.e., an ill-fated journey to the underworld in pursuit of purification and redemption (Seery 1996, pp. 155–67). Voluntarily casting himself into the underworld, where no one ever would expect him to aspire to grace, he aims to avail himself of his anonymity to complete the opera he has struggled thus far to compose. He will perform his chosen penance—e.g., tending Lucy's meager garden, selling flowers at the farmer's market, assisting Bev at the shelter, etc.—and his tedium will spur him to create his final testament—or so he thinks. As we shall see, his failed attempt at *katabasis* will also position him to experience what it means to endure the superfluous existence he has unwisely romanticized.

At least at first, the price David pays for his ersatz afterlife suggests an acceptable bargain: He looks forward to a fresh start on the Eastern Cape, and he envisions his new life as that of a romantic exile, whose afterlife, though no doubt difficult, will prove the value of his former exploits. He will answer not to a ridiculous committee of inquiry, but to the world at large, which, he foolishly believes, will smile upon (or at least ignore)

the reckless lover he presumes himself to be. In particular, he is relieved to be rid of the burdens associated with his own expectations of himself and the expectations of others. From this point forward, or so he wishfully believes, no one will ever expect anything of him. He may while away his remaining years in peace, quietly homing in on the secret of Byron's persistent appeal to romantics such as himself. Accounting for the modesty of his aspirations, he explains to Lucy that "After a certain age one . . . just has to buckle down and live out the rest of one's life. Serve one's time" (Coetzee 1999, p. 67).

Of course, he is mistaken about this. Lucy voices her expectations of him, including her expectation that he must cease to remake her in his own image. Bev Shaw has expectations of him, which remind him, painfully, of the expectations he has thoughtlessly imposed on past lovers. There is also Driepoot, the banjo-loving dog with whom he has improbably bonded, whose unvoiced expectations unsettle him to the core. Most importantly, he also finds that he has expectations, familiar expectations, of himself. It does not take long for his ill-conceived pastoral idyll to reproduce the failures of past relationships and adventures. The point, of course, is that David himself has not changed. Although he is now in much closer proximity to his daughter, he is no closer to her in any genuinely meaningful sense. His inspired performance of righteous indignation at his administrative hearing may have boosted him from scandal to spectacle, but it will carry him no further. If he ever was an involuntary "servant of Eros," as he claimed in his defense, he is no longer caught in the mesh of cosmic forces beyond his control.

The "release" he hoped his disgrace would grant him turns out to have been a fantasy all along. As he hatched his plan to visit Lucy following his public disgrace, he may have looked vaguely forward to the opportunity to engage in the kinds of conversations and interactions that eventually might have healed their strained relationship. To no one's surprise, however, the hoped-for rapprochement never materializes. Distracted by the secret of Byron, bored by life in the country, and unwilling to see himself through the eyes of another, David soon grows miserable and unwelcome in Lucy's home. As before, he compulsively remakes his surroundings with himself at their center, thereby ensuring a repetition of past failures. Far from the innocent "infant babe" he and Wordsworth had idealized, David carries his disgrace into the next chapter of his life.

## 8. Lucy's Keeping Secret

The title of my earlier section, "Keeping Secrets," is meant to forward a potentially useful double meaning: Coetzee is primarily interested in the ethical status of those secrets that *keep* (or sustain) us, those secrets that allow us to continue our lives in the absence or decline of the norms and structures that formerly supported our shared ethical existence. These "keeping secrets," as I prefer to call them, make possible the relationships and intimacies to which we aspire, while also acknowledging the affective and volitional limits of what we reasonably may expect from ourselves and others.

I am particularly concerned in this section to investigate one such keeping secret, to which even the bearer of the secret may not be privy. As we know, Lucy is an enigma to her father, and not simply because he fails to engage meaningfully with her. To be sure, she has followed a path that has diverged markedly from his. But that is not the chief impediment to the rapprochement he thinks he wants to achieve with her. Simply put, understanding her would take considerably more effort than he is inclined to invest in anyone. Her sexual orientation, her love of the land, of earthy simplicities, of flowers and dogs, her rejection of his values, are all mysterious to him, but they are not mysterious per se. What is genuinely mysterious to him, and perhaps also to her, is the secret pertaining to her response to the vicious attack and gang rape. As she makes clear to David before he departs for Cape Town, "I don't know [what I will do]. But whatever I decide I want to decide by myself, without being pushed. There are things you just don't understand" (Coetzee 1999, p. 157).

And her secret is not limited to the paternity of her child. The larger or deeper secret pertains to her eventual decision to enter into the dominion and proximity of her assailants, to choose to remain rooted on her smallholding regardless of the costs. Having weighed



her options “objectively” (Coetzee 1999, p. 204), or so she insists, Lucy has agreed to enter into a pragmatic kinship arrangement with Petrus. In exchange for the title to her land, he will provide her and her child with the “protection” and “patronage” they will need in the “new” South Africa (Coetzee 1999, p. 204). And although Lucy has deliberately kept secrets from David in the past, it may be the case that she herself is not privy to the secret that shrouds her decision to accept the patronage of Petrus. Indeed, she may simply be unable to articulate a reason or defense that anyone would recognize as such. And if it is the case that she carries a secret to which she is not privy, no amount of imploring or cajoling will wrest it from her. In that event, Lucy must be allowed to keep her keeping secret, even if doing so prevents others, including David, from moving forward with their lives. David’s fear, of course, is that they will never move past this polarized situation, that Lucy’s secret will keep them apart forever. And it very well may do so.

Coetzee’s readers may be tempted to explain (and perhaps applaud) Lucy’s decision as *authentic*, i.e., as uniquely expressive of her wishes and as uniquely hers to make in any event. This temptation is encouraged, perhaps, by the sketchy account we receive from David (via Coetzee’s unnamed narrator) of Lucy’s life on the Eastern Cape. As he initially understands her from the considerable emotional and geographical distance at which he resides, she has attempted a wholesale rejection of his life and values, including his urban existence, the overly intellectualized and escapist center of his life, and his rapacious heterosexuality. What is missing, of course, is any sense of her positive motives for doing so, of her attraction and attachment to the life she leads. This aspect of Lucy’s existence remains unknown to David, largely because, as is the case with all of his relationships, he does not think to ask in a way that might elicit a genuine, candid response. In any event, Lucy initially takes shape before us in the positive light that accrues to her by virtue of having rejected the loathsome example set for her by David. As such, we may be tempted to valorize, and perhaps to romanticize, her unencumbered pastoral existence, the earthy simplicity of her subsistence, and the contentment she apparently derives from the unadorned, barefoot routines of her life on the Eastern Cape.

At the same time, however, the sadness of Lucy’s life is palpable, even prior to the vicious attack, and we may suspect even without David’s encouragement that she too is going through the motions, waiting for something or someone to fill the void at the center of her life. The departed Helen is very much present in her unexplained absence, though David struggles to understand what Lucy could possibly miss from their life together. All of this remains a secret, which Lucy chooses not to divulge.

As I understand Coetzee’s aims in the second half of the novel, he is determined to complicate any attempt on the part of the reader to commend Lucy’s supposed authenticity. It is especially difficult to commend her meaningfully in light of how little we know about her and her situation. (Here, as elsewhere, Coetzee’s narrator is barely more helpful than David. In our efforts to hear and understand Lucy, we are largely on our own.) Simply to declare her decision an expression of authenticity would be to minimize her in much the same way that is accomplished by David’s narcissism. In other words, we have good reason to be concerned that her decision to stay is indicative of something other than authentic self-determination. Is her rejection of David’s life so thorough that she will rush into a potentially destructive and overtly servile kinship arrangement? Is she attempting to atone personally for the grievous sins of history, or of Apartheid? Is she punishing herself for encouraging or allowing the disaffection of Helen, her former lover? Is her post-Helen existence so barren that she regards the patronage of Petrus as a desirable upgrade? Coetzee apparently wishes to remind his readers that well-intentioned celebrations of Lucy’s authenticity are no more plausible in this setting than the more traditional claims pressed by David.

As valid as these (and other) concerns may be, however, the novel also reminds us, albeit indirectly, that all such concerns presuppose the ongoing coherence of a social order in which appeals to respect, rights, justice, authenticity, and even law itself acquire and maintain their familiar validity. What Lucy apparently understands (or intuits) more

clearly than David is that no such social order currently obtains. A new order, uncanny and inchoate, is taking shape, but it has not yet rounded sufficiently into view for anyone to assess with the reflexive confidence that David (of all people!) invests in traditional forms and categories of morality, civility, politics, and law. As Lucy attempts to explain to him, his various objections, appeals, entreaties, etc. make perfect sense, *but not in this context*.<sup>11</sup> He is not wrong to encourage her to avail herself of the typical remedies available to her, but he is mistaken to assume (and insist) that these remedies are relevant to her current situation. As Lucy puts it, he is “powerless in the terms that matter here” (Coetzee 1999, p. 204).

What *are* these terms? Lucy does not say, and she may not know. Although she is confident in her rejection of the various “abstractions” to which David continues to appeal, she may not be prepared to articulate—much less defend—an alternative set of principles and norms. Having aligned herself with the emerging social order, despite failing as yet to understand its defining ethos (if any), Lucy is determined *not* to revert to remedies dependent on the depleted validity of the formerly authoritative social order. Aware, like Nietzsche, that she eventually may come to rue her decision, she remains cautiously and reservedly open to the future and closed to the past. At the same time, however, it must be acknowledged that her attempt to accommodate the emerging social order places her in an unfortunate, all-too-familiar position of subjugation, one which naturally leads David (and the reader) to question her motives. She may wish to renounce the claims of the past, but she has as yet nothing but the claims of the past to guide her.

To be sure, Lucy’s refusal of David’s various appeals appears to involve her in a significant step backward. If she chooses to remain on her smallholding, as David points out, does she not invite her assailants to return? Responding to his insistence that she “can’t possibly stay,” Lucy wonders aloud if the emerging post-theistic order might require her to accept burdens and risks that were formerly unthinkable:

*But isn’t there another way of looking at it, David? What if . . . what if that is the price one has to pay for staying on? Perhaps that is how they look at it; perhaps that is how I should look at it too. They see me as owing something.* (Coetzee 1999, p. 158)

When David insists that her assailants “want [her] for their slave,” Lucy corrects him, “Not slavery. Subjection. Subjugation” (Coetzee 1999, p. 159). Like the Madman, apparently, Lucy is prepared to accept the (largely) settled identity that her “guess” at the eventual meaning of the “death of God” grants her. Rather than wait any longer to ascertain the contours of the emerging social order, she accepts for herself and her unborn child the terms of the “subjugation” that awaits her under the patronage of Petrus (Attridge 2004, pp. 170–72).

As David stands by helplessly, unable to dissuade his only daughter from (what he regards as) a disastrous match, we can ask for no clearer indication that we are meant to find ourselves in uncharted territory. David’s impotence in this matter, which is precisely the condition he hoped his disgrace would obviate, is thus suggestive of a larger decline in the institutions and traditions that were supposed to have been emblematic of the grand, civilizing aspirations of modernity itself. On the Eastern Cape, he discovers, God is officially dead: a formerly authoritative and meaningful way of life has been supplanted by an incipient, as yet unrecognizable, new order. The secrets and silences that (barely) secured the frayed ethical life he had known have been replaced by secrets and silences for which he holds no decryption key. As he foolishly had wished for himself, he is now like an “infant babe” who must learn from scratch the mysterious language spoken by those around him. And it is not simply a matter of mastering Xhosa and the local dialects spoken by Petrus and others. Nothing about the new order makes any sense to him, save for his exclusion from its inner dynamics.

That David did not intend his staged disgrace to be permanent is confirmed by his immediate, reflexive assertion of his patriarchal authority over Lucy. As it turns out, he wanted it both ways: to be free from expectations and responsibilities, while retaining his patriarchal authority over his only child. But now he finds that he is nobody. Not because he had a disastrous affair with a student, but because the world he thoughtlessly inhabited

no longer exists. In his new home (or place of residence), *he* is the alien, the other, the unwanted immigrant. His voice, his language, and his reasoning carry no weight here. He must either begin from scratch—much as Lucy intends to do—or he must confront the unfamiliar forces that now constrain him. Back home, he knew the score and could manipulate others (and his surroundings) to suit his wishes. Here, he is an “outsider” looking in, understanding almost nothing, and lacking a suitable outlet for his crescent “outrage” (Coetzee 1999, pp. 140–41).

### 9. Living and Dying like a Dog

The new normal thus rounds into view as a setting in which the traditional appeals voiced by David no longer carry sufficient force to persuade Lucy. Truth be told, they do not really impress him either. He appears to be aware that he is performing a role and following a script, not unlike the members on the committee of inquiry whom he recruited into his spectacle. When his attempt at patriarchal thunder falls on deaf ears, he is not inclined to reprise his performance. Lucy has chosen an unconventional path—we might say an un-modern or anti-modern path—from which he cannot divert her.

To be sure, moreover, it is not simply the case that David’s appeals are compromised by his suspect standing in the life of his estranged daughter. Accepting his description of her situation as “humiliating” (and thereby disarming him one final time), Lucy voices her consent to “start [over] at ground level . . . with nothing” (Coetzee 1999, p. 205). As they both agree, she will live henceforth “like a dog” (Coetzee 1999, p. 205), though they by no means agree on what this actually will mean for her. At this point in their deteriorating relationship, David still sees the dogs as beneath him, as inappropriate objects of human affection and concern. To live or die like a dog is, for him, to live or die in a manner unworthy of a human being. To do so voluntarily, to choose this life for oneself, is unmistakably servile. He does not understand Lucy’s decision and he is ashamed of her for making it.

Lucy, however, understands dogs very differently. Theirs is another way, and not necessarily a degenerate way, of being in the world. They too are ensouled creatures, and she refuses to accord any special status or privilege to human beings. She lives close to the earth, as Bev says, which endows her with an appreciation of the depth and dignity of a dog’s life. She has learned from the dogs, as David soon will do, and she is appreciative. To be sure, her life as a human being, supposedly enhanced by an anthropocentric privilege and standing, has not been so wonderful that a dog’s life would be out of the question. She has cultivated the creaturely humility that defines her in contrast to David; she has learned to adjust, adapt, and make do. Can life with Petrus be so bad? After all, we know how well Petrus, the “dog-man” himself, cares for *his* dogs.

We thus arrive at the bedrock of their disagreement: Lucy understands or believes that living or dying like a dog is not necessarily an objection to the course of one’s life. Although one might not select it from a menu of limitless options, it is neither intolerable nor out of the question, especially if it is ordained by the new, as-yet-inchoate social order. (Here, it bears noting that, as far as we know, Lucy does not seriously consider the option of suicide.) When she chooses to stay put, she chooses a life that may resemble that of an animal. David, on the other hand, believes (or pretends to believe) that living or dying like a dog is not a worthy option. But whence the traction of this belief? And why does David continue to cling to it?

To live or die like a dog is objectionable, Coetzee apparently means to suggest, only if one as yet despises one’s own animality, one’s own proximity to the ground, one’s own vulnerability, one’s own superfluous existence. Like the animals whom we love or neglect, we are precarious creatures, limited in our capacity to alter the conditions of our existence. We would do well, or so Coetzee seems to think, to receive this insight as issuing something resembling a normative principle, on the strength of which we might resist those individuals and schemes that would tempt us to an existence that is (supposedly) immune to the precarity of animal life (Kuzniar 2006, pp. 172–76; Taylor 2008, pp. 66–71).

At the same time, however, it would be premature to conclude that Lucy has learned some core life lesson that David would do well to acquire for himself. Although he eventually cultivates a deeper appreciation for the dogs whom he tends, he does not (yet) wish to live or die like a dog.

In the wake of David's ill-conceived efforts at rapprochement, Lucy feels obliged to retreat from him once again. Not unlike Rosalind, Lucy is content to hold David at a significant emotional distance. He is welcome to share her meager existence on the Eastern Cape, but not to share in her privacy. In no event may he assert a right or claim to her reasons for living as she does. If he stays, and she bids him neither to stay nor to leave, he must do so on her terms, which she feels no obligation to revisit or negotiate. This small "piece of land" may not amount to much, but it is hers to keep in any way she sees fit. The same might be said of the future she has brokered for herself on the Eastern Cape, a future she will neither explain nor defend to David. Despite his various entreaties, she will not suffer him to cloud or poison the uncertain life she has arranged for herself and her unborn child, even to the point of refusing his help and counsel. Despite his stubborn attempts to assert himself as her father, she is unwilling to grant him the second chance he believes he has earned. No "infant babe," he.

And so they have reached an impasse. He has lodged several reasonable appeals, even offering to fund her relocation to Europe. She has rejected his every claim, effectively turning her back on the cumulative wisdom and collective resources of contemporary civilization. What more can he do? He could seek a court order, perhaps, or have her declared unfit, or resort to some other form of state-sanctioned paternalistic coercion. Doing so, however, would place him in the debt of those oppressive bourgeois institutions he claims to despise. Given the circumstances, moreover, any such measure would be likely to enact a repetition of the violence Lucy already has endured.

More to the point, though, David himself is spent. He has passionately defended juridical remedies that he does not genuinely respect—here we recall his mockery of a similar inquisition into his own disgrace—and he has exhausted the paternal outrage he manufactured for the occasion. A better father, or a better man, might resolve to persevere, reaching deep within himself for the insight or intimacy that would persuade Lucy not to throw her life away. But David is not the better father or better man this situation apparently demands. (Lucy in fact addresses him by his given name rather than by any designation or nickname that would suggest filial devotion.) David absconded to the Eastern Cape, after all, not to save his daughter or salvage his relationship with her—these are but handy pretexts—but to enjoy the creative anonymity his post-disgrace afterlife was supposed to grant him. For Lucy he has neither the energy nor the patience nor the will to persevere. He would prefer to devote his remaining time and energy to Teresa, whose predicament he understands, whose elegy he tenderly labors to bring to life.

When David implores Bev to disclose Lucy's secret, he discovers that his performance in their clandestine couplings has earned him no recourse with her. Bev displays no fear of him withdrawing sexually, or of blackmailing her, or of exposing her infidelity. Her allegiances are as straightforward and secure as his are conflicted and confused. Here, it becomes clear, in fact, that he cleaves strictly to a bipolar—though not in the clinical sense—existence. He is either predator or prey, unwilling and perhaps unable to negotiate the terms of a reciprocal, mutually respectful relationship. In response to Rosalind and Bev, two women over whom he holds no coercive power, he meekly acquiesces to their plans for him. It is no coincidence, I believe, that Teresa becomes the focus of David's envisioned opera as he accustoms himself to the routines that define his working relationship with Bev. No longer an aspiring epigone of Byron, David comes to identify more strongly with the woman he left behind. Both are doomed, or so he imagines, to transact the tedium and sadness of a remaindered existence. Eros no longer requires their service.

For David, Lucy's unconventional decision is not as vexatious as the secrecy that shrouds it. After initially keeping her pregnancy from him, she now refuses his demands for an account of her decision to carry her unborn child to term under the uncertain patronage

of Petrus. Here, David experiences the full force of the impotence he thoughtlessly arranged for himself. Her reasons will remain unspoken and, for all he knows, unformed. Refusing the reasonable terms on which his appeals rest, she indicates that she is bound by nothing resembling the kind of filial or familial covenant that would compel her to explain herself. For his part, David fears that her decision means that she has *forgiven* her assailants, who, in his eyes, remain unforgivable. This, he suspects, is the secret she refuses to divulge. As we shall see, however, he is wrong about this as well.

## 10. Conclusions

As Lucy makes clear to David, the path she has chosen allows all involved to move forward, albeit in the direction of an uncertain future, and under the inscrutable terms of a dubious covenant. She thus appears in the second half of the novel as an agent of reconciliation. Her self-effacing decision to accept the patronage of Petrus promises to bring an ugly episode to a tolerable conclusion. As Petrus says, “It is finish” (Coetzee 1999, p. 201).

At the same time, however, Lucy arranges for herself a concession that agents of reconciliation typically do not enjoy: She may keep her secret for as long as she likes. Notably, that is, the terms she has proposed to Petrus do not include her forgiveness of her assailants. Petrus in turn does not expect Lucy to forgive Pollux; she simply must agree to live with him and the others while contributing to the harmony of the extended kinship network. She has secured this concession, we might note, by forfeiting all vestiges of what we might call, following Derrida, her “sovereignty,” i.e., her power over herself and others.<sup>12</sup> In doing so, I offer, she provides Coetzee’s readers with an alternative model of disgrace.<sup>13</sup>

In this respect, David’s greatest fear could not be further from the mark. Lucy has agreed to enter into this questionable union *not* because she has forgiven her assailants, but because she has *not* forgiven them and may never do so. She has ensured from the outset that *if* she forgives her assailants, she will do so from a position of powerlessness, a position untainted by feelings of contempt and revenge. By accepting the terms of reconciliation, she agrees to move forward, but only outwardly, in the emerging political context of the strange new family she has promised to join (Attwell 2002, pp. 334–35), while remaining inwardly undecided. Her acceptance of these terms grants her the time she needs to forgive or not, the time she needs, in Derrida’s words, to forgive the “unforgivable” crime perpetrated against her (Derrida 2001, p. 55). If and when she does forgive her assailants, moreover, she will have no choice but to do so without sovereignty, which means that she may not reasonably expect to receive anything by way of apology, recompense, or penitence.

To be sure, Lucy’s decision also may signal her forfeiture of any residual sovereignty over her father. As is his wont, of course, David takes her decision personally, as a hurtful rejection of him and as payback for a lifetime of distant and distracted affections. But in fact Lucy makes no further claims upon him. He is welcome to live with her, provided he is willing to live with the secret that keeps her. If he stays, David has little choice but to “move forward” according to Lucy’s wishes, reconciled to a new social order whose unlikely guardians he may never be prepared to forgive. What is he to do?

Remarkably, given his history, he does not flee. (Where does one go to escape the underworld?) Convinced by his brief return visit that Cape Town is no longer his home, he resolves for a second time to take his chances on the Eastern Cape. Despite the vehemence of his objections to Lucy’s decision, he submits himself unbidden to the terms of the strange new covenant into which she has entered. Following her lead, he commences to “live like a dog,” which, to his surprise, he finds not only tolerable but also sustaining. In this respect, it might be said that Lucy’s keeping secret throws him off balance, perhaps for the first time in his life. As before, he will live with her at a healthy remove, though no longer at a distance convenient to him. Improbably, that is, Lucy has become his dark star, the center of a gravitational field that he does not struggle to escape. Petrus may be the new alpha male, but Lucy is the rock on which David’s narcissism finally suffers shipwreck (Attridge 2004, pp. 171–72).



Clearly, something has changed in and for him. As he explains to Melanie's father, who has urged him to beseech God for guidance,

*In my own terms, I am being punished for what happened between myself and your daughter. I am sunk into a state of disgrace from which it will not be easy to life myself. It is not a punishment I have refused. I do not murmur against it. On the contrary, I am living it out from day to day, trying to accept disgrace as my state of being. Is it enough for God, do you think, that I live in disgrace without term?*<sup>14</sup> (Coetzee 1999, p. 172)

Here Coetzee indicates, following Nietzsche, that the "death of God" need not be understood to entail the immediate and categorical invalidation of familiar appeals and claims to theistic authority. Although David does not accept this invitation to turn to God, he does not reject what he takes to be its animating, centering spirit. Having formerly considered himself a non-believer, a mere "clerk in a post-religious age" (Coetzee 1999, p. 4), he is surprisingly receptive to the suggestion lodged by Melanie's father. Indeed, if we are prepared to accept his reply as indicative of a newfound (and sincere) commitment to self-reflection and self-awareness, we might do well to take note of his efforts to emerge from the underworld into which he has thrown himself.

David makes himself useful at the clinic in his service to Bev and the dogs they tend. From his uninspired coupling with her, he acquires the uneasy humility of the seducer turned plaything. From the animals he prepares for death he acquires a measure of long-deferred creatureliness. The banjo he plucks does not coax into verse the opera to which he fitfully aspires, but it pleases Driepoot, the abandoned, deathbound dog that has become his unlikely (but perfect) companion. (Having earlier resigned himself to the role of "dog-man," he now leans into this role, tending the dogs not out of "stupidity" (Coetzee 1999, p. 146), but as an expression of his dawning appreciation for their creaturely precarity (Coetzee 1999, p. 146; Coleman 2009, pp. 598–600; Kuzniar 2006, p. 174). The important point here, I take it, is that the obduracy of Lucy's secret has obliged David to begin anew, to gather himself under the as-yet-mysterious conditions of his new existence. The quiet, anonymous afterlife he foolishly sought for himself on the Eastern Cape is no longer—and in fact never was—a viable option for him. He must adjust and adapt to his new surroundings, and he decides to do so by cautiously following the lead of his estranged daughter.

Is this a glimmer of redemption, the beginning of a long, labored return to grace? Perhaps.<sup>15</sup> But let us not get carried away. David has burned us before, and he remains, potentially, as "lury" as ever. His sudden decision to "give up" his companion animal, for example, smacks of the uncritical sovereignty that we might have hoped he had resigned (Graham 2002, p. 11; Kuzniar 2006, pp. 177–79). Nor can it be said that his uneasy truce with Lucy and her assailants is the stuff of moral regeneration. although his grudging acceptance of his impending grandfatherhood is worth noting, his expectations for himself in this role remain conspicuously low. Most importantly, he remains tethered to the old ways by dint of his ongoing obsession with Teresa's elegy for Byron, which remains emblematic of the anxiety that afflicts him. It may be the case, finally, that the emerging post-theistic order will grant no currency to crypto-religious normative terms and concepts such as "grace" and "disgrace." Here, too, Coetzee prefers description to prescription, witness to judgment, observation to moralization. Lucy's secret has compelled David to change, to reorient himself, but there is as yet insufficient basis for predicting a radically different future for him.<sup>16</sup> Let us call it, simply, a first step toward living with, rather than in, disgrace.

To be continued . . . Or perhaps not.<sup>17</sup>

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## Notes

- 1 The interpretation I sketch here is informed (and supported) by some remarks made by Coetzee in his Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech: "I will confine myself to one observation [about the structures of power that define the South African state]. The deformed and stunted relations between human beings that were created under colonialism and exacerbated under what is loosely called apartheid have their psychic representation in a deformed and stunted inner life. All expressions of that inner life, no matter how intense, no matter how pierced with exultation or despair, suffer from the same stuntedness and deformity" (Coetzee 1992, pp. 97–98).
- 2 In his Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech, Coetzee observes, "At the heart of the unfreedom of the hereditary masters of South Africa is a failure of love. To be blunt: their love is not enough today and has not been enough since they arrived on the continent . . . If one fails to see the relevance of this talk about love, once can replace the word *love* with the word *fraternity* . . . The vain and essentially sentimental yearning that expresses itself in the reform movement in South Africa today is a yearning to have fraternity without paying for it" (Coetzee 1992, p. 97).
- 3 In my attempt to characterize David's predation in terms of his compulsion to expose (and thereby explode) the secrets that sustain the ethical life of which he partakes, I wish to expand on Kossew's excellent description of *Disgrace* as "a complex exploration of the collision between private and public worlds" (Kossew 2003, p. 155).
- 4 Of relevance here is an account of disgrace drawn from an earlier novel: "He takes her by the arm. It is dark, she is carrying a basket, she cannot free herself. He presses himself against her, drawing in the walnut scent of her hair. He tries to kiss her, but she turns away and his lips brush her ear. Nothing in the pressure of her body answers to him. Disgrace, he thinks: this is how one enters disgrace" (Coetzee 1994, p. 59).
- 5 As Gogoi observes, for example, "The relationship has overtones of rape" (Gogoi 2015, pp. 146–47). See also McDonald, who describes Melanie as a victim of David's "abuse" (McDonald 2011, p. 326; Kuzniar 2006, p. 175).
- 6 As Neimneh instructively notes, this tortured analogy is yet another example of David's tendency to "allegorize . . . animals to expose his corporeal predicament in a desiring body" (Neimneh 2014, p. 1571).
- 7 Here I follow Mulhall: "But the madman finds this conception of God as an (illusory) entity to be far more childish than the religious faith it claims to have outgrown . . . [God's] presence was real, part of the living tissue of our culture, our responses, our most intimate self-understanding. His destruction is therefore a radical act of violence, not only against Him but also against ourselves" (Mulhall 2005, p. 22).
- 8 As Heidegger influentially maintains, "The pronouncement 'God is dead' means: The suprasensory world is without effective power. It bestows no life. Metaphysics, i.e., for Nietzsche Western philosophy understood as Platonism, is at an end" (Heidegger 1977, p. 61).
- 9 His point here, as Pippin notes, is that the Madman's "melancholic" tone is as yet unsupported by his experience of the "death of God" (Pippin 2010, pp. 109–13). While it may be the case that the Madman's doomsaying may be proved correct, there is no warrant as yet to endorse the melancholy with which the Madman wishes to infect others.
- 10 Here I follow Willett, who observes that David "embraces the maternal element (the aging and ever more abject Teresa) through music and identifies with the image of the loving father, or grandfather, as he says, and does so only after suffering through an ordeal that brings him face-to-face with his own abject nature" (Willett 2012, p. 11).
- 11 In support of a distinction between "legal morality," represented by David, and "spiritual morality," exemplified by Lucy, van Heerden observes that "although Lucy may be considered a better person on the spiritual level, she has give up hope on legal morality and therefore fails to protest against social injustice" (van Heerden 2010, p. 58).
- 12 At the conclusion of his essay "On Forgiveness," Derrida pauses to rehearse the "dream" that apparently inspired him to survey the ground he has covered: "What I dream of, what I try to think as the 'purity' of a forgiveness worthy of its name, would be a *forgiveness without power: unconditional but without sovereignty*. The most difficult task, at once necessary and apparently impossible, would be to dissociate *unconditionality* and *sovereignty*. Will that be done one day? It is not around the corner, as is said. But since the hypothesis of this unrepresentable task announces itself, be it as a dream for thought, this madness is perhaps not so mad . . ." (Derrida 2001, pp. 59–60, emphasis added).
- 13 I am indebted here to Sanders (2002, pp. 363–73).
- 14 "Without term" is an interesting qualification for David to attach to his disgrace, especially if he means to imply that his disgrace will survive his death. As we know, he says of the superfluous animals he and Bev euthanize as "those whose term has come" (Coetzee 1999, p. 218).
- 15 While I am sympathetic to those interpretations of the novel in which David is seen to "move . . . from disgrace toward grace, from the loss of social position and reputation to an individual secular salvation" (Sarvan 2004, p. 29), as well as those in which grace is seen to reside, perhaps, "in simple acts of love that will enable the world's creatures to die graciously" (Attwell 2001, p. 867), I don't find that the text of *Disgrace* supports the cautious optimism these readings convey.
- 16 As Willett observes, "The novel is ethically compelling, and yet no moral theory . . . explains its force" (Willett 2012, p. 3).
- 17 A very early version of this essay was presented to the faculty of the School of Humanities and Languages and the Biopolitical Studies Research Network at the University of New South Wales. My thanks to those in attendance for their generous comments

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