King Lear 'After' Auschwitz

Shakespeare, Appropriation and Subjectivity in the Catastrophist Playwriting of David Rudkin, Howard Barker and Sarah Kane

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PhD Thesis

Declaration of Authorship

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis and that the work it presents is my own

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Abstract

This study analyses appropriations of *King Lear* in post-war British playwriting, from Edward Bond's 1971 play *Lear* to Dennis Kelly's 2010 play *The Gods Weep*. It shows that post-war playwrights have variously appropriated *King Lear* in response to the disaster of the Holocaust and its near-total destruction of human subjectivity. I concentrate particularly on the playwrights David Rudkin, Howard Barker and Sarah Kane, all of whom appropriate *King Lear* in the service of a type of playwriting and drama called 'Catastrophism' – a form deeply influenced by Frankfurt School theorist Theodor Adorno and his conceptualization of aesthetics and subjectivity 'after' Auschwitz. Catastrophism names a form of tragic drama that eschews resolution and retains the autonomy of the tragic subject, who cannot be finally constrained by any form of aesthetic or ideological closure. Over and against repressive systems of thought and society, the Catastrophist subject retains his/her freedom. I show that appropriations of *King Lear* have played a vital role in Catastrophism and its response to the degradation of human subjectivity and freedom in the Holocaust.

Introduction

1. *King Lear* 'After' Auschwitz

Since the Second World War, *King Lear* has emerged as the Shakespeare play which seems to speak most powerfully to the catastrophes of modern times. The play is, without doubt, the most catastrophic in Shakespeare. From the fateful division of the Kingdom, which begins the play, to the protracted death of Lear at its end, as he cradles the dead body of his daughter Cordelia, the play insistently dramatizes 'the disasters of the world' and a vision of 'dark and deadly' devastation.[1] By the close of the play, only a few, distraught survivors remain, and there is no sign that restitution or redemption is anywhere to be found on a blasted vista. Emily Sun writes that *King Lear* speaks with distinct urgency to audiences living in the continuing aftermath of 'genocidal horror and global total warfare'.[2] Such sentiments are hard to contest. The increasing relevance of *King Lear* in post-war culture is clearly reflected in both criticism and performance, where it has gained an unparalleled status. R.A. Foakes convincingly shows that, after the disaster of the Second World War, *King Lear* came to displace the previously ascendant *Hamlet* at the pinnacle of the Shakespeare canon.[3] Even with the war now fading from living memory, Foakes contends that the most 'urgent

[1] William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, ed. R.A. Foakes (London: Methuen, 1997), p. 170 and p. 388. All references to *King Lear* are from the Foakes Arden edition, except when I underscore the distinctions between the Quarto and Folio texts of *King Lear*, which I do using *King Lear: A Parallel Text Edition*, 2nd edition, ed. René Weis (Oxford: Routledge, 2013). See below for a thorough analysis of the textual status of *King Lear*. All other references to Shakespeare are from *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, ed. John Jowett *et al* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

[2] Emily Sun, *Succeeding King Lear: Literature, Exposure and the Possibility of Politics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), p. 14.

[3] R.A. Foakes, *Hamlet Versus Lear: Cultural Politics and Shakespeare's Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 1993). See especially pp. 45-77.

play for the times is still *King Lear*' – and that it is 'likely to remain so for the foreseeable future'.[4]

What has so far been neglected in Shakespeare Studies, however, is the increased presence of *King Lear* in post-war British playwriting. The play has been appropriated time and again in post-war British writing for the stage. These appropriations comprise various forms of creative intervention, ranging from complete rewritings of the play, to sequels and prequels, to re-visionings of single scenes or speeches, to the use of individual protagonists from the play, to allusions and citations, whether transient or more sustained. With plays that represent Shakespeare, there have also been appropriations of the iconic author of *King Lear* 'himself'.

Why is it that *King Lear* has been appropriated so widely in post-war British playwriting? How do post-war playwrights use the play? What is the purpose of appropriating *King Lear* in the post-war era? This thesis sets out to address a gap in Shakespeare Studies and analyse appropriations of *King Lear* in post-war British playwriting. It will show that some of the most significant appropriations of the play – and vital trends in both post-war criticism and performance – can be situated historically, ideationally and dramaturgically as responses to the catastrophes of modern times. Most of all, it is the catastrophe of the Holocaust that informs appropriations of *King Lear*. I show that various post-war appropriations of *King Lear* use the play to respond to and 'write' the disaster of Auschwitz, the worst calamity of post-Enlightenment European modernity.[5] Far from a

[4] R.A. Foakes, '*King Lear* and the Displacement of *Hamlet*', *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 50:3 (1987), p. 275.
[5] The idea of 'writing the disaster' is taken from Maurice Blanchot and his 1980 work *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1995). I return to the type of fragmentary writing demanded by the Holocaust in Chapter One, though I do so through Theodor Adorno. It will be seen that I use 'Holocaust' and 'Auschwitz' interchangeably. Auschwitz is sometimes preferred as a metonym for the Holocaust, as the word Holocaust has its roots in the Jewish practice of a sacrificial offering, which was burnt completely on an altar. The term is problematic in that it imputes a sacrificial status to the genocide of the European Jews – which may syncopate with Nazi ideology and its conception of the Final

parochial concern with questions of national and cultural identity, British playwrights have appropriated *King Lear* to engage with a European (and, indeed, world) legacy of catastrophe.

This is not to say that post-war British playwrights appropriate *King Lear* to write plays that directly depict the Holocaust and the dehumanizing conditions of the concentration camps – though there have been 'documentary'-style Holocaust plays on the British stage.[6] The case I make has to do with the status of subjectivity 'after' Auschwitz. For many artists and thinkers writing in its wake, Auschwitz is an event that revealed the complete degradation of the human subject in modernity. Far from an autonomous agent shaping its own destiny, Auschwitz reveals the way modern society debases the subject, turning it into an object of dehumanizing processes over which it has no control and which, finally, destroy it.

If, as Elizabeth Sakellaridou has written, the 'iconography' of the Holocaust – ruined scenescapes, brutalizing institutions of repression and torture, damaged and disfigured subjects, displacement and dislocation, desire and perverse eroticization, destruction and death – haunts post-war playwriting, *King Lear* has obvious resonances for a post-Auschwitz historical and cultural imaginary.[7] This has seen the play develop into a vital intertext through which the utter degradation of the human subject – a bestializing process that would make humanity 'a worm' (IV.i.35) – might be written. The play has, perhaps unsurprisingly, been particularly pivotal in tragic playwriting 'after' Auschwitz. *King Lear* has

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Solution as a necessary sacrifice in the name of Aryan racial purity. Timothy Snyder in *Black Earth: The Holocaust as History and Warning* (London: Penguin, 2015) contends that using Auschwitz metonymically is misleading, as it reduces the Holocaust to a single camp (pp. 207-224). Precisely because of its nightmarish status in the post-war historical and cultural imaginary, however, I will use Auschwitz metonymically, while also sometimes using the more common 'Holocaust'.

[6] These plays include – among others – *Kindertransport*, a 1984 play by Diane Samuels and *Albert Speer*, a 2000 play by David Edgar. The plays I study are far less 'realist' in approach and realization.

[7] Elizabeth Sakellaridou, 'A Lover's Discourse – but Whose? Inversions of the Fascist Aesthetic in Howard Barker's *Und* and Other Recent English Plays', *European Journal of English Studies*, 7:1 (2003), p. 90.

enabled forms of tragic drama that would seek to represent and critique the devastating diminution of the modern human subject. These forms of post-Auschwitz tragedy have ranged from Beckettian absurdism to post-Brechtian political theatre. The play has been used in a variety of ways to (re)conceptualize both the subject and tragedy 'after' Auschwitz.

My analysis of *King Lear* and post-war appropriation will, however, concentrate primarily on the plays and playwriting of David Rudkin, Howard Barker and Sarah Kane. These playwrights are all engaged in a form of post-Auschwitz, tragic playwriting that I describe as 'Catastrophist'. To date, Catastrophist appropriations of *King Lear* have been neglected by critics; however, Catastrophism represents a compelling 'strand' of post-war British playwriting and its response to – and appropriation of – *King Lear* in the aftermath of Auschwitz.

I turn now to provide an overview of Catastrophism – a category I derive primarily from Howard Barker. I proceed to relate Catastrophism to the work of Frankfurt School theorist Theodor Adorno, whose profound philosophical and historical reflections on the disaster of Auschwitz, modernity, subjectivity and aesthetics make him a vital figure for theorizing post-Auschwitz culture and playwriting. I will also begin to consider the relationship between *King Lear* and Catastrophism before historicizing Catastrophism and the plays under study. Over the rest of the Introduction, I set out some of the theoretical and practical questions pertaining to intertextuality and appropriation and consider the fraught textual status of *King Lear*. I also provide a review of the critical literature on *King Lear* and post-war British playwriting, before setting out the research methods I have used. Finally, the Introduction provides an overview of the thesis and a breakdown of its structure.

2. Catastrophism

2.1. What is Catastrophism?

David Rudkin (1936-), Howard Barker (1946-) and Sarah Kane (1971-1999) are all significant post-war British playwrights, writing across the post-war era in distinct styles.[8] What unites Rudkin, Barker and Kane is a concern with catastrophe and its impact on the subject. It is not simply that catastrophe is a force of degradation, however. On the contrary: catastrophe can also *enable* the subject. During times and spaces of catastrophe, the subject is suddenly emancipated from dominative social systems, which are left in ruins. This allows the subject to emerge 'anew' from the wreckage of a devastated world, re-interpreting and re-fashioning him or herself out of the fragments of disaster. Through catastrophe, the subject discovers new possibilities for selfhood, embodying freedom in the face of a decaying civilisation.

Catastrophe in the plays of Rudkin, Barker and Kane serves – paradoxically – to catalyse autonomy. This representation of subjectivity is in sharp contrast to a culture that would otherwise systematically diminish and destroy the subject. This is precisely the experience of Auschwitz and the concentration camps. Where Auschwitz revealed the total domination of the subject by cruelly reductive forms of social and political control, the playwrights under study insist on the possibility and necessity of freedom, even in the midst of disaster.

[8] I provide more contextual and biographical information on the playwrights under analysis in each of the case studies.

Catastrophism is drawn principally from Barker and his self-styled conception of the 'Theatre of Catastrophe', which he demarcates in his 1989 artistic 'manifesto' *Arguments for a Theatre*.[9] Catastrophism, as Barker uses it, designates a form of tragic drama, which represents the autonomy the subject finds in moments of catastrophe. 'Catastrophe is also birth. Out the ruins crawls the bloody *thing*, unrecognizable in the ripped rags of former life'.[10] Catastrophe is not only a thematic concern for Barker, however; it is also formal. The Theatre of Catastrophe is formally fragmented and violates aesthetic closure. The upshot is a tragic subject who finally retains his or her autonomy in a shattered world. Catastrophe is never brought to an end by the reinstatement of the *status quo* and the Catastrophist subject never reaches any form of reconciliation with the prevailing social and political order. There are no limits – aesthetic or ideological – placed on tragic subjectivity in Catastrophism.

I want to make the case that Catastrophism has a wider relevance than Barker necessarily recognizes and can be used to describe the work of other playwrights – most obviously Rudkin and Kane. These playwrights are engaged with the same constellation of ideas found in Barker around catastrophe, tragedy, subjectivity and aesthetic form. I do not contend that other playwrights would ever self-identify as Catastrophist – but Barker does provide a compelling critical and dramaturgical language that can be used to analyse wider developments in post-war British writing. By applying Catastrophism more widely than Barker necessarily intends, I aim to develop the possible critical usage of Catastrophism beyond Barker and his own, distinctive definition(s). This will be furnished through close analyses of the work of the other playwrights under consideration, but it will also mean

[9] Howard Barker, *Arguments for a Theatre*, 3rd edition (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1997), p. 50. I place 'manifesto' in apostrophes as the fragments that make up the text do not constitute a systematic statement of intent. I touch on the formal properties of Catastrophism again in Chapter Five.
[10] Howard Barker, *Women Beware Women*, *Collected Plays: Vol. 3* (London: Calder, 1986), p. 180.

drawing on the post-Auschwitz aesthetic theory developed by Adorno, which I now briefly consider.

2.2. Theorizing Catastrophism

Adorno, perhaps the foremost thinker of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory, often uses the concept of catastrophe in his writing.[11] It is, on the one hand, a descriptive historical category, and is typically related to the total degradation of human subjectivity at Auschwitz, which Adorno understands as symptomatic of modernity and its tendency towards disaster. But for Adorno, catastrophe is also an aesthetic category, which he relates to formally fragmented works of art.[12] Adorno believes that catastrophic art, while not necessarily confined to a discrete era, is the aesthetic form *par excellence* in post-Auschwitz culture. Such works, by denying aesthetic harmony, implicitly reveal the catastrophic condition of modernity – its failure to embody its liberal ideals of harmony and progress. But at the same time, catastrophic art allows for the 'force of subjectivity'.[13] Through its violent fissures, catastrophist art shatters formal coherence and closure. This opens a space for the representation of subjectivity beyond the parameters of conventional aesthetic form – a space of freedom.

[11] The Frankfurt School is both an institution and a type of critical thought, which grew out of the catastrophic experience of the twentieth century and its impact on conventional Marxist categories. See Tom Bottomore, *The Frankfurt School and Its Critics* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 7. The pioneering figures of the Frankfurt School are: Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse and Walter Benjamin. My emphasis falls on Adorno, though I do refer to other Frankfurt School thinkers, all of whom share a preoccupation with subjectivity and catastrophe. I also use Critical Theory and Frankfurt School interchangeably.

[12] This is particularly apparent in his observations on the late style of Beethoven in *Beethoven: The Philosophy of Music: Fragments and Texts* ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Cambridge: Polity, 1998). Adorno writes: 'The fragmented landscape is objective, while the light in which it grows alone is subjective. He does not bring about their harmonious synthesis. As a dissociative force, he tears them apart in time, perhaps in order to preserve them for the eternal. In the history of art, late works are the catastrophes' (p. 126).

[13] Ibid, p. 125.

This thesis draws heavily on the work of Adorno, as his work provides a powerful paradigm for analysing questions around catastrophe, subjectivity and aesthetics. Adorno, more than any other philosopher, offers a frame through which to theorize the historical catastrophe of Auschwitz and the role of subjectivity and aesthetics in post-Auschwitz playwriting. This is not to deny the descriptive power of other forms of philosophy and theory which have emerged in the post-war era. Similar thematics are addressed in the writings of Hannah Arendt, Maurice Blanchot, Jean-François Lyotard and Giorgio Agamben, among others.[14] No figure addressed such questions as consistently and rigorously as Adorno, however, and no figure in the world of philosophy has had the same influence on the playwrights under study. Both Rudkin and Barker are directly indebted to Adorno, and Kane, through the influence of Barker, is at least residually inspired by Frankfurt School theory.

With a broadly conceived definition and historical and theoretical genealogy of Catastrophism in place, I want to start drawing out the relationship between Catastrophism and *King Lear*, identifying the primary case studies under analysis and historicizing Catastrophism.

2.3. Historicizing Catastrophism

There are some obvious parallels between Catastrophism and *King Lear*. Its representation of human subjectivity in times and spaces of catastrophe obviously resonates with Catastrophism, as does its irruptive violation of closure, its failure to bring about aesthetic

[14] I pick up on the thoughts of some of these theorists again in Chapter One and in Chapters Two and Five, particularly Lyotard and, via Foucault, Agamben.

(and indeed social and political) order at its *dénouement*. To gain a more profound appreciation of the role played by appropriations of *King Lear* in Catastrophist playwriting, I identify as case studies the plays *Will's Way* (Rudkin, 1984), *Seven Lears* (Barker, 1989) and *Blasted* (Kane, 1995). These plays, in various ways, all appropriate *King Lear* in the service of a Catastrophist vision.

The case studies I have chosen all take place over a critical era in British (and indeed European and world) post-war culture: the early 1980s to the mid-1990s. This period witnessed the end of the Cold War, the transition from industrial society to post-industrial globalization, the growth of consumer culture and the so-called 'End of History' as postulated by Francis Fukuyama, where liberal capitalist democracy emerges as the final and only system of society.[15] These developments are often captured through the nebulous term 'neoliberalism' – the free-market ideology preached by Fredrick Hayek and Milton Friedman, which proposes to unleash the freedom of the individual via sweeping privatization and deregulation.[16] To define the period, however, I prefer the term 'late capitalism'.

My choice is – in part – influenced by Adorno, who tends to use late capitalism to describe the developments in liberal, capitalist society after the Second World War.[17] It is also influenced by theorist (and Holocaust survivor) Ernest Mandel, who popularised the term in his 1972 *Late Capitalism*.[18] Mandel predicted that the era of late capitalism would see the capitalist system become increasingly 'total', with the emergence of transnational

[15] Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (London: Penguin, 2012).
[16] See David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). It is worth pointing out that, in its emphasis on the individual and rolling back the state, right-wing neoliberal theory can itself be viewed as a response to Holocaust – though obviously without the critique of capitalism the Frankfurt School provide.
[17] See his 'Late Capitalism or Industrial Society?', *Can One Live After Auschwitz?*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Rodney Livingstone and others (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), pp. 111-125.
[18] Ernest Mandel, *Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1998).

corporations, globalized markets and labour, the fluidities of financial capital and a culture of mass consumption. He also predicted that (so-called) post-industrial global capital, far from freeing people from repressive state administration and the inhumane depredations of the industrial system, would see the commodification – the 'industrialisation' – of ever more inclusive areas of human life. He insisted that, far from 'representing a "post-industrial society"', late capitalism 'constitutes generalized universal industrialization for the first time in history'.[19] This means the supposed historical 'break' between an era of administered industrial capital and a 'freer', post-industrial capitalist system is not nearly as momentous as it appeared to be. Both forms, as Adorno similarly contests in his thoughts on post-war capital, tend to commodify ('industrialize') the world and everything before it – including people.[20]

The relationship between the playwrights under study and *King Lear* is not necessarily limited to the era of late capitalism. These plays should be situated against historical developments and catastrophes from the late 1930s onwards and, in both conscious and less conscious ways, are in dialogue with other various post-war interpretations of *King Lear* – and its relationship to the disaster of Auschwitz – over that time. I am, however, also concerned with Catastrophism as a post-Auschwitz aesthetic form and its more proximate relationship with the phenomenon of late capitalism. By analysing appropriations of *King Lear* in the 1980s and 1990s, I want to show that Catastrophism is – in part – a response to late capitalist culture. It is a culture that has become increasingly total and which tends, as a result, to dominate and diminish the subject, whose autonomy is imperilled. Adorno, when using the phrase 'after Auschwitz', did so with the consciousness

[19] Ibid, p. 387.
[20] 'The dialectician, above all, should not let himself be forced into a clear-cut distinction between late capitalism and industrial society', 'Late Capitalism or Industrial Society?', p. 114.

that there is no conclusive 'after': all the time subjects are reduced to nothing more than the objects of a totalized social system, the atrocities committed at Auschwitz remain a possibility.[21] I have chosen to consistently place apostrophes around 'after' for the same reason – to adumbrate the historical continuity between Auschwitz and late liberal capitalism, avoiding the idea of a definitive 'break' that places the Holocaust safely in 'the past'.

This section has provided an introductory definition of Catastrophism and traced a possible theoretical genealogy for catastrophic art by drawing on Adorno. These are topics I return to – and deepen – in subsequent chapters. It has also set out the case studies under analysis and the periods that will be considered. Over the rest of the Introduction, I want to identify some of the key conceptual – and practical – questions raised by appropriation. These primarily have to do with questions around textuality, intertextuality and authorship. These issues – for reasons that I will develop – are particularly fraught when it comes to analysing appropriations of *King Lear*. I begin by briefly considering the long 'pre'-history of *King Lear* and appropriation and consider the status of *King Lear* as itself an appropriation of a prior work – *The True Chronicle History of King Leir*. I go on to consider the work of critic and playwright David Ian Rabey. Rabey is predominantly known as an academic and Barker specialist, but his own appropriations of *King Lear* in *The Wye Plays* (1994, 1996) are deeply indebted to Catastrophism and shed light on the way Rudkin, Barker and Kane appropriate *King Lear*.

3. Appropriation

[21] See Chapter One, p. 55, for more on the idea of 'after' Auschwitz and the reduction of subjects to objects.

3.1. *King Lear* and/as Appropriation

King Lear has a long history of appropriations. In 1681, Nahum Tate 'revived' the play, but with far-reaching 'alterations'.[22] The most telling change was to the ending: Tate replaced the cataclysmic finale of *King Lear* with a 'happy' ending, where Lear, after being restored to the throne by Cordelia, retires to a 'cool Cell' for a life of monastic contemplation.[23] Tate also introduced the plot-device of a love-match between Edgar and Cordelia, who succeed to the throne as a 'celestial Pair' (V.96). The rationale for 'altering' *King Lear* was both aesthetic and political: the deaths of Cordelia and Lear violated formal closure and did not allow for the 'blest / Restauration' (V.95) of a legitimate sovereign, obviously a concern for Restoration playwrights and audiences: '*Legitimacy* / At last has got it' (V.93). This version, however, far outlived its own historical moment: continuing moral disquiet about the action of the play and its radically irruptive form meant that the Shakespeare version of *King Lear* was not staged again until 1838, when William Charles Macready 'restored' the 'original' Shakespeare, most obviously the un-Tateified ending, in his production at the Covent Garden Theatre.[24]

Tate has been much maligned for his intervention and 'Tatification' has entered the language to describe an unnecessary and ill-advised re-visioning of a canonical work.[25] It is important to recognize, however, that Shakespeare is himself part of the long history of appropriation: his *King Lear* is in dialogue with, and consciously reworks, other 'King Lears'

[22] Quoted in Nahum Tate, *The History of King Lear*, ed. James Black (London: Edward Arnold, 1976), p. 1.
[23] Nahum Tate, *The History of King Lear*, *Adaptations of Shakespeare*, ed. Daniel Fischlin and Mark Fortier (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 96. All references to the Tate *King Lear* are from the Fischlin and Fortier edition. Quotes from the play will be referenced using act and page number.
[24] See Emily Mullin, 'Macready's Triumph: The Restoration of *King Lear* to the Stage', *Penn History Review*, 18:1 (2010), pp. 17-35.
[25] David Crystal and Ben Crystal, *The Shakespeare Miscellany* (London: Penguin, 2005), p. 151.

circulating in the early modern period (and before). The tale of King Lear (sometimes Leir, Ler or Llyr) was, for the early moderns, a part of ancient British history, recorded by Geoffrey of Monmouth in his twelfth century *Historia Regum Britanniae*. Monmouth traces the story of Leir from the death of his father, Bladud, to the love-test and the division of the Kingdom, the civil war it unleashes and the restoration of Leir. Monmouth continues the story with the accession of Cordelia to the throne and her eventual suicide, as she is deposed and imprisoned by her nephews Cunedagius and Marganus, with both indignant 'that Britain was subjected to the rule of a woman'.[26] The story was retold in various ways in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, from the 1577 *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland*, where Raphael Holinshed gives a short retelling of the narrative, which ends with the suicide of Cordelia, to the 1574 *The Mirror for Magistrates*, where John Higgins has 'Cordila' (and not Lear) recite her 'storie tragicall ech word'. Cordila, who commits suicide after she is haunted by the 'ghost' of '*Despaire*', ends her narration by giving an exemplary moral warning on the sin of self-slaughter: 'Farre greater folly is it for to kill, / Themselves dispayring, then is any ill'.[27] The Lear story also appears in Book Two of *The Faerie Queene* (1590) and the William Warner work *Albions England* (1586). For the Gloucester subplot, Shakespeare drew on the *New Arcadia* (1586) by Philip Sidney and its story of the Paphlagonian King, where a legitimate son (Leonatus) is disowned by his father after being maligned by his illegitimate half-brother (Plexitrus) – a betrayal 'fit' enough 'to make the stage of any Tragodie'.[28]

[26] Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, trans. Lewis Thorpe (London: Penguin, 1966), p. 95 and 96.
[27] John Higgins, *The first parte of the Mirour for magistrates* (London: 1574). *Early English Books Online*. Accessed 27 July 2017. http://eebo.chadwyck.com.ezproxy01.rhul.ac.uk/search/fulltext?ACTION=ByID&ID=D20000998418730033&SOURCE=var_spell.cfg&DISPLAY=AUTHOR&WARN=N&FILE=../session/1501148434_13628.
[28] Philip Sidney, *The Countesse of Pembrokes Arcadia* (London: 1590). *Early English Books Online*. Accessed 27 July 2017.https://data-historicaltexts-jisc-ac-uk.ezproxy01.rhul.ac.uk/view?pubId=eebo-

The most obvious intertext for *King Lear* is the anonymous play *The True Chronicle History of King Leir*, published in 1605 (and most likely originally performed in 1594). This play depicts the Lear story up until the moment the 'lawful king' Leir is restored to his throne, with the martial and political aid of Cordella (Cordelia) and Gallia (France) and an uprising by other nobles and the commons.[29] With Cordella and Leir 'firmly reconcil'd / In perfect love' (IV.iii.59-60) by the end of the action, the play conveys a socially and politically conservative moral steeped in Christian values, where the 'good' finally triumph: 'The perfect good indeed / Can never be corrupted by the bad' (V.iii.76-77) for 'the heav'ns are just and hate impiety' (V.ii.30). Where the story of Cordelia and her suicide is, in the early modern era, often portrayed in terms of 'tragedy', the anonymous author of *King Leir* precludes tragedy by ending his version in a more sentimental vein of reconciliation and restoration.

But even while the Lear story was sometimes related to tragedy, the change Shakespeare makes to the story is unprecedented. No other version has so catastrophic a finale, with Cordelia being hanged and Lear dying as he bewails her death. Shakespeare radically subverts both a conventional romantic ending, with Lear and Cordelia reconciled, and a more conventional tragic ending, which usually ends with the death of Cordelia and a moralistic dictum about the sin of suicide. His play violates aesthetic closure and containment, destabilizing the meanings (social, political and moral) that are usually inscribed in the King Lear story. It would not be stretching the point to say that Tate is not so much violating Shakespeare as he is restoring King Lear to some of its formal (and moral) shape.

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ocm17202096e&terms=New%20Arcadia&pageTerms=New%20Arcadia&pageId=eebo-ocm17202096e-106206-1.

[29] Anonymous, *King Leir*, ed. Tiffany Stern (London: Nick Hern Books, 2002). All references are to the Stern edition and include her act and scene divisions.

It is not always the case that appropriation aims to repair the damaged aesthetic of *King Lear*, however. Other playwrights have appropriated the play precisely *because* of its violation of the limits of tragic closure. This is a point made by Rabey, whose own appropriations of *King Lear* in his sequels *The Back of Beyond* (1996) and *The Battle of Crows* (1998) are deeply influenced by Barker and Rudkin. Rabey remarks in his 'On Being a Shakespearean Dramatist', which prefaces his *King Lear* plays, that, through his appropriation of *King Leir*, Shakespeare subverts a once-familiar story to prolong 'horror and uncertainty beyond the conventional generic markers of tragedy and drama'.[30] Rabey contends that, by appropriating a pre-existing play and subverting any resolution, Shakespeare authorizes other writers to appropriate *King Lear* and develop its catastrophic violation of the outer limits of tragic form. Rabey states that, by challenging the closure of 'predetermined dramatic form', *King Lear* fails to restore the 'legitimate' social and political order that obtains at the outset of the play – so imperative to Tate.[31] This opens a space for Catastrophist subjectivity, where a failure to restore the usual 'boundaries and limitations' means the tragic subject retains his/her autonomy and 'capacity for unpredictable self-transformation'.[32]

Rabey provides a rationale for appropriating *King Lear* that resonates strongly with the work of Rudkin, Barker and Kane.[33] His allusion to *The True Chronicle History of King Leir*, however, also pays witness to various other 'Lear' texts in the early modern period – and beyond. This raises the problem of reference. What is the specific 'text' being referred to when a post-war (or any other) writer appropriates '*King Lear*'? Is it possible to identify a

[30] David Ian Rabey, *The Wye Plays* (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2004), p. 6.
[31] Ibid, p. 3.
[32] Ibid, p. 10 and p. 4.
[33] Rabey does not cite Kane, but there are parallels, the most obvious of which is the '*ABRUPT MASSIVE SHATTERING EXPLOSION*' (p. 43) that concludes Act Three of his *The Back of Beyond*, which recalls *Blasted*.

singular text which is being appropriated, or is it more appropriate to talk of various 'Lears'? This problem is even more acute when it comes to *King Lear*. The play exists in two discrete 'versions', both of which seem reliably 'Shakespearean'. Should these be seen as distinct contributions to a wider Lear 'tradition'? Or is it possible to speak in the singular, of a play called *King Lear* by Shakespeare? I want to address the controversy around the texts of *King Lear*, making the case that the play can (and should) be seen as a singular textual and formal entity, even while it exists in varying versions. I show that, while the playwrights under study are part of a wider Lear 'tradition', *King Lear* is the dominant intertext, with distinct textual and formal features which make it – perhaps uniquely – open to Catastrophist appropriation.

3.2. Which *King Lear*? The Textual Problem of *King Lear*

For any study of *King Lear*, the question inevitably arises – which *King Lear*? The play exists in the Quarto of 1608, originally entitled the *True Chronicle Historie of the life and death of King LEAR and his three Daughters*, and the 1632 Folio, called more simply *The Tragedie of King Lear*. On top of the titles and the generic shift from 'Historie' to 'Tragedie', which indicates the roots of the Lear story and its reception as 'history' in early modern culture, there are a wide array of both minor and more sweeping textual variations between the texts of *King Lear*.[34]

For most of its history, standard editorial practice has been to conflate the versions of *King Lear* and preserve as many aspects from both as possible, while negotiating the numerous textual variants either on aesthetic grounds or on the basis of a speculative

[34] For a detailed discussion, see Weis and his parallel text edition, pp. 1-35.

reconstruction of printing history. The same practice, perhaps less controversially, has also been true of the play in performance. Directors have tended to work with a conflated text, even while the Folio has generally been considered to be the more amenable to the practicalities of theatrical realization (Quarto or Folio-only stagings remain something of a rarity).[35]

Over the mid-1980s, however, conflation began to be challenged. Under the influence of various articles and the landmark 1983 collection *The Division of the Kingdoms,* edited by Gary Taylor and Michael Warren, the distinct versions of *King Lear* were increasingly regarded as conceptually separate: closely related but appreciably distinct and authoritative treatments of the same basic content.[36] The idea that both versions are 'authoritative' derives from the notion that Shakespeare himself revised his play from Quarto to Folio.

Whatever the (ultimately unknowable) historical reasons for the existence of discrete texts, the view that Quarto and Folio can be read as distinct versions of the same play found favour in Shakespeare Studies, reflecting, in part, a growing interest in theatrical practices and the new brand of materially conscious, poststructuralist criticism that emerged in Shakespeare Studies in the 1980s, which tended to question the precept of aesthetic 'unity' and engaged in deconstructive interrogations of textual gaps and ellipses, often with distinct political aims.[37] The Oxford *Complete Works* of 1985 printed the versions

[35] In the 'Introduction' to his parallel text edition, Weis notes that, for his 1990 RSC production of the play, Nicholas Hytner primarily used the Folio; yet even Hytner could not resist aspects of the Quarto, finally including the Quarto-only mock trial scene for III.vi. Weis concludes that the Folio could not '*automatically* carry the burden of performance' (p. 30).

[36] Gary Taylor and Michael Warren (eds.), *The Division of the Kingdoms: Shakespeare's Two Versions of King Lear* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983). See also P. W. K. Stone, *The Textual History of 'King Lear'* (London: Ashgate, 1980). The two-text question has recently been revived by Brian Vickers with his controversial *The One 'King Lear'* (Cambridge, MA and London: Yale University Press, 2016).

[37] I return to the critical history around *King Lear* in Chapter Three.

separately, and Quarto editions of the play were also published in 1994 and 2000.[38] René Weis published his parallel text edition of *King Lear* in 1993, which printed Quarto and Folio version side-by-side – though Weis, not unreasonably, remained unconvinced that the revisionist theory could ever be finally proved by scholars speculating about print history and conditions.[39]

The revisionist theory is undeniably intriguing for a study on appropriations of *King Lear*, as it raises the prospect that Shakespeare adapted his own play. My own conviction, however, is that the distinctions between the texts, while no doubt important to recognize, have been overstated. I take the same position as Foakes, who, though he is persuaded by the revisionist stance on the Quarto and/or Folio debate, makes the case that the reworking of *King Lear* from Quarto to Folio is not so thorough as to mean that critics have to think of finally 'separate' plays.[40] Weis similarly insists on 'The Integral *King Lear*' and contends that the versions of the play tell a story of convergence, not divergence, while Richard Knowles concludes that 'if the Folio *Lear* represents a new "concept" of the play, it is a remarkably limited revision'.[41]

Even in the wake of the bi-text controversy, *King Lear* can still be thought of as a formally and conceptually 'singular' work by Shakespeare – both in the world of Shakespeare Studies and in the wider public cultural imaginary. With that in mind, I would make the case that contemporary appropriators of the play are confronting a single work. More practically for the purposes of the present study, it is worth remembering the

[38] William Shakespeare, *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, ed. John Jowett *et al* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985); *The First Quarto of King Lear*, ed. Jay L. Halio (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); *The History of King Lear*, ed. Stanley Wells (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).
[39] 'Introduction', *King Lear: A Parallel Text Edition*, pp. 36-37.
[40] *Hamlet Versus Lear*, p. 111.
[41] *King Lear: A Parallel Text Edition*, p. 36; Richard Knowles, 'Two Lears? By Shakespeare?', *Lear from Study to Stage: Essays in Criticism*, ed. James Ogden and Arthur Scouten (Madison and London: Associated University Presses, 1997), pp. 68-69.

playwrights under analysis are precisely that – playwrights, not textual historians or academics concerned with early modern print culture. My hunch is that, on the page, Rudkin and Barker would most likely have originally encountered *King Lear* in the popular, conflated 1952 Arden edition, edited by Frank Muir (reprinted in 1972). The edition Sarah Kane was most familiar with is harder to gauge – and it is worth pointing out that some of the 'un-edited' editions that grew out of the revisionist controversy would have been available by the time she came to write *Blasted*. Even with her diverse intellectual interests, however, I find it doubtful questions around early modern book culture would have been a priority.

This is not to say that I completely ignore the distinction(s) between the texts of *King Lear* or insist that there is some 'definitive' version of the play. There are variations in the Quarto and Folio versions. These variations can be relevant when a contemporary author intervenes to appropriate, or make textual changes to, the play. I will touch on some of the textual and formal discrepancies between the '*King Lear*s' and pay attention to the varying ways appropriations may signify based on whether the Quarto or Folio is the version under consideration. I will also have cause to analyse some of the editorial interventions which have shaped the play. My emphasis, however, is on *King Lear* as a singular textual and formal entity.

To underscore the textual 'integrity' of *King Lear* is not to say that the playwrights engage in a direct and unmediated relationship with the text of *King Lear*, which is in some way hermetically-sealed from 'outside' influence. Nor is it to say that *King Lear* has a singular textual 'meaning' which remains constant through time. There is obviously a wider historical, cultural and interpretive *milieu* around *King Lear* in the post-war era. Various interpretative formations have aggregated around the play over the period and, in some

ways, determine its received 'meaning' in the wider imaginary. The playwrights under study are embedded in a wider cultural discourse around *King Lear* and, in both explicit and implicit ways, appropriations are always responsive to that discourse and not merely to the text 'itself'. There are, however, specific textual and formal features of *King Lear* which preoccupy the appropriators under consideration – not the least of which is its catastrophic violation of formal containment. These distinct authorial preoccupations serve to bring certain aspects of the play into focus, over and against those stressed in other interpretations in the post-war era – whether those are by scholars, practitioners or other playwrights.

The controversy around the texts of *King Lear* obviously raises important conceptual and theoretical questions around the issues of textuality, intertextuality and authorship. What should artworks that are based on, or consciously rework and rewrite, previous works be called? What role (if any) does 'the author' play in the processes of intertextuality? The complexity of the questions at hand means that there is no abiding critical agreement as to precisely *how* the artistic practice of creatively intervening in and with past texts should be defined. My preference is for the word 'appropriation' – as the title I have chosen attests. In the next section, I will provide a theoretical interpretation and defence of appropriation as a viable (and flexible) descriptor for various forms of authorial practice in relation to past texts.

3.3. Intertextuality, Adaptation or Appropriation?

In her 1976 work *Modern Shakespeare Offshoots*, Ruby Cohn provides a litany of words to try and describe works that have an obvious relationship to a Shakespearean antecedent, considering everything from 'version' to 'abridgement', before settling on the more open-ended 'offshoots'.[42] The surfeit of possible descriptors Cohn provides testifies to the 'problem of naming' – as Daniel Fischlin and Marker Fortier have called it – when it comes to defining artistic works that are based on or rework a prior text.[43] Fischlin and Fortier contend that the field remains relatively undertheorized and rightly point out that no single word can ultimately capture all forms of appropriative artistic practice – though Fischlin and Fortier do finally settle for 'adaptation' by way of compromise.[44] Some particular terms are, however, more prominent than others and have tended to inform the theoretical and critical conversation. The most dominant are intertextuality, adaptation and appropriation. I want to consider these terms and the type of theoretical and critical claims that are generally made for them as a way of defining why and how I use the concept of appropriation.

The theory of intertextuality is perhaps the most radical in its scope and implications, raising fundamental questions about ideas around the 'original', the 'author' and the integrity of the unique 'work'. Though usage has shifted in various ways, the word still tends to signify a series of endlessly unravelling relationships 'between' various texts.[45] The idea of intertextuality would have it that all texts, and not only consciously appropriative or adaptive texts, are made up of webs of allusions to – and transformations of – other texts. The 'meaning' of any work is ultimately produced by the interrelationship between it and

[42] Ruby Cohn, *Modern Shakespeare Offshoots* (Princeton NJ: Princeton, 1974), pp. 3-4.
[43] 'Introduction' to *Adaptations of Shakespeare*, p. 2.
[44] Ibid, pp. 3-4.
[45] See María Jesús Martínez Alfaro, 'Intertextuality: Origins and Development of the Concept', *Atlantis*, 18:1/2 (1996), pp. 268-285

various other texts, as opposed to being a unique product of the original work or the intentions of its author. Like much poststructuralist thought, intertextuality is suspicious of the supposed 'singularity' of the text and of the notion of the subject (author) as a unified centre of meaning.[46]

These very same features can, however, be problematic. The limitation of intertextuality is that, by concentrating on the general interplay of texts through space and time, it tends to elide the distinctiveness, or alterity, of the textual and formal aspects that make up any specific text. By treating all texts as intertexts, intertextuality is ultimately inadequate for a study on the appropriations of a single play and, as a theory that posits a universal and ahistorical theory of the relation pertaining between all texts at all times, can also be blind to the reasons why a particular work might be prominent at a certain historical moment. Its stress on the so-called 'Death of the Author' is similarly problematic for the present study: implying as it does that the meaning and autonomy of the human subject is a chimera, intertextuality is in theoretical conflict with a study dealing with the total eradication of subjectivity at Auschwitz.[47] This study will, at times, use the word 'intertext' to designate an appropriated work. But while I am interested in the relation between texts – and so 'intertexts' – that should not be taken to imply a simple endorsement of the theory of intertextuality.

The word adaptation is increasingly used in criticism, as reflected by the formation of the International Association of Adaptation Studies in 2008, the same year the journal *Adaptation* was established. The etymology of adaptation sheds light on its usage. Derived

[46] See Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', *Image Music Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), pp. 142-148 and Michel Foucault 'What is an Author?', *Michel Foucault: Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology, Volume 2*, ed. James D. Faubion and Paul Rabinow (New York: The New Press, 1994) pp. 205-222.

[47] See also Sean Burke, *The Death and Return of the Author: Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault and Derrida*, 2nd edition (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008).

from the Latin *adaptāre*, to make 'suitable' or 'fit', usually for a new purpose, adaptation has generally been concerned with the way in which a work from one *media* is made to fit another – say the adaptation of a novel to film.[48] This is certainly the dominant meaning of adaptation for Linda Hutcheon.[49] But adaptation is not only used to designate the inter-medial transformations of a work into another form; it has also been used in relation to intra-medial works – say where an old play is adapted by another dramatist to make it 'fit' with a new *milieu*. Fischlin and Fortier use adaptation to designate theatrical reworkings of Shakespeare, citing the way Tate adapts *King Lear* to make it fit with Restoration aesthetic and political principles.[50] The problem with adaptation, however, is that it is potentially limiting in its scope. Because of its roots in intermedia transitions, adaptation tends to focus on the wholesale transformation of texts. This means that, when it comes to Shakespeare, adaptation has increasingly been used to designate complete rewritings of the 'original' adapted play. This does not necessarily leave room for other forms of artistic and cultural intervention in relation to Shakespeare – say the rewriting of a single scene or the use of a particular character.

I think that appropriation is wider in scope. The word appropriation has its etymological roots in the Latin *appropriāre* and tends to connote the seizure of 'property' belonging to another, to 'take to oneself' or 'make one's own'.[51] The word is most readily related in Shakespeare Studies with the Cultural Materialist criticism of the 1980s and 1990s. Cultural Materialist critics of the time were concerned with the ways in which

[48] 'adaptation, n.'. *OED Online*. Accessed, 27 July 2017. http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/2115?redirectedFrom=adaptation. See also *Adaptation and Appropriation*, p. 19.
[49] Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 2nd edition (Oxford: Routledge, 2013).
[50] 'Introduction', *The History of King Lear*, *Adaptations of Shakespeare*, pp. 66-67.
[51] 'appropriation, n.'. *OED Online*. Accessed 27 July 2017. http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/9877?redirectedFrom=appropriation.

Shakespeare is appropriated and the ideological uses the Bard is conscripted to serve. This mostly meant interrogating the conservative use of Shakespeare in various forms; but, at the same time, critics also sought to prioritize the redeployment of Shakespeare for politically and ideologically oppositional purposes. These critics were particularly concerned with the way in which feminist, queer and postcolonial writers upended the patriarchal, heteronormative and imperialist ideologies which Shakespeare has been used to promulgate, in the service of 'marginalized, oppressed and disenfranchised cultural voices'.[52] Such writers were seen to be appropriating the dominant, hegemonic culture – material belonging to the establishment – for themselves, at once interrogating the values attached to 'Shakespeare' whilst simultaneously redeploying him for new social and political purposes.[53]

My own use of the word appropriation is far less politicized than it is for Cultural Materialist criticism. Where appropriation has, in the past, often been used 'as a weapon in the struggle for supremacy between various ideologies' and 'various poetics', I am not as concerned with the way in which writers appropriate Shakespeare in the service of particular forms of (usually, identity) politics.[54] Such appropriations often work by representing a character marginalized in the 'original' play, with feminist rewritings of Shakespeare written from the 'untold' perspective of Ophelia or Desdemona by no means unusual.[55] While I do not want to contest the political aspirations which underpin

[52] Alexa Huang and Elizabeth Rivlin, 'Introduction', *Shakespeare and the Ethics of Appropriation*, ed. Alexa Huang and Elizabeth Rivlin (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 1.
[53] The pathbreaking 1983 collection *Political Shakespeare: Essays in Cultural Materialism*, ed. Jonathon Dollimore and Alan Sinfield (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983) dedicated its second half (pp. 154-289) to analysing both conservative 'reproductions' of Shakespearean authority and radical 'appropriations' of it. I return to Cultural Materialism in Chapter Three.
[54] André Lefevere, 'Why Waste Our Time on Rewrites? The Trouble with Interpretation and the Role of Rewriting in an Alternative Paradigm', *The Manipulation of Literature: Studies in Literary Translation*, ed. T. Hermans (London: Croom Helm, 1983), p. 234
[55] I refer to feminist appropriations of *King Lear* in Chapter Three.

appropriation, Cultural Materialist criticism – in its search for oppositional meanings – has limited the scope of appropriation, which has been reduced to meaning nothing but 'a seizure of authority over the original in a way that appeals to contemporary sensibilities steeped in a politicized understanding of culture'.[56] This is hardly unjustified given the etymology of the word, but it has meant that *other forms* of appropriation have been overlooked. This is particularly true of Rudkin, Barker and Kane, whose appropriations are not necessarily concerned with (and are even suspicious of) particular political iterations of identity.

What I find useful about the word appropriation is that, far more strongly than intertextuality and adaptation, it implies an intentional subject *doing* the appropriating – an author. This reflects the 'proper' in 'appropriation', which means 'pertaining to a person' 'in particular, specific; distinctive, characteristic'.[57] Using appropriation creates space for authorial agency. This authorial aspect is – for Sanders – 'inescapable' when thinking about the way a contemporary writer approaches and appropriates a prior text.[58] While appropriation may have its root in *propruis* – 'belonging to', the 'property of' – the 'a'-prefix denotes 'an approach towards'.[59] This conception of the 'approach' is open-ended; it does not necessitate a posture of antagonistically politicized hostility. The approach 'toward' property belonging to another may be more reverential – or simply more ambivalent – even if the desire of the author is to 'take' that property 'to oneself', to make it his or her 'own'. This may serve to make the relationship between the appropriator and text more dialogic than antagonistic – a 'conversation' between writer and work, as Barker sometimes calls it,

[56] *Adaptations of Shakespeare*, p. 3.
[57] 'appropriation, n.'.
[58] *Adaptation and Appropriation*, p. 2.
[59] Christy Desmet and Sujata Iyengar, 'Adaptation, Appropriation, or What you Will', *Shakespeare*, 11:1 (2015), p. 14.

as opposed to the complete domination of the textual object by the appropriating authorial subject.[60]

The word appropriation can usefully serve to capture 'approaches' to past texts that are not necessarily constrained by questions of cultural and political identity. But it can also encompass several forms of artistic practice, in a way that is not so available to the more limited 'adaptation'. Where adaptation is increasingly identified with wholesale (and usually intermedial) transformations of a text, appropriation may be of a single speech or character, or even an unchanged quotation. This will be particularly useful in tracing the various ways in which *King Lear* is appropriated in post-war British playwriting. *King Lear* has been appropriated in many ways 'after' Auschwitz, from complete rewritings of the play (Bond); to prequels and sequels (Barker and Rabey); to the appropriation of a vital scene or scenes (Kane); to appropriating a particular character (Rudkin). By using appropriation, it is possible to bring various forms of practice into dialogue as part of a wider study into the way writers have used *King Lear*.

No single word can comprise all forms of intertextuality and, to a degree, all definitions will have limitations. It would be wrong, however, to take a 'What You Will' approach to the 'problem of naming': the theories of intertextuality, adaptation and appropriation, though in constant evolution, have underlying assumptions and critical genealogies.[61] With some of those assumptions and genealogies adduced and with 'appropriation' taken as a preferred term, I want to provide a brief survey of the criticism dealing with Shakespeare and appropriation, presenting the distinctive contribution that I make to the field.

[60] In his *Arguments for a Theatre*, Barker stages a 'conversation' between himself and Thomas Middleton, pp. 25-28. This more open dynamic is also a vital aspect of Adornian thinking on the wider relationship between subject and object in post-Auschwitz life and culture, as I show in Chapter One.
[61] 'Adaptation, Appropriation, or What You Will'.

4. Literature Survey: Shakespeare Studies and Post-War British Theatre Studies

To define briefly the research *milieu* in which I am operating, I will concentrate on the foremost research areas the thesis straddles – Shakespeare Studies and post-war British Theatre Studies. To date, no work of criticism has emerged that deals solely with appropriations of *King Lear* in post-war British playwriting. There have, however, been some critical pieces on Shakespeare and modern drama and some single-author studies on the Catastrophist playwrights under consideration. Where critics working in Shakespeare Studies have tended to produce criticism dealing with the wider issue of Shakespeare and modern drama, critics working in contemporary Theatre Studies tend to prioritize the work of a single playwright. These are approaches that I hope to bring into dialogue. I will begin with Shakespeare Studies and, more specifically, the topic of Shakespeare and appropriation.

4.1. Shakespeare Studies

Shakespeare and appropriation is a vast, and still growing, field of critical enquiry, covering everything from the appropriation of Shakespeare in eighteenth century political cartoons to 'YouTube Ophelias'.[62] This reflects a wider historical shift in Shakespeare Studies from the meaning 'of' Shakespeare to the phenomenon of meaning 'by' Shakespeare, which

[62] For Shakespeare and political cartoons, see Jonathan Bate, *Shakespearean Constitutions: Politics, Theatre, Criticism 1730-1830* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), while a study of YouTube Ophelias can be found in Christy Desmet and Sujata Iyengar, 'Rebooting Ophelia: Social Media and the Rhetorics of Appropriation', *The Afterlife of Ophelia*, ed. Kaara L. Peterson and Deanne Williams (New York: Palgrave McMillan, 2012), pp. 59-78.

abandons the idea that there is any finally authoritative 'meaning' in Shakespeare for critics to decipher in favour of analysing the way Shakespeare is variously used to generate meaning(s).[63]

Perhaps unexpectedly, however, studies dealing with Shakespeare and appropriation have not always paid much attention to appropriations by modern playwrights, typically preferring inter-medial appropriations (and adaptations) of Shakespeare as opposed to intra-medial appropriations. This failure to address Shakespeare and playwriting can be seen in the 1991 Peter Erickson work, *Rewriting Shakespeare, Rewriting Ourselves* and the influential 1991 and 1999 collections *The Appropriation of Shakespeare: Post-Renaissance Reconstruction of the Works and Myths* and *Shakespeare and Appropriation*, none of which includes a single piece on appropriations of Shakespeare by historical or post-war playwrights.[64]

Despite the relative paucity of works dealing with Shakespeare and modern playwriting, some studies have emerged dedicated to the topic. In her *Modern Shakespeare Offshoots*, Cohn sets herself the task of studying theatrical appropriations (or 'offshoots') of Shakespeare, but, finding little of worth, frequently abandons her task in order to devote more study to novels and other generic forms that 'offshoot' from Shakespeare: 'Shakespeare offshoots are not Shakespeare or, a little less tersely, no modern Shakespeare offshoot has improved upon the original'.[65] Cohn does dedicate some time to *King Lear*

[63] Terence Hawkes, *Meaning by Shakespeare* (London: Routledge, 1992).
[64] Peter Erickson, *Rewriting Shakespeare, Rewriting Ourselves* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1991); Jean I. Marsden (ed.), *The Appropriation of Shakespeare: Post-Renaissance Reconstruction of the Works and Myths* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991); Christy Desmet and Robert Sawyer (eds.), *Shakespeare and Appropriation* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999).
[65] *Modern Shakespeare Offshoots*, p. vii.

offshoots but does not develop a reading that attends to the status of the play in post-war playwriting.[66]

In his 1989 study *Shakespeare and the Modern Dramatist*, Michael Scott sticks more faithfully to his task and provides readings of the way contemporary dramatists have 'modernized' Shakespeare, including Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco, Tom Stoppard, Edward Bond, Arnold Wesker and Charles Marowitz.[67] This 'modernization' of the Bard, as Scott conceives it, falls into distinct categories: the 'metaphysical' theatre of the absurdists (Beckett, Ionesco, Stoppard) or the avowedly political theatre of the Brechtian socialists (Bond, Wesker and Marowitz).[68] The problem with his conception of modernization, however, is that it is both vague and overly schematic. It implies modern drama is split solely between the metaphysical and the political, with appropriations of Shakespeare following suit. This renders Scott somewhat blind to other forms of appropriative intervention in post-war playwriting and drama, which is not nearly as binary as he makes out. This is particularly problematic when it comes to *King Lear*. Scott fails to acknowledge the various ways the play has been appropriated in post-war British writing or the possibility that appropriation ('modernization') operates in ways other than his limited conception of metaphysical/political.

In the more recent 2013 work *Shakespeare's Surrogates: Rewriting Renaissance Drama*, Sonya Freeman Loftis draws on ideas around theatrical surrogacy to analyse the ways literary adaptation and appropriation is often metaphorized, in both early modern and modern writing, as a violent dismemberment of the human body (corpse/corpus).[69] Loftis is

[66] For the chapter on *King Lear*, which is far shorter than the *Hamlet* chapter, see pp. 232-266.
[67] Michael Scott, *Shakespeare and the Modern Dramatist* (Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press, 1989).
[68] Ibid, p. 103.
[69] Sonya Freeman Loftis, *Shakespeare's Surrogates: Rewriting Renaissance Drama* (London and New York: Palgrave and Macmillan, 2013).

convincing in her demonstration of images of literary adaptation and/as physical dismemberment. Her analysis of the paradox of violence and veneration in images of dismemberment also has some purchase on the playwrights under study.[70] For all its strengths, however, the work suffers – I argue – from a lack of scope. The playwrights Loftis considers very much represent a roll-call of the 'usual suspects', already considered in the work of Cohn and Scott: Shaw, Beckett, Brecht, Stoppard and Müller. Loftis does not consider the work of other playwrights who have appropriated Shakespeare, so that her work, while theoretically and conceptually rigorous, is not nearly as original as it might have been in its choices.

Criticism dedicated solely to *King Lear* and appropriation has also started to emerge in recent times. In her 2010 *Succeeding King Lear: Literature, Exposure and the Possibility of Politics*, Emily Sun analyses the cultural afterlife of *King Lear*, the way that the play 'generates a literary genealogy, or history of successors'.[71] Drawing on the work of Agamben, Sun contends that *King Lear* depicts the originary moment of modernity – the disaster brought about by a crisis in the legitimacy of the sovereign.[72] The play, as Sun reads it, inaugurates a historical rift which other writers compulsively return to in times of crisis. Sun concentrates on discrete historical eras – the 1790s and the 1930s, with William Wordsworth and the James Agee and Walker Evans multi-media work *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* the 'successors' Sun is concerned to analyse. My own work on *King Lear* is also concerned with appropriation, catastrophe and modernity; however, where Sun provides an analysis that ranges between discrete eras, I concentrate on playwriting of the post-war

[70] This, as I will show in Chapter Six, is particularly true of Barker.
[71] *Succeeding King Lear*, pp. 2-3.
[72] Ibid, p. 2.

period and the way *King Lear* has been appropriated in response to the catastrophe of the Holocaust.

My area of inquiry most obviously overlaps with the work of Lynne Bradley and her 2010 *Adapting King Lear for the Stage*.[73] Bradley analyses adaptations (by which she means wholesale rewritings) of *King Lear* from the Nahum Tate 'revival' of the play in 1681 to post-war plays from the twentieth century. This includes work on some of the playwrights I analyse (though it overlooks David Rudkin and Sarah Kane). My main criticism of *Adapting King Lear for the Stage* is that it does not give a particularly strong rationale for prioritizing *King Lear*. Bradley writes that she concentrates on *King Lear* because 'tracing adaptation as it is practised on one particular work creates a consistency of focus around the methodology of adaptation'.[74] This is surely right – but if Bradley is concerned only with 'a consistency of focus' around the way adaptation takes place, she might equally have picked any other play.[75] By situating the play against the catastrophe of the Holocaust, I intend to provide some of the historical and conceptual context around *King Lear*, modernity and disaster lacking in *Adapting King Lear for the Stage*. By studying appropriations of the play, as opposed to adaptations, I also provide a wider prospectus of the way the play has been deployed.

So vast is the literature around Shakespeare and appropriation in Shakespeare Studies that no survey can be exhaustive. What is striking about the field, however, is the relative infrequency of studies dealing with appropriations by contemporary playwrights. Even more conspicuously, hardly any critics in Shakespeare Studies have considered the

[73] Lynne Bradley, *Adapting King Lear for the Stage* (Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate, 2010).
[74] Ibid, p. 7.
[75] There are precedents for tracing responses to (and adaptations of) a single play, most obviously *'The Tempest' and its Travels*, ed. Peter Hulme and William H. Sherman (London: Reaktion, 2000). This, however, is a collection, not a monograph.

appropriations undertaken by Rudkin, Barker and Kane. This is partially due to the legacy of Cultural Materialism and a politicized conception of appropriation, which has not always left room for other forms of creative intervention. By concentrating on Catastrophism, I intend to make a distinctive contribution to the topic of Shakespeare and appropriation, while also questioning the theoretical – and, indeed, political – priorities that traditionally have underpinned it.

4.2. Post-War British Theatre Studies

For the most part, Shakespeare Studies has not had much to say about appropriations of *King Lear* in post-war playwriting – and even less to say about Rudkin, Barker and Kane. The way these figures appropriate *King Lear* has, however, been considered more fully by scholars of post-war British theatre. Graham Saunders has written about the relationship between *Blasted* and *King Lear* and has also analysed *Seven Lears*.[76] Saunders has consolidated his work on Shakespeare and appropriation with his 2017 *Elizabethan and Jacobean Reappropriation in Contemporary British Drama: 'Upstart Crows'*. Saunders also prefers the term appropriation – though for him it captures the way British playwrights appropriate Shakespeare to challenge the ideologies within Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, questioning the legitimacy and cultural authority of Shakespeare.[77] Other works on Barker and his Shakespeare appropriations have been produced by Andy Smith and Vanasay

[76] Graham Saunders, '"Out Vile Jelly": Sarah Kane's *Blasted* and Shakespeare's *King Lear*', *New Theatre Quarterly*, 10:1 (2004), pp. 69-78; '"Missing Mothers and Absent Fathers": Howard Barker's *Seven Lears* and Elaine Feinstein's *Lear's Daughters*', *Modern Drama*, 42:3 (1999), pp. 401-410; 'Howard Barker's "Monstrous Assaults": Eroticism, Death and the Antique Text', *Eroticism and Death in Theatre and Performance*, ed. Karoline Gritzner (Hertfordshire: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2010), pp. 144-159.
[77] Graham Saunders, *Elizabethan and Jacobean Reappropriation in Contemporary British Drama: 'Upstart Crows'* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

Khamphommala, while David Ian Rabey has touched on the relationship between Barker and Shakespeare in his most recent monograph on the playwright.[78] Criticism on Rudkin, perhaps the least known playwright under study, remains sparse: Rabey has, however, provided some analysis of the Shakespearean echoes found in his work, as has Robert Wilcher.[79]

Some of these critics will be considered again more deeply – and critiqued – in the pending case studies. For now, I want to draw attention to the absence of a wider critical engagement with *King Lear* and appropriation. To date, criticism has generally only dealt with the appropriations of a single playwright, failing to provide a more comprehensive analysis of *King Lear* in post-war culture and playwriting. This means that criticism has (as yet) failed to analyse the discourse around the play and the catastrophe of Auschwitz, which has shaped the way in which post-war playwrights have responded to and appropriated the play. This failure to situate *King Lear* and appropriation within a deeper socio-historical *milieu* means that criticism has not always been alive to the full implications of *King Lear* appropriations. It has also meant that the relationship *between* various *King Lear* appropriations in post-war drama has been neglected. By bringing the appropriations of particular playwrights into a wider dialogue around Auschwitz, catastrophe and subjectivity, I intend to provide a deeper analysis of *King Lear* and post-war writing than has previously been attempted.

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[78] Andy Smith, '"I Am Not What I Was": Adaptation and Transformation in the Theatre of Howard Barker and the Wrestling School', *Theatre of Catastrophe: New Essays on Howard Barker*, ed. Karoline Gritzner and David Ian Rabey (London: Oberon Books, 2006), pp. 38-55; Vanasay Khamphommala, '"Watch Out for Two-handed Swords": Double-Edged Poetics in Howard Barker's *Henry V in Two Parts* (1971)', *Shakespeare Survey, 63: Shakespeare's English Histories*, ed. Peter Holland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 162-171; David Ian Rabey, *Howard Barker: Ecstasy and Death, An Expository Study of His Drama, Theory and Production, 1988-2008* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), pp. 51-71.

[79] David Ian Rabey, *David Rudkin: Sacred Disobedience, An Expository Study of His Drama 1959-1996* (Oxford: Routledge, 1997), pp. 155-158; Robert Wilcher, 'Only a Bard: The Theatre of David Rudkin', *Red Sun and Merlin Unchained*, David Rudkin (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2011), pp. 247-259.

In her 2015 *Adorno and Modern Theatre: The Drama of the Damaged Self in Bond, Rudkin, Barker and Kane* – and in other previous articles – Karoline Gritzner has read the drama of all of the playwrights under study through the perspective of Critical Theory and its conceptualization of Auschwitz, the aesthetics of catastrophe and modern subjectivity.[80] My own research has many overlaps with – and is also indebted to – the pathbreaking work of Gritzner. My thesis, however, aims to demonstrate the critical role *King Lear* has played in the development of post-Auschwitz, Catastrophist dramaturgies, whereas Gritzner tends to concentrate on the formative influence of Beckett and the ruined scenescapes of absurdism.[81] I intend to show that Catastrophism has not only a Beckettian, but also a Shakespearean, genealogy. To that end, I want to develop aspects of her analysis of post-Auschwitz, Catastrophist dramaturgy and playwriting to include Shakespeare, *King Lear* and appropriation.

This is the first full-length study to analyse appropriations of *King Lear* in post-war British playwriting, representing a new contribution to criticism on the cultural afterlife of the play. By drawing on Adorno and bringing various appropriations of the play into dialogue, I intend to situate *King Lear* in a wider cultural discourse around the Holocaust, showing that Catastrophist appropriations have played a vital role in post-Auschwitz drama and playwriting.

I turn now to give a description of the research methods I have used to analyse appropriations of *King Lear* in post-war British playwriting and its role in Catastrophist aesthetics. I concentrate on the approach I have taken to textuality, authorship and

[80] Karoline Gritzner, *Adorno and Modern Theatre: The Drama of the Damaged Self in Bond, Rudkin, Barker and Kane* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015). See also her '(Post)Modern Subjectivity and the New Expressionism: Howard Barker, Sarah Kane, and Forced Entertainment', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 18:3 (2008), pp. 328-340.
[81] *Adorno and Modern Theatre*, pp. 24-45 and 106-117.

performance, which have – in part – been determined by the way in which I conceptualize appropriation.

5. Research Methods

This is primarily a study of playwrights and playwriting. To that end, I have taken an author-centred approach to research and prioritized close textual and formal analysis of my selected case studies. There are various theoretical concerns that may be raised against the text-based approach I have taken, which can be accused of granting the text an over-privileged status as a self-contained literary artefact it does not warrant – particularly in the world of Theatre Studies, where the authority of the text has increasingly been displaced in favour of the 'liveness' of the performance event.[82] My primary research method nevertheless has a firm foundation in some of the basic presumptions of appropriation studies which, as Fischlin and Fortier contend, invariably involves an analysis of the way a writer intervenes to appropriate, and make intertextual changes to, a prior text.[83] Close-text analysis has also been vital in recovering a wide range of appropriations of *King Lear*, often beyond plays that 'announce' a specific intertextual relation to *King Lear* via a title (as in *Seven Lears*). This has allowed for a more thorough appreciation of various forms of appropriation.

My approach to close-text analysis has been author-centred. By resurrecting a figure pronounced dead in some poststructuralist theory, I have attempted to situate

[82] See in particular Hans-Thies Lehman, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. Karen Jürs-Munby (Oxford: Routledge, 2006). See also the Special Issue of *Performance Research* entitled 'Performing Literatures', *Performance Research*, 14:1 (2009) for an excellent collection of essays on the question of text/performance.
[83] *Adaptations of Shakespeare*, p. 7.

appropriations of *King Lear* within the wider *oeuvre* of the playwrights under study. To determine, analyse and even critique aspects of authorial intention, I have also drawn on other, 'non-literary' and 'non-dramatic' texts. These have come in the form of essays, critical articles, interviews, public addresses and so on. My prioritization of the author and authorship is also reflected in the original, in-depth interviews I have conducted with Rudkin and Barker, transcriptions of which are included in the Appendix. While the interviews are concerned with authorial intention, it should also be observed that these conversations are not always supportive of the readings I have taken and that interpretation can never be reduced to the (in any case, variously conceived and contingent) intentions of the author. These interviews were also undertaken with the aim of ascertaining more about the original performances of the plays and some of the conditions around staging. I have also engaged in archival textual research, most of all on David Rudkin, who donated an archive of materials to the British Library in 2010. My research in the Rudkin Archive led to the discovery of an unfinished 'Shakespeare' play, which I touch on again in Chapter Five. I remain one of the few researchers working on the Rudkin Archive, which I visited over 2015-2016.

My emphasis on close-text analysis has, in part, been motivated by practical concerns. Due to the relatively marginal status of the playwrights I study, revivals of the plays have been few and far between. Playwriting does, however, invariably (though not inevitably) take place with a performance in mind and, in studying appropriations of a drama text by playwrights, I have also undertaken performance analysis. Over 2016 I accessed the Exeter Digital Performance Archive in order to study its recordings of Wrestling School productions, which includes some of the original staging of *Seven Lears*. I have also engaged in other forms of archival work to analyse past stagings and the way Catastrophist

subjectivity is performatively embodied. This has meant work on various performance ephemera and press reviews, which have played a role in the way I read subjectivity in performance.

My analysis of performance both draws on – and contributes to – Frankfurt School theory. In his analysis of artistic performance – most obviously in music – Adorno critiques the 'compulsive repetition' of 'standardized performances', whereby performers repetitively embody the same predictable movements and actions.[84] This is something he relates to social and political systems that aspire to total domination, which must inhibit all individual spontaneity – a phenomena Arendt also analyses.[85] It is a process of domination that, as both Adorno and Arendt contend, found its nadir in the concentration camps.[86] My analysis of past stagings draws on the etymology of catastrophe as an unexpectedly sudden 'turn'.[87] I show that the Catastrophist subject often performs a sudden turn away from the predictable action or word, in favour of something more open-ended. This may be a turn in physical and psychic orientation and/or in speech. These enable the autonomy of the subject, who turns away from prescribed actions and even from closure itself – the expected (or, as *King Lear* would have it, 'promised') end.[88] It is also worth recalling that the oldest of the Three Fates in Greek mythology is Atropos, whose name signifies 'without turn'.[89] Atropos implies the impossibility of turning away from fate, the end which is allotted to the tragic hero in Greek tragedy. The Catastrophist subject who has the capacity to turn reveals

[84] James Martin Harding, *Adorno and "A Writing of the Ruins"* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1997).
[85] See Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (London: Penguin, 2007), p. 597 and 573.
[86] Ibid, pp. 573-603.
[87] 'catastrophe, n.'. *OED Online*. Accessed February 26, 2018 http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/28794?redirectedFrom=catastrophe.
[88] This is again captured in the etymology of catastrophe as a 'subversion of order' (*OED Online*).
[89] Quoted in Knut Ove Eliassen, 'Catastrophic Turns – From the Literary History of Catastrophic', *The Cultural Life of Catastrophes and Crises*, ed. Carsten Meiner and Kristin Veel (Berlin and Boston: de Gruyter, 2012), p. 40.

a form of tragedy where the subject can resist the 'inevitable' end and preserve his or her bid for freedom.

6. Thesis Structure

This thesis is divided into seven chapters. Chapters One, Two and Three are designed to provide the theoretical, aesthetic and historical backdrop to Catastrophist appropriations of *King Lear*, while in Chapters Four to Seven I will turn to the individual case studies I have chosen.

In Chapter One, I analyse the work of Theodor Adorno to establish his historical and philosophical understanding of Auschwitz, analysing the impact which the camps had on his conceptualization of subjectivity, aesthetics and tragedy. This will establish some of the historical and theoretical foundations for the close readings I develop over the course of the study. In Chapter Two, I draw on the reading of Auschwitz, subjectivity, aesthetics and tragedy provided in Chapter One to analyse the thematic and, most urgently, formal aspects of *King Lear* that have made it so pivotal an intertext in Catastrophist playwriting. I intend to show that *King Lear* is a play occupied with catastrophe, modernity, subjectivity and tragic form, in a way that makes it uniquely viable for Catastrophist appropriation. This consideration of *King Lear* will also serve as a frame for Chapter Three, where I analyse the way these vital aspects of the play have been interpreted in criticism, performance and appropriation in the period 1939-1997. This era comprises significant shifts in the reception of *King Lear* and important developments in post-war society, from the outbreak of the Second World War to the consolidation of late capitalist ideology with the rise of 'Third

Way' liberal democratic parties, which largely embraced the 'emancipatory' potential of global capitalism. The chapter analyses a cultural discourse around *King Lear* and Auschwitz to show that Rudkin, Barker and Kane are embedded in a wider post-war constellation of ideas around the play, while I also situate Catastrophism as an aesthetic phenomenon of the 1980s-1990s.

My case studies begin with perhaps the most famous appropriation of *King Lear* in post-war British playwriting: the 1971 play *Lear*, by Edward Bond. In Chapter Four, I analyse *Lear*, showing that, through his appropriation of Shakespeare, Bond forms a critique of post-Auschwitz culture. This has obvious parallels with the other playwrights under study. Where Bond departs from Catastrophism is in his Marxist-humanist ideology of engagement. This places the subject in an overarching historical teleology, where s/he acts out a prescribed role against social injustice. I will show that Bond shares his analysis of modernity and disaster with the Catastrophists, but that his tragic form remains reliant on ideals of progress and closure. My analysis of a play that falls outside the definition Catastrophism will serve to bring the form (or, indeed, anti-form) of Catastrophist tragedy and subjectivity into relief.

In Chapter Five, I turn to David Rudkin. Through an analysis of his *Will's Way* I will consider the vital role Edgar plays in the way Rudkin conceptualizes subjectivity – both on stage and in relation to his own process as an author. This revolves around the negative state of exile and the self-loss – and necessary self re-invention – exile involves. I will show that the tragic state of exile is – for Rudkin – a state of autonomy. By drawing on Adorno and his conceptualization of exile, I situate Rudkin and his appropriation of *King Lear* as a response to the degradation of the subject in modernity – something which found its nadir at Auschwitz.

In Chapter Six, I analyse the Howard Barker play *Seven Lears*, a prequel to *King Lear*. I contend that Barker appropriates *King Lear* to enact a radical interrogation of conventional understandings of the 'good life' in the wake of the Holocaust – an interrogation that Adorno also undertakes in *Minima Moralia*, which is dedicated to the 'melancholy science' of the 'good life' post-Auschwitz culture.[90] My analysis of the play will concentrate on the way Barker appropriates Lear as a Catastrophist subject by rewriting the storm scenes from Shakespeare.

In Chapter Seven, I analyse the Sarah Kane play *Blasted* and its appropriation of *King Lear* by drawing on the 1966 work *Negative Dialectics.* I consider the way in which *Negative Dialectics* deconstructs the philosophical distinction between the material and metaphysical, which Adorno sees as necessary 'after' Auschwitz. Through an analysis of *Blasted*, I show that Kane similarly interrogates the distinction between the material and the metaphysical by appropriating the 'Dover cliff' scene from *King Lear*. I contend Kane appropriates *King Lear* to make a space for autonomy – for transcendence – in a totalized world.

In the Conclusion to the thesis, I will briefly consider the ongoing legacy of *King Lear* and Catastrophist drama in post-war British playwriting, before once again considering the significance of the research I have undertaken into *King Lear* and Catastrophist appropriation.

[90] Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life* (London: Verso, 2005), p. 15.

Chapter One

Adorno and Tragedy 'After' Auschwitz

Introduction

This chapter provides a theoretical basis for the readings developed in the thesis as a whole, organizing a dialogue under various critical 'themes' from Adorno: Auschwitz, subjectivity, aesthetics and tragedy. I begin with Auschwitz as it conditions every other aspect of Adornian thought in the post-war era, from his analysis of the fate of the modern subject to his understanding of fragmented, late modernist art. I will analyse a wide range of primary texts, from *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* to *Aesthetic Theory*. I also draw on relevant criticism on Adorno and consider some of the more pressing critiques of his post-Auschwitz philosophy. My consideration of those critics who draw on Adorno when analysing theatre – whether that is Shakespeare or post-war – will take place in pending chapters and the individual case studies.

In the Introduction, I observed that *King Lear* has risen to prominence in the post-war era as the Shakespeare play that seems to speak most powerfully to the catastrophe(s) of modernity – typified by the Holocaust. I also observed that the play has been a vital intertext for a variety of (often competing) understandings of tragedy and subjectivity after Auschwitz, from Beckettian absurdism to post-Brechtian political theatre. These undertakings to write the disaster through *King Lear* will be considered in more depth in Chapter Three. The main aim of the present chapter, however, is to make a case for a type of formally fragmented tragic drama, where resolution is denied and the tragic subject

retains his or her autonomy: Catastrophism. This is not necessarily to say that Adorno would advocate a renewed form of tragedy. But while Adorno does not offer an overt theory (let alone a defence) of tragedy, I will show that his various insights on the Holocaust, history, modernity, subjectivity and aesthetics *imply* a theory of post-Auschwitz tragedy.[91] I begin by analysing the dialectic of Enlightenment, which proposes a paradoxical relationship between Auschwitz and the humanist philosophy of reason and freedom typified by the Enlightenment.

1. Auschwitz

1.1. The Dialectic of Enlightenment

Though mostly written before the full scale of the atrocity was revealed, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944) – which Adorno co-authored with Max Horkheimer – provides a formative analysis of the European Enlightenment from the disconcerting vantage-point of the Holocaust.[92] Adorno and Horkheimer write that 'in the most general sense of progressive thought, the Enlightenment has always aimed at liberating men'.[93] But seen from the disabused perspective of the Second World War, the 'fully enlightened earth

[91] Other thinkers who consider Adorno and tragedy include Samir Gandesha 'Enlightenment as Tragedy: Reflections on Adorno's Ethics', *Thesis Eleven*, No, 65:1 (2001), pp. 109-130; Markku Nivalainen, 'On Thinking the Tragic with Adorno', *The European Legacy*, 21:7 (2016), pp. 644–663; and Karoline Gritzner, *Adorno and Modern Theatre*, pp. 163–81.
[92] Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (London, Verso: 2010). The text was re-published in 1947 with an added chapter, 'Elements of Anti-Semitism', which was added once the extermination of European Jews in the Holocaust had become more widely known.
[93] Ibid, p. 3.

radiates disaster triumphant'.[94] How did that reversal from human 'liberation' to total 'disaster' occur?

It was, as Adorno and Horkheimer contend, the aim of the Enlightenment and its humanist philosophy to critique the superstitious myths about the world that obtained from pre-modern times. These had perpetuated the idea that the world is created by opaque, divine forces that suffuse material reality and determine human fate. These same forces are also immanent in society and its institutions, which are part of a wider cosmic order. This relates most obviously to the monarch and the church – both myth-based forms of social and political authority, which represent divinity on earth. This means that both reality and society represent a providentially ordained and immutable world order, in which all subjects are fatefully embedded. Most of humanity in pre-modern times is in thrall to mythic ideas and unfree.

The demystification of pre-modern beliefs relies on the ability of the individual to use his (and, less frequently, her) inherent capacity for reason, which can serve to interrogate and ultimately free people from dogma. This prepares the way for more modern social and political ideals and institutions, which reflect and enable the freedom of the subject – say parliamentary democracy and the legal system. Over time, liberal ideals ranging from freedom and equality tended to displace more traditional forms of mystified power, so the relationship between subject and society becomes more consensual. This portrayal of the development of human thought turns world history into a type of *Bildung* narrative, where humanity is understood to progress through stages of myth and rationality,

[94] Ibid.

dependant on the human capacity to promote freedom as the basis for social and political life.[95]

But for Adorno and Horkheimer, the Second World War and the concentration camps require a newly reconfigured understanding of modernity. This is not simply because Enlightenment culture in some way 'failed' to redeem humanity from pre-modern barbarity and oppression. More profoundly, Adorno and Horkheimer critique the Enlightenment for producing the conditions that made Auschwitz possible. Far from viewing the Holocaust as an aberration – a violent break in the historical emancipation of an increasingly 'rational' humanity – Auschwitz is, for Adorno and Horkheimer, closely related to Enlightenment progress itself.

Dialectic of Enlightenment has at its centre a Nietzschean genealogical critique of the epistemological practices of Enlightenment philosophy and science. Adorno and Horkheimer make the case that enlightened, philosophical and scientific reason produces knowledge by separating the material world – and the objects that make it up – into abstract categories, say the taxonomic distinctions between various animal and plant species. These categories are understood to properly reflect the object of perception, where pre-modern dogma superstitiously mystifies it by viewing the world as the product of divine fiat. Through the use of reason, more and more objects are understood and categorized, so that the systematization of the world is seen to be progressively complete – or total. Over time, every 'thing' (and everything) is sublated under abstract categories of perception and, finally, utility, where the object is increasingly used as an instrument to serve the purposes of humanity.

[95] For the relationship between Enlightenment philosophy and the idea of *Bildung* – or education – see Rebekka Horlacher, *The Educated Subject and the German Concept of Bildung: A Comparative Cultural History* (New York and Oxford: Routledge, 2016), especially. pp. 7-18.

Adorno and Horkheimer contend that Hegel represents the pinnacle of the Enlightenment and its theoretical and practical attempt to produce a unified totality of all human knowledge.[96] Hegel famously contests the Kantian 'block', the idea that the noumenal object – or the 'thing-in-itself' – is ultimately resistant to phenomenal human perception.[97] He insists that the objects of human experience can ultimately be seen to conform to human concepts – or 'abstract categories'. [98] By using concepts, it is possible for the subject to gain a complete perceptual understanding of the object, via a continuing process in which the subject 'negates the negation' – or the aspects of the object that seem to resist interpretation. This process is at the heart of the idea of dialectics – or the synthesis of thesis and anti-thesis. Hegel contends that the dialectic reaches its conclusion in the 'positive' synthesis of the subject (perception) and object (reality) in time. By virtue of reason, the subject comes to dominate a previously opaque and oppressive material world – the object. Through its negation of a recalcitrant object, the subject achieves full self-actualization and, finally, self-determination. This allows Hegel to adopt a teleological view of history as the universal progress of reason and freedom over time. The perfected state of knowledge and autonomy to which humanity is progressing is the 'end of history', as Hegel called it.[99]

Hegel might represent the culmination of Enlightenment confidence in the unlimited powers of human reason, but, for Adorno and Horkheimer, 'enlightenment' refers, not only to the era known as the Enlightenment, but to 'any intellectual and practical operations

[96] Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).
[97] For Hegel on the thing-in-itself, see John McCumber, *Understanding Hegel's Mature Critique of Kant* (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2012), pp. 53-60.
[98] Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind*, trans. W. Wallace and A.V. Miller, ed. Michael Inwood (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 126.
[99] Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (New York: Dover Publications, 2004), p. 103.

which are presented as demythologizing, secularizing or disenchanting some mythical, religious or magical representation of the world' through the power of 'modern' reasoning.[100] This is not necessarily restricted to the Enlightenment, but has its roots deep in European thought, with Adorno and Horkheimer making the case that the 'cunning' Odysseus displays in *The Odyssey* represents a disenchanted understanding of the mythic powers supposed to control human destiny.[101] The notion of a conceptual, systematic unity of knowledge, write Adorno and Horkheimer, remains 'the slogan from Parmenides to Russell'.[102]

Despite its central place in European thinking, there is a problem with the conceptual 'unity' of knowledge provided by enlightenment thought. This has to do with the way enlightenment thinking ultimately reduces discrete objects to a conceptual category. By making various objects 'fit' into a predetermined epistemic category, the actual, specific uniqueness of the object under survey – its singularity – is lost to view. Every object becomes nothing more than a representative of the abstract category to which it has been consigned. This causes Adorno and Horkheimer to critique enlightenment thought as systematically *misrepresenting* reality by disregarding – and dissolving – the singular qualities of the object that distinguish it from the category to which abstract thought ascribes it.

Adorno coins the term identity-thinking to describe the process of categorical thought in enlightenment reasoning, which 'identifies' discrete objects with a preconceived category.[103] The idea that a particular object can be subsumed within a general category without remainder leads to the idea that the conceptual realm has no outer boundary, that

[100] Simon Jarvis, *Adorno: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 1998) p. 24
[101] *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, pp. 43-80.
[102] Ibid, p. 8.
[103] See Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), pp. 4-6.

there is nothing which it does not have the capacity to identify. This means that the object becomes totally identical with the category under which it is sublated; but it also means that the whole of reality itself is necessarily subsumed within a single (total) representational schema. It is for that reason Adorno and Horkheimer make the case that 'Enlightenment is totalitarian'.[104]

This reversal is where the 'dialectic' of enlightenment becomes most obvious. By subsuming discrete objects into a totalized conceptual configuration and dispelling anything that does not fit, categorical reasoning institutes 'a law of perennial sameness'.[105] Understood as identical with its representation in and by categorical reason, reality comes to appear as heteronomous and unchanging, an immutable order that predetermines human experience and seems ultimately resistant to intervention or transformation. Enlightenment thinking ends up reverting to the mythic state of divine fate it was understood to displace. For the subject, the consequences are dire. Horkheimer writes that reason catalyses the 'elevation of reality to the status of the ideal', which 'confronts the subject as absolute, overpowering'.[106] The subject supposedly liberated by rationality ends up dominated by it.

The most pressing question, however, is the way in which a philosophy of rational knowledge and self-determination gave rise to a social and political policy of extermination. I turn now to address that shift from enlightenment to genocide and the total domination of the subject.

[104] *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 6.
[105] *Negative Dialectics*, p. 41.
[106] Max Horkheimer, *The Eclipse of Reason* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 68.

1.2. Enlightenment and Auschwitz

Adorno and Horkheimer combine a comprehensive deconstruction of the progress of reason with a Weberian analysis of disenchantment and administration.[107] Adorno and Horkheimer contend that reason did not replace pre-modern traditions and institutions with enlightened civic and ethical values, which protect the freedom of the individual. On the contrary: the modern principles of systematic order and control have been applied to the total administration of society itself, so that subjects are increasingly bound in a repressive, 'iron cage'.[108]

This process is reflected in the increasingly universal pervasiveness of bureaucratic systems in modern society. Adorno is profoundly critical of the various systems of administrative bureaucracy found in modernity, which operate by separating every subject into abstract classes or categories – most obviously on the basis of age, status, gender, sexuality and race, among other possible 'vectors' of identity. Just as categorical reason creates a totally organized system of knowledge, so the disenchanted process of rationalization creates a totally organized social system, which similarly proceeds by administratively processing and dominating everything before it. Only where categorical reason had previously been applied to objects – to brute material reality – rationalized social systems are now also practised on and through human subjects, who are deemed so

[107] See *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, pp. 3-41.
[108] Max Weber, *Political Writings*, ed. Peter Lassman, trans. Ronald Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. xvi.

much 'material' to be arbitrarily systematized and controlled as the dictates of reason demand.[109]

Through the rationalization process, the modern subject becomes a target of the very same categorizing reason it is supposed to practise and apply. Far from being emancipated, the modern subject is reified – *turned into an object*. This evinces the profound influence of György Lukács, whose analysis of reification in *History and Class Consciousness* uncovers the way in which a social and political system created by humans comes to seem independent (and originally independent) of the very social actors who produce it.[110] This, as Lukács contends, occasions a profound reversal: subjects are turned into objects of the system, with the result that individuals are rendered passive or determined, while the system itself is increasingly understood as the active, determining agent – as a subject. This process means that subjects are ultimately transformed into little more than 'things' (*Verdinglichung* means, quite literally, 'thingification'). Adorno contends that the dialectic of Enlightenment is a reifying process, whereby the subject is transformed into an object of 'reason', meaning it is ultimately left 'without autonomy or substance of its own'.[111]

Adorno contends that, through the process of administrative rationalization, the subject comes to be completely identified with the category under which s/he has been placed, so the unique specificity of the individual subject is obscured – or, as Adorno

[109] 'For the rulers,' as Adorno and Horkheimer contend, 'men become material' – in the same way as 'nature as a whole is material for society.' *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 87.
[110] György Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics* (Pontypool: Merlin, 2010). For reification, see the chapter 'Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat', pp. 82-222. Lukács writes that 'the reified world appears […] as the only possible world, the only conceptually accessible, comprehensible world vouchsafed to us humans' (p. 110).
[111] *Minima Moralia*, p. 15.

provocatively imagines it, 'liquidated'.[112] This depersonalization reaches its horrifying apotheosis at Auschwitz, which represents the catastrophic nadir of a wider trend towards rationalization in post-Enlightenment society. The concentrationary universe, as Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi calls it, represents a total – and totally administered – social world, where subjects were processed in a closed organizational system based on the category to which he or she was consigned.[113] Adorno does not contend that the reifying process of modern administration *inevitably* ends in genocide, as its *telos*. He does, however, insist that any process whereby subjects are reduced to the status of objects *creates the conditions* under which Auschwitz was made possible. Adorno contends that the 'administrative murder of millions' which took place in the Holocaust is a result of a 'process of abstract integration' and potentially 'in preparation wherever human beings are de-individualized'.[114] Through the camp, the social and political process of rationalization has been 'refined' until subjects are 'literally exterminated' – but the camps are the (il)logical consequence of the way modern society more widely liquidates the qualitative particularity of its subjects.[115]

This representation of the concentration camp does not mean Adorno and Horkheimer dodge or deny other explicatory causes for the Holocaust – not the least of which is a violent history of European-Christian anti-Semitism, which culminates in the 'Final Solution to the Jewish Question'.[116] Nor is it to deny the particularity of the Holocaust as a

[112] Theodor Adorno, 'Trying to Understand *Endgame*', *Can One Live After Auschwitz? A Philosophical Reader*, trans. Rodney Livingstone *et al*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 286.
[113] Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved* (London: Abacus Books, 2013), p. 36.
[114] Quoted in *Theodor W. Adorno: An Introduction*, Gerhard Schweppenhäuser, trans. James Rolleston (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2009), p. 67.
[115] Ibid.
[116] See David Cesarani, *Final Solution: The Fate of the Jews 1933-49* (London: Macmillan, 2016).

predominantly (though, of course, not exclusively) Jewish experience.[117] The point Adorno makes by tying the Holocaust to the legacy of the Enlightenment is to deny that the events of Auschwitz represent an atavistic return of pre-modern barbarism in an era of civilized European progress. Adorno and Horkheimer show that pre-modern myths about the Jews can co-exist with – and even be strengthened by – a supposedly 'rational' age of modernity. Adorno and Horkheimer contend that the virulent anti-Semitism of European modernity is intensified by a social system shaped by a desire for regulated order and control. By virtue of not being fully 'integrated' into the state and the nation, the Jewish people appear unfixed – a part of society but also not completely desegregated into the identifying systems of the 'whole'. This only deepens a mythic fear of the uncontrollable and threatening 'other' – the Jew.[118]

Adorno and Horkheimer conclude that the destruction of human subjectivity witnessed during the 1930s and the Second World War was not some sort of deviation but part of a wider practice of rationality based on absolute domination – of the world and the subjects that comprise it. Such a danger lies in the modern condition *per se*. 'It was', writes Zygmunt Bauman 'the rational world of modern civilization that made the Holocaust thinkable'.[119] Part of that modern condition is, as Adorno sees it, totalitarianism. But he also – and provocatively – relates Auschwitz to capitalism and the totalization of the commodity-form. It is that relationship I analyse next, as it conditions the way Adorno critiques post-war society and art.

[117] The Nazi theory of racial purity also classed Slavs and Romany gypsies as 'inferior', though Jews were the main target of mass extermination.
[118] This is part of the explanation Adorno and Horkheimer offer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, in the chapter 'Elements of Anti-Semitism' (pp. 168-208).
[119] Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Polity, 1989), p. 13.

1.3. Auschwitz and Capitalism

Auschwitz is for Adorno deeply related to and imbricated in modernity – to Enlightenment thinking, the process of categorization, social rationalization and the systemizing practices of modern culture. But perhaps most provocatively, Adorno also relates the atrocities committed under Nazi totalitarianism to the social and economic system that had seemed to prevail over fascism – liberal capitalism. What place does Auschwitz occupy in the history of Western capitalism?

Drawing on a Marxist analysis of the commodity-form, Adorno relates both epistemological and social systems based on identity-thinking to the way that capitalism, through the equalizing process present in exchange-value, enables wholly unalike objects 'to be made commensurable and exchangeable'.[120] The exchange-value of a commodity – the commodities it might be exchanged for in a trade or the price it fetches on the market – means that distinct objects become artificially commensurate, with the unique properties of the traded object obscured to understanding. It is not simply a matter of historical coincidence that modern capitalism and the era of Enlightenment rationality converge in time. Latent in the law of identity-thinking is, as Adorno understands it, the commodity-form, and *vice-versa*. Categorical rationality and capitalist exchange are for Adorno reciprocally-informing dialectical historical developments that cannot be analysed in isolation.

The way in which Adorno relates identity-thinking to capitalism means that his critique of Auschwitz and the history of reason also relates to pre- and post-war capitalism. Adorno contends that, by incorporating everything into itself as a potentially exchangeable

[120] Andrew Bowie, *Adorno and the Ends of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), p. 33.

commodity, capitalism is a universalizing system, which produces a reified world of total fungibility. This is not a process the subject is able to escape – let alone determine. Adorno contends that capitalist society, while it promotes a liberal ideology of individual freedom, ultimately reifies the subject – turning him or her into an object of a totalized social and economic process.

This process is typified by Fordism. Fordism operates by integrating the subject into a wholly administered industrial system, in which s/he is called upon to perform the same single task over and over again in a wider production process.[121] The idea of reducing the subject to a prescribed role is to mass produce standardized commodities with a consistently realizable value. The result, however, is that the subject transformed into an identity – into an object of the administered system of production. This means the qualitative distinction between subjects is inevitably degraded. One subject might stand in for any other in the overall process of production. The abstract equalizations produced by the Fordist system parallels the abstract equalizations of other modern administrative systems, which operate by making the unalike (non-identical subjects) appear alike (identical subjects).

Adorno is, however, also suspicious (perhaps even more keenly so) of rationalized systems of *consumption* in post-Auschwitz life. Adorno does not believe that the post-war transition from industrial (productive, Fordist) to post-industrial (consumer, late) capital represents a decisive shift in the administered way that capitalism operates. This is most obvious in the devastating critique Adorno and Horkheimer mount against the so-called

[121] Antonio Gramsci coined the term Fordism in his 1934 'Americanism and Fordism'. See Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971), pp. 277-318

'Culture Industry'.[122] This concept relates to the mass production of cultural products in post-Auschwitz society. Adorno makes the case that modern cultural life, far from being the product of a human subject concretizing his or her creativity and freedom, has been brought under the ambit of the capitalist system. He contends that post-Auschwitz cultural production is akin to a factory rolling out standardized cultural products – films, novels, plays, radio programmes, magazines and even astrology columns – which are used to ensure that subjects conform with standardized systems of thought and action in an ideological process of 'mass deception'.[123] The result – once again – is that subjects are integrated into an orderly administered system. This transforms the individual from a subject of culture to its fungible object. This is not to say that Adorno is in some way 'against' popular (or 'low') art, despite often being caricatured as a mandarin cultural elitist.[124] Adorno is aware that popular art can unleash politically oppositional and destabilizing libidinal forces. He is, however, deeply critical of the 'repetitiveness, the self-sameness, and the ubiquity of modern mass culture', which tends to 'weaken the forces of individual resistance'.[125] For him, the Culture Industry serves to incorporate subjects into a totalized world that degrades freedom.

Nowhere does Adorno collapse the qualitative distinction between consumer capitalism and the unmitigated horrors of Nazi fascism – though it is perhaps worth observing that Auschwitz operated as both a death-camp and labour-camp, with an industrial system of production and consumption that was exploited by private industry.[126] Adorno also remains conscious of the distinctions between capitalism and Stalinism, a

[122] *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, pp. 120-167.
[123] Ibid, p. 120.
[124] See in particular Robert Miklitsch, *Roll over Adorno: Critical Theory, Popular Culture, Audiovisual Media* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2006).
[125] Theodor Adorno, 'How to Look at Television', *The Culture Industry*, p. 162.
[126] See Sybille Steinbacher, *Auschwitz: A History*, trans. Shaun Whiteside (London: Penguin, 2005), pp. 51-53.

totalitarian system which he often critiqued.[127] Adorno does think, however, that capitalism, Nazi fascism and Stalinism are totalized systems that can all be seen as iterations of rationalized modernity and identity-thinking. Adorno also makes the case that capitalism, in its reification of the subject, can slide into totalitarian fascism far more unresistingly than liberal thought would like to imagine ('whoever is not prepared to talk about capitalism', as Horkheimer once observed, 'should also remain silent about fascism').[128] These systems all produce widespread socialization – or the 'total' 'socialization' of society – and tend to disregard the particularity of the subject in the process.[129] This means that, while contemporary capitalist culture does not necessarily produce the same horrors of the concentration camp or the gulag, such catastrophes remain a live possibility. 'Auschwitz was possible', writes Adorno, 'and remains possible for the foreseeable future': its enabling conditions persist in a society marked by the 'permanent catastrophe' of a degraded human subject.[130]

Adorno provides an undeniably bleak portrait of the transformation of modern freedom back into mythic oppression. He writes in his 1966 work *Negative Dialectics* that no 'universal history leads from savagery to humanitarianism, but there is one leading from the slingshot to the megaton bomb'.[131] His analysis has, however, been challenged by theorists of the postmodern. I want to consider the postmodern critique of Adorno to establish the relevance of his ideas around Auschwitz and reification for an era of postmodern (late) capital.

[127] See in particular 'Reconciliation under Duress', *Aesthetics and Politics*, trans. and ed. Ronald Taylor (London: Verso, 2007), pp. 151-176.
[128] Quoted in Peter Davies and Derek Lynch, *The Routledge Companion to the Fascism and the Far Right* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 52.
[129] *Negative Dialectics*, p. 346.
[130] Theodor Adorno, 'Is Art Lighthearted?', *Can One Live After Auschwitz?*, p. 251; *Negative Dialectics*, p. 320.
[131] Ibid, p. 320.

1.4. The Actuality of Adorno: The Postmodern Critique of Adorno

While his ideas have been influential, there are inevitably criticisms of Adorno and his conceptualizations of modernity and Auschwitz. These have ranged from the work of Jürgen Habermas – who critiques Adorno for being overly reliant on the subject-object relation, failing to consider the subject-subject relation and the possibility of rational communicative interaction – to Timothy Snyder, who makes a defence of the modern administrative state and its role in protecting Jews from the Holocaust.[132] For the most part, however, criticisms of Adorno have been undertaken from a postmodern position. These are both philosophical and historical and tend to concentrate on the 'actuality' of Critical Theory in the postmodern era.[133]

This critique of Critical Theory from a postmodern perspective largely begins with Lyotard, the foremost theorist of the postmodern, and his 1974 piece 'Adorno as the Devil' – an allusion to the 1947 Thomas Mann novel *Dr Faustus*, where Adorno makes an appearance as Satan.[134] I want to concentrate on Lyotard as his critique of Adorno rests on a changed understanding of the social and cultural shift from industrial to post-industrial capitalist society. Lyotard reiterates Adorno when he makes the case that modernity is shaped by totalizing 'metanarratives' of reason and progress – overarching stories or systems of thought that seek to provide a total representation of the world and its

[132] See Deborah Cook, *Adorno, Habermas and the Search for a Rational Society* (London: Routledge, 2004) and Timothy Snyder, *Black Earth*, p. 340. I return to Habermas and intersubjectivity in Chapter Two. See pp. 115-116.
[133] Theodor Adorno, 'The Actuality of Philosophy', *Telos*, 31 (1977), pp. 120-133. See also *The Actuality of Adorno: Critical Essays on Adorno and the Postmodern*, ed. Max Pensky (New York: State University of New York Press, 1997).
[134] Jean-François Lyotard, 'Adorno as the Devil', *Telos*, 19 (1974), pp. 127-137.

development. He also critiques metanarratives as complicit with systems of domination that dissolve the heterogeneous. But where Lyotard ultimately parts with Adorno is with his more 'positive' representation of post-war society and his conception of a new era of postmodernity.

Lyotard makes the case that post-war society is not a total system, dominating subjects. He contends that metanarratives have been replaced by smaller, fragmented stories, which are conveyed in limited but pluralistic 'language-games' – a phrase he takes from Ludwig Wittgenstein.[135] Lyotard uses the term *differend* to describe the heterogeneity of diverse language-games, which can never be reduced to a totalized 'sameness'.[136] This proliferation of language-games is, for Lyotard, a distinguishing feature of postmodern society, which breaks with the totalizing conditions of modernity. Lyotard portrays the split between modernity and postmodernity as incredulity towards metanarratives which, in contradiction to totalizing systems of thought, embraces heterogeneity. This is not to say that Lyotard simply ignores the Holocaust. On the contrary: Auschwitz is a persistent theme for Lyotard in his conceptualization of the postmodern, writing that Auschwitz is the 'crime opening postmodernity'.[137] Auschwitz signals the end of the metanarrative of reason and calls for the prioritization of hybrid *differends* over metanarratives.[138] Lyotard insists that postmodernity ('after' Auschwitz) represents that historical shift towards hybridity and plurality.[139]

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[135] Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), p. 10.
[136] Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).
[137] Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained: Correspondence, 1982-1985*, trans. Julian Pefanis and Morgan Thomas (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1997), p. 19.
[138] Of course, Lyotard demonstrates his conception of the *differend* through an analysis of Holocaust representation. Since nobody survived the gas chamber itself, the Holocaust is finally un-representable, a non-totalizable 'event' that cannot be rendered in a holistic and consensually approved metanarrative. See *The Differend*, p. 2, p. 26 and p. 27.
[139] See also Robert Eaglestone, *The Holocaust and the Postmodern* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

Lyotard contends that the transition from modernity to postmodernity is a historical and cultural shift Adorno fails to perceive. This means the concept of totality is ultimately outmoded by the transition to postmodernity; but it also means that Adorno is retrogressively constrained by the very same universalizing historical conditions he sets out to critique. Lyotard makes the case that Adorno provides a negative (or 'demonic') inversion that reiterates, albeit critically, precisely the same metanarrative he wants to undermine by prioritizing the particular over the universal ('the slingshot to the megaton bomb').[140] This leads Adorno into various contradictions. Most of all, Adorno turns Auschwitz – a specific concentration camp and historical event, where real subjects lived and died – into an abstract category through which the whole historical metaprocess of modernity and reason is understood.[141] Adorno transforms the particular (Auschwitz) into the universal (dialectic of Enlightenment).[142]

This historical shift also represents a shift in capitalisms. 'We have the advantage over Adorno', writes Lyotard of contemporary capitalist culture, of 'living in a capitalism that is more energetic, more cynical, less tragic', a system where 'the tragic gives way to the parodic' and where more open-ended and plural forms of subjectivity are 'catalysed'.[143] Lyotard, in his conceptualization of the postmodern, is concerned with a shift away from industrial to post-industrial finance capital – which he sees as a less autocratic and authoritarian form of capitalism that releases more language-games, libidinal energies and

[140] See 'Adorno as the Devil'.
[141] This has parallels with the critique Habermas – the chief inheritor of Critical Theory – forms against Adorno, when he contends that his former mentor is guilty of a 'performative self-contradiction'. See his *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), p. 119.
[142] For more on the synecdochic usage of 'Auschwitz' in Critical Theory, see Mark J. Webber, 'Metaphorizing the Holocaust: The Ethics of Comparison', *Images* 8:15/16 (2011), pp. 17–19.
[143] 'Adorno as the Devil', p. 128.

subjectivities.[144] Where industrial capitalism (Fordism) dominates and destroys the subject, for Lyotard post-industrial consumer capitalism unleashes a new spirit of open-endedness and 'play'. He even goes as far as to make the argument that, far from being resisted, 'the dissolution of forms and individuals in the so-called "consumer society" should be *affirmed*'.[145]

The question, however, is whether the reifying conditions of modernity have truly been displaced by a new era of postmodernity and whether totality and catastrophe as critical concepts have, as a result, been historically and philosophically invalidated. Adorno would be suspicious of any belief that post-war capitalist culture represents a decisive shift away from totality towards the diverse. He writes, in *Negative Dialectics*, that for 'the time being a so-called pluralism would falsely deny the total structure of society'.[146] This is because 'total socialization objectively hatches its opposite' – the *ostensible* diversity of commodities and the lifestyles those commodities are supposed to represent.[147] This diversity is nothing but 'the anarchy of commodity production'.[148] Underlying the heterogeneous commodities of the market is the homogenous totality of capitalist social relations, a paradox Adorno captures in his critique of the 'ever-changing sameness' of post-Auschwitz capitalist life.[149] Postmodern theory may tend to concentrate on the fragmentary and hybrid in its historico-philosophical speculations but it often does so by overlooking the enabling totality of capitalist hegemony. This oversight becomes even more obvious in an age of globalization, which sees the market penetrate into every sphere of human existence

[144] See *The Postmodern Condition* and *Libidinal Economy*, trans. Ian Hamilton Grant (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).
[145] Quoted in Peter Dews, *Logics of Disintegration: Poststructuralist Thought and the Claims of Critical Theory* (London: Verso, 2007), p. 174.
[146] *Negative Dialectics*, p. 346.
[147] Ibid.
[148] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 281.
[149] *Minima Moralia*, p. 238.

around the world, intensifying the disastrous reification of subjectivity far into the post-war era.

Fredric Jameson famously makes the case that the seemingly fragmentary worlds of postmodernism are – paradoxically – the cultural 'logic' of an increasingly totalized capitalism system.[150] The phenomena of post-industrialism and globalization pay witness to the universalization of capitalism, as opposed to its postmodern hybridization. Jameson contends that postmodernity, far from representing a qualitative break with modern totality, is a continuation (even 'intensification') of it, writing that postmodernity is typified by an 'increasingly closed organization of the world into a seamless web'.[151] Jameson concludes that Adorno, far from being outdated by a shift into the new spirit of postmodernity, should be seen as the philosopher *par excellence* for the cultural and historical developments that took place over the late 1970s into the 1980s and 1990s (and beyond):

> in which late capitalism has all but succeeded in eliminating the final loopholes of nature and the Unconscious, of subversion and the aesthetic, of individual and collective praxis alike, and, with a final fillip, in eliminating any memory trace of what thereby no longer existed in the henceforth postmodern landscape.[152]

Under the conditions of postmodern capitalism, the domination of the subject by totalizing social and political systems has only increased; it is an era that 'calls forth a much degraded subject, one defined by much diminished capabilities for autonomy and agency, so crucial to

[150] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991).
[151] Fredric Jameson, 'Afterword', in *Aesthetics and Politics*, p. 208.
[152] Frederic Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno, or, the Persistence of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 2007), p. 5. Timothy Bewes, though often critical of Jameson, similarly insists on understanding late capitalism through the concept of reification. See his *Reification, or, The Anxiety of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2002).

the formation of human subjectivity'.[153] This degradation of subjectivity means that late capitalist culture is a potentially catastrophic dispensation: it continues the same depredation and destruction of human subjectivity that – for Adorno – found its nadir at Auschwitz.

Such pronouncements might seem fatally pessimistic. But there is a point to reviving the modernist concept of totality in the putatively postmodern epoch. Through the concept of totality, it once again becomes possible to conceptualize the tension between universal and particular, subject and object, which may otherwise be lost to view in the postmodern denial of totality. Jameson writes that Adorno underscores 'the relationship between the universal and particular', which is coincident with 'the objective' ('and specifically modernist') tension 'between the social totality and its subjects.'[154] This clash between subject and society, as I will go on to show, is the dynamic underlying tragic form, which Lyotard believes has been superseded by postmodernity. But in his writings, Adorno places the (properly tragic) tension between subject and totality at the forefront of his philosophy and cultural criticism. I turn now to address the way in which Adorno conceptualizes subjectivity.

2. Subjectivity

2.1. The Humanist Subject and 'Negative' Freedom

[153] David Chandler and Julian Reid, *The Neoliberal Subject: Resilience, Adaptation and Vulnerability* (London and New York: Roman and Littlefield, 2016), p. 1.
[154] *Late Marxism*, p. 245.

For the Frankfurt School, Auschwitz testifies to the liquidation of the subject in modernity. This liquidation necessitates a 'turn to the subject', as Adorno often calls it, which entails a recovery of the subjective dimension and, critically, autonomy.[155] The subject furnishes 'the only point of leverage' in a totalized social order, insists Adorno, which 'might indict it as such'.[156] Yet the theory of subjectivity Adorno develops is undeniably complicated and, for some, even seems to be flatly contradictory.[157] Adorno calls for a turn to the subject and insists on the possibility (and necessity) of subjective autonomy. This, however, runs parallel with a critique of the 'total' domination of the subject in post-Auschwitz culture. How can the subject realize even a shred of autonomy if it is totally dominated by a reified social system?

The answer lies in the way that Adorno rewrites the history of the subject and revises the notion of autonomy itself. The turn to the subject does not herald a return of the humanist subject, who rationally interprets and controls the world around it. Adorno is deeply suspicious of the humanist conception of autonomy, which is a form of subjectivity that cannot simply be 'left intact' post-Auschwitz.[158] This is not only because the subject has been liquidated; the humanist conception of subjectivity also plays its own, vital role in the dialectic of Enlightenment. The humanistic idea that the subject has total perceptual 'access' to the object means that reality is hypostasized: the various categories posited by the subject (reason) come to seem as the only possible – indeed the only real and factual – interpretation of the object and the world. This process ultimately rebounds on the subject. Precisely insofar as it reifies the world around it, the subject finally comes to be dominated

[155] Theodor Adorno, 'Working Through the Past', *Can One Live After Auschwitz?*, p. 17.
[156] *Aesthetics and Politics*, p. 147.
[157] See also Max Pensky, 'Introduction', *The Actuality of Adorno*, p. 14
[158] *Aesthetics and Politics*, pp. 118-119.

by the very categories – and by the very object(s) – which it seems to rule so imperiously over.

The philosophical and practical response Adorno provides in the teeth of such reification is typically dialectical. The way in which the humanist subject comes to be dominated by the reality it seems to perceptually organize around itself persuades Adorno to decentre the subject – to show it is not the all-knowing centre of the world. Adorno finds a fable of decentring in the 1957 Samuel Beckett play *Endgame*, where Hamm and Clov struggle to find the centre of the room where the play is set, having skirted its outermost edges in a (failed) quest for knowledge. 'Am I right in the centre?' enquires Hamm, as it becomes obvious that the centre cannot hold – or indeed even be found.[159] The scene reveals 'the truth that expels man from the centre of creation': that the subject is not the master in its own house, but is dominated by a closed world of objects, which surrounds and penetrates it.[160]

This aspect of Critical Theory aligns Adorno with poststructuralist and deconstructionist thought.[161] But while Adorno seeks to decentre the subject, he does not completely dissolve it by proclaiming its 'death'. This has been the case in some post-structuralist and deconstructionist criticism, which risks removing any possibility of subjective autonomy by proclaiming the subject to be nothing other than a product of discourse and social power.[162] It is also something Adorno perceives in Benjamin, whom Adorno critiques for discarding the 'whole notion of a subjective dimension itself'.[163] Far

[159] Samuel Beckett, *Endgame*, *The Complete Works of Samuel Beckett* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p. 104. All references to Beckett are taken from *The Complete Works*.
[160] *Negative Dialectics*, p. 68.
[161] See also *Logics of Disintegration* for an analysis of Adorno and poststructuralist thought.
[162] See James Heartfield, *The 'Death of the Subject' Explained* (Sheffield: Sheffield Hallam University Press, 2002).
[163] Theodor Adorno, 'Portrait of Walter Benjamin', *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press, 1983), p. 235.

from abandoning the subject, Adorno proposes to use 'the strength of the subject to break through the fallacy of constitutive subjectivity'.[164] What that means is producing a form of subjectivity that does not involve the subject arbitrarily 'constituting' the object of perception. By disabusing the subject of the fantasy that it constitutes the object world around it, Adorno aims to show that the subject is itself constituted by the object and the reified categories through which it interprets the world. This would allow the subject to perceive that it is determined by the object, as opposed to being the determining agent. With that knowledge, a gap may open between subject and object, enabling the subject to recognize its imbrication in the total dominance of 'the supra-ordinated concept'.[165] Adorno purposes to free the subject from a reified world of objects and, critically, with the society that dominates it, to 'open up critical spaces' where the subject 'might think against the world'.[166]

It is that gap between subject and object, subject and world, which Adorno calls non-identity. Over and against the 'positive' dialectics of Hegel, Adorno proposes his own 'negative' dialectics which, far from positing the uniform identity of subject and object, strives to keep the antithetical tension – the non-identity – between subject and object in play. Adorno contends that the subject is not always completely captured – or objectified – by the social process. Just as no object fits completely with the category under which it placed, so the subject does not fit seamlessly with any of the conceptual categories which are used to identify it. This non-identity of the subject is something that Adorno also refers to as the subjective 'share' or 'surplus' – by which he means something that outstrips the

[164] *Negative Dialectics*, p. xx.
[165] Ibid.
[166] David Sherman, *Sartre and Adorno, Dialectics of Subjectivity* (New York: State of New York University Press, 2007), p. 28.

identity of the categorizing process.[167] Adorno writes that 'in the needs of even the people who are covered, who are administered, there reacts something in regard to which they are not fully covered – a surplus of the subjective share, which the system has not wholly mastered'.[168]

Adorno does not necessarily define the subjective surplus in a strict way, stating that it is whatever 'stirs in a man' that 'contradicts his unity'.[169] But on occasion, Adorno does relate the surplus or share to the shattering experiences of disaster and catastrophe. Adorno is aware that crises are socially mediated by – and can even be appropriated to serve – the 'total situation'.[170] But catastrophic rupture also contradicts the utopian idea that the subject and object have reached a congruent state of reconciled identity. Such experiences testify to a lack of fit between the subject and object and the conflicted state of a society that would otherwise seek to universalize itself by interpolating all subjects into the totality.

This conceptualization of the surplus speaks to the way that the word 'catastrophe' takes on a variety of potential meanings in Critical Theory. Adorno makes the case that post-Auschwitz society is marked by permanent catastrophe – the continuing destruction of subjectivity in modernity, where the 'individual disappears before the apparatus'.[171] But for Adorno, catastrophe can also connote experiences of rupture – and particularly aesthetic rupture – in an otherwise closed social world that endlessly reproduces itself by reifying subjectivity. These disruptive experiences of crisis and upheaval – the sudden subversions of

[167] *Negative Dialectics*, p. 41.
[168] Ibid, p. 92. Adorno also uses the phrase 'addendum', ibid, pp. 226-230.
[169] Ibid, p. 277.
[170] Naomi Klein, in a deeply perceptive analysis, has shown that disasters have been used as a way of *entrenching* capitalist economic relations. See her *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (London: Penguin, 2007).
[171] *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. xiv.

catastrophe – can serve to dislocate the subject from society, allowing for a critical, negative perspective on totality.[172] Precisely because its uncanny 'superfluity' disengages the subject from the social totality, Adorno calls for a subject who, by embracing catastrophe, refuses to 'fit in'. Adorno insists on a non-identical subject – a subject that resists the demands of identity.

This reinterpretation of subjectivity has profound implications for the notion of autonomy. Adorno does not imagine freedom as a 'positive' state, where the (humanist) subject freely determines itself as it wishes, realizing its reason and free-will in the world. Adorno conceives of autonomy *negatively*, as the power of refusal. Jameson provides an eloquent synopsis of the type of autonomy Adorno means, writing in his *Marxism and Form* that

> wherever the concept of freedom is once more understood, it always comes as the awakening of dissatisfaction in the midst of all that is – at one, that is, with the birth of the negative itself: never a state that is enjoyed, or a mental construction that is contemplated, but rather an ontological impatience in which the constraining situation is for the first time perceived in the very moment in which it is refused […]. It is not too much to say that the concept of freedom permits us to transcend […] the most fundamental contradictions in modern existence.[173]

Subjective autonomy is coincident with the 'birth of the negative', the dissatisfaction with – and resistance to – the social totality with which the subject is confronted. Adorno writes in *Negative Dialectics* that freedom turns concrete 'in negation only, corresponding to the

[172] See Introduction for the etymology of catastrophe. I discuss the meaning(s) of catastrophe again in Chapter Two. The valences around the word catastrophe in Critical Theory evince the influence of Benjamin, who writes that the history of progress constitutes a 'single' unfolding 'catastrophe', but also insists on moments of catastrophic rupture that 'blast' the subject out of 'the continuum of history'. See his 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zorn (London: Pimlico, 1999), p. 249 and p. 254.

[173] Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), pp. 84-85.

concrete form of a specific unfreedom'.[174] The basis of Adornian non-identity and freedom is the deep, totalizing system Adorno equates with Auschwitz and post-Auschwitz rationality. To gain freedom it is up to the subject to continually break the grip of identity-categories that 'circulate within the (now globalized) capitalist life-world, be it in the rather abstract domains of philosophy, or in the repetitive and recombinant practices of the "culture industry"'.[175]

The idea of the reified identities that circulate in the capitalist life-world brings up the fraught question of the relationship between identity-thinking and identity politics. I want to provide a critical analysis of identity politics, which as I set out in the Introduction, has often conditioned (and been conditioned by) particular approaches to appropriation. While I recognize the gains of various post-war social movements, I intend to critique identity politics through the prism of Adornian identity-thinking and the concept of the commodity-form.

2.3. Identity Politics

For present purposes, identity politics can be defined as a tendency for those belonging to a specific (and usually marginalized) gender, sexuality, race or religion to form ideological coalitions and social movements to agitate for political representation, based on shared but usually marginalized experiences.[176] This form of political identity can be historicized as part of a wider shift away from modern humanist notions of social and political 'progress' –

[174] *Negative Dialectics*, p. 231. Or as Adorno also puts it: 'there exists no positive freedom' (p. 241).
[175] Bradley J. McDonald, 'Theodor Adorno, Alterglobalization, and Non-identity Politics', *New Political Science*, 34:3 (2012), p. 328.
[176] See also 'Identity Politics', *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*. Accessed 24 April 2017. https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2016/entries/identity-politics/

which shape Enlightenment thought – to a more socially and politically diverse postmodern society, with its transition from metanarratives to fragmented language-games. Such politicized conceptions of subjectivity show that the metanarrative of the 'universal' humanist subject is phallo-, hetero-, Euro- and ethnocentric. This has meant challenging the non-representational status of post-Enlightenment social and political institutions, which build themselves around (putatively) 'universal' humanist principles of freedom and equality.

Adorno does not deny that the autonomous, humanist subject of enlightened rationality has historically been gendered – not to say sexualized and racialized, culminating in the Nazi vision of the racially and sexually 'pure' masculinity of the blue-eyed, blonde-haired Aryan. This means, as Adorno writes in *Minima Moralia*, that historically women have borne the 'the negative imprint of domination'.[177] Adorno is similarly aware of the way in which other oppressed or marginalized sections of society bear the negative imprint of domination – not least European Jews.[178] For the most part, however, critics are right to insist that gender, sexuality and race do not necessarily represent a political or theoretical priority for Adorno.

This divergence is – for many critics – typified by the growing distance between Adorno and the radical Student Movement of the 1960s, a movement that often identified itself in the terms of the liberationist politics of gender, sexuality and race. This divergence (in)famously had something of a crescendo in the so-called Breasts Attack – or *Busenattentat* – where a female student bared her breasts to Adorno as he was giving a

[177] *Minima Moralia*, p. 95.
[178] See, Theodor Adorno *et al*, *The Authoritarian Personality* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1950).

lecture on dialectics, boldly declaring that 'Adorno as an institution is dead!'.[179] The incident is often understood to witness a transition to new forms of political identity, which Adorno fails to understand (Adorno notoriously called the police in response to one student occupation).[180]

Some feminist – and also queer and postcolonial – critics have nevertheless tried to dialectically recruit Adorno in the service of various forms of contemporary identity politics, where non-normative subjects are seen to disrupt the totalizing conceptualizations of a white, male instrumental rationality.[181] But any synthesis of Adornian negative dialectics and the ideological praxes of identity politics also (and perhaps necessarily) runs against a theoretical *aporia*. Despite its emancipatory aims, identity politics can itself be seen as a variety of identity-thinking, whereby the (particular) subject is understood as representative of a (universal) category. The problem with identity politics is that it ultimately risks reiterating the form of reasoning found in 'the administered world', where the subject is subsumed under various conceptual categories (man/woman, heterosexual/homosexual, black/white and so on) – however intersectionally these identities may be imagined and practised. The danger is that totalizing appeals about the meaning of politically-laden

[179] For an astute reading of the incident, see Lisa Yun Lee, *Dialectics of the Body: Corporeality in the Philosophy of T.W Adorno*, (London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 49-76.

[180] The relationship between the Frankfurt School and the student movement is far more complex than the received binary of Marcuse (pro) and Adorno (anti). See John Abromeit 'Limits of Praxis: The Social-Psychological Foundations of Theodor Adorno's and Herbert Marcuse's Interpretations of the 1960s Protest Movements', *Changing the World, Changing Oneself*, ed. Belinda Davis *et al* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2012), pp. 13-40.

[181] See *Feminist Interpretations of Theodor Adorno*, ed. Renee J. Heberle (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania University Press, 2006). See also *Looking Away: Phenomenality and Dissatisfaction, Kant to Adorno* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009) for a queer Adorno. For work dealing with Adorno and postcolonialism, see Robert Spencer, 'Thoughts from Abroad: Theodor Adorno as Postcolonial Theorist', *Culture, Theory and Critique*, 51:3 (2010), pp. 207-221.

experiences to diverse people risks obscuring the singularity of the subject supposed to be 'representative'.[182]

This is not to deny the socio-political gains of various movements motivated by identity politics or indeed to downplay the reactionary forces that have contested the aspirations of marginalized peoples. But despite its emancipatory intentions, identity politics does not necessarily question the whole, de-subjectifiying process of identity-thinking itself. Not only does identity politics of various stripes represent a 'negative' inversion of the humanist (male, heterosexual, white) subject, but it also means the 'positive' avowal of other identifying categories – categories that have often been pre-established by instrumental reason.[183] What is required for Adorno is not an identity politics, but a non-identity politics. The political aspect of the subject lies precisely in its refusal to conform to or wholly identify with *any* prescribed categorization. The political emerges as the capacity to reflect and contest.

The stress that Adorno lays on the non-identity of the subject, over and above its possible cultural and political identifications, is perhaps more and not less relevant in the culturally diverse *milieu* of capitalist globalization. The dominant form of political organization in postmodern society – as both sympathetic and more dubious theorists have shown – has been identity politics, where an era of political struggle which orientates itself around the clash of conflicting social and industrial classes ends and the diverse intensities of post-industrial society are unleashed.[184] But identity politics might also be accused of too

[182] Anthony Appiah, 'Identity, Authenticity, Survival: Multicultural Societies and Social Reproduction', *Multiculturalism*, ed. Amy Gutmann and Charles Taylor (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 163.
[183] Dvora Yanow has analysed the questions around political activism based on a pre-established, externally imposed categorization. See her *Constructing "Race" and "Ethnicity" in America: Category Making in Public Policy and Administration* (Oxford: Routledge, 2015).
[184] See Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990) and Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

often neglecting to consider the way that its own identitarian ideology mimics that of the commodity-form, which similarly operates by making that which is incommensurable appear commensurable – a point that has been made by writer and queer theorist Alexandra Chasin.[185]

It is a provocative thesis, but if the non-identity of the subject relies on its ability to resist the identities that 'circulate within the (now globalized) capitalist life-world', identity politics might be thought of as inhibiting, as opposed to enabling, the autonomy of the subject. Such freedom is for Adorno crucially reliant on a realm of human experience and creativity that, despite the Culture Industry, retains some negative force – the aesthetic sphere. I turn now to consider the way that Adorno understands aesthetics and the role the artwork plays in catalysing the non-identity required 'to deny an identity conceived as total'.[186]

3. Aesthetics

3.1. Aesthetics 'After' Auschwitz

Despite his often-quoted proclamation that 'To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric' – a formulation he would later revise and partially refute due to the confusion it caused – no twentieth century philosopher reflected as deeply about the implications of Auschwitz for aesthetics than Adorno, whose *magnum opus*, *Aesthetic Theory*, was posthumously

[185] See Alexandra Chasin, *Selling Out: The Gay and Lesbian Movement Goes to Market* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001).
[186] *Negative Dialectics*, p. 22.

published in 1970.[187] Adorno insists that, in 'the wake of the European catastrophes', the ostensibly 'apolitical' world of philosophical aesthetics and the artwork it interprets is undergoing 'a crisis'.[188] Most of all, Auschwitz problematizes the priorities of Enlightenment aesthetics – represented by Kant and Hegel, among others – which for Adorno are no longer valid.

Adorno makes the case that aesthetics has traditionally prioritized notions of unity and harmony in its reflections on the nature of beauty. Such harmony is understood through the relation of 'whole' and 'part'. For most Enlightenment philosophies, the more 'beautiful' artworks are those which harmoniously unify the various parts that make up the work into a sensuously pleasing whole, with artworks becoming more and more 'beautiful' throughout human history. The progress of art over time reflects a wider faith in the possibility of human development. Through its harmonious reconciliation of its parts, art concretizes universal history, adumbrating a more 'ideal' realm where particular and universal find synthesis.

Adorno contends that a harmonious aesthetic relation between whole and part is no longer possible (or desirable) after Auschwitz. With the totalized system of the concentration camp in mind, Adorno is suspicious of any system – social or aesthetic – that subsumes the part (particular) under the whole (universal). Adorno believes that a form which prioritizes the universal risks destroying the particular in its drive for ever-closer integration. By making the case that aesthetic unity amounts to the identity of particular and universal, Adorno contends that the 'task of aesthetics today' is nothing short of the

[187] Theodor Adorno, 'Cultural Criticism and Society', *Prisms*, p. 34. Adorno clarifies his point in *Negative Dialectics*, pp. 362-363.
[188] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 239.

'historical suspension of aesthetic harmony altogether'.[189] This allows for a more nuanced understanding of the so-called 'barbarity' of poetry after Auschwitz. Adorno is not saying that all art – all *poesies* – is compromised by Auschwitz. His argument relates to the 'traditional concept of the poetic' as 'something categorically "high" and sacred' – the idea that art mimics in its form a perfected ideal realm where particular and universal find harmonious synthesis.[190] Auschwitz renders such art – 'before' and 'after' the catastrophe – 'barbaric'.

Adorno makes the case that, in the wake of the catastrophes of modernity, 'art that makes the highest claim compels itself beyond form as totality and into the fragmentary'.[191] This 'claim' has to do with the way that fragmented artworks allow for the aesthetic release of the particular – the part – from the whole, from the 'spell' of identity. Such works disallow the unified harmony envisaged in previous conceptions of aesthetics and, by virtue of fragmentation, invalidate the idea that art provides a semblance of the historical synthesis of subject and object. 'What appears in art is no longer the ideal, no longer harmony': 'the locus of its power of resolution is now exclusively in the contradictory and the dissonant'.[192]

Post-Auschwitz art cannot 'return to peace and order' – to 'affirmative replication and harmony'.[193] What is required, as far as Adorno understands it, is 'a radically darkened art'.[194] This is not simply to say that, after the harrowing events of the war, art should be depressing, or even more banally, 'sad'.[195] It is to say, however, that the artwork should

[189] Ibid, p.170 and p. 145.
[190] Ibid, pp. 21-22.
[191] Ibid.
[192] Ibid, p. 111.
[193] Ibid, p. 338.
[194] Ibid, p. 24 and p. 50.
[195] Ibid, p. 313.

follow the 'necessity of going to the extreme'.[196] It can only do so, Adorno contests, by violating its own formal closure, by refusing resolution and reconciliation and insisting on contradiction. Adorno contends that, through formal closure, the various antagonisms and contradictions to be found in a work of art are artificially resolved, something Adorno understands as a displaced echo of the social violence that typifies modernity. Adorno calls for artworks that disavow every last possible trace of resolution, where 'form tends to dissociate unity'.[197]

Adorno draws a distinction between 'open' (authentic) and 'closed' (inauthentic) aesthetic forms.[198] Where closed forms reflect a closed society by enforcing integration, open forms – which eschew closure and resolution – indict both closed aesthetic forms and, indeed, the notion of harmonious integration itself. The open form retains the unreconciled antagonism of the universal and particular, so that 'art takes into itself the impossibility of the unity of the one and the many' – an insight relevant to an Adornian conception of the tragic, where the clash between subject and society ('the one and the many') goes unresolved.[199]

Adorno contends that 'explosion' is one of the 'invariants' of open forms.[200] He writes that open works have 'blasted away the overarching form' through which part and whole otherwise 'cohere' and where it is 'the catastrophic instant that destroys temporal continuity'.[201] What Adorno calls for in his analysis of post-Auschwitz art is an aesthetic of catastrophe, which shatters formal unity. This lays the ground for the 'social explosiveness

[196] Ibid, p. 44.
[197] Ibid, p. 108.
[198] Ibid, p. 206.
[199] Ibid, p. 240.
[200] Ibid, p. 112.
[201] Ibid, p. 142.

of art'. [202] Adorno contends that the formally fragmented artwork resists, not only the totality of closed aesthetic form, but its own inscription into the wider social totality. Through its dissonant form, the artwork unleashes 'the fleeting, the ephemeral and the transitory in a form that is immune to reification'.[203] This means that authentic works provide a negative, inverse image of a social system that seeks everywhere to unify whole and part, universal and particular, object and subject. The work of art stands critically opposed to a homogenous social world that perpetuates itself by reducing everything to an iteration of identity.

This is where the 'autonomy' of the aesthetic resides.[204] This is an idea which requires clarification. Adorno does not believe that the artwork subsists in some sort of rarefied sphere 'beyond' society. He concedes that artworks are material products of society informed by the cultural specificities of time and place. He also recognizes that 'aesthetics' as a branch of thought has a specific historical genealogy, as evidenced by the relatively late usage of the word in relation to art theory.[205] But that is not to say that the artwork or the aesthetic sphere is completely reducible to the determinations of society and history. The artwork, as Adorno understands it, has a relation to society analogous to that of the subject: it is a product of society, but it is also able to realize its autonomy by *negating* society, which it does through its fragmentary form. This negation of totality underpins 'metaphysics of art', as Adorno calls it – its partial transcendence of the immanent material and social world.[206]

[202] Ibid, p. 298
[203] Ibid, p. 219.
[204] Ibid, p. 1.
[205] Ibid, p. 85.
[206] Ibid, p. 173.

The idea that artworks open a perspective beyond the social totality persuades Adorno to dismiss those artworks that reflect social reality – or the world as it is. Adorno denounces 'dull-minded doctrines of aesthetic realism' that would strive to reflect (and reflect on) topical social and historical events, as opposed to challenging totality through the aesthetic form.[207] But it also (and relatedly) prompts Adorno to dismiss artworks that are socially and political 'engaged', or which seek to promulgate a social and political 'message' – something Adorno accuses Brechtian theatre of doing.[208] 'The view of art as politically engaged or didactic', contends Adorno, 'integrates art into the reality it opposes'.[209] This compromises the autonomy of the aesthetic and sinks art into a social world characterized by total fungibility, as the singularity of the work of art is compromised by turning it into an iteration of something else, a political proposition. This, paradoxically, aligns politically engaged art with Culture Industry, which similarly integrates the subject into the social totality.

This critique of politically engaged art is not to say that Adorno conceives of works of art as apolitical. He insists that art does have distinct social and political ramifications. This, however, arises from its fragmented form, not from its content. 'By shattering the symbolic unity of the work of art', writes Adorno, 'the artwork reveals the untruth of any reconciliation of the general and particular in an unreconciled reality'.[210] Precisely by virtue of its refusal to 'engage', the artwork negates a social and political world that has become totalized. This goes some way to clarifying why Adorno similarly refused to adopt a clear-cut position on political action. It also sheds lights on his decision to deploy a fragmented and aphoristic writing-style (*Darstellung*) in his own philosophical reflections. His sometimes

[207] Ibid, p. 120,
[208] *Negative Dialectics*, p. 200.
[209] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 114.
[210] 'Parataxis', p. 127.

fractured, sometimes dense style is intended to be resistant to integration and the pitfalls of a holistic philosophical 'system', where discrete observations all serve to underwrite a binding whole.[211]

The disconcerting irony of politically committed art is that it integrates subjects into the society it sets out to critique. This is precisely the opposite of authentic aesthetic experience, as Adorno understands it. Adorno makes the case that aesthetic experience is ecstatic and individuating, that it momentarily throws the subject beside him or herself and outside of the collective parameters of the social totality. This – once again – results from the way the artwork fragments itself. By denying reconciliatory synthesis, the artwork releases its parts from an overarching whole. This means that 'in art one experiences something singular, something particular in its necessity'.[212] The fragmented work of art cannot be reduced to a totalizing concept; it is up to the viewer to self-reflexively interpret the work without recourse to the shared categories of understanding derived from the social totality. This severs the subject from a reified world of conceptual identity, so the subject 'becomes aware of itself as a negativity', which 'no fiction of a positive community can abolish'.[213] The autonomy of the aesthetic, as Adorno views it, catalyses the autonomy of the subject. This form of aesthetic response sometimes goes under the enigmatic name of 'the shudder'.[214] It is a phrase Adorno uses to try and capture the disequilibrium caused by artworks that cannot be determined by the usual categories of identity, pushing the shuddering subject (fractionally) out of wider conceptual order. It has to be said, however, that Adorno does not empirically 'evidence' his claims about aesthetic response. His

[211] I touch again on Adornian style throughout the case studies. See also Steven Helmling, *Adorno's Poetics of Critique* (London: Continuum, 2009).
[212] Quoted in *Adorno and the Ends of Philosophy*, p. 164.
[213] 'Parataxis', p. 127.
[214] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 418. Adorno writes 'aesthetic comportment is to be defined as the capacity to shudder' (ibid).

imagined aesthetic subject is an 'ideal', arising from his conception of formal disunity and fragmentation.[215]

These reflections on the disintegration of aesthetic form occasion a 'turn' to the friable and fragmentary forms of modernist art, which Adorno tends to favour in his writings – most notably in the atonal and dissonant works of Kafka, Beckett, Schoenberg and Picasso. This valorisation of the modernist *avant-garde* (conventionally understood as a pre-war constellation of phenomena) in the post-war era obviously raises questions of periodization and, once again, brings up the modernism and/or postmodernism question in relation to Adorno. These are questions that I address in the next section by drawing on the notion of 'late' modernism.

3.2. 'Late' Modernism versus Postmodernism

Adorno laments the dwindling of the modernist tradition and complains of the 'loss of tension in post-war art, much of which goes slack the moment it appears'.[216] To historically and philosophically 'place' Adorno, Jameson uses the category 'late modernism'. Jameson understands late modernism as an iteration of modernism that was made possible by the critical re-theorization of modernism in the post-war period – or 'after' Auschwitz.[217] Where 'high' (or as Jameson sometimes calls it, 'classic') pre-war modernism often embraced mythic ideas around national 'unity' with a simultaneous investment in the possibility of social and scientific progress, late modernism brings those values into question in the face

[215] The same is also often true of the way Rudkin, Barker and Kane conceive of aesthetic affect, as I show in the case studies.
[216] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 240.
[217] Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity* (London: Verso, 2012). See especially. pp. 161-179. Adorno also uses the phrase 'late modernism' in *Aesthetic Theory*, though he does so to make a distinct point about unity versus fragmentation (p. 135).

of the catastrophe of the Second World War and Nazism. This precipitates a shift towards aesthetic disintegration, as opposed to the unity and coherence of form concomitant with classic modernism.

This transition obviously has parallels with postmodern aesthetics, which is similarly understood in terms of fragmentation, disallowing metanarratives and the totalization of whole and part.[218] Jameson makes the case that postmodernism is epitomized by the collapse of the traditional distinction between 'high' and 'low' culture, techniques of pastiche and parody, the cannibalization of past styles, the play of random stylistic allusion, a loss of the feeling of social alienation and a more schizophrenic consciousness, which embraces the synchronic understanding of time and space in modern consumer capitalism.[219]

But late modernism and postmodernism are – for Jameson – also qualitatively distinct. The problem with postmodern aesthetics is that it risks formally reiterating the total reification of historical and cultural life in post-Auschwitz society. Jameson makes the case that, precisely by virtue of its collapse of all sorts of qualitative distinctions, postmodern aesthetics reflects and enables the system of universal equivalence that reigns in the totalized world of late capitalism. He contends that the cultural practice of postmodernism concretizes a field of stylistic and discursive heterogeneity that ultimately obscures an underlying homogeneity – the social totality. This, critically, leaves little room for formulations of subjectivity and autonomy. This is no doubt consistent with a postmodernist and poststructuralist worldview that would seek to deny the idea that the subject (or indeed the artwork) is an autonomous entity, but is composed of heteroglot

[218] For a classic take on postmodern (anti-)aesthetics and its relation to modernism, see Hal Foster (ed.), *Postmodern Culture*, (London: Pluto Press, 1985).
[219] See in particular *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*.

discourses (language-games) which collapse the modernist subject-object dialectic. But the denial of the subjective dimension in postmodern aesthetics also tends to foreclose the possibility of resisting a reified totality which, more often than not, postmodern theory disavows.

This is where late modernism might be seen as a potential 'corrective' to postmodernism. Unlike postmodernism, late modernist aesthetics as Jameson understands it remains suspicious of mass society and culture and, as a consequence, seeks to retain the autonomy of the aesthetic and the subject in post-Auschwitz life.[220] This formalization of the autonomy of the subject over and against society means that late modernism has obvious parallels with tragic form. Christopher Butler writes that 'modernism has a close affinity to the conflicts of the tragic tradition', as modernist art prioritizes a subjectivity that is 'opposed to any political or institutional forces'.[221] This reception of the tragic distinguishes modernism from postmodernism, as viewed by Lyotard. Adorno, however, is deeply suspicious of the idea of post-war tragedy, which 'after' Auschwitz he understands to be an invalid form. I turn now to an analysis of the way Adorno understands tragedy and the tragic, showing that his philosophical and historical analysis of Auschwitz implies a conception of the late tragic, even if he ultimately refuses – or fails – to make a case for tragedy in modernity.

4. Tragedy

[220] *A Singular Modernity*, p. 161.
[221] Christopher Butler, *Modernism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 44 and p. 66.

4.1. The (Im)possibility of Tragedy

The idea of post-Auschwitz tragedy may, for Adorno, be something of an oxymoron. Adorno contends that Auschwitz renders tragedy problematic because, historically, tragic form relies on a tension between the subject (individual) and object (society) which is increasingly being nullified in post-Auschwitz culture. Auschwitz testifies to the reification of subjectivity in modernity and, as such, similarly testifies to the possible 'death' of tragedy as a viable idiom.[222]

Adorno clarifies his theory concerning the negative relation between artwork and society by analysing the dialectic between the content and form of classical tragedy. It might be that Greek tragedy depicted, as its thematic content, the same violent events that took place in society; but the deeper relation between society and tragedy is adumbrated by its form:

> It is possible to argue over how much Attic tragedy, including those by Euripides, took part in the violent social conflicts of the epoch; however, the basic tendency of tragic form, in contrast to its mythical subjects, the dissolution of the spell of fate and the birth of subjectivity, bears witness as much to social emancipation from feudal familial ties as, in the collision between mythical law and subjectivity, to the antagonism between fateful domination and a humanity awakening to maturity. This antagonism, as well as the historico-philosophical tendency, became an *a priori* of form rather than being treated simply as thematic material, endowed tragedy with its social substantiality.[223]

The social 'substance' of tragedy, as captured in its form, is the opposition between subject and society, where 'mythical law and subjectivity' and 'the antagonism between fateful

[222] *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 154. George Steiner also insists that tragedy is a defunct form – though for him the death of tragedy is a result of the historical rise of 'positive' ideologies, like Christianity and Marxism. See his *The Death of Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press) and, for a reconsideration, '"Tragedy", Reconsidered', *New Literary History*, 35:1 (2005), pp. 1-15

[223] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 303.

domination and a humanity awakening to maturity' is concretized in the clash between conflicting social forces. The language recalls that of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. It is vital to recall, however, that 'enlightenment' is not a strictly historical category in Adornian thinking, to be identified with the era known as the Enlightenment, but a tendency with deep roots in Western civilization. Greek tragedy formalizes the collision between the fateful domination of the object world (society) and the autonomy of the tragic protagonist (subject) – a clash that becomes increasingly pronounced in modern European society and its art. The collision between subject and society is for Adorno 'the basic tendency' of Western tragic drama from the Greeks onwards and is an *a priori* of the form *per se*, similarly discernible in subsequent iterations of tragic form – including, of course, Shakespeare.[224]

This is not to say that Adorno collapses the historical distance between Greek and Shakespearean tragedy, or that he proposes a universal concept of the tragic that might sublate its particular historical and formal iterations – a form of identity-thinking. Adorno gives due consideration to the historical conditions inflecting tragedy over time while retaining a consciousness of the ideational ties between discrete forms. The split between subject and society is something that Adorno takes to be an integral aspect of tragic form in its various historical guises – so much so that 'tragedy' is impossible, or abolished, without it.

While he insists that the dialectic between subject and society is the driving principle of tragic form, Adorno is under no illusions about the usual result of that clash. Adorno is aware that tragic drama frequently ends with the demise of the tragic 'hero', whose death

[224] See also Garrett Sullivan, 'Tragic Subjectivities', *The Cambridge Companion to Early Modern Tragedy*, ed. Emma Smith and Garrett Sullivan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 73-85. Sullivan writes 'Early modern tragic subjectivity is created out of the collision between the individual and the social order' (p. 73).

results from hubristically transgressing the inherited norms and values of the community. This vision of the tragic is confirmed in tragic theory – most obviously as it is found in German Idealism. Peter Szondi observes that the philosophy of the tragic in German thought more or less coincides with the Enlightenment era. This is because tragedy provided philosophers with a formal paradigm for the dialectical synthesis of forces which are in contradiction.[225]

It is an understanding of tragedy built, in part, on Aristotle. Though perhaps most famous for his notion of catharsis, where tragic incidents arousing pity and fear allow for the safe 'purgation' of anti-social feelings, Aristotle also provides an analysis of tragic form. Aristotle makes the case that tragedy should depict the downfall of the tragic hero, who – via a process of revelation and recognition (*anagnorisis*) about the dominant powers of fate or the divine – undergoes a change 'from ignorance to awareness'.[226] It is not always necessary for the hero to die in a tragedy; but if the hero does survive, there should be a resolution in which the hero recognizes and reconciles him or herself to dominant forces beyond intervention.

Hegel similarly prioritizes tragic resolution, but incorporates that Aristotelean reading of the form into his wider analysis of the historical process as a synthesis of dialectical forces. Tragedy is particularly vital for the way in which Hegel understands the relationship between subject and society. Hegel insists on the freedom – the self-determination – of the individual. But he also contends that the state – and its civic and ethical customs – reflect and institute the freedoms of all.[227] Hegel contends that tragedy depicts the conflict between the individual subject – the tragic hero – and the institutions of

[225] Peter Szondi, *An Essay on The Tragic*, trans. Paul Fleming (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).
[226] Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Gerald Franck Else (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1967), p. 21.
[227] See *Outlines for a Philosophy of Right*, pp. 154-304.

civic and ethical life. These embody society and, for Hegel, are typically represented in Greek tragedy by the Chorus.[228] By pursuing his or her freedom without consideration for its impact on the rest of community, the tragic hero over-privileges his or her autonomy, clashes with the institutions of civic life and imperils the rights and freedoms of others. This means the tragic subject ultimately acts in an irrational way and, as freedom and rationality are inseparable for Hegel, even *unfreely.* If the tragic hero should remain in contradiction with society, s/he will either die or society will disintegrate and human life descend into anomie.[229] The other possible outcome is the synthesis of opposing forces, where the tragic hero recognizes the predominant claim of the state and reconciliation between the subject (individual) and object (society) is formalized, as history progresses towards its perfected *telos*.

The idealist reading of tragedy which insists on formal reconciliation and resolution is – of course – deeply suspicious for Adorno and the rest of the Frankfurt School. The idea that the tragic hero (particular) is finally integrated in, or destroyed by, society (universal) is no doubt consistent for a philosophy which posits that historical progress proceeds via the 'negation of the negation'. Such a reading has, however, become deeply problematic 'after' Auschwitz, where the progress of reason led – not to the final synthesis of subject and object – but to the Final Solution and the complete 'liquidation' of subjectivity. 'The annihilation of the individual', as Adorno contends, 'can no longer be seen as transcended positivity'.[230]

The historical fate of the subject and tragedy 'after' Auschwitz is, for Adorno, most powerfully revealed in in the plays of his favourite playwright, Beckett. Adorno contends

[228] See *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, pp. 444-451
[229] See also Martin Thibodeau, *Hegel and Greek Tragedy*, trans. Hans Jakob Wilhelm (New York and Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2013), particularly pp. 160-163.
[230] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 259.

that the damaged and incapacitated characters found in Beckett testify to the liquidation of subjectivity – and so the impossibility of tragedy – in post-Auschwitz life.[231] Adorno makes the case that Beckett 'writes the comedy of the tragic'.[232] His plays represent the complete collapse of the tragic subject, who is transformed into a useless and reviled comic figure.[233] This diminution of the voluntaristic subject of tragedy into a clownish failure is reflected in the way *Endgame* reduces the name 'Hamlet' to the porcine 'Hamm' – though Beckett disagreed with that reading and was frustrated when Adorno chose to pursue it publically.[234] Adorno contends that, where *Hamlet* has been understood as witnessing 'the birth of the subject' – the 'nominalistic Shakespearean breakthrough into mortal and infinitely rich individuality' – Hamm reveals the mutilating damage that has been done to the subject, its reduction to thing-like, consumable status.[235] Through Hamm, Beckett forms a post-Holocaust response to Shakespeare that centres on the degradation of the tragic subject.

It is not simply that tragedy has 'disappeared' from post-Auschwitz life, however: it has also been misappropriated by the Culture Industry. Adorno and Horkheimer make the case that the Culture Industry does not necessarily shrink from the representation of 'tragic' suffering. What it does, however, is present that suffering as a fate to which the subject falls when it flouts prevailing norms and values, to which the subject must adapt for its own well-being and self-preservation.[236] This means that tragedy becomes an institution for moral improvement and that catharsis – *à la* Aristotle – catalyses the controlled purgation of anti-

[231] He writes 'the catastrophes that inspire *Endgame* have shattered the individual' (Ibid).
[232] Ibid, p. 259.
[233] 'Is Art Lighthearted?', p. 253.
[234] See Andrea Oppo, *Philosophical Aesthetics and Samuel Beckett* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2008), p. 136.
[235] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 279.
[236] *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 152.

social feelings about the dominant culture.[237] It is an understanding of tragic 'inevitability' that has some parallels with Brecht and his critique of the tragic – though for Brecht tragedy resembles fate only because the solitary tragic hero cannot possibly oppose society alone: meaningful social and political change can only take place through concerted collective action.[238]

There is a contradiction in the way Adorno thinks about modern tragedy. On the one hand, Adorno praises Beckett for his representation of an incapacitated subject and the 'death' of tragedy. On the other, Adorno provides a profoundly sceptical reading of the representation of tragic suffering in the Culture Industry. What both forms share, however, is a denial of the properly negative, subjective dimension of tragic form. Adorno vies that Beckett represents the only adequate dramaturgical response to the Holocaust, as his plays portray the total reification of the subject – and the death of tragedy. This 'unprotesting depiction of ubiquitous regression' is perceived by Adorno as 'a protest against a state of the world that so accommodates the law of regression that it no longer has anything to hold up against it'.[239] Though purposefully paradoxical, it is not necessarily a convincing argument: it is hard to see that Beckettian drama is likely to provoke 'protest' if the very (tragic) subject required for negative critique is no longer able to contest its reification. It may be that Beckettian drama, in the same vein as the Culture Industry, transforms tragic suffering into 'fate' – an irresistible social and historical necessity to which subjects must resign or adapt.

This contradiction causes Adorno (albeit occasionally) to provide analyses of subjectivity and totality that would seem to undermine his otherwise consistent valorisation

[237] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 311
[238] This is a conception of the tragic I will return to in Chapter Four, where I discuss Bond and his *Lear*.
[239] 'Trying to Understand *Endgame*', p. 266.

of Beckettian drama as the post-Auschwitz form *par excellence*. Adorno writes suspiciously in *Negative Dialectics* of any philosophy (or, indeed, of any work of art) that might 'confirm the sense of impotence' that typifies post-Auschwitz culture, which can only serve to reinforce 'the spell of identity'.[240] With words that could form a critique of Beckettian silence, Adorno contends that a denial of the subjective dimension can be seen to be 'directly abetting speechless domination and barbarism', precluding the negativity of the subject in 'a gesture of self-imposed muteness and vanishing'.[241] This undermines the possibility of even the 'tiniest bit of self-reflection by a subject pondering upon itself and its real captivity'.[242]

What the reification of subjectivity in post-Auschwitz culture requires is tragic autonomy. Gritzner writes that 'life in late capitalist culture has transformed into a nexus of […] reification, which problematizes the notion of individual freedom and […] makes a renewal of the discourse on tragedy relevant and necessary', as tragedy inherently implies a dialectical 'recovery of the notion of autonomous individuality'.[243] Despite the absence of a fully articulated tragic theory in his writings, tragedy and autonomy, both subjective and aesthetic, are deeply intertwined in Adornian thinking. Adorno makes the (admittedly speculative) case that tragedy 'may have been the origin of the idea of aesthetic autonomy'.[244] This originating status lies in the way that tragedy can be seen as 'an afterimage of cultic acts'.[245] The cultic acts Adorno refers to are sacrificial. Adorno contends that, in pre-modern, myth-based societies, ritualized sacrifice was seen as performing the role of appeasing otherwise uncontrollable divine forces and ensuring the continued

[240] Ibid, p 68.
[241] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 273.
[242] *Negative Dialectics*, p. 123 and p. 68.
[243] *Adorno and Modern Theatre*, p. 164 and p.176.
[244] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 8.
[245] Ibid.

survival of the community as a whole. This scapegoating continues into tragedy, only now the 'sacrifice' is of the tragic hero, who transgresses the ethical norms of the body politic and threatens the survival of the *polis*. The eventual 'sacrifice' or re-integration of the hero into conformity with the values of civic life is necessary if the social whole is to be preserved.

Adorno contends that sacrifice generates a dialectical relation between subject and object, particular and universal. On the one hand, the sacrifice is a cipher for the community as a whole – a sort of 'stand-in' to expiate the wrongs of the politic. On the other, the sacrifice is uniquely singular, an entity which nothing else can take the place of in the ritual. The sacrifice is both exchangeable and non-exchangeable; or, perhaps more precisely, the sacrifice becomes non-exchangeable *even in the act of its exchange*. The sacrifice exhibits the 'non-specifity of the example' and so conforms to the norms of categorical reason; but it also embodies the uniqueness of the 'chosen one', which 'radically marks it off' and makes it 'unfit for exchange'.[246] Sacrifice, as Adorno understands it, is the historical origin of the idea of autonomy.

Sacrifice is vital for Adorno because it allows for a properly social and historical understanding of autonomy. The sacrifice, for Adorno, is 'social by its opposition to society'.[247] This dialectic continues into tragedy, which formalizes the autonomy of the subject, its release from the domination of society – even if that autonomy is revoked by his or her sacrificial death. It also lays the foundations for the autonomy of the aesthetic, whereby 'the emancipation of the subject in art is the emancipation of the autonomy of art'.[248] Though not always stated explicitly, the alignment between tragedy, subjectivity,

[246] *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 10
[247] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 296.
[248] Ibid, p. 257.

aesthetics and autonomy is critical to Adorno. Part of the problem with post-Auschwitz culture is that it demands 'the introversion of sacrifice', as Adorno and Horkheimer call it, where the individual actively 'sacrifices' aspects of his or her self that do not conform to society.[249] This introversion disallows non-identity: the opposition between subject and society is pre-empted.[250]

The critique of conventional tragic synthesis – and indeed, aesthetic resolution *per se* – and the introversion of sacrifice serves to adumbrate a conception of tragedy in which the antagonism between subject and society remains intact, as opposed to being nullified by formal closure. Far from upholding reconciliation, a conception of the tragic informed (though not necessarily advocated) by Adorno would refuse the sacrificial process of resolution, keeping the tension between the tragic 'hero' and society unresolved by insisting on a subject who refuses the need to identify, to reconcile with the collective. This would mean a tragic subject who violates aesthetic closure, instantiating precisely the type of formally open-ended aesthetic form Adorno calls for in response to post-Auschwitz totality. Where aesthetic fragmentation occasions the autonomy of the viewer, the tragic hero who upends resolution can even be thought of as *catalysing* subjective freedom – a point I return to throughout the case studies. It is such a form of tragic drama that I have described as Catastrophist.

Conclusion

[249] *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 55.
[250] Ibid.

This chapter has analysed Auschwitz, subjectivity, aesthetics and tragedy in the work of Theodor Adorno. I have shown that, for Adorno and Horkheimer, Auschwitz exemplifies the dialectic of Enlightenment, the process whereby the social and historical 'progress' promised by Enlightenment thought ultimately led to the creation of rationalized administrative systems that reduce the subject to a mere object. I have also considered the way Auschwitz relates to capitalism and the commodity-form, showing that, for Adorno, the conditions that made the Holocaust possible continue into post-Auschwitz society and its Culture Industry, as opposed to being transcended by a new phase of postmodernity. I have also analysed his understanding of the subject and subjectivity and shown that, while Adorno critiques the humanist subject, he also retains the idea of autonomy through his concept of non-identity. I have provided a critique of identity politics through the concept of identity-thinking and presented an interpretation of the role the aesthetic plays in catalysing the non-identity of the subject. I finally show that, while Adorno deems tragedy to be an obsolete form that has been appropriated by the Culture Industry and transcended by Beckett, his analysis of post-Auschwitz cultural life implies a Catastrophist theory of tragic subjectivity and aesthetics.

'To save the tragic from the limits set to it by a redundant dramatic form', writes Mark Nivalainen, 'it is necessary to find the modern locus of the tragic outside the traditional forms of tragic art'.[251] The idea that the canonical Shakespeare has been the 'locus' where tragedy has been refigured outside 'traditional forms of tragic art' may seem perverse. In Chapter Two, I will provide a reading of *King Lear* informed by the insights I have drawn from a reading of Adorno and tragedy, showing the play transgresses the 'limits' of 'dramatic form'.

[251] 'On Thinking the Tragic with Adorno', p. 655.

Chapter Two

Why *King Lear*?

Introduction

This chapter analyses the thematic and, most importantly, formal aspects of *King Lear* that make it so vital an intertext for Catastrophist tragedy. By providing a close-reading of the play and by drawing on relevant areas of Shakespeare Studies informed by the work of Adorno and Critical Theory, I show that *King Lear* is a play concerned with catastrophe, social and cultural modernity, subjectivity and the limits of tragic resolution, in a way that makes it – perhaps uniquely – open to Catastrophist intervention and appropriation 'after' Auschwitz.

I begin by showing that *King Lear* thematizes catastrophe. The play consistently portrays disaster and its impact on subjectivity, whereby catastrophe brutalizes the human individual and occasions a degenerative reversal into a form of 'base life'. I proceed to analyse the way catastrophe is understood by the protagonists of the play itself. These interpretations adumbrate the emergence of a new humanist and rationalist ethos that, *pace* the dialectic of Enlightenment, ultimately reifies subjectivity. By providing a close reading of Edgar and his transformation into Poor Tom, I go on to analyse the way subjectivity implicitly emerges as a site of non-identity – most obviously in those moments of crisis and upheaval that fissure totality. I finally consider the aesthetics of catastrophe in *King Lear*. Drawing on early modern dramatic theory, as derived from Aelius Donatus, I show

that *King Lear* violates formal closure – or, as early modern usage would have it, 'the catastrophe'.

1. Catastrophe in *King Lear*

King Lear is a play that piles disaster upon disaster. Its unremitting catastrophes seem to 'top extremity' (V.iii.206) and 'amplify too much' (V.iii.205) to allow for respite or reprieve, as humanity is 'left darkling' (I.iv.208) in a desolate world of 'ruinous disorders' (I.ii.113-114). 'Who is't can say "I am at the worst"?', reflects Edgar, in a speech that epitomizes the 'sequent' (I.ii.106) movement of ever-worsening 'terrors' (II.ii.279) in the play, 'I am worse than e'er I was' (IV.i.27-28): 'And worse I may be yet' (IV.i.29). So cataclysmic are the events of the play that Gloucester believes 'the great world / Shall so wear out to naught' (IV.vi.130-131) – perhaps an apocalyptic consummation devoutly to be wished, as humanity cannot 'carry / Th'affliction, nor the fear' (III.ii.48-49) of the devastation that begins to 'mar' (I.iv.32) it.

The sheer 'extremity' (III.iv.100) of the ruin depicted in *King Lear* occasions a reversion of the subject into its 'worst estate' (V.iii.208) – a 'worse than brutish' (I.ii.77) condition. This reduction of people to a form of 'base life' (II.iv.212) is most obvious in the storm scenes, which dominate Act Three of the play. 'Is man no more than this?' (III.iv.101) wonders Lear, as he gazes upon 'Poor Tom', the 'basest' (II.ii.7) form of humanity that Edgar can imagine. Poor Tom, as far as Lear sees, is 'the thing itself': 'Unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare forked animal as thou art' (III.iv.104-106). 'Is man no more than

this?': for some Holocaust scholars, the question takes on new urgency 'after' Auschwitz.[252] The words are even echoed in *If This Is a Man* – the title which Levi gave his reflections on his internment at Auschwitz.[253] 'Consider if this is a man', writes Levi.[254] 'Consider him well' (III.iv.101) declares Lear, importuning Kent and the Fool to reconsider the status of the human.

The question – and, indeed, the word – that *King Lear* time and again invokes, however, is the 'cause' (III.iv.150). What (or perhaps who) is 'guilty of our disasters' (I.ii.120)? The play itself provides a variety of interpretations. The most consistently realized can be designated as the reactionary/traditionalist response and the nihilistic/absurdist response. The traditionalist response would have it that catastrophe inevitably results from the collapse of a providentially ordained, hierarchical world order, which is embodied by the sovereign; the nihilistic interpretation of events, however, would have it that catastrophe simply is the lot of a wretched humanity, which suffers humiliating (yet also grotesquely comic) depredations through the agency of arbitrary forces that are beyond appeal and intervention.

I want – briefly – to trace both interpretations of disaster. Both have been influential in important post-war readings, stagings and appropriations of *King Lear*, which I analyse in Chapter Three. Both also serve to adumbrate a social and historical shift depicted in the play towards a more obviously modern, proto-Enlightenment worldview that, in the same dialectical reversal analysed by the Frankfurt School, precipitates catastrophe. The reactionary conservative stance is the worldview against which a proto-modern, rationalist

[252] See especially Edward Alexander *The Holocaust: History and the War of Ideas* (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 1994), p. 141 and Berel Lang, *The Future of the Holocaust: Between History and Memory* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1999), p. 38.
[253] Primo Levi, *If This Is A Man/The Truce* (London: Abacus, 2013).
[254] Ibid, p. 11.

discourse emerges; while the constant apostrophes to a violent universe beyond human reckoning (whether driven by fate, fortune, or the gods) unwittingly reveal the way in which the protagonists of the play have become trapped in – and dominated by – impersonal forms of power and control.[255] By analysing the way catastrophe is interpreted in the play, I show that *King Lear* both ideationally and rhetorically frames the emergence of an incipiently modern subject-object split, which portends the brute reification of human life.

2.1. Understanding Catastrophe in *King Lear*

The opening scene of *King Lear* famously depicts the division of the Kingdom, where the ageing King Lear seeks to divide his Kingdom between his daughters (and, more to the point in his patriarchal world, his current and prospective sons-in-law) so 'that future strife / May be prevented now' (I.i.43-44). Lear, as part of the wider public ceremony, sets up a 'love-test':

> —Tell me, my daughters,
> Since now we will divest us both of rule,
> Interest of territory, cares of state
> Which of you shall we say doth love us most
> That we our largest bounty may extend
> Where nature doth with merit challenge? (I.i.48-53)

Goneril and Regan instantly comply and 'profess' (I.i.72) to love Lear 'Beyond what can be valued' (I.i.57). Cordelia, however, refuses the rhetorical inflation, insisting that 'I love your majesty / According to my bond, no more nor less' (I.i.92-93). She tells Lear that she has

[255] See also Hugh Grady, *Shakespeare's Universal Wolf: Studies in Early Modern Reification* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 31, for an analysis of the relationship between the apostrophe and catastrophe.

'Nothing' (I.i.89) to add to the words of her sisters ('Nothing will come of nothing' (I.i.92), replies Lear). Loving Cordelia 'most' (I.i.124) and having intended to set his 'rest / On her kind nursery' (I.i.124-125), Lear vents his wrath and banishes Cordelia, leaving Albany and Cornwall to 'digest' (I.i.129) her portion of the Kingdom. Lear goes on to 'invest' Albany and Cornwall with his 'power' (I.i.131) but intends to 'retain / The name, and all th'addition to a King' (I.i.136-137).

Kent admonishes Lear for banishing Cordelia after she refuses to 'heave' (I.i.91) her heart into her mouth and produce the 'glib and oily' (I.i.226) rhetoric Lear demands. But for Kent, for the sovereign to renounce his 'power' (I.i.149) and split the Kingdom is, in and of itself, catastrophic. Though undertaken with the aim of preventing rivalrous power-struggles, Kent insists that the violation of social order can only result in chaos. 'Reserve thy state, / And in thy best consideration check / This hideousness rashness' (I.i.150-152): 'thou dost evil' (I.i.167).

The order Kent valorizes is not only social and political; it is also natural and divine. By abdicating the throne, dividing the Kingdom and disowning Cordelia, Lear not only ruptures the order of both state and family, he also threatens the orderly system of hierarchy that obtains in nature and the cosmos. When Lear invokes the cosmic 'orbs' (I.i.110) and the 'mysteries' (I.i.111) of the natural world, Kent chastises him for swearing 'thy gods in vain' (I.i.162). Lear has violated the providentially ordained order he is supposed to embody on earth. Kent implies as much when he states that the 'madness' of Lear allows him to break with decorum and openly indict the actions of his monarch: 'be Kent unmannerly / When Lear is mad' (I.i.146-147). This 'unmannerly' intervention adumbrates the wider collapse of order, allowing Kent to addresses the 'divine' figure of the King as 'old man' (I.i.147). The pagan world of *King Lear* obviously predates the Incarnation and the

advent of Christianity. It is 'the gods' and not 'God' who appear in the rhetoric of the play – and those gods named individually are all drawn from classical myth: 'Hecate' (I.i.111), 'Apollo' (I.i.161) and even 'blind Cupid' (IV.vi.134). But the cosmic order represented in the play, and the social world it permeates and sanctions, is by no means incompatible with the hierarchic universe found in early modern theocentric political thought – not least as propagated by James I. This would similarly have it that the subversion of social and political order is a violation of Godly precepts and can only result in unmitigated disaster for humanity.[256]

For the arch-traditionalist Kent, the division of the Kingdom violates a providentially ordained social and political world. With the breaking of that world order, chaos ensues. This conservative understanding of catastrophe is also taken up by Gloucester. Gloucester similarly fears that the division of the Kingdom heralds 'death, dearth, dissolutions of ancient amities' (I.ii.145) – or the collapse of the old ('ancient') order and various unifying relationships between individuals ('amities'). Gloucester believes that unusual natural and astrological events are intimately related to the emergent social and political chaos. He frets that

> These late eclipses of the sun and moon portend no good to us. Though the wisdom of Nature can reason it thus and thus, yet nature finds itself scourged by the sequent effects. Love cools, friendship falls off, brothers divide: in cities, mutinies; in countries, discord; in palaces, treason […] We have seen the best of our time, machinations, hollowness, treachery and all ruinous disorders follow us disquietly to our graves (I.ii.103-112).

[256] Leonard Tennenhouse contends that the original purpose of *King Lear* was the exemplary torture of a royal miscreant, who by splitting his Kingdom and renouncing his divinely sanctioned position, has violated the taboos that safeguard the mystique of sovereignty. See his *Power on Display* (London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 102-146. I return to Christian ideas of natural and cosmic order in Chapter Three, pp. 134-141.

What the speech reveals is the profound intertwining of the natural and cosmological hierarchy with the social and political hierarchy. The 'late eclipses' Gloucester worries over portend the collapse (the 'falling off') of traditional society, the subversion of its natural and divine 'bonds', which degenerate from order into 'discord': 'We have seen the best of our time'.[257]

Gloucester is reacting to the 'plot' against his life formed by his 'legitimate' (I.ii.19) son, Edgar – a plot, in reality, cooked-up by his bastard 'whoreson' (I.i.22) Edmund, who has designs on the 'land' he cannot inherit. The plot, as far as Gloucester is concerned, is testament to the collapse of hierarchical relationships and civilized – or as Lear imagines it, 'sophisticated' (III.iv.104) – social life. This unleashes a self-interested, individualist ethos which propagates 'hollowness' and 'treachery'. The collapse of all social values seemingly presaged by late eclipses raises the prospect of a *bellum omnium contra omnes* – a war of all against all where, as the Duke of Albany states, 'humanity must perforce prey on itself / Like monsters of the deep' (IV.ii.50-51) in a state of appetitive *homo homini lupus*. It is the same nightmare Thomas Hobbes would go on to imagine: humanity in a cruelly anarchic 'State of Nature', from which traditional social authority and constraint is the only possible salvation.[258]

Over the action of the play, however, the idea that disaster results from the violation of a providentially sanctioned world order is transformed into something even more pessimistic – that catastrophe simply *is* the 'lot' of a degraded humanity, which is prey to

[257] The word 'disaster' is etymologically related to a calamity brought about by the evil influence of a star or planet. 'disaster, n.'. *OED Online*. Accessed April 26, 2018. http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/53561?rskey=0OAKY4&result=1. See also Alexandra Walsham, 'Deciphering Divine Wrath and Displaying Godly Sorrow: Providentialism and Emotion in Early Modern England', *Disaster, Death and the Emotions in the Shadow of the Apocalypse, 1400-1700*, ed. Jennifer Spinks and Charles Zika (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. 23.

[258] For a recent interpretation of the intersection between Hobbes and Shakespearean drama see Andrew Moore, *Shakespeare between Machiavelli and Hobbes: Dead Body Politics* (New York and London: Lexington Books, 2016), pp. 63-82.

arbitrary forces beyond its ken. Perhaps ironically, it is Gloucester who, after being viciously blinded by Cornwall and Regan, provides the most trenchant statement of that despair, when he insists that 'As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods / They kill us for their sport' (IV.i.38-39). Lear provides a similarly nihilistic image of that condition, which is both tragic and absurdly comic: 'When we are born, we cry that we are come / To this great stage of fools' (IV.vi.178-179).

This nihilistic interpretation of catastrophe leaves little room for meaningful human agency. Lear preaches 'patience' (IV.vi.174) to Gloucester in the face of tragi-comic absurdity – a reaction echoed by Edgar when he tells Gloucester that 'Men must endure' (V.ii.9) as, finally, 'Ripeness is all' (V.ii.11).[259] Such responses would have it that resigned endurance is the only response to an inherently catastrophic world, which, far from an immanently meaningful cosmological order, appears as a torturously 'tough rack' (V.iii.313) on which human subjects are stretched, broken to pieces and finally destroyed – for no reason whatsoever.

Neither interpretation of catastrophe is, however, adequate. On the one hand, the conservative reading exculpates a hierarchical order that itself is obviously liable to produce disaster. Lear may act rashly in dividing the Kingdom – but his rashness is, as Goneril and Regan so piercingly observe, 'a long-engrafted condition' (I.i.298). His rashness has been socially and culturally 'conditioned' by the 'long-engrafted' (or artificially implanted) autocratic power and authority that devolves to the King.[260] Perhaps more urgently, as the play progresses Lear also begins to see that hierarchical 'authority' (IV.vi.154) *as such* is politically suspect and socially unjust. Not only is the 'great image of authority' that a 'dog' is 'obeyed in office' (IV.vi.154-155), but – as Lear perceives – 'Through tattered clothes great

[259] This is the view which, as I will show in Chapter Four, Edward Bond is most concerned to contest.
[260] The word engrafting relates to horticulture and the artificial grafting of plants.

vices do appear; / Robes and furred gowns hide all' (IV.vi.160-161). Such sentiments leave little room for the backward-looking, conservative nostalgia evinced by Kent and Gloucester. On the other hand, the nihilistic interpretation provided by Gloucester (and, at other times, by Lear and others) would serve to release humanity from any responsibility whatsoever for disaster, implying as it does that people are at the mercy of implacable forces beyond intervention. Both Lear and Gloucester are culpable for the disaster that overtakes the Kingdom: Lear for dividing the Kingdom and trusting to the sincerity of Goneril and Regan, disinheriting Cordelia and banishing Kent, and Gloucester for his own utterly insensitive treatment of Edmund, treatment itself authorized by the system of primogeniture and its 'order of law' (I.i.18).[261]

But while the traditionalist and nihilistic interpretations are both flawed, neither should be dismissed outright. Both frame the emergence and experience of new, and potentially catastrophic, 'dispositions' (IV.ii.32): capitalist self-interest and humanist reason – those irruptive social and historical phenomena commonly understood as modernity. Through the 'images of revolt and flying off' (II.iv.279) that suffuse the play, *King Lear* conveys the 'great decay' (V.iii.296) of a mystified hierarchical system as it gives way to a disenchanted, capitalist worldview, a rapacious ideology that, once set in motion, seems divorced from human control. I turn in the next section to an analysis of Edmund, who embodies the newly emergent, modern view of the world and its dialectical reversal into reifying domination.

[261] Gloucester says that the 'whoreson' – by which he means son of a whore – 'must be acknowledged' (I.i.23-24). Gloucester is less than discreet when talking about Edmund and his mother: he even boasts to Kent about his sexual 'sport' (I.i.22) in front of Edmund.

2.1. The Catastrophe of Modernity in *King Lear*

It is often observed that *King Lear* depicts a historical – and, indeed, a generational – transition, from a pre-modern (feudal) to a more recognizably modern (capitalist) society.[262] The 'old' order is based on hierarchy, embodied by the figure of the sovereign, and is characterized by superstitious beliefs, most obviously in the gods/God and other non-human entities that determine human life (whether beneficently or cruelly). The 'new' order is less hierarchical and more individualistic, with a new set of scientific, rational beliefs that overturn the more superstitious ideas inherited from the past. The old order is – for the most part – taken to be represented by the older characters – Lear, Gloucester, Kent and, though in a perhaps more complicated way, the Fool.[263] The new order, on the other hand, is represented by a younger and more hard-hearted generation – Goneril, Regan, Cornwall and Edmund.

Using the dialectical reading of modernity provided by Adorno, the reactionary interpretations of catastrophe provided by Kent and Gloucester evince a pre-modern, mythical worldview, where a hierarchical society is understood to manifest a deific order – an order Lear refers to as the 'mystery of things' (V.iii.16). But the play also depicts a modern, disenchanted worldview that interrogates the type of mystified thinking other characters cleave to in the midst of catastrophe. This iconoclastic worldview is epitomized by Edmund.

During his reading of astrological signs, Gloucester contests the 'wisdom of Nature' – by which he means the type of scientific 'reason' (I.ii.103-104) that would seek to provide a

[262] See in particular Paul Delaney, '*King Lear* and the Decline of Feudalism', *Materialist Shakespeare: A History*, ed. Ivo Kamps (London: Verso 1995), pp. 20-38.
[263] I return to the ambiguous figure of the Fool in Chapter Six, pp. 272-273.

more 'naturalistic' interpretation of the material world and its mysteries. This is precisely the type of worldview that Edmund embraces when he gleefully ironizes his credulous father:

> This is the excellent foppery of the world that when we are sick in fortune—often the surfeit of our own behaviour—we make guilty of our disasters the sun, the moon, and the stars, as if we were villains by necessity, fools by heavenly compulsion, knaves, thieves, and treachers by spherical predominance, drunkards, liars, and adulterers by an enforced obedience of planetary influence, and all that we are evil in by a divine thrusting-on. (I.ii.118-119)

Far from being providentially ordained, the disasters which trouble the world have, as Edmund perceives it, a human cause.[264] This is a humanistic shift in perception. Where, for Gloucester, humanity is dominated ('compelled') by deterministic forces ('spherical dominance') beyond its control, for Edmund the individual subject is free to act on the world as he or she wishes (which also comprises the choice to be 'evil'). This turns the world and the various phenomena that constitute it into an instrument of the willed purposes – or as Edmund calls it, 'business' (I.ii.180) – of a rationally interposing and self-fashioning human subject. Edmund boasts that, for him, everything is 'meet that I can fashion fit' (I.ii.182). Edmund, armed as he is with a rational understanding of the world, is able to 'fashion', to frame, the world and himself in a way that suits (is 'meet' with) his own ends.[265] He is, quite simply, free.

[264] Edmund also refers to the 'goatish disposition' (I.ii.127) of humanity, which may recall the Greek meaning of tragedy – 'goat song'. Edmund may be saying that the 'tragic' (catastrophic) disposition of humanity is largely of its own making.

[265] Some cultural historicist critics have revised the modern, humanist subject-object split when it comes to pre-Cartesian early modern period texts. See in particular Gail Kern Paster, '"Minded Like the Weather": The Tragic Body and Its Passions', *The Oxford Handbook to Shakespearean Tragedy*, ed. Michael Neill, David Schalkwyk (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 202-217. Paster contends that, in *King Lear*, the subject is corporeally embedded in a mutually interpenetrating cosmological order. Paster, however, has to more or less dismiss Edmund, who questions the sort of cosmological order his (ignorant) father posits. My own conviction is that the play *does* open out a more modern conception of the subject-object split.

Reason allows Edmund to overturn the belief that humanity is prey to divine forces beyond its understanding. But he also pours scorn on the hierarchical society which that cosmological order is supposed to sanction. For him, traditional social and political authority is nothing *but* convention. In the soliloquy that opens Act One, Scene Two of the play, he declares:

> Thou, Nature, art my goddess; to thy law
> My services are bound. Wherefore should I
> Stand in the plague of custom, and permit
> The curiosity of nations to deprive me,
> For that I am some twelve or fourteen moon-shines
> Lag of a brother? Why bastard? wherefore base?
> When my dimensions are as well compact,
> My mind as generous, and my shape as true,
> As honest madam's issue? Why brand they us
> With base? with baseness? bastardy? base, base?
> Who, in the lusty stealth of nature, take
> More composition and fierce quality
> Than doth, within a dull, stale, tired bed,
> Go to the creating a whole tribe of fops,
> Got 'tween asleep and wake? Well, then,
> Legitimate Edgar, I must have your land:
> Our father's love is to the bastard Edmund
> As to the legitimate: fine word, legitimate!
> Well, my legitimate, if this letter speed,
> And my invention thrive, Edmund the base
> Shall top the legitimate. I grow; I prosper:
> Now, gods, stand up for bastards! (I.ii.1-22)

Edmund provides a deeply sceptical, rationalistic critique of the 'plague of custom' and the 'curiosity of nations', customs which mean that he – as an illegitimate bastard – is marginalized from civilized social discourse and barred from inheriting land. His is a form of (as he calls it) 'base' life – life that is lived outside of received social and political legitimacy and meaning. His response – in an ironic, even quasi-satirical twist – is to make *all* human life 'base'.

Edmund, in his quest for self-promotion, turns the customary order into nothing more than an instrument of his own designs. His falsified 'conspiracy' manipulates the disavowed intergenerational tensions that are produced by the traditional system of primogeniture. This desacralizing instrumentalization of the social order also means the desacralizing instrumentalization of the subjects who make it up. Through his demystification of superstitious beliefs and traditional social forms, Edmund turns other subjects into mere objects – most obviously his father and brother, who become means to his ends. Without the legitimacy conferred by the social order, potentially any and all subjects are 'base' – are not afforded the authority and even protection that a 'lawful' place in the hierarchy should underwrite. When he ironically calls upon the gods to stand up for bastards, Edmund is not only inverting the usual order by claiming grace for those outside the social and cosmic hierarchy; he is also saying that now, with everybody reduced to the illegitimate status of baseness, all subjects are 'bastards' and will need divine favour – which he knows not to exist. Edmund, as part of his humanistic perspective on the world, ends up delegitimizing all human life. His rationalist critique reveals the way in which the 'sovereignty, knowledge and reason' (I.iv.223-224) purposed with freeing the subject from traditional authority can degenerate into 'slaughter' (I.iv.312). He embodies the dialectic of Enlightenment.

It is worth pausing over the word 'business' and its relationship to the universalization of base life. Edmund is not only depicted in the play as a proto-humanist figure; he is also a nascent, self-interestedly acquisitive capitalist, who seeks for his own advancement in the world (typified by his use of the word 'prosper'). There is an obvious relation in *King Lear* between humanist reason and the commodity-form. By making all life base, Edmund collapses any and all qualitative distinctions between individuals, creating a

world of total fungibility that brings about the transvaluation of all values ('Fine word, legitimate', as Edmund says – but perhaps only a word and open to transformation). This makes the subject (potentially) interchangeable – a commodity with no obvious inherent value or meaning. Through his rationalistic deconstruction of hierarchy, Edmund plans – quite literally – to exchange himself for his brother, whose own life is (as far as Edmund is concerned) no more sacrosanct than his own form of base ('illegitimate') life. The rhetoric of disenchantment and the rhetoric of reification are symbiotic in *King Lear*: proto-humanist rationality and proto-capitalist commodity fetishism cannot be neatly parcelled out in the play.

What the speech also reveals is the ideational and rhetorical tie between scientific reason and the natural world it is meant properly to interpret and dominate. Edmund, in a statement that might seem to contradict his status as a rational humanist, cites 'Nature' as his 'goddess', proclaiming the 'lusty stealth of nature' over and above the type of civilized cultural relations epitomized by 'lawful' primogeniture. This is deeply paradoxical. Edmund uses his reason to undermine the 'naturalness' of the prevailing social and political order, part of his bid for freedom. But his reason ends up creating conditions that once again take on the semblance of 'nature' and to which subjects must subscribe for the sake of self-preservation. Edmund thinks that dog-eat-dog competition is simply the way of the world – 'natural'. This, however, is not the natural state of humanity at all; it is a state produced by the new order of capitalist reason Edmund represents. The freedom that reason is supposed to provide ultimately relapses into a new form of heteronomy, into conditions that take on the appearance of 'a law of nature'.[266] This reversal sheds light on the oft-repeated apostrophes to 'Nature' (and the 'gods') in the play. The appeals to various inhuman

[266] Deborah Cook, *Adorno on Nature* (London: Routledge, 2014), p. 72.

agencies in *King Lear* reveal the way in which reason takes on an autotelic life of its own, apparently beyond the control of the individuals it is supposed to serve. The representation of 'Nature' as a detached, ravening system reflects the reign of capitalist reason run wild: images of beast-like life evince, not humanity in 'a state of Nature', but its brutalization by a reified rationality.

The notion that reason brutalizes the subject – and produces inhumanly cold and rapacious individuals – is particularly relevant to Goneril and Regan, who are variously described as 'Tigers' (IV.ii.41) and 'wolvish' (I.iv.300). These epithets, and the absence of any characterization that may offer some orientation in telling 'one o'the pairings' (I.iv.179) from the other, has been critiqued as misogynistic – a misogyny that is most obvious when Lear talks of the vagina as a place of 'hell' and 'darkness' (IV.vi.123-124).[267] But the seeming absence of any distinction between Goneril and Regan may also be read as symptomatic of the type of depersonalized subjects produced by 'a reified power'.[268] Goneril and Regan are depicted as typical of the depersonalized 'automaton-like subjects' to be found 'in the new system of nothing'.[269] It would also be wrong to solely identify that 'new system' with Goneril and Regan (or even Edmund and Cornwall): its ascendancy is apparent even in the opening scene of the play, where the abstract quality of love is turned into the quantity of land to be (prematurely) inherited by the next generation. During the division of the Kingdom, Lear describes the resistant Cordelia as 'untender' (I.i.107). He means that she is emotionally hard-hearted (quite literally, un-tenderized); but the word 'tender' also signifies her refusal to engage in the system of exchange (tendering) that Lear institutes through the love-test. Lear tells the King of France that, as a result, 'her price is fallen' (I.i.198). The

[267] I return to the misogyny of Lear, and the response of both feminist critics and appropriators, in Chapter Three, p. 165 and pp. 165-168.
[268] *Shakespeare's Universal Wolf*, p. 154.
[269] Ibid, p. 155.

emergent dispensations represented in *King Lear* cannot be isolated to a single, 'immoral' character, even if Edmund is the most eloquent rhetorician of base life found in the play. The historical and ideological shift the play depicts ultimately debases the whole of society.[270]

Foakes observes that, of all the plays by Shakespeare, *King Lear* speaks most directly to a late capitalist culture that appears to place ultimate ideological importance on 'individual expression and fulfilment, on the freedom and autonomy of the individual' and its actual material 'diminution of the subject to a nobody', another 'entry in the systems of the government, banks, police and advertisers, marking the social, economic and political insignificance of each person in a mass society'.[271] *King Lear*, as Foakes understands it, represents nothing short of a prophetic indictment of a (still developing) culture of abstract capitalist rationality. It is a boldly stated argument – but Foakes does not pursue it as far as he might. By portraying the total reification of the subject, *King Lear* can also be seen to portend the 'future strife' (I.i.43) and 'the image and horror' (I.ii.173) of the concentration camps, where human life truly did become vanishingly 'base'. What Edmund (and other characters) institute through the reduction of the human being to a form of base life is a world of bio-politics, as Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben call it.[272] This names a social system where human life is stripped of its cultural legitimacy and the subject reduced to a bare organism (the 'poor, bare forked animal'). When he searches for a paradigm of a bio-

[270] This vision of wholesale, sweeping social and historical change is reflected in the use of a subplot, which extends the action beyond a single family. It is worth noting *King Lear* is the only Shakespearean tragedy with a subplot.
[271] *Hamlet Versus Lear*, p. 213
[272] See Giorgi Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel-Heller Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998). I return to the notion of bare life, and analyse its limits for a study of tragedy, in Chapter Five, pp. 211-213.

political regime, Agamben alights on the concentration camps, which he calls 'the *nomos* of the modern'.[273]

But while *King Lear* depicts the often disastrous outcomes of modern rationality, it also presents catastrophe as potentially *generative* – a paradox captured in the storm-flung imagery of Act Three, when Lear calls out for the end of the world, desiring that the storm 'crack' the 'moulds' through which 'Nature' produces and reproduces its many forms, so that 'all germens spill at once' (III.ii.8). It is an image of catastrophic destruction that, simultaneously, raises the prospect of anarchic (re)creation, which takes place without being determined by the forms and shapes ('moulds') that have obtained before. The play comprises the diverse meanings of catastrophe found in Critical Theory: modernity as a form of permanent catastrophe, a 'general woe' (V.iii.318) which reduces human subjects to mere ciphers, to be disposed of at will; and catastrophe as potentially emancipatory, a disastrous upheaval that 'blasts' the subject from prevailing social and political systems and forces. I now analyse the relationship between catastrophe and subjectivity in *King Lear* by considering Edgar, who begins the play typical of the non-descript 'tribe of fops' (I.ii.14) Edmund rails against, but in catastrophe also discovers new forms of subjectivity – and, indeed, freedom.

3. Catastrophe and Subjectivity in *King Lear*

Despite the violent terrors it represents, *King Lear* also evinces a paradoxical 'openness to change and catastrophe'.[274] It is in moments of disruption and crisis – in moments when, to

[273] *Homo Sacer*, pp. 166-180.
[274] Steven Mentz,' Strange Weather in *King Lear*', *Shakespeare* 6:2 (2010), p. 147.

quote Lear, 'We are not ourselves' (II.iv.296) – where new possibilities for subjective experience and autonomy might be actualized. This is typified by Edgar. When, in Act Two, Edgar is exiled and violently shorn from his inherited social and political identity, he is forced to reinvent himself as the raving Bedlamite Poor Tom, an identity that cedes to a host of others as Edgar embodies a whole variety of other 'selves' over the action of the play.[275] Hugh Grady makes the case that Edgar is a 'consummate figure of human indeterminacy and potential', who confirms through his self-transformations the open-ended 'possibility of human change', defying absorption into 'ready-made signifying systems'.[276] Edgar does not necessarily apostrophize against the social and political totality or even form a coherent critique of the type of all-consuming, modern *ratio* which arises in the play. But his protean transformations testify to the way in which subjectivity *implicitly* emerges as a space of resistance to a reifying modernity. Edgar retains a form of autonomy, of freedom from totality.

The importance of Edgar and his non-identical subjectivity is underscored by the Quarto version of the play, which, after advertising the 'True Chronicle History of the life and death of King Lear' also features 'the unfortunate life of Edgar, son and heir to the Earl of Gloucester and his sullen and assumed humour of Tom of Bedlam'.[277] The words 'assumed' and 'sullen' are significant. The word 'assumed' obviously means more than Edgar simply 'pretends' to be Poor Tom: the Latin *adsumere*, meaning 'to take to oneself', implies that Edgar takes another identity to himself in his time of crisis; while the word 'sullen' is, as the *OED* notes, derived from the Anglo-Norman 'solein' or 'solain', from the Latin *solitaneus*,

[275] For more on Edgar see Chapter Five, especially pp. 205-215.
[276] *Shakespeare's Universal Wolf*, p. 178, p. 168 and p. 158.
[277] Quoted in 'Introduction' to the *Parallel Text Edition*, p. 4. I have modernized spelling.

meaning 'sole, solitary, alone', or 'singular'.[278] By taking up the figure of Poor Tom, Edgar testifies to the tragic non-identity of subject (the one) and society (the many) in *King Lear*. Edgar takes it upon himself to become a singular figure in – and non-identical with – his social world.

Grady develops an interpretation of modernity that is informed by Habermas and the idea of consensual intersubjectivity.[279] He makes the case that modern, reifying 'systems' in the play should be set against the resistance provided by customary 'lifeworlds' that have yet to be fully incorporated into a dominative social totality.[280] Where systems tend to reify the subject, lifeworlds foster the possibility of mutual understanding.[281] Grady is drawn to a subaltern, plebeian culture of communal solidarity that he finds in the play – a world Edgar comes to be identified with in his (initial) transformation into the impoverished Poor Tom. Grady picks out the servant who tries to stop Cornwall from blinding Gloucester – 'A peasant stand up thus?' (III.vii.79) is the incredulous response given by Regan, while Cornwall orders the body of the dead 'slave' to be cast on a 'dunghill' (III.vii.95-96); the servants who, in the Quarto, tend to the blinded Gloucester – bringing 'flax and the whites of eggs / To apply to his bleeding face' (III.vii.105-106); and the Old Man who leads Gloucester to safety and brings him 'the best 'pparel that I have' (IV.i.52). The most stunning political identification with a subaltern lifeworld, however, takes place in the storm scenes

[278] 'assume, v.'. *OED Online*. Accessed 30 May 2017. http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/12036?redirectedFrom=assume; 'sullen, adj., adv., and n.'. *OED Online*. Accessed 30 May 2017. http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/193784?rskey=PoH4SH&result=1

[279] My own take on intersubjectivity in Shakespeare is far less consensual than that proposed by Grady, via Habermas. See my 'Face-off: defacement, ethics and the "neighbour" in *The Comedy of Errors*', *Textual Practice* (epub, 2017), pp. 1-20. For more on early modern intersubjectivity and ideas around mutuality (and its lack) see Eric Langley, *Narcissism and Suicide in Shakespeare and His Contemporaries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

[280] *Shakespeare's Universal Wolf*, p. 22.

[281] Ibid, p. 138.

of Act Three, when Lear makes his famous 'prayer' to the destitute masses he has ignored during his reign:

> Poor naked wretches, whereso'er you are,
> That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,
> How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,
> Your looped and windowed raggedness, defend you
> From seasons such as these? Oh, I have ta'en
> Too little care of this! Take physic, pomp.
> Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
> That thou mayst shake the superflux to them. (III.iv.28-35)

Through his own suffering, Lear comes to learn about and empathize with the suffering of others. He will even attempt to assert his common identity with 'unaccommodated man' by removing his royal ermine – 'Off, off, you lendings: come unbutton' (III.iv.105-106). Lear postulates a new form of sociality where the 'superflux' – the surplus wealth and property owned by the ruling-classes – comes to be distributed to the poor, overturning the social injustice that obtains in the Kingdom. This more consensual relationship between self and others means that Grady perceives 'utopian alternatives to reification within the debris of *King Lear*'.[282] There is, as Grady understands it, hope that self and society can synthesize in *King Lear*.

This collective unity represents for Grady the main agent of resistance against the impersonal power of the new regimes of modernity. This interpretation recalls previous humanist, Christian and indeed Marxist readings of *King Lear*, which I analyse more fully in Chapter Three. These readings of the play similarly concentrate on the storm scenes and the idea that Lear undergoes some form of moral (and indeed social) redemption. Christian readings of the play have it that Lear is finally redeemed through his suffering and discovers

[282] Ibid, p. 56

the value of humility and charity; humanist readings plot a progressive narrative action whereby Lear is disabused of his mythical conviction in his divine status and discovers himself as fleshy and mortal, allowing for his wider insight into the ills of his society; and Marxist readings of the play similarly prioritize the moral progress made by Lear in his new vision for an egalitarian society, where 'distribution should undo excess / And each man have enough' (IV.i.73-74).

This is where a Catastrophist interpretation of *King Lear* parts ways with Grady. I do not deny the play depicts powerful moments of empathy and solidarity that contradict the cruelly reductive, depersonalizing form of modern reasoning implemented by (and, indeed, through) Edmund, Cornwall, Goneril and Regan. Nor do I contest the political aspirations which underpin the desire to find utopian alternatives to a totalizing autotelic *ratio*. The problem with the type of reading pursued by Grady is that, by insisting on the possibility of reconciliation between subject and society, he is guilty of ignoring the *form* of the play, its violation of aesthetic closure. The reconciliatory movement Grady identifies in *King Lear* is obviously dashed at the end of the drama, which denies the sort of *telos* he wants to trace. The prospect of some sort of sort of dialectical synthesis of subject and society seems remote by the end of a play which, as Ewan Fernie writes, insists on a 'tearing tension' between 'the gored state' (V.iii.319) and an 'equally wounded and deformed subject'.[283] Subject and society, as Fernie observes, remain in an unreconciled state at the close of *King Lear*.

I will now provide an analysis of the fragmentary, catastrophic form of *King Lear*, which Grady neglects. I want particularly to concentrate on its final moments, where an

[283] Ewan Fernie, *Shakespeare for Freedom: Why the Plays Matter* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 214

irruptive violation of closure means that the play 'cannot be bordered certain in itself' (IV.ii.42).

4. 'Is this the promised end?' *King Lear* and the Aesthetics of Catastrophe

My analysis of *King Lear* so far has tended to use the word 'catastrophe' as more or less equivalent with 'disaster', so that catastrophe can be understood as 'terrible event'. This was not necessarily the dominant meaning of the word in the early modern era, however, as 'catastrophe' did not begin to be more readily identified with 'sudden disaster' (or 'an event producing a subversion of order or system') until toward the end of the seventeenth century.[284] When *King Lear* was composed, catastrophe was a term related to dramatic form.

For early moderns, catastrophe meant the resolution of a play or simply the end or conclusion of something more generally, as evidenced by Thomas Cooper in his 1565 *Thesaurus Linguae Romanae et Britannicae*, where catastrophe is defined as 'the latter end of a comedie, the ende of any thing', a definition reflecting the Greek καταστροφή, which connotes 'overturning, sudden turn, conclusion'.[285] Samuel Johnson (whose own famed reaction to the death of Cordelia – and Lear – will be touched upon again) similarly defines catastrophe as the 'change or revolution which produces the conclusion or final event of a dramatic piece' – though his definition conspicuously widens the potential generic scope of

[284] 'catastrophe, n.'. *OED Online*.
[285] Quoted in Franz Mauelshagen, 'Defining Catastrophe', *Catastrophe and Catharsis: Perspectives on Disasters and Redemption*, ed. Katharina Gerstenberger and Tanja Nusser (Rochester NY: Camden House, 2015), p. 174.

catastrophe beyond comedy to any 'dramatic piece', so that catastrophe might apply beyond comedy.[286]

The early modern usage derived largely from the reception of the writings of fourth century Roman rhetorician, Aelius Donatus, via his commentary on Terence and his comedy *The Andrian*, published in the fifteenth century.[287] Donatus separated drama into the *prologue*, followed by the *protasis* ('the beginning of the drama'), the *epitasis* ('the development and enlargement of the conflict and, as it were, the knot of all error') and, finally, *catastrophe* – 'the resolution of the events' in comedy 'so that there is a happy ending which is made evident to all by the recognition of past events'.[288] By tying up the *epitasis* in a moment of recognition – or *anagnorisis* – catastrophe strongly denotes a resolution of conflict. The catastrophe, as a sudden transformation, may for Donatus be an event, but it may equally be a character that intervenes from 'outside' of the plot to resolve the conflicts which the action of the play has generated – a sort of non-narrative *persona ex machina*.[289]

Leo Salingar makes the case that, in his reading of Terentian comedy, Donatus shifts an Aristotelian interpretation of tragic form onto comic drama.[290] Not unlike Aristotle, Donatus stresses the formal necessity of resolving conflicts and confusions – a reading of tragic form which, as I set out previously, is critical for Hegel and his conception of dialectics. While early modern thought tends to classify catastrophe in terms of comic drama, the

[286] 'catastrophe, n.'. *OED Online*.
[287] For the reception of Donatus in Renaissance Europe and England, see Howard B. Norland, *Drama in Early Tudor Britain, 1485-1558* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), pp. 65-83.
[288] Quoted in David Galbraith, 'Theories of Comedy', *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespearean Comedy*, ed. Alexander Leggatt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 9.
[289] See also Alan Rosen, *Dislocating the End: Climax, Closure, and the Invention of Genre* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2001), p. 8.
[290] Leo Salingar, *Shakespeare and the Traditions of Comedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), p. 84.

word, particularly insofar as it implies formal resolution, might be understood to transcend genre.[291]

Kenneth Muir has made the case that catastrophe is a word Shakespeare derived from the John Florio translation of Montaigne, where catastrophe is understood in Donathusian terms as 'the conclusion or shutting up of a comedie or any thing else'.[292] On the very rare occasions when he uses the word, Shakespeare tends to do so in an ironic vein, as typified by *Henry IV Part Two*, where Page tells Mistress Quickly that he will 'tickle' her 'catastrophe' (II.i.58) – by which he means beat her backside (her 'end', her 'catastrophe'). The same comic-ironic tone appears in *King Lear*, when Edmund, in Act One, Scene Two of the play, uses the word (which, *pace* Donatus, he relates to comic form) to describe the entrance of his hapless brother, against whom, moments previously, he had been plotting. 'And pat he comes', Edmund exultantly states, 'like the catastrophe of the old comedy' (I.ii.134). The superficial point is that Edgar, like the character of the catastrophe in both Old and New Comedy, has arrived right on 'cue' (I.ii.135). This implies the total authorial control Edmund seems to have over (even 'chance') events. He has trapped his brother in a pre-scripted plot of his devising and Edgar arrives, *ex machina*, on cue and on time.

But the allusion also self-reflexively ironizes the artificiality of the catastrophe as a formal device – and indeed the overdetermined conventions of dramatic resolution more widely. It is telling that *King Lear* is the only tragedy where there is a citation of the catastrophe. The allusion to dramatic theory, as Alan Rosen has convincingly shown, invites attention to the wider violation of formal closure in *King Lear*, its (as Rosen calls it) anti-

[291] See also T.W. Baldwin, *Shakespeare's Five-Act Structure: Shakespeare's Early Plays on the Background of Renaissance Theories of Five Act Structure from 1470* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1947), pp. 252-311.
[292] Kenneth Muir, *Shakespeare's Sources: Comedies and Tragedies* (Oxford: Routledge, 2005), p. 161.

formalist 'shape'.[293] The catastrophe, conventionally supposed to take place at the end of a drama and resolve its outstanding conflicts and confusions, makes a 'displaced' appearance in Act One of *King Lear* – almost as if the rest of the play were a grotesquely elongated catastrophe. Through its untimely allusion to the catastrophe and early modern dramatic theory, *King Lear* self-consciously reveals its own violent transgression of 'due resolution' (I.ii.100).

Perhaps the most astute interpreter of the anti-form of *King Lear* is Stephen Booth, who provides a particularly insightful reading of the way in which *King Lear* constantly transgresses its own formal limits.[294] Booth analyses a range of closure-defying techniques. These range from the way Shakespeare draws repetitively on a constellation of words – 'fool', 'kind', 'nature', 'fate', 'nothing', 'something' and so on – but with diverse possible meanings, so that repeated words are constantly and 'arbitrarily redefined'.[295] This serves to forestall any final 'meaning' – any closure. The same can be said for the way Shakespeare uses words that are 'densely resistant to verse articulation' – 'tender-hefted' (II.iv.166), 'sea-monster' (I.iv.258), 'sepulchring' (II.iv.127), 'head-lugged' (IV.ii.42) – which adumbrate the 'operation of some dangerously unregulable power, something not quite contained by the procedures that seek to organize it'.[296] The failure of formal closure also relates to the representation of space and time, where the main characters spend most of the play wandering about in (literally) unbounded, outside spaces, without any obvious 'conclusive' destination. This dilates the onward progress of time itself, which, far from obeying

[293] *Dislocating the End*, pp. 6-26.
[294] Stephen Booth, *King Lear, Macbeth, Indefinition and Tragedy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983). Rabey was taught by Stephen Booth while he was working on *Indefinition and Tragedy*. The way in which Rabey understands Catastrophism owes, I believe, a debt to Booth.
[295] *King Lear, Macbeth, Indefinition and Tragedy*, p. 40
[296] Michael Goldman, '*King Lear*: Acting and Feeling', *On King Lear*, ed. Laurence Danson (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), p. 33.

conventional linearity towards a teleological end, is often suspended. It also relates to the representation of death in the play, where characters that, to all intents and purposes, seem 'dead' might also and at the same time be 'alive' – an idea I return to when I analyse *Blasted*.

This violation of formal limits pertains most obviously to the end of the play, which, as I set out in the Introduction, subverts the usual Lear/Leir narrative. Over the action of Act Five, the play seems to be resolving the 'complications' that characterize the *epitasis* and working toward the catastrophe, 'the resolution of the events' and 'recognition'. The plot against the life of Albany is revealed (V.iii.71-90); Edgar defeats Edmund in single combat (V.iii.160-171); the sisters who have vied for marriage to Edmund both die, Goneril killing Regan with poison (V.iii.105) before she kills herself (V.iii.222-225); and Albany and Edgar both give moralizing speeches that are typical of the end of a play – of the catastrophe – with Edgar stating 'the gods are just and of our pleasant vices / Make instruments to plague us' (V.iii.168-169).

But while the play seems to be enacting a formalized 'catastrophe' that will, by the end of the action, have 'concluded all' (IV.vii.42), it soon becomes apparent that, as Booth contends, *King Lear* only appears to be formally concluding 'while its substance is still in urgent progress'.[297] The precise whereabouts of Lear and Cordelia towards the end of the play have been overlooked: 'Great things of us forgot!' (V.iii.235). No sooner has Edmund repented and revealed his 'commission' (V.iii.250) on the life of Lear and Cordelia than Lear re-enters the stage – carrying the dead Cordelia in his arms: 'Howl, howl, howl, howl!' (V.iii.255). Booth writes that, in having both Lear and Cordelia finally die, Shakespeare presents the 'final action of the play *after* the story is over', so that *King Lear* transgresses

[297] *King Lear, Macbeth, Indefinition and Tragedy*, p. 22.

the 'generic promise inherent in its story'.[298] *King Lear* outstrips the formal containment it seems to be observing, creating a sense of uncertainty and irresolution at precisely the moment it should be providing closure. The play has violently subverted its own catastrophe.

This uncertainty and irresolution spills over into the speeches that take place 'after' the deaths of Lear and Cordelia. I quote from the Folio version of the play – for reasons I will develop shortly:

Lear: No, no, no life.
Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life
And thou no breath at all? Thou'lt come no more.
Never, never, never, never, never.
Pray you, undo this button. Thank you, sir.
Do you see this? Look on her, look, her lips.
Look there, look there. *He dies*.
Edgar: He faints. My lord, my lord.
Kent: Break, heart, I prithee break.
Edgar: Look up, my lord.
Kent: Vex not his ghost. O let him pass. He hates him
That would upon the rack of this tough world
Stretch him out longer.
Edgar: He is gone indeed.
The wonder is he hath endured so long.
He but usurped his life.
Albany: Bear them hence. Our present business
Is general woe. [*To Edgar and Kent*] Friends of my soul, you twain
Rule in this realm, and the gored state sustain.
Kent: I have a journey, sir, shortly to go.
My master calls me, I must not say no.
Edgar: The weight of this sad time we must obey,
Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.
The oldest hath borne most; we that are young
Shall never see so much, nor live so long.

Exeunt with a dead march.[299]

[298] Ibid, p. 28.
[299] Quoted in *King Lear: A Parallel Text Edition*, p. 339.

The final action and speeches of *King Lear* are deeply ambiguous, from the final state of Lear (rapturous about the seeming survival of Cordelia, or completely deluded?) to the precise intentions of Kent (does 'shortly to go' indicate his suicide, or simply that he will shortly die of old age?). Perhaps most uncertain, however, is the political situation, which remains unresolved. Albany is the socially superior of the survivors and should be the obvious heir to the throne; however, he instantly passes the crown to Kent and Edgar, as he had previously tried to 'resign' it back to the 'old majesty' (V.iii.298): Lear. Kent, however, implies that he must follow Lear into death, meaning that the crown (if the resignation of the state to Kent and Edgar 'twain' still obtains after Kent has stated his apparent intention to commit suicide) seemingly falls to Edgar. But his ascension to the place of King is not stated unambiguously**:** Edgar (or in the Quarto, Albany) is provided with a truly obscure quatrain which leaves both the political situation and the play disconcertingly 'unfixed'.[300] The final speech offers 'no strongly felt reassurance that the world is now once more firmly the right-way-up'.[301]

The ending of *King Lear* departs from the other tragedies of Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth* and *Othello*, which portray the imminent reinstitution of the social and political order. Hamlet dies importuning Horatio to tell his 'story' (V.ii.328) and formally gives his 'dying voice' (V.ii.335) to 'th'election' (V.ii.334) of the questing and 'warlike' (V.ii.330) Fortinbras, whose newfound status as *de facto* King of Denmark is signalled by his delivery of the final speech of the play, where he commands that the body of Hamlet be borne 'like a soldier to the stage' (V.ii375). The same formality – and the restoration of a broken social

[300] *King Lear, Macbeth, Indefinition and Tragedy*, p. 65.
[301] Margot Heinemann, 'Demystifying the Mystery of State: *King Lear* and the World Turned Upside Down', *Shakespeare Survey, Volume 44: Shakespeare and Politics*, ed. Stanley Wells (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 80. Heinemann writes that, in *King Lear*, 'no single dominant ideology or consensus is capable of holding the society together' (p.76).

and political order – is found in *Macbeth*. With the death of the 'hellhound' (V.vi.42) Macbeth, the true heir to Duncan, Malcolm, is restored to the throne of Scotland – and is duly given the climatic speech of the play, proclaiming his coronation by inviting his thanes 'to see us crowned at Scone' (V.vi.114). The ending of *Othello* does not repeat the ritual state ceremonies of *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*; but Othello is given a final, climatic speech, where a distracted Lear is not, in which he asks others to 'relate' (V.ii.339) his story, kissing Desdemona before his suicide (V.ii.366-367). Lodovico appears to consent, settling the new political organization of Cyprus before he states his intention to return to Venice and 'relate' the tragic events, 'straight aboard, and to the state / This heavy act with heavy heart relate' (V.i.368-369).[302]

I have quoted the Folio version of *King Lear* because the Quarto provides *even less* in the way of resolution. This version has no stage direction indicating when (if?) Lear finally dies and is also missing the rapt words found in the Folio, where Lear seems to die in the belief that Cordelia lives (the discrepancy has prompted some critics to observe that the Quarto is the 'bleaker' version of the play).[303] Albany (not Edgar) is given the final quatrain of the play (which appears unchanged) – but, as in the Folio, Albany has already resigned the crown and the care of the 'gored state'. Though he is given the final speech, the precise status of Albany (and that of the state itself) remains unclear. The Quarto is also missing the direction '*Exeunt with a dead march*', which is found in the Folio, a processional, funeral ritual proper to the ending of a tragedy.[304] But as Booth shows, even the '*dead march*' of the

[302] The total ruin depicted in *King Lear* arguably resonates more strongly with the sonnets than it does with the other tragedies. Drawing on Derrida and his conception of total nuclear war, Tom Muir has made the case that the sonnets are shaped by a vision of 'remainderless destruction'. See his 'Without Remainder: Ruins and Tombs in Shakespeare's Sonnets', *Textual Practice*, 24:1 (2009), pp. 21-49.
[303] See Introduction for more on the texts of *King Lear*.
[304] See Brian Cummings, '"Dead March": Liturgy and Mimesis in Shakespeare's Funerals', *Shakespeare*, 8:4 (2010), pp. 368-385.

Folio is ambiguous: *King Lear* is the only Shakespeare tragedy in which the final speeches do not point to an immediate off-stage location to which the bodies (and the survivors) are meant to repair. Albany, Kent and Edgar are left to simply walk off the stage – seemingly to nowhere.[305]

This failure to restore communal social and political relations at the end of *King Lear* is reflected in the (relative) absence of collective pronouns in its final speeches. Kent refers to himself, using 'I', while 'thou' and 'you' are used on five occasions, cognates of 'him'/'her' on ten. The distant (and distancing) 'them' is used once, while 'we' only occurs in the final quatrain. The referent is, however, unclear. '[W]e that are young' would presumably disqualify Kent (who roundly declares himself to be in his late forties in Act Two) and potentially also Albany, so that the collective imperative ('we must obey'/'speak what we feel') does not have any obvious onstage addressee(s). It may be that Edgar delivers the final speech directly to the audience, turning the final quatrain into a sort of quasi-epilogue. But, if so, the demands the play/Edgar is making on that collective entity ('we') 'remains enigmatic'.[306] There is an irreconcilable contradiction implicit in the appeal. Edgar insists on the need to pay full witness to experience, speaking feelingly (and so truthfully) about everything that has been seen. But at the same time, the survivors will 'never see so much' as those who have 'borne most'. It is up to the survivors to speak about, to bear witness, to events and experiences that defy comprehension, violating the limits of understanding. This paradox is as liable to make 'breath poor and speech unable' (I.i.60) as it is to encourage 'us' to speak 'feelingly' (IV.vi.145). It is precisely the same contradiction that, for survivors and those who 'come after', besets Auschwitz, the un-narratable event: paying witness to the

[305] *King Lear, Macbeth, Indefinition and Tragedy*, p. 28.
[306] Foakes, 'Introduction', p. 79.

un-witnessable, speaking the un-speakable.[307] Edgar does not go on to say *anything* at all, let alone speak from the 'heart' (I.i.105). The type of response *King Lear* calls for remains open-ended.[308]

This contradiction means the shared, collective response Edgar calls for cannot be made operative. Some of the other Shakespeare tragedies – most obviously *Hamlet* and *Othello* – place an emphasis on 'relating', on telling a story around which society can, once again, unify. But the scale of the catastrophe in *King Lear*, the devastation of witnessing so much, would seem to prevent narration – or relation. The end of the play invalidates all of its morally trite but shareable 'conclusions' – 'the gods are just'/ 'the wheel is come full circle' – and so does very little to 'approve the common saw' (II.ii.158). This inability to relate adumbrates a wider failure of relationships *as such* – the possibility of shared social meaning and being. Even while Edgar calls for a collective response, the play leaves individuals adrift; it does not allow for the social relation(s) that may enable a 'wholesome end' (II.ii.333).

It is its shocking violation of formal coherence and resolution that has preoccupied critics of *King Lear* throughout its history. I will provide an in-depth analysis of the critical reception of *King Lear* in Chapter Three, where I concentrate on its post-Auschwitz 'afterlife'. But I also want to provide a brief survey of pre-Holocaust criticism to show the way in which the fragmentation of the play can take on new meanings in discrete cultural moments.

[307] The contradiction around Holocaust testimony – of speaking the un-speakable, representing the un-representable – has, as Sara Horowitz writes, become the central paradox of Holocaust literature. See her 'Literature', *The Oxford Handbook of Holocaust Studies*, ed. Peter Hayes and John K. Roth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 430.

[308] I return to the formal and affective open-endedness of *King Lear* below, pp. 130-131.

5. *King Lear* and Catastrophe in Criticism

In his reflections on *King Lear*, Samuel Johnson famously bewailed the death of Cordelia, which, he confessed, left him so shocked he did not re-read the final scenes until he 'undertook to revise them as editor'.[309] Johnson laments the end *King Lear*, which violates 'poetic justice':

> Shakespeare has suffered the virtue of Cordelia to perish in a just cause, contrary to the natural ideas of justice […] and, what is yet more strange, to the faith of the chronicles […]. I cannot be easily persuaded that the observation of justice makes a play worse; or that […] the audience will not always rise better pleased from the final triumph of persecuted virtue.
>
> In the present case the public has decided. Cordelia, from the time of Tate, has always retired with victory and felicity.[310]

By transgressing the formalized convention of the final recovery (and 'felicity') of Lear and Cordelia – however temporary that recovery is even in other versions of the story – Shakespeare, as far as Johnson is concerned, upends both formal resolution and the 'form of justice' (III.vii.25) supposedly enshrined in that closure: that the morally 'good' finally prevail. Though Johnson also provides some criticism of Tate in his remarks on *King Lear* – 'blaming' him for some aspects of his 'alteration' – he ultimately endorses the horrified 'sensations' which (for his era) still makes the Tate version more popular with the theatre-going 'public'.[311]

The concerns articulated by both Tate and Johnson with regard to the 'ruinous disorders' (I.ii.113-114) of *King Lear* reflect an increasingly 'enlightened' emphasis on

[309] Quoted in John Joughin, 'Lear's Afterlife', *Shakespeare Survey: Volume 55*: *King Lear and Its Afterlife*, ed. Peter Holland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 70.
[310] Ibid.
[311] Ibid.

aesthetic order and ethical decorum in the Restoration era and beyond, against which the disintegration and disorder of *King Lear* as it shatters into 'a hundred thousand flaws' (II.ii.472) seems out-of-place. But for the Romantics, the unbounded aesthetic overflow of *King Lear* was testament to its sublimity, which poets from Coleridge to Keats usually tied to its representation of an awesome and 'convulsed Nature', which escapes arbitrary human categories and cannot be compassed by the 'little world of man' (III.i.10).[312] Even Coleridge, however, finally critiqued *King Lear* for its failure fully to 'harmonize' – though it was the blinding of Gloucester that he seems to have found most excessive, despite his (somewhat Bardolatrous) 'reluctance' to 'find Shakespeare wrong' in his choices for the action of the play.[313]

The absence of harmonious aesthetic resolution became even more apparent in the nineteenth century, particularly after 1838, when Charles McCready ditched the Tate version of the play for the Shakespeare *King Lear* (albeit still in a cut and altered version). Algernon Swinburne observed that the 'tragic fatalism' of *King Lear* denied 'atonement' and the usual tragic 'pledge of reconciliation' – an insight reiterated by George Bernard Shaw, who, observing its failure to instate resolution, remarked on 'the blasphemous despair of Lear'.[314] Such thoughts were also on the mind of the perhaps most influential of early twentieth century Shakespeare critics, A.C. Bradley. Though Bradley, as I will show in Chapter Three, was concerned to try and make the action of *King Lear* fit a providential schema that relies on generic closure, he also laments, in words that recall Donatus, the 'unexpected catastrophe' of the deaths of Lear and Cordelia.[315] This ending (or indeed non-

[312] Quoted in Joan Fitzpatrick, 'The Critical Backstory', *King Lear: A Critical Guide*, ed. Andrew Hiscock and Lisa Hopkins (London: Continuum, 2011), pp. 33.
[313] Ibid, pp. 33-34.
[314] Ibid, p. 40.
[315] A.C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 252.

ending) takes place 'outside the dramatic nexus', writes Bradley, as if it were a sort of grotesque outgrowth – 'or embossed carbuncle' (II.ii.413) – that 'monsters' (I.i.221) closure.[316]

Though it has often been criticized or even negated entirely through the act of appropriation, the violation of closure – of the catastrophe – in *King Lear* takes on shifting meanings in discrete historical moments. Rosen, who is also a Holocaust scholar, writes that 'historical catastrophes' (by which Rosen principally means Auschwitz) 'intersect with and alter the formal properties of catastrophe' and that 'formal violations of endings play a key role in the invention of genre'.[317] This point has also been picked up by John Joughin. Joughin insists on the necessity of situating the (non)ending of *King Lear* in relation to post-Auschwitz culture. The ongoing cultural and historical 'afterlife' of the play in late modernity is, as Joughin understands it, related to its deep-seated formal disintegration. Joughin makes the case that *King Lear* is remarkable for its aesthetics of 'irruptive excess' – something Joughin (*à la* Booth) sees being epitomized by the final deaths of Cordelia and Lear, which happens 'outside an *a priori* grid of expectations' and refuses 'generic and ideological foreclosure'.[318] This, as Joughin perceives it, makes *King Lear* the 'exemplary' Shakespeare play 'after' the catastrophe of Auschwitz. By virtue of its failure to resolve – by being 'constitutively incomplete and unfulfillable in its very failure to reconcile' – the play obviates the cumulative, 'harmonious' synthesis of part and whole, individual and universal, subject and object, instantiating the more fragmentary aesthetic that Adorno calls for 'after' the Holocaust.[319]

[316] Ibid, p. 233. See Chapter Three, pp. 135-136, for more on Bradley and his influence.
[317] *Dislocating the End*, p. 3.
[318] '*Lear's* Afterlife', p. 70.
[319] Ibid, p. 78.

This aesthetic also serves – for Joughin – to formalize an 'excessive affect', where the 'viewing subject experiences a sense of ungrounding and disorientation'.[320] The play, as Joughin reads it, occasions the same type of uncanny disequilibrium Adorno calls the shudder. Edgar (or Albany) might call for a form of collective response at the end of the play, but *King Lear* cannot ultimately be experienced through any unifying generic categories of 'meaningful interpretation' or 'reasonable explanation'.[321] By virtue of its violation of aesthetic resolution and the type of moral 'saws' provided by Edgar and Albany, *King Lear* does not offer any consensual interpretive frame through which to contain the action, so displacing the subject 'outside' of a totalizing conceptual system and occasioning a more individual response. There is, as Joughin observes, no straightforward sense in which *King Lear* underwrites 'a form of restoration'.[322] The play opens out 'a form of inexplicable alterity or otherness rather than providing the grounded repleteness of a "meaningful" solution'.[323]

5. Conclusion

My analysis of the anti-form of *King Lear* is not to say that the play can be considered uncomplicatedly 'Catastrophist', or that it depicts the type of ideologically illimitable subjects found in Catastrophist tragedy. The play is, however, obviously concerned with questions around catastrophe, modernity, subjectivity and tragic form in a way that makes it uniquely 'open' to post-Auschwitz appropriation. I have shown that *King Lear* thematizes

[320] Ibid, p. 71.
[321] Ibid, p. 67.
[322] Ibid, p. 78.
[323] Ibid, p. 67.

catastrophe and its impact on human subjectivity; that the play depicts a historical shift to a rationalist ethos that precipitates disaster; that, in the throes of a systematically totalizing *ratio*, subjectivity implicitly emerges in the play as a force of non-identity; and that, through its violation of the formalized dramatic convention of the catastrophe, *King Lear* subverts tragic resolution. This is not a comprehensive reading of *King Lear*; the aim has been to identify facets of the play that have made it so vital an intertext for Catastrophist appropriation.

In Chapter Three, I analyse the history of *King Lear* in the post-war era, and consider the way in which a range of critics, practitioners and playwrights have interpreted its representation of catastrophe, modernity, subjectivity and its aesthetic form 'after' Auschwitz.

Chapter Three

'Strange Mutations': The History of *King Lear* 'After' Auschwitz

Introduction

This chapter will analyse the critical, performance and appropriation history of *King Lear* in the post-war era. The aim of the chapter is to provide a new history of the play, which reveals the vital historical role *King Lear* has played in shifting ideational and dramaturgical responses to the Holocaust. This analysis, while wide-ranging, cannot be exhaustive. To gain a wider historical understanding of *King Lear* 'after' Auschwitz, I have identified for analysis some of the more important interpretations, stagings and appropriations of the play, which emblematize developments in its reception. By analysing the post-war history of *King Lear*, I intend to situate Rudkin, Barker and Kane in a community of discourse that aggregates around *King Lear* 'after' Auschwitz, where various conceptions of subjectivity, tragic aesthetics and catastrophe were mediated through changing responses to a play that increasingly came to be seen as the Shakespearean drama for 'our times'. It is not necessarily the case that Rudkin, Barker and Kane are responding directly to other interpretations or stagings of the play in the post-war era. But if *King Lear* 'has entered the fabric of artistic and critical discourse as a play somehow capable of shedding light on catastrophe, of providing illumination in the wake – and the midst – of disaster' Rudkin, Barker and Kane should be seen as part (if a distinct part) of that wider artistic and cultural 'fabric'.[324]

[324] *Succeeding King Lear*, p. 14.

This analysis, as I set out in the Introduction, will trace changing responses to *King Lear* from 1939-1997, from the outbreak of the Second World War up until the election victory of New Labour, whose post-socialist 'Third Way' ideology consolidated the hegemony of late capitalist culture. The chapter will be split into sections on the 1940s-1950s, 1960s-1970s and the 1980s-1990s, and will analyse *King Lear* in criticism before going on to consider the play in performance and any dramatic appropriations, drawing out some of the relationships between these various forms of interpretive intervention. The approach I have taken to periodization is not to say that new understandings of *King Lear* completely displace previous interpretations. On the contrary: it is often the case that an interpretation of the play lives far beyond an originary moment and continues to influence its cultural reception. The periods I have organized do, however, represent important changes in the post-Auschwitz history of *King Lear* and the way in which the play has been understood.

1. The 1940s and 1950s: Christian Redemption and the Threat of Modernity

1.2. *King Lear* in Criticism

During the Second World War and its immediate aftermath, *King Lear* was predominantly understood to represent something akin to the Christian Morality Play. The play, as Christian readings would have it, depicts a proud and sinful King who, through his suffering, ultimately achieves salvation, as he undergoes a Christian pilgrimage through 'sin-suffering-

redemption'.[325] These religiously-inclined readings of *King Lear* (and Lear) were unwaveringly common, and can be traced in the work of R.W. Chambers, Irving Ribner and Kenneth Muir.[326]

This interpretation pays witness to the profound influence of A.C. Bradley on post-war Shakespeare criticism. In his reading of the play, Bradley concentrated most acutely on the storm scenes, where Lear, after being pushed out into the wilderness and stripped of his status and even his clothes, reaches through suffering 'the power of moral perception and reflection' as a result of a 'process of purification'.[327] The language Bradley uses – 'purification', 'acquittal', 'redemption' – and his insistence on a world of 'rational and moral order' indicates a Christianized reading that would universalize *King Lear* into a Morality Tale on the suffering of 'Man' (or Everyman) on his 'quest' to find redemption from sin.[328] Bradley even goes as far as to contend the play might be retitled *The Redemption of King Lear.*[329] There are moments in his analysis where Bradley seems to contradict his own case – not least when stating that the end of the play appears to be 'a dramatic mistake' and that, while the 'destruction of the good' is surely a tragic 'reality of life', its use has to be contained within '*certain limits* in tragic art'.[330] The implication is that *King Lear* does not necessarily observe the traditional limits of tragic art – that the play breaks through the type of Christianized, formal organization where Lear is 'a thousand-fold redeemed'.[331] But such

[325] I take the phrase 'sin-suffering-redemption' from William Elton and his *King Lear and the Gods* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1966), p. 337. I touch on Elton again when analysing *King Lear* criticism in the 1960s.
[326] R.W. Chambers, *King Lear* (W.P. Ker Memorial Lecture, 1939, Glasgow: Jackson Son and Co., 1940), p. 25; Irving Ribner, '"The Gods are Just": A Reading of *King Lear*', *Tulane Drama Review*, 2:3 (1958), pp. 34-54.
[327] *Shakespearean Tragedy*, p. 263 and p. 266.
[328] Ibid, p. 298 and p. 261.
[329] Ibid, p. 262.
[330] Ibid, p. 235 and p. 129 (italics added). Bradley also writes that Shakespearean tragedy should 'be a self-contained whole with a catastrophe' (p. 256) – by which he means formal closure.
[331] Ibid, p. 292.

doubts were not recognized by the more zealously Christian interpreters of the post-war period.

The prominence given in Christian readings to the 'final victory' of the good over and against a 'poisonous evil' concerned with total power had an obvious attraction during and after the Second World War.[332] Where the rise of Nazism had represented 'a mortal' threat to the very survival of 'British Christian civilization', for wartime and post-war critics the Bradleyean notion of redemption proved 'an irresistible temptation'.[333] This concern with the traditional values of 'British Christian civilization' preoccupied no few critics, from Theodore Spencer to Edwin Muir, but found its most eloquent interpreter in the form of John F. Danby.

Danby analyses a historical shift in *King Lear* from a traditional Christian order that has its basis in 'organic' human relationships of familial and national fealty, to a more recognizably modern, 'inorganic' world where such relationships are overturned.[334] Danby writes of 'the new age of scientific enquiry, of industrial development, of bureaucratic organisation and social regimentation'.[335] This nascent era of Weberian disenchantment is, in its capitalistic iteration, epitomized by the 'New Man' Edmund, who spurns traditional social relationships in his individualistic 'impulse to acquire'.[336] But it can also be seen in other characters. When an irate Lear casts Cordelia out for refusing to quantify her love in the gross conditions he demands – 'Which of you shall we say doth love us most / That we our largest bounty may extend' (I.i.51-52) – he falls foul of the same, instrumentalizing

[332] Chambers, p. 25.
[333] William W. French, 'A Kind of Courage: *King Lear* at the Old Vic, London, 1940', *Theatre Topics*, 3:1 (1993), p. 52 and p. 53.
[334] John F. Danby, *Shakespeare's Doctrine of Nature: A Study of King Lear* (London: Faber, 1949). The text was re-printed in 1951, 1958 and 1961.
[335] Ibid, p. 138.
[336] Ibid, p. 46.

rationality seen in Edmund. This causes Danby to make the case that Cordelia – in her commitment to the 'natural' 'bonds' (I.i.93) of familial and patriarchal fealty, which are at threat of being displaced – is representative of 'the perfection of truth, justice, charity'.[337] If in his dark night of the soul Lear gains new moral perception, for Danby that 'redemption' is not merely personal, but also implies a return to the 'bonds' of traditional society.[338] Danby sees Lear as being 'redeemed' from nothing less than the 'New Age' of disenchanted secular rationality.

The critique Danby mounts in his analysis of *King Lear* is predominantly against the 'New Man' of the capitalist revolution; but when Danby makes the (frankly startling) observation that the 'prison' (V.iii.9) Lear and Cordelia are led away to towards the end of the play 'points to the continuing possibility of the concentration camp', it becomes apparent that, in his reading of *King Lear* as a conservative, Christian drama, his critique relates not only to capitalism but to *modernity* and – in its most horrifying manifestation – fascism and the Holocaust.[339] This critique of modernity from the perspective of the concentration camp has obvious parallels with Adorno and his post-Auschwitz interpretation of the Enlightenment. Where Danby departs from Adorno, however, is in his reactionary idea of the possibility of a return to a pre-modern Christian past, where the depredations of modernity are reneged. Danby is strangely blind to the way in which Nazism had integrated industrial modernity with dark myths around a more rooted 'organic' society and Fatherland.

Danby contends that *King Lear* represents the catastrophic eruption of modernity and a less disenchanted time when subject and object, individual and society, word and

[337] Ibid, p. 138.
[338] See also *Hamlet Versus Lear*, p. 53.
[339] *Shakespeare's Doctrine of Nature*, p. 194.

feeling, and even mind and body were not – as Gloucester imagines it – 'crack'd' (I.ii.105) but part of a harmoniously unified form of life, 'ordered and patterned'.[340] The inherent desirability of that more naturally harmonious society is, as Danby sees it, the 'final outcome' of the 'achieved insights' of Shakespeare and 'the wisdom the tragic period establishes', with tragedy identified with the ruinous breakdown of society but also its final reinstitution.[341] These ideas around organic 'unity' also inform the way Danby understands aesthetic form.[342] Danby views *King Lear* as a unified aesthetic whole, which progresses toward closure – a conception of aesthetics disputed by Adorno in his analysis of fragmentation. While it depicts the catastrophe of modernity, for Danby *King Lear* ultimately enacts formal resolution, which he sees as embodied by Edgar, his victory over Edmund and rise to the throne.[343] The play, as Danby sees it, is as formally unified as the idealized world it represents, and progresses toward an artistically and morally coherent outcome.

For many critics in the 1940s and 1950s, Edmund, Goneril and Regan typify modernity and even, in the words of Muir, 'the rise of Fascism', while Lear, Cordelia and Edgar represent an imperilled but finally triumphant 'communal tradition'.[344] This interpretation represents a desire to find within 'an idealized British culture the basis for regeneration into a desired post-war redemptive utopia, in the wake of the Gonerils and Regans of Nazism'.[345] This same desire can also be seen in the performance history of *King Lear* over the period.

[340] *Hamlet Versus Lear*, p. 54.
[341] *Shakespeare's Doctrine of Nature*, p. 189.
[342] Ibid, p. 169. See also Hugh Grady, *The Modernist Shakespeare: Critical Texts in a Material World* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991) for the New Criticism and its concept of aesthetic unity.
[343] *Shakespeare's Doctrine of Nature*, p. 191.
[344] Quoted in R.A. Foakes, 'Introduction', p. 44.
[345] *Shakespeare's Universal Wolf*, p. 161.

1.2. *King Lear* in Performance

John Gielgud took up the role of the ageing King Lear in a 1940 production of the play at the Old Vic, a staging nominally directed by Lewis Casson but, in reality, dominated by the ideas and presence of Harley Granville-Barker.[346] While the choice of Shakespeare for a wartime production was not unusual, the choice of *King Lear* was: in 1940 the play was 'not part of the Shakespeare canon that dominated the English theatre' and, perhaps more to the point, a play that depicts a foreign army invading Britain 'may not have seemed a wise choice at the time'.[347]

King Lear, as viewed by Gielgud and Granville-Barker, is representative of the traditional values that were under threat from modernity. The choice of *King Lear* at the outset of the war reflected, on the parts of both Granville-Barker and Gielgud, an 'idealistic view of the social role of theatre' converging with a 'sense of the Nazi threat to civilized values'.[348] 'Nothing but a mighty work like *King Lear* could have kept one so concentrated', reflected Gielgud, 'with such a holocaust going on around us' – his use of the (un-capitalized) word 'holocaust' signifying the war generally, as opposed to the Shoah.[349] The play was to be used to unify audiences around British, Christian ideals in a period of wartime suffering and deepening social and political distress. 'Our fight has been a fight for the

[346] See Jonathan Croall, *Performing King Lear: Gielgud to Russell Beale* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), pp. 22-25. Granville Barker sets out his (largely Christian redemptionist) reading of *King Lear* in his *Preface to King Lear*, originally published in 1927 (London: Nick Hern Books, 1993).
[347] 'A Kind of Courage', p. 47.
[348] Ibid, p. 46.
[349] John Gielgud, *Sir John Gielgud: A Life in Letters*, ed. Richard Mangan (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2004), p. 59.

future of Christian civilization', stated Granville-Barker after the war, 'and it was bound to be won'.[350]

The collective address ('our fight') was reflected in the spatial arrangements of the Old Vic stage, recorded in the copious notes of Hallam Fordham.[351] During the storm, Gielgud occupied the front of the stage and physically knelt during his 'prayer' to the suffering, the 'poor naked wretches'. When the prayer ended – 'And show the heavens more just' (III.iv.28-36) – Gielgud 'dropped his hands in front of him, palms outward, in a gesture of complete supplicatory resignation to suffering'.[352] This posture signified that his struggle has been resolved, as suffering evoked – not rage and egoistic pride – but patience and compassion.[353] By bringing Lear out of the picture-frame of the proscenium arch and onto the apron during the scenes in the storm, Gielgud and Granville-Barker catalysed deeper identification with the suffering of Lear, bringing Gielgud closer to the audience with the aim of 'empowering them with the mythic collective power' of the 'Christian' and national values Lear 'embodied'.[354] The play ended with formalized gestures of mourning, implying an end to the violence and the restitution of a divinely sanctioned Christian order.[355]

William French observes that the 'positive', Christian interpretation of *King Lear* in the 1940 production seemed more plausible at a time 'before bombs fell upon London, before the first Nazi rockets whistled in, before Auschwitz had become a household word

[350] Henry Granville-Barker, *The Use of the Drama* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1945), p. 88.
[351] These can be found in the Folger Shakespeare Library, but Alexander Leggatt provides some analysis in his *Shakespeare in Performance: King Lear*, 2nd Edition (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), pp. 25-40.
[352] 'A Kind of Courage', p. 52.
[353] Ibid.
[354] Ibid, p. 51.
[355] *Shakespeare in Performance*, p. 34.

for horror, before Hiroshima was incinerated'.[356] Even so, the conservative interpretation of *King Lear* as a parable of Christian redemption still held sway in both criticism and on the stage for most of the 1940s and 1950s.[357] It was not until the 1960s that the Christian consensus began to be challenged. I turn now to consider the absurdist and political readings of the play that emerged after the 1950s, which challenged the idea *King Lear* is a Christian play.

2. The 1960s and the 1970s: From the Absurd to the Political

2.1. *King Lear* in Criticism

Over the 1940s-1950s, *King Lear* was typically read 'positively' as a story of Christian redemption, even being conscripted as a bulwark of traditional social and moral values in the face of a catastrophic modernity. But in the 1960s, the play began to be read 'negatively', as violating the type of schematic Christian worldview that would see Lear redeemed through his sufferings. This newly negative tone was set by Barbara Everett in her pathbreaking 1960 piece 'The New *King Lear*', in which she contests the Christian readings of *King Lear* that had dominated Shakespeare criticism – and the recent performance history of the play.[358] J. Stampfer echoes Everett by insisting that the 'purgation' and 'spiritual regeneration' of Lear take place, not at the end of the play, but in Acts Three and Four, while Act Five only served to confirm 'the worst fear' – that humanity inhabits 'an

[356] 'A Kind of Courage', p. 54.
[357] See *Performing King Lear*, pp. 31-33 and pp. 28-31.
[358] Barbara Everett, 'The New *King Lear*', *Critical Quarterly*, 2 (1960), pp. 325-339.

imbecile universe'.[359] William Elton similarly contends that – crucially – 'no evidence exists to show that Lear arrives finally at "salvation", "regeneration" or "redemption"', meaning the benevolent providence ascribed to the play 'cannot be shown to be operative'.[360] These interpretations stress the irruptive aesthetic deformity of *King Lear*, as opposed to the redemptive resolution found by Danby. The play, as read by Everett, Stampfer and Elton, violates the aesthetic closure imputed to it by previous critics, undermining the idea that *King Lear* progresses toward a morally Christian ending. This involves a radically changed understanding of its tragic vision: far from revealing a providentially ordained world order, which is finally restored, *King Lear* depicts a Godless cosmos, which is resistant to meaning and understanding.

Foakes makes the case that the challenge mounted to the Christian orthodoxy in the early years of the 1960s can (and should) be read in direct relation to contemporaneous political events – most obviously the deepening tensions of the Cold War and the threat of nuclear apocalypse.[361] But shifting responses to the play also reflected the growth of public and political consciousness about the Holocaust. It was only in the 1960s and the 1970s that the full scale of the atrocities committed during the Second World War began to be more widely known. The Adolf Eichmann trial in 1961, famously covered by Hannah Arendt in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, and the Frankfurt Auschwitz trials of 1963-1965, increased public awareness about the unparalleled suffering and degradation of the Nazi camps.[362] The scale of destruction unleashed in the Holocaust – along with the prospect of total nuclear warfare

[359] J. Stampfer, 'The Catharsis in *King Lear*', *Shakespeare Survey 13: King Lear*, ed. Allardyce Nicoll (Cambridge: Cambridge university Press, 1966), p. 1-10.
[360] *King Lear and the Gods*, p. 336.
[361] *Hamlet Versus Lear*, p. 58 and p. 71.
[362] Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (London: Penguin, 2006); Devin O. Pendas, *The Frankfurt Auschwitz Trial, 1963-1965: Genocide, History, and the Limits of the Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), see in particular pp. 249-287 ('Public Reaction'). For more on the Holocaust and international public awareness, see the exemplary David S. Wyman (ed.) *The World Reacts to the Holocaust* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

– profoundly challenged the idea that history has any providential meaning or that salvation from a fallen world is possible, inaugurating a new conception of human life – as inherently absurd.[363]

Writing in his 1965 *King Lear in Our Time*, Maynard Mack contends that, 'after the World Wars and Auschwitz', the violence of *King Lear* – 'its sadism, madness and processional of deaths' – 'resonates more powerfully' than it had done for pre-war and even wartime audiences.[364] By far the most powerful voice proclaiming the urgent 'resonance' of *King Lear* (and Shakespeare) in the 1960s was Jan Kott in his 1964 *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*.[365] Kott – a Pole from a Jewish background who had lived through Nazi occupation, the Holocaust and the social and political regressions of Soviet Communism – insists on reading *King Lear* through the prism of disastrous modern events, which comprised:

> modern war in all its destructiveness, occupation by invading armies, living in bombed out cities, the *univers concentrationnaire* – that whole Dante-esque inferno of concentration camps, gas chambers, genocide – and the world of ghettos and systematic destruction.[366]

These catastrophic events revealed that human life, far from inhering to the type of immanently meaningful providential schema Christian critics had found represented in *King Lear*, is absurd – that its 'sole meaning is its meaninglessness'.[367] 'Auschwitz is no exception, but the rule', writes Kott: 'History is a sequence of Auschwitzes'.[368] The concentration camps

[363] For more on the Holocaust and the philosophy of the absurd, see Matthew Bowker, *Rethinking the Politics of Absurdity: Albert Camus, Postmodernity, and the Innocence of Survival* (London: Routledge, 2014).
[364] Maynard Mack, '*King Lear' in Our Time* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1965), p. 25.
[365] Jan Kott, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* (New York: Norton, 1974).
[366] Peter Brook, 'Introduction', *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, p. xiii.
[367] Ibid, p. xx.
[368] Jan Kott, *The Theatre of Essence* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1985), p. 177.

have, as Kott understands it, revealed the absurdity of the human condition, which pertains throughout history.

Kott stresses the contemporaneity of *King Lear* by drawing parallels between its hopeless vision of an imbecile universe with the drama of Beckett. He remarks that, in the world of *King Lear*, 'there is neither Christian heaven, nor the heaven predicted and believed in by humanists' – precisely the endpoints that had been imagined in recent interpretations of the play:

> *King Lear* makes a tragic mockery of all eschatologies: of the heaven promised on earth, and the heaven promised after death; of both Christian and secular theodicies; of cosmogony and of the rational view of history; of the gods and natural goodness, of man made in the 'image and likeness'.[369]

King Lear, as Kott understands it, is less of a conventional tragedy than it is a presciently absurdist play. This, for Kott, is typified by the representation of subjectivity in the play. Kott contends that, in *King Lear*, the subject finds him or herself trapped in degrading but inescapable situations – a reading that, as I show in Chapter Seven, relies on his reading of the scene at Dover cliff.[370] This stress on closed systems reflects the apparent absence of any wider metaphysical schema that provides history and tragedy with meaning – or, as Kott calls it, 'the Auschwitz experience'.[371] With the collapse of any transcendent value, human life is deprived of tragic worth and grandeur, as the subject is reduced to pathetic comic clowning and arbitrary violence. *King Lear* represents a 'great stage of fools' (IV.vi.172) in a world where humanity has been abandoned and left 'darkling' (I.iv.208). Far from pursuing

[369] *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, p. 147.
[370] See Chapter Seven, pp. 303-305. It is an interpretation of post-Auschwitz tragedy and subjectivity which, as I have shown in Chapter One, has some parallels with Adorno.
[371] *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, p. 92.

self-realization, all the individual can do is stoically endure the depredations of an absurd cosmos.

The Kott reading of *King Lear* as paradigmatic work of the Theatre of the Absurd gave, in the words of Foakes, 'powerful currency' to 'a bleak reading' of *King Lear* that stressed its 'supreme tragic horror'.[372] But some more positive, politically-informed understandings of *King Lear* were also beginning to emerge in Shakespeare Studies over the 1960s into the 1970s. If the play truly did presage a world of violence and the concentration camps, for Marxist critics the response it called for is not resignation to events, but revolutionary social and political action. This required a new conception of the subject and tragedy. Where the absurdist interpretation provided by Kott denied the possibility of human agency, political interpretations of *King Lear* called upon a 'heroic' subject able to act meaningfully on the world. Such tragic heroism was often understood to be embodied by Lear himself.

Arnold Kettle set the priorities for political readings of *King Lear* in his 1964 piece 'From Hamlet to Lear'.[373] Kettle contends that, in its representation of a transition from a feudal to a bourgeois social order, a more radically egalitarian socialist ethos is also incipient in *King Lear* – not least in the scenes in the storm and on the heath, where Lear identifies with the poor and promises to act against social inequality. Kettle sees the rampant individualism of Goneril, Regan and Edmund as being *already* outmoded by a more humane dispensation the play is prefiguring in the midst of images of historical strife and ruin. This dispensation is, as Kettle reads the play, embodied by Lear, who Kettle sees as a tragic 'hero' – by which he means someone who, though ultimately destroyed by the dominant forces of

[372] Foakes, *Hamlet versus Lear*, p. 59.
[373] Arnold Kettle, 'From Hamlet to Lear', *Shakespeare in a Changing World*, ed. Arnold Kettle (London: Laurence and Wishart, 1964), pp. 146-171.

history, bears 'something of the actual aspirations of humanity in its struggle to advance its condition'.[374]

The revolutionary spirit of the late 1960s is perhaps most apparent in the words of H.A. Mason, who writes in his 1970 work *Tragedies of Love* that Lear dies, not in a rhapsody of Christian hope or in nihilistic despair, but as 'an obstinately unreconstructed rebel' – as if Lear died 'most rebel-like' (IV.iii.14) with a Molotov cocktail in his hand.[375] The same idea is pursued by S.L. Goldberg in his 1974 *An Essay on King Lear*, where Goldberg echoes Kettle and make the case that Lear can be seen as a 'heroic' figure, who discovers the impulse to act 'energetically in and on the world'.[376] Lear, as Goldberg reads the play, recognizes 'the need both to realize an essential capacity of the self and to make "justice" an objective reality'.[377] The 'true need' of humanity, as Goldberg views it, is for nothing less than 'action and justice'.[378]

These readings were obviously informed by the radical political interventions of 1968, which saw student unrest and protests break out across Europe and other parts of the world.[379] The uprisings were inspired by the prospect of a radically changed future society, which broke with the capitalist system. But as Hans Kundnani has shown, the protests were also about a reckoning with the past, where a new generation questioned the legitimacy of institutions that had remained unchanged since the war and challenged the culpability of the 'Auschwitz generation'.[380] Moshie Postone and Eric Santner observe that 'the student revolts in the 1960s are generally held to be a crucial breakthrough in the history of

[374] Quoted in *King Lear: Contemporary Critical Essays*, ed. Kieran Ryan (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993), p. 29.
[375] H.A Mason, *Tragedies of Love* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1970), p. 226.
[376] S.L. Goldberg, *An Essay on King Lear* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), p. 117.
[377] Ibid.
[378] Ibid.
[379] See Mark Kurlansky, *1968: The Year that Rocked the World* (London: Vintage, 2010).
[380] Hans Kundnani, *Utopia Or Auschwitz: Germany's 1968 Generation and the Holocaust* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 2009).

responses to the Holocaust', which often 'took shape within the frame of critiques of capitalism'.[381] It was not unusual for the movements of the time to 'discern a continuity of the societal relations characteristic of National Socialism and those of post-Auschwitz Western liberal democracies in capitalism'.[382] 'The world today', as Marcuse writes in his 1964 *One-Dimensional Man*, which is sometimes thought of as the 'Bible' of the student movement, 'is still that of the gas chambers and concentration camps': 'Auschwitz continues to haunt'.[383]

This divergence between absurdist and political interpretations of *King Lear* (and, indeed, the Holocaust) also relates to the performance history of the play over the 1960s and 1970s. To show the profound influence which Kott had on stagings of *King Lear*, I will analyse the 1962 production by Peter Brook. I go on to analyse the 1974 Buzz Goodbody production, which, though influenced by Brook, takes a politically radical approach to the play.

2.2. *King Lear* in Performance

Shakespeare Our Contemporary did not appear in English until 1964, but Peter Brook – whose production of *Titus Andronicus*, with Laurence Olivier as Titus, Kott had seen in

[381] Moshie Postone and Eric Santner, *Catastrophe and Meaning: The Holocaust and the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), p. 5.
[382] Erik Vogt, '"The Useless Residue of the Western Idea of Art": Adorno and Lacoue-Labarthe Concerning Art "After" Auschwitz', *Adorno and the Concept of Genocide*, ed. Ryan Crawford and Erik Vogt (Leiden and Boston: Brill Rodopi, 2014), p. 35.
[383] Hebert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*, trans. Douglas Kellner (Oxford: Routledge, 2002), p. 185 and p. 252.

Warsaw in 1957 – read the French edition in the early 1960s.[384] His 1962 RSC production of *King Lear* at Stratford, with Paul Scofield taking the title role, was famously influenced by the absurdist reading that was pioneered by Kott, which changed the way Brook thought about Shakespeare, tragedy and modernity. Through Kott, Brook had come to view *King Lear* as a prototypically absurdist drama – a play that might almost be a 'Concentration Camp document'.[385]

Brook chose a stage aesthetic that reflected the cataclysmic fallout of recent European history. His stage was virtually bare, while the few props Brook did use were in a state of disintegration – as in the rusty thunder-sheets that visibly descended from the flies to rumble ominously in the storm scenes.[386] This bare space was meant to signify a vacant and Godless universe – a pitiless void in which human life is drained of any meaning or purpose, leaving individuals bereft of hope and unable to act. 'The emptiness was metaphysical, as well as "actual"': 'The fierce illumination banished any shadows of divinity, mystery or superstition'.[387] By treating *King Lear* as the 'prime illustration of the theatre of the Absurd' – 'from which everything valuable in modern drama has been drawn' – Brook also stressed the grotesque violence of the play.[388] This meant cutting any moments that might relieve the brutality, from the servants who tend to Gloucester after he is blinded to the final, doomed attempt of Edgar to do 'Some good' (V.iii.291) and reprieve Lear and Cordelia.

By intensifying the violence, Brook disallowed the redemptive consolation found in Christian interpretations of *King Lear*. This was epitomized by the ending (such as it was) of

[384] See Leanore Leiblein, 'Jan Kott, Peter Brook and *King Lear*', *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, 1:2 (1987), pp. 39-49.
[385] Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 74.
[386] Ibid.
[387] Marvin Rosenberg, *The Masks of King Lear* (London: Associated University Press, 1975),p. 34.
[388] Quoted in *Shakespeare in Performance: King Lear*, p. 55.

the production. Where the 1940 Gielgud production ended with formal acts of mourning, adumbrating the return of some form of Christian metaphysical order, in his production Brook had the actor playing Edgar unceremoniously drag the corpse of his vanquished brother off-stage, while, somewhere in the distance, the low, ominous rumble of thunder that had presaged the storm scenes was heard again.[389] This not only forestalled any possibility of resolution; it also intimated that there would soon be another outbreak of catastrophic violence. The *dénouement* – once again – drew on Kott, who in his image of the 'Grand Mechanism' observed that, in Shakespeare, individuals are mere 'cogs' in a self-perpetuating and repetitive historical cycle, which does not admit of any transcendent meaning.[390]

Even while acknowledging that Kott set the 'dark', post-Auschwitz tone of his production, Brook self-consciously drew on an array of Continental stylistic influences and theories: Kott, Beckett, Ionesco, Artaud and Brecht.[391] The use of Brechtian dramaturgy in 1962 was most obvious in its use of the distancing *Verfremdungseffekt.* Whereas past productions (as in Gielgud-Barker in 1940) sought to promote empathetic identification with Lear, Brook wanted to 'detach the audience'.[392] This was evident in the storm scenes, where the thunder-sheets hanging over the stage served as a constant reminder of the aesthetic unreality of the events Lear is (ostensibly) struggling through on his path to 'redemptive' self-realization.

Book also drew on Artaud, whose Theatre of Cruelty aims less at rational disinterest and more at puncturing the subconscious of the spectator through remorseless sensory

[389] See *Shakespeare in Performance: King Lear*, pp. 54-55.
[390] *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, p. 10.
[391] For more on the self-consciously hybrid stylistic influences informing the 1962 production, see *The Empty Space*, especially 'The Rough Theatre', pp. 65-97.
[392] *Shakespeare in Performance: King Lear*, p. 52.

agitation.[393] This informed the way in which Brook chose to stage the blinding of Gloucester. Brook purposefully contradicted the way the scene was usually staged. It had been customary for the blinding to be staged after the interval, so that anyone in the audience unwilling to watch the violence could prudently postpone his or her re-entrance. Brook not only placed the blinding *before* the interval, forcing the audience to watch, but also 'cruelly' raised the house-lights, intensifying the visceral impact of the scene on a stunned audience.[394]

The 1962 production remains, in the words of Jay Halio, 'undeniably the most influential post-war production of the play'.[395] But the most important contribution of the Brook production was to 'de-Englishize or de-nationalize *King Lear* and Shakespeare'.[396] Where in the 1940s and 1950s the play was typically understood as positive reminder of British Christian civilization, over and against the destructive threat of 'unnatural' forms of Continental modernity, Brook used the play for the purposes of a far less insular engagement with the catastrophes of twentieth century Europe and to reflect on the shared experience of living through Stalinism, Nazism and, most harrowingly, the Holocaust. Brook brought Shakespeare and *King Lear* into dialogue with a variety of European, late modernist theories and dramaturgies as these developed in the wake of Auschwitz, from Beckett to Brecht. This would set the scene for other post-Auschwitz analyses and appropriations of the play.

[393] See Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre and Its Double*, trans. Victor Corti (London: OneWorld Classics, 2010).
[394] *Shakespeare in Performance: King Lear*, p. 45.
[395] Jay Halio, 'Introduction', *The Tragedy of King Lear* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 47.
[396] Zoltan Markus, 'Kott in the West', *Great Shakespeareans, Volume Thirteen: Empson, Wilson Knight, Barber, Kott*, Hugh Grady (ed.) (London: Continuum, 2012), p. 158.

Buzz Goodbody was, as Elizabeth Schafer has remarked, influenced by Brook.[397] Her 1974 RSC production of *King Lear* drew on the same empty aesthetic Brook had used, with a *mise-en-scène* that was, for the most part, 'uncluttered' by props.[398] But her version was far more consciously politicized, offering a vision of the play that was 'forcefully directed towards social change'.[399] This production, which has been viewed as the most important re-evaluation of *King Lear* since 1962, was the first production at The Other Place, the smaller studio space Goodbody opened in 1974 with the intention of staging more politically and artistically *avant-garde* productions than were possible at the main Royal Shakespeare Theatre.[400]

Goodbody cut the play drastically and concentrated her interpretation of its action around the poor and the disenfranchised, revealed to Lear when he confronts Poor Tom. Dympna Callaghan observes that, over the action, the gulf between rich and poor was powerfully shown in the simple distinction being 'being clothed and going naked'.[401] Goodbody sought to underscore the way in which the modern capitalist system reduces the masses to a form of naked – 'unaccommodated' – bare life. She would go as far as to include a controversial prologue – spoken in unison by Lear (Tony Church) and Edgar (Mike Gwilym) – that drew parallels between the condition of the iterant poor in the early modern era and that of the industrial working-classes of the 1970s.[402] For her, the aim was to indict 'the

[397] Elizabeth Schafer, *Ms-Directing Shakespeare: Women Direct Shakespeare* (New York: St Martin's Press, 2000), p. 234.
[398] Ibid.
[399] Dympna Callaghan, 'Buzz Goodbody: Directing for Change', *The Appropriation of Shakespeare: Post-Renaissance Reconstruction of the Works and Myths*, p. 177.
[400] For more on the foundation and history of The Other Place, see Alycia Smith-Howard, *Studio Shakespeare: The Royal Shakespeare Company at The Other Place* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2006), pp. 1-3. For a reading of the 1974 *(King) Lear*, see pp. 35-42.
[401] 'Buzz Goodbody: Directing for Change', p. 172.
[402] See *Studio Shakespeare*, p. 37 and 'Buzz Goodbody: Directing for Change', p. 171.

capitalist order' and its 'cultural apparatus' in its 'totality'.[403] It is an order which debases and – quite literally – denudes subjects. The moment when Lear chances on Poor Tom and 'unbuttons', as he promises to pass the 'superflux' to the naked masses, became the centre for a revolutionary Marxist-socialist staging of the play that stressed the necessity of social and political action. Lear gained a heroically 'oppositional consciousness' over the production, becoming a radical critic of the social injustice he has blindly presided over during his reign.[404]

By showing the subject reduced to a form of bare 'naked' life, Goodbody revealed that her social and political conception of modern capitalism is implicitly informed by Auschwitz and the production of 'unaccommodated man' in the concentration camps. This, as I have shown, is not unusual in post-1968 critiques of capitalism; but it also reveals her specific debt to Bond. Goodbody, evincing the influence of Bond, shortened the title of *King Lear* to *Lear*, signalling the importance which she placed on the transformation of the King to a destitute figure. Her understanding of the play and its relevance for modern capitalist society was informed by Bond and his post-Auschwitz version of the play, which views *King Lear* as 'a play where people are getting on and off a train with a lot of luggage' – an image that recalls the mass transportation of Jews to the camps and the appropriation of Jewish property by the Nazis.[405]

Goodbody was both a Marxist and a feminist.[406] Her production concentrated on Lear and his nascent understanding of social injustice; but it also sought to provide a critique of patriarchal culture by showing 'how much the "bad" sisters had to put up with'.[407] This

[403] 'Buzz Goodbody: Directing for Change', p. 177.
[404] Ibid.
[405] Quoted in *Shakespeare and Me*, ed. Susannah Carson (London: OneWorld Classics, 2013), p. 54.
[406] See 'Buzz Goodbody: Directing for Change', pp. 163-167.
[407] Ibid, p. 171.

desire to fashion new perspectives on the play, from institutionally and politically 'marginal' spaces, would become an important aspect of Shakespeare criticism. It is to the increasingly politicized understanding of culture and identity in Shakespeare Studies that I turn in the next section.

3. The 1980s and 1990s: Identity Politics and Postmodernity

3.1. *King Lear* in Criticism

The transformation in Shakespeare Studies over the 1980s and 1990s can, for Kiernan Ryan, be summed up in a single word: 'politics'.[408] For many Shakespeare critics in the 1980s and beyond, even the 'political' readings of *King Lear* that had emerged after the Second World War were deaf to political struggle as it related to the plight of marginalized and oppressed sections of society – from homosexuals to Black and Asian men and women. Over the 1980s and 1990s, Shakespeare critics sought increasingly to secure the representation and social and political freedom of specific constituencies marginalized in society – and indeed in Shakespearean drama – challenging oppressive discourses of identity and subjectivity in the dominant culture and its cherished canonical plays. This political agenda, as I have also shown in the Introduction, was perhaps most obvious in the work of Cultural Materialist critics.[409]

[408] Kiernan Ryan, 'Introduction', *King Lear: New Casebooks*, ed. Kieran Ryan (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993), p. 3.
[409] See Introduction, pp. 29-32.

Most problematic for the Cultural Materialist critics was the humanist conception of the subject to be found in Shakespearean tragedy, which for Catherine Belsey is the white, heterosexual, male subject of European Enlightenment modernity.[410] This conception of the tragic subject is, as Belsey understands it, exclusive of other forms of subjectivity and identity – non-male, non-white, non-heterosexual – and not universally intelligible or meaningful at all.

Jonathan Dollimore, writing in his 1984 *Radical Tragedy*, similarly critiques humanist understandings of Shakespeare and *King Lear*. He remarks that, in recent times, the humanist view of *King Lear* has been 'culturally dominant', and alludes to the writings of Clifford Leech, Wilbur Sanders and Philip Brockbank, all of whom adopt humanist readings of the play.[411] This humanist reading of *King Lear* is, for Dollimore, nothing more than a secularization of the Christian reading and its interpretation of the 'redemption' of Lear. Where the Christian reading places 'Man' at the centre of a providential universe, the humanist reading places the tragic subject (Lear) at the centre of meaning and action, as through 'kindness and shared vulnerability human kind redeems itself'.[412] The same constraining humanism is visible in politically Marxist readings of the play, which also centre on the redemption of Lear and his identification with the suffering masses. It can even be seen in absurdist interpretations, which are as beholden to the idea of the tragic subject as a centre of meaning that life without that subject is barely imaginable – and hardly worth living. Dollimore makes the case that previous readings are guilty of an 'essentializing humanism', which ignore that *King Lear* is 'above all a play about property, power and

[410] Catherine Belsey, *The Subject of Tragedy: Identity and Difference in English Renaissance Drama* (London: Methuen, 1985), p. 2.
[411] Jonathon Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and his Contemporaries*, 3rd edition (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 189.
[412] Ibid.

inheritance'.[413] The vision of the 'human' promulgated by the play is – as Dollimore sees it – socially and politically exclusive. The human comes to be identified with the white, patriarchal figure of a King – Lear – whose identification of himself with 'unaccommodated man' (or 'Man') in the shape of Poor Tom obliterates class, sexual and racial distinctions and, paradoxically, indorses the *status quo* and the systems of marginalization and oppression perpetuated through the inequitable division of 'property, power and inheritance'.

This politicized reconsideration of the humanism of *King Lear* was also (and perhaps most powerfully) reflected in feminist interpretations of the play**.** In her 1984 critique of 'The Patriarchal Bard', Kathleen McKluskie contends that the subject of tragedy, far from being simply 'human', is explicitly and misogynistically gendered as male, while the female characters in the play are marginalized in a repressive, patriarchal world. This world insists on heterosexual relations in which the woman is subordinated, with any figures contesting that social and familial organization deemed disruptively 'monstrous' or 'unnatural' and in dire need of containment – as Goneril and Regan consistently are by Lear and, indeed, by Cordelia.[414] Feminist interpretations of the play are also advanced in the nuanced psychoanalytic readings of Coppélia Kahn (1986) and Janet Adelman (1992). Both critics attended to the 'missing' wife/mother figure from the play, with Adelman observing that

> King Lear has no wife, his daughters no mother; nor, apparently, have they ever had one: Queen Lear goes unmentioned, except for those characteristic moments when Lear invokes her to cast doubt on his paternity.[415]

[413] Ibid, p. 198.
[414] Kathleen Mcluskie, 'The Patriarchal Bard: A Reading of *King Lear*', *King Lear: New Casebooks*, pp. 48-59.
[415] Janet Adelman, *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare's Play, Hamlet to The Tempest* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 104; Coppélia Kahn, 'The Absent Mother in *King Lear*', *King Lear: New Casebooks*, pp. 92-113.

Adleman and Khan both read the absence of any mother figure from the play as part of a wider, homosocial desire to supress the debilitating memory of maternal origin and disavow an uncontrollably sexualized female presence – a fear reflected in the anxiety-ridden speeches of Lear, where he refers to the vagina as a 'sulphurous pit' (IV.vi.130) and to the 'riotous appetite' of women: 'Down from the waist they are centaurs, though women all above' (IV.vi.120).

Less common were readings that contested the perceived heteronormative or racist aspects of the play – though as Keith Linley observes, the 'lust' that Lear bewails was often understood in the early modern era to comprise all 'unclean thoughts and unclean acts, involving unnatural desires like bestiality, incest and homosexuality', so that the rage against female lust might (albeit spectrally) include a variety of possible and unspecified sexual acts.[416] Benjamin Minor and Ayanna Thompson also draw attention to the early modern ideational tie between diabolic possession and the figure of 'the Moor', so that – in his ostensible possession by and flight from demonic forces – Poor Tom can be said to be haunted by a figure against which the Eurocentric norm of the civilized white Christian male was formed and became recognizable.[417] Minor and Thompson do not make the argument, but the implication is that, in identifying with the figure of Poor Tom, the common human identity Lear avows in the storm is a white, Europeanized identity pathologically haunted by the devilish 'black' figure it would seek to disavow and (quite literally) exorcize – if it only could.

[416] Keith Linley, *King Lear in Context: The Cultural Background* (London and New York: Anthem Press, 2015), p. 57.
[417] Benjamin Minor and Ayanna Thompson, '"Edgar I nothing am": Blackface in *King Lear*', *Staged Transgression in Shakespeare's England*, ed. Rory Loughnane and Edel Semple (New York and London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 155.

By bringing the various subjectivities marginalized or oppressed in the play back to the fore, many Shakespeare critics were concerned to show that the 'tragic' discourse of subjectivity in *King Lear* is not universal, but revealed the need for 'dissident politics of class, race, gender and sexual orientation, both within texts and in the role those texts play in culture'.[418] This often involved a self-consciously deconstructive hermeneutic practice, which concentrated on the gaps, omissions and ellipses in the play (the missing mother, the absent 'back-stories' of Goneril and Regan, the disappearance of the Fool and so on). These various 'gaps', along with the newly acknowledged divergences between Quarto and Folio versions of *King Lear*, provided critics with the opportunity to interrogate the play and its investment in suspicious ideological and aesthetic values. It was the work of criticism to reveal the lie of aesthetic unity and read the play against the grain of its superficial 'meaning' by analysing its disavowed absences and interstices – though that often meant simply accepting that *King Lear* is the unified aesthetic phenomena previous (most usually Christian) critics had found. This failure to give proper consideration to aesthetic form would ultimately undermine much political criticism over the period, as both Joughin and Grady have contended.[419] Most political interpretations of *King Lear* treated the idea of aesthetic form with suspicion, insisting the play – far from being in any way 'above' or 'beyond' society – is ultimately made up of ideological discourses that ought to be interrogated by critics.[420]

On the one hand, Shakespeare critics in the 1980s were obviously and openly responding to previous readings of *King Lear* as a Christian, humanist or absurdist play – a

[418] Alan Sinfield, *Faultlines: Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading* (Berkley, Los Angeles, Oxford: University of California Press, 1992), p. 10.
[419] John Joughin, 'Shakespeare, Modernity, and the Aesthetic: Art, Truth and Judgement in *The Winter's Tale*', *Shakespeare and Modernity: Early Modern to Millennium*, ed. Hugh Grady (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 61-84; Hugh Grady, *Shakespeare and Impure Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 1-5.
[420] Ibid.

response informed by growing social movements from the 1960s onwards and by the reception of Continental theory via Cultural Studies. On the other hand, the politicization of Shakespeare Studies in the 1980s and 1990s is also a response to the rise of the so-called New Right, as represented by the election victory of Margret Thatcher in 1979 and Ronald Reagan in 1981.

Deeply influenced by the work of Friedrich Hayek, most obviously his 1943 *The Road to Serfdom*, the New Right were ideologically committed to a version of neoliberalism that promoted the freedom of the individual, with central policies including the dismantling various forms of state bureaucracy, the deregulation of markets and the privatization of previously nationalized industries.[421] The New Right were equally committed to a vision of social conservativism – a vision that did not necessarily square with, and was even undermined by, its neoliberal economic policies.[422] This aspect of the New Right stressed conservative ('British') values that were exclusive of precisely those marginalized peoples and identities which the Cultural Materialists were keen to defend and promote. The wide range of social and religious concerns (abortion, education, gay rights) around which the New Right organized itself were disproportionately damaging for sections of the community that did not seem to fit into the ideological vision of traditional (male, white, heteronormative) values. Various cuts to state infrastructure also impacted already marginal communities.[423]

But the development of Cultural Materialism can, as Grady has shown, also be seen as indicative of a shift from modernism to postmodernism – and from industrialism to post-

[421] For Hayek and his influence on Thatcher and the New Right, see Andrew Adonis 'The Transformation of the Conservative Party in the 1980s', *A Conservative Revolution?: The Thatcher-Reagan Decade in Perspective*, ed. Andrew Adonis and Tim Hames (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1994), pp. 145-167.
[422] Gillian Peele, 'Culture, Religion and Public Morality', *A Conservative Revolution?*, pp. 67-88.
[423] See in particular Sylvia Bashevkin, *Women on the Defensive: Living Through Conservative Times* (London and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

industrialism – in culture and theory over the 1980s and 1990s.[424] Previous Christian, absurdist and political readings of *King Lear* were, if in various ways, all responsive to the reification of the subject by modern totalized systems. But with its new preoccupation with pluralist discourses of the subject, Shakespeare Studies reflected the transition to post-industrial society, where the heterogeneously postmodern worlds of globalized capitalism and consumer culture made more hybrid forms of identity newly intelligible. These social developments were – ironically – largely brought about by the neoliberalization of economic policy wrought by the New Right, even its social policy promoted a return to 'Victorian values'.

With the movement from modernist reification to postmodern identity politics, Auschwitz more or less disappears from the critical discourse surrounding *King Lear*. Where in previous readings Auschwitz is seen as the nadir of modernity, in the politically radical criticism of the 1980s and 1990s the Holocaust largely falls from view. There is no allusion to the event that – in many ways – had led to the unrivalled supremacy of *King Lear* in the Shakespeare canon in the pathbreaking 1984 collection *Political Shakespeare: Essays in Cultural Materialism*. It is also absent from *The Subject of Tragedy* and a host of other vital, works of Shakespeare criticism that deal with *King Lear*, including *Radical Tragedy*.[425] Postmodernism – as I set out in Chapter One – has been theorized as a critical response to the Holocaust.[426] But the near-total absence of Auschwitz from critical analyses of *King Lear* is telling: it is indicative of a paradigm-shift away from a concern with de-subjectification in totalized, modern society to the articulation of various forms of political identity in

[424] See the final chapter of *The Modernist Shakespeare*, 'Towards the Postmodern Shakespeare: Contemporary Critical Trends', pp. 191-245.
[425] Terry Eagleton does refer to Auschwitz in his Foreword to the third (2010) edition (p. x) and Dollimore takes up the challenge in his new 'Introduction' (p. xxv and p. xxvii).
[426] See Chapter One, p. 63.

fragmented, postmodern society, comprising feminist, post-colonial and queer intersections.

Cultural Materialist criticism set out to critique both *King Lear* and its critical reception. But it also critiqued the meanings produced by both past and contemporary stagings. These were often seen as inadequate and caught up in institutional forms of power that did not represent the marginalized and oppressed. I now turn to analyse *King Lear* in performance in the 1980s and the 1990s, before considering the way in which the critical and performance history of the play was understood to necessitate subversive acts of appropriation.

3.2. *King Lear* in Performance

It would be wrong to say that stagings of *King Lear* over the 1980s and 1990s were 'apolitical'. But it would also be wrong to say that productions of the play pursued the social and political questions that were relevant to the anti-hegemonic priorities of Shakespeare criticism. Productions of *King Lear* were predominantly shaped, on the one hand, by the discourse of Christian or humanist redemption and, on the other, by the discourse of absurdism – precisely the universalizing interpretations of the play critics were placing under scrutiny.

For his 1982 production, Adrian Noble directed *King Lear* in repertoire with *Lear* (*King Lear* was played on the main stage, *Lear* at The Other Place). The decision reflected a desire to produce a political interpretation of the play that drew on Brecht; but Noble also drew on Kott and, as he put it, sought to stress 'the savage cruelty and the sense of the

absurd' found in 'a vengeful, Godless universe'.[427] Precisely the same vision informed the 1997 Peter Hall production at the Old Vic. Fresh from having directed the same company in a production of *Waiting for Godot*, Hall made the case that *King Lear* conveys a 'Sophoclean – almost a post-Beckett – recognition of the awful meaninglessness and randomness of life', with director, company and reviewers playing-up – perhaps unavoidably – the 'unmistakable echoes between these plays'.[428] Nicholas Hytner similarly refuted 'the idea of the tragic hero ennobled and achieving wisdom through suffering' and in his 1990 staging insisted that *King Lear* is 'a brutal play which offers no consolation' for the unmitigated 'catastrophe' that Lear 'unleashes'.[429]

It is perhaps not surprising to find that David Hare – former Royal Court playwright in-residence in 1971-1972 and a co-founder of the politically radical Joint Stock Theatre Company – found the Kott reading of Shakespeare as 'an unknowing forerunner of Beckett' and *King Lear* as a prototypical work of the Theatre of the Absurd 'nonsense' – even though it was his attendance at the 1962 Brook production that had originally inspired Hare to become a playwright.[430] Hare had alluded to *King Lear* in his play *The Great Exhibition* (Hampstead Theatre, 1972) – a satirical anatomy of the self-enclosed middle-class world of the political elite as typified by the temperamentally aloof Labour MP, Charlie Hammet. The epigraph to the play was the 'unaccommodated man' speech from *King Lear*, placed alongside statistics concerning the 'Distribution of Private Property: Percentage of total net private capital in relation to percentage of total population'.[431] Maud Hammet – the Tory wife of Charlie – is the casting director in an amateur production of *King Lear* and ends up

[427] *Performing King Lear*, p. 57.
[428] Quoted in *Shakespeare in Performance: King Lear*, p. 88 and p. 89.
[429] Ibid, p. 100.
[430] Ibid, pp. 218-219.
[431] See Scott Fraser, *A Politic Theatre: The Drama of David Hare* (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 1996), pp. 33-40. This obviously has parallels with the prologue Goodbody used in her 1974 production.

playing Cordelia in a performance that is deemed a failure. Even more of a failure, however, is the way Charlie meets his mistress, Catriona. Charlie publically exposes (or 'exhibits') himself to Catriona on Hampstead Heath. She fails to respond, rendering Charlie impotent. The whole scene, with its parodic inversion of the heath scenes from *King Lear*, is indicative of the way the ostensibly radical Charlie fails to live up to and properly 'perform' socialist politics – the politics of the heath.[432] His interest lies less in distribution undoing excess than tawdry self-display and illicit affairs, and does nothing to advance the condition of the working-classes.

Hare might be accused of the same type of political failure. Hare directed *King Lear* at the National Theatre in 1986 – the first time he had directed Shakespeare and the first time the play had appeared at the National.[433] Hare stated that *King Lear* is a play 'about' 'Family, religion, politics, madness, sex'.[434] Whereas in the 1970s 'politics' may have been paramount, by the 1980s 'politics' had been displaced by a concentration on family and religion, fading into the distance with 'madness' and 'sex'. This division served to artificially separate areas of social life from 'politics', rendering family, religion, madness and sex ostensibly 'above' or 'beyond' material cultural and historical specificity. Carol Homden contends that Hare produced a humanist *King Lear* that was 'incompatible with a supposed genesis within a tradition of political theatre', where the 'mystery is no longer merely political, it is eternally human' – a sense of the 'eternal' formalized by the Brook-influenced bare stage Hare used.[435]

Perhaps the most openly 'political' staging of *King Lear* in the 1990s was the Max Stafford-Clark production at the Royal Court in 1993. For reviewer Paul Taylor, 'tremors of

[432] Ibid, p. 37.
[433] See *Performing King Lear*, p. 218.
[434] Quoted in Carol Homden, *The Plays of David Hare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 231.
[435] Ibid.

contemporaneity' were stirred in images of a disintegrating state that echoed the breakup of Yugoslavia – not least in the final act, where cowed refugees were seen hurrying with meagre worldly goods bundled into supermarket trolleys while artillery fire sounded in the distance.[436] Such images would return to the Royal Court with the 1995 *Blasted* (I analyse some of the overlaps in Chapter Seven). But for most reviewers and critics, the most remarkable aspect of the production was the 'drag-queen' Fool, played by Andy Serkis.[437] The sexually indeterminate Fool underscored the misogyny of Lear, even as he disrupted and undermined the performative nature of the gender binaries on which that misogyny rests. This aspect of the production was applauded for its feminist and queer credentials and its reconsideration of the 'heroic' Lear, who in the opening scenes was seen bending over while the Fool pretended to ride him, whipping the monarch with his own crop.[438] But the politically radical feminist/queer aspects of the production were – for some – ultimately diminished by the way in which Lear underwent 'a late-flowering recognition of social injustice', where a universalizing humanism restated the image of 'unaccommodated "Man"'.[439]

For the most part, the production history of *King Lear* in the 1980s and 1990s did little to progress the sort of interrogatory political agenda being advanced in the world of Shakespeare Studies. Susan Bennett takes an irrevocably dim view of the prominence of *King Lear* on-stage in the 1980s (and beyond); she contends that the Cultural Industrial 'over-production' and unceasing 'proliferation' of the play over 1980s-1990s served to

[436] Paul Taylor, 'The Woman Question', *Independent*, Saturday 23rd January 1993.
[437] Ibid. See also Peter Holland, *English Shakespeares: Shakespeare on the English Stage in the 1990s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 154.
[438] Ibid.
[439] See *Performing King Lear*, p. 181.

perform 'a nostalgic identification with "greatness" – of the text, of Shakespeare'.[440] Bennett sees productions of the play as relying on a narrow set of design, acting and conceptual choices, which did little to shift the dominant interpretations that had been formed by previous stagings. This is most apparent, for Bennett, in the persistent ideational tie between the play and Beckettian absurdism and Christian-humanist redemption, both of which restate the 'transcendent' cultural value of the play. Such choices leave little room for the cultural representation of marginalized peoples, which Bennett sees as politically urgent.

This cultural homogenization of *King Lear* is portrayed in the Caryl Churchill satire *Serious Money* (Royal Court, 1987), which represents the machinations of the London International Financial Futures and Options Exchange. One of the more rapacious traders in the play, Billy Corman, is elected to the Board of the National Theatre and uses the cultural capital his new position affords him to burnish his own self and public image and to make contacts that augment his various business and political interests. Earlier in the action, Corman had met the Tory Cabinet Minister Gleason, during an intermission at the National, which is used for the purposes of a consultation. The play on offer is *King Lear* – but while Gleason perfunctorily deems the production to be 'excellent *of course*', he also admits to bouts of sleep that are spasmodically interrupted by the 'shouting' onstage, while he also confuses both Goneril and Regan with Ophelia from *Hamlet*.[441] This brief interlude reflects the commodification of Shakespeare in the market-driven world of the 1980s and the privileged canonical status given to *King Lear* as a piece of 'high' national and cultural capital – even while that position remains haunted by the memory of the once ascendant *Hamlet*.

[440] Susan Bennett, *Performing Nostalgia: Shifting Shakespeare and the Contemporary Past* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 77.
[441] Caryl Churchill, *Serious Money*, ed. Bill Naismith (London: Methuen, 2013), p. 102 (italics added).

The implication is that *King Lear* has become a cultural 'experience' to be consumed by Philistine audiences in a state of post-work stupor – a situation akin to the commodification of 'leisure time' critiqued by Adorno and the growing role of the Culture Industry in post-Auschwitz life.[442]

It is the increasing cultural homogenization of Shakespeare which underpins calls for appropriation in politically radical readings of Shakespeare – the arrogation (and transformation) of property that belongs to the establishment in the service of politically oppositional meanings. It is to the intersection of political Shakespeare(s) and appropriation I now turn. By providing an analysis of *Lear's Daughters* (1987) and *King of England* (1988) I want to show that some writers have appropriated *King Lear* to represent socially and politically marginalized subjectivities. I go on to consider where Rudkin, Barker and Kane 'sit' in the wider cultural and political developments around appropriation and *King Lear* in the 1980s and 1990s.

3.3. *King Lear* and Appropriation

For the most part, Cultural Materialist criticism addressed itself to the conservative social and political ideologies Shakespeare is appropriated to serve. But for Dollimore and Sinfield, writing in *Political Shakespeare*, 'appropriation could work the other way: subordinate, marginal or dissident elements could appropriate dominant discourses' – even while, for Francis Barker, it would take 'a massive re-writing' to make the action of *King Lear*

[442] See in particular the essay 'Free Time' in *The Culture Industry*, pp. 187-197.

'radical'.[443] This reflects a wider prioritizing of acts of so-called 'creative vandalism' in Shakespeare Studies over the 1980s and 1990s.[444] Cultural Materialist critics called on artists (and other critics) to engage in acts of artistic and political sabotage against Shakespeare, often through the use of ironic postmodern aesthetic strategies, including pastiche and parody. Such vandalism was to be undertaken with the aim of deconstructing the 'original' play and allowing the space for marginalized subjectivities to (re)appear in an exclusionary dramatic work.

Such 'creative vandalism' is typified by the 1987 play *Lear's Daughters* – a play originally written by Elaine Feinstein, but heavily and collaboratively rewritten by the Women's Theatre Group (WTG).[445] Described by Lizbeth Goodman as 'a landmark in feminist "re-inventing" of Shakespeare', the play is a 'her-story' prequel that deconstructs the moralistic 'fairy-tale structure of *King Lear*' and its simplistic binary of 'good' and 'bad' daughters.[446] Over a series of fifteen, short non-linear scenes, *Lear's Daughters* depicts the early-lives of Goneril, Regan and Cordelia – with a Nanny and androgynous ('a woman or a man?') Serkis-like Fool, who acts as a morally ambiguous narrator, in tow.[447] The play fills out the back-stories of the daughters to show that all are victims of psychological and sexual abuse on the part of Lear. *Lear's Daughters* omits Lear from the stage completely, indicative

[443] Jonathon Dollimore, 'Shakespeare, Cultural Materialism and the New Historicism', *Political Shakespeare*, p. 12; Francis Barker, *The Culture of Violence: Essays on Tragedy and History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), p. 49.
[444] Jonathon Dollimore, 'Shakespeare Understudies: The Sodomite, The Prostitute, The Transvestite and Their Critics', *Political Shakespeare*, p. 144.
[445] See Daniel Fischler and Mark Fortier, 'Introduction', *Lear's Daughters*, Elaine Feinstein and the WTG, *Adaptations of Shakespeare*, p. 215.
[446] Lizbeth Goodman, 'Women's Alternative Shakespeares and Women's Alternatives to Shakespeare in Contemporary British Theater', *Cross-Cultural Performances: Difference in Women's Re-Visions of Shakespeare* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois, 1993), p. 220.
[447] *Lear's Daughters*, p. 226. All references to the text are from *Adaptations of Shakespeare*, where I indicate scene and page number in text.

of its deep-seated interrogation of the Lear-figure, his perceived moral 'progression' and his misogyny.

This shift from a humanist (phallocentric) narrative of moral progress and tragic recognition to the marginalized subjectivities of Goneril, Regan and Cordelia is typified by the way the play subverts the word 'unbutton'. Lear 'unbuttons' in *King Lear* to assert his identity with the poor and suffering – with 'man' in its most basic, denuded state – but in *Lear's Daughters* Goneril remembers Lear 'unbuttoning' (8.224) as a prelude to incestuous rape. 'I cannot put it all together', admits Goneril (10.229) – a failure of self-narration that witnesses a traumatized history. The non-linear form of the play allows for a more open-ended, exploratory dramatization of the damaged subjectivities of the daughters, all of whom are individualized in a more compelling way than in *King Lear*. The Nanny even provides 'fairy tale' stories about the daughters, recalling that Cordelia conveys her history through 'words', Goneril through 'colours' and Regan through 'touch' and 'shape' (1.217-218).

The absence of the 'missing mother', Queen Lear, is also clarified in the play, though she never appears onstage. In his patriarchal desire for a male heir, Lear – as the Nanny remembers – constantly 'whined on at her to let him fuck her' (10.228). This, however, results in a string of miscarriages which eventually kills the Queen; any memory of her is subsequently repressed and her plight is understood as nothing short of biological destiny: 'It is our role. To marry and breed' (12.229). While the play depicts the oppressive patriarchal ideology that reduces women to 'daughters, wives and mothers', however, it also insists on the possibility of female empowerment and liberation. Despite her death, the Nanny remembers that the Queen was 'important' to Lear: 'Yes. She *was* important to him. She organized the budget. Looked after his interests. Night after night when he was not with

her, adding and subtracting' (10.228). The idea that Queen Lear would make a more responsible and morally upright ruler in view of the chaos presided over by Lear – 'He will have to manage on his own now', as Goneril plaintively puts it (8.224) – is also broached by Barker in his *Seven Lears*. The play also stages something akin to the discovery of the gaol in the opening scene of *Seven Lears*, where the 'poor' – 'begging for food' (9.226) – plead with those in power: 'Bars. As I walked past, these hands came from out of them, clawing and scratching. Nanny. There were people in there. Shut in. He is the King. He must know that they are there?' (10.228).[448] The final image of the play shows the crown belonging to Lear being thrown unceremoniously into the air before it is caught by Goneril, Regan and Cordelia simultaneously – an unambiguous image of collective female self-empowerment and sovereignty.[449]

In his play *King of England* (1988) – staged at the London Theatre Royal in the ethnically diverse community of Stratford – Barrie Keefe produced a 'racialized' *King Lear*, which used the play to dramatize the contradictions and intergenerational conflicts that shape the racial and class identity of succeeding generations of Black Caribbean migrants. The play transforms 'King' Lear into the black Trinidadian tube driver Mr King, who on his retirement decides to leave his (now, mortgage-free) council home in Forest Gate to his daughters, Susan (Cordelia) and Linda (Goneril and Regan), and re-locate back 'home' to Trinidad, after the recent death of his wife (the 'missing' mother) – Malvina. Both daughters are sceptical – and, in the case of Linda, downright resentful – of the social and political conservativism of King. King is a monarchist and he also upbraids Susan for her 'un-ladylike' criticism of Thatcher, who – for King – necessarily demands respect because she is Prime

[448] See Chapter Six, pp. 264-269.
[449] 'Women's Alternative Shakespeares', pp. 222-223.

Minister: 'I find such sentiments particularly astonishing coming from a woman'.[450] During an '*intimate family occasion*' (1.1.12) of a restaurant dinner to mark his retirement, King waxes lyrical about the 'Mother Country' (by which he means England) and insists that his daughters drink a toast to the nation – which both resent: 'England – some bloody mother!' (1.1.23).

King recalls how, 'after the war', he thought he would be 'welcome home to England, the Mother Country' as a 'hero' (2.3.35) – a statement of post-war optimism in the type of social justice *King Lear* has often been thought of as envisioning. King even seems to see the dream of home-ownership (as expedited by the Thatcherite, Right-to-Buy policy) as a natural extension of the 'better things' (2.2.35) promised after the war. Susan, however, disabuses her father of his 'fantasy' (1.1.23) with a more clear-eyed view of Thatcherism. 'Thatcher is butchering the NHS', observes Susan, who provides her Cordelia-like 'kind nursery' (I.i.125) as an NHS nurse. 'England is going to rack and ruin' (1.1.12): 'This country now, does not care about its weak, or its poor or its ill. Not really care. Because that costs money' (1.1.24).

Keefe uses *King Lear* to reflect on the 'shame' and the 'tragedy' (2.1.30) of the disproportionate impact New Right policy had on marginalized and oppressed sections of society – as typified by the inadequate care the missing mother Malvina receives in her struggle against breast cancer, the disease that finally kills her (2.4). Keefe does not necessarily 'interrogate' the humanist, redemptive understanding of *King Lear* in *King of England*; indeed, the play even restores the 'happy ending' of the original myth, as King and Susan reconcile before his return to Trinidad, with the Bob Marley score that accompanies the play shifting to '*Redemption Song*' (2.4.37) in the final scene. But Keefe does appropriate

[450] Barrie Keefe, *King of England and Bastard Angel: Two Plays* (London: Methuen, 1988), p. 14. All references to the text are from the Methuen edition, where I indicate scene and page number in text.

the play to represent otherwise marginalized subjectivities. He even provides some ideologically suspicious demystification of *King Lear* in his re-working of the storm scenes. When he meets a former tube-worker called Jimmy – now a homeless alcoholic after being made redundant – in a scrap-yard, King engages in some Lear-like rhetoric, about his apparent loss, and rediscovery, of 'humanity': 'I am a man now!' (2.1.26). The partial character of that ascription 'man' is betrayed by Jimmy, whose repugnant, homophobic rhetoric reveals the ideological and cultural limits inscribed in patriarchal ideals of masculinity.

Both *Lear's Daughters* and *King of England* represent the type of appropriation Cultural Materialist critics thought necessary to 'radicalize' Shakespeare and allow *King Lear* to represent marginalized subjectivities. What place, however, do Rudkin, Barker and Kane occupy in the developments of the 1980s and 1990s? It is to the Catastrophists that I now turn.

3.4. Rudkin, Barker and Kane

There are some obvious parallels between the politically-informed understanding of appropriation advanced by Cultural Materialist critics and the Catastrophist appropriations of *King Lear* by Rudkin, Barker and Kane. These dramatists all repudiate both the Christian and/or humanist redemptionist reading of *King Lear* and the absurdist reading of the play developed in its wake. These playwrights are also deeply suspicious of the growing role of various Culture (including 'Shakespearean') Industries in society. Rudkin, Barker and Kane diverge from Cultural Materialist criticism, however, in stressing the autonomy of the tragic

subject, who cannot be finally constrained by any form of identity. These playwrights also insist on the autonomy of the aesthetic sphere, which is reducible to neither society nor politics.

This prioritization of subjective autonomy can be (and, in the case of Barker, has been) seen as an expansion of New Right ideas and the ideological fetishization of the neoliberal individual, who is understood to be completely unconstrained by traditional forms of power and authority in his/her bid for self-actualization.[451] What such readings collapse is the contradiction between rhetoric and reality. Where late capitalist culture proclaims 'universal concepts of "freedom"' and '"social emancipation"' it does so even 'as individuals are consumed by an economic totality'.[452] What the dominance of neoliberal capitalist democracy and the so-called 'end of history' precipitated in the 1980s and 1990s was no less than the totalization of a reifying capitalist system and its related socio-political forces. The period saw the 'massification' of a society that Thatcher had proclaimed did not even exist: 'There is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families'.[453]

It is in response to the catastrophic totalization of late capitalist society that Rudkin, Barker and Kane develop ideas around the autonomy of the subject and the aesthetic – a point I develop in the case studies. Through appropriations of *King Lear*, Rudkin, Barker and Kane radically extend a late modernist critique of totalization into the postmodern era. This critique is less preoccupied with political conceptions of identity than it is with the

[451] Liz Tomlin, 'The Politics of Catastrophe: Confrontation or Confirmation in Howard Barker's Theatre', *Modern Drama*, Volume 43, Number 1 (2000), pp. 66-77. Tomlin writes that the tragic individual in Catastrophist theatre typifies 'neoliberal egotism' (p. 68).
[452] Charles Pusick, 'Negative Reason: Adorno and the Critique of Neoliberal Society' (PhD: Villanova University, 2017), p. 36.
[453] Quoted in Andrew S. Crines, Timothy Heppell and Peter Dorey, *The Political Rhetoric and Oratory of Margaret Thatcher* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. 131.

destruction of subjectivity *as such* in the totalized social systems of post-Auschwitz culture. This situates Catastrophism in an ongoing discourse around *King Lear*, modernity and the Holocaust that stretches back into the 1940s. *King Lear* becomes a vehicle through which Catastrophist playwrights can interrogate the destruction of the subject in post-Auschwitz life and insist on the autonomy of the tragic subject, who (re)fashions him or herself out of disaster.

Conclusion

This chapter has analysed the critical, performance and appropriation history of *King Lear* in the post-war era. I have shown that, since the Second World War, *King Lear* has emerged as the play through which the Auschwitz experience – the total destruction of the subject by modern social systems – has been interpreted and 'thought through'. This discourse around *King Lear* and the Holocaust has comprised reactionary Christian readings that analyse (and critique) the whole process of modernity itself and absurdist interpretations that use the play for a wider engagement with the Holocaust and the European catastrophe. I have also shown that political readings of the play, which generally take a Marxist approach to conceptions of the historical process and the necessity of engagement, can also be located against the ongoing legacy of Auschwitz. My interpretation of *King Lear* in the 1980s and 1990s shows that political conceptions of *King Lear* morphed into a concern with identity and appropriation. This, as I understand it, reflects a wider shift in criticism and the history of ideas from a modernist (society as totality) to postmodernist (society as fragmented) paradigm. I have shown that Rudkin, Barker and Kane share some traits with Cultural

Materialist conceptions of appropriation; but I have also contended that Catastrophism continues a late modernist critique of totality into the postmodern epoch. This sees a reorientation around the autonomy of the tragic subject and the non-reified space of the aesthetic sphere.

Chapters One, Two and Three have analysed the theoretical, aesthetic and historical backdrop to Catastrophist appropriation. With that backdrop now considered, I turn to close-readings of the chosen case studies. I begin with Edward Bond and his 1971 play, *Lear*. Bond, as I set out in the Introduction, cannot necessarily be considered a Catastrophist writer. His analysis of modernity and Auschwitz has parallels with the Catastrophists, but his tragic aesthetic ultimately repeats the reification of subjectivity, as opposed to contesting it. This makes his play invaluable as a frame through which to analyse Catastrophist aesthetics and subjectivity.

Chapter Four

'The Man Without Pity is Mad': Edward Bond's *Lear* and the Dialectic of Engagement

'Coldness, the basic principle […] without which there could have been no Auschwitz' – Theodor Adorno.[454]

'Once the wall is built, it takes almost a miracle to break through it' – Max Horkheimer.[455]

Introduction

This chapter will analyse the Edward Bond play *Lear*. The play, which has been described as a 'landmark' in post-war British theatre, was originally staged at the Royal Court Theatre in 1971, with William Gaskill directing and Harry Andrews taking the eponymous title role.[456] The play is a wholesale rewriting of *King Lear*, which makes sweeping textual and formal changes to the Shakespearean 'original'. The action of the play, which reduces the Five Acts of *King Lear* into a more condensed, Three Act form, revolves around the construction, and attempted destruction, of a Wall, which Lear is building in order to keep out the (largely imagined) enemies of his Kingdom. His daughters, Bodice and Fontanelle (Goneril and

[454] *Negative Dialectics*, p. 363.
[455] Max Horkheimer, *Critique of Instrumental Reason*, trans. Matthew Jay O'Connell *et al* (London: Verso, 2012), p. 116.
[456] Patricia Hern, 'Commentary', *Lear*, Edward Bond (London: Methuen, 2006) pp. lxvii-lxviii; Peter Billingham, *Edward Bond: A Critical Study* (London: Palgrave McMillan, 2014), p. 49. All references to *Lear* are from the Methuen edition and take the form of act, scene and line numbers.

Regan) secretly conspire to marry the Duke of Cornwall and Duke of North – the figures against whom Lear has built and defended the Wall. Lear soon finds himself in conflict with his daughters and, by the end of Act One, is defeated and made a refugee. Cordelia is transformed into an anonymous woman whose husband gives the outcast Lear temporary haven. Cordelia is subsequently raped and widowed in an act of state terror. Prompted by motives of vengeance to take up arms against the daughters and the Dukes, Cordelia adopts the role of revolutionary utopian ideologue, subduing Bodice and Fontanelle and taking over the state by the end of Act Two. Cordelia, far from instituting a promised utopian society, repeats the depravations of the previous regimes and begins a reign of terror, symbolized by the rebuilt Wall. Lear, who escapes from prison, is haunted by a ghost, who in Act Three tries to tempt Lear away from politics into an idyllic, pastoral fantasy. Lear resists the ghost and confronts Cordelia: 'Our lives are awkward and fragile and we have only one thing to keep us sane: pity, and the man without pity is mad' (III.iii.84). Lear, however, fails to make Cordelia 'pregnant to good pity' (*King Lear*, IV.vi.211). His only recourse is a final, doomed gesture. The play ends with Lear scaling the Wall and attempting to 'dig' it up, before he is shot dead by a guard.

By providing a close-reading of *Lear* and by drawing on some of his own theatre theory and its relation to aspects of the original 1971 production, I aim to show that Bond appropriates *King Lear* in response to the totally reified world instituted at Auschwitz. This – in part – aligns Bond with Catastrophism. *Lear* departs from Catastrophism, however, in its Marxist-humanist conception of the historical process, which is ultimately conditioned by a

rationalistic Enlightenment faith in the possibility of moral and political 'progress' over time.[457]

I will show that, in his appropriation of *King Lear*, Bond critiques a posture of complete resignation, which he believes to be the central trait of both absurdist drama and *King Lear*. Bond intends to replace the (perceived) absurdist passivity of *King Lear* with a version of the play that insists on concerted social and political engagement, which is necessary to bring about change. Not unlike other Marxist interpretations of the play in the 1970s, which I analysed in Chapter Three, Bond sees absurdist resignation as politically retrogressive.[458] His version of *King Lear* represents 'heroic' action against a reified and reifying world – the world, not only of the concentration camps, but also of Stalinism and Western capitalism.

The notion that drama should both represent and catalyse action against a dehumanizing social system evinces the profound influence of Brecht. This is not, however, to ignore the critical controversy around the 'debt' that Bond owes to Brecht. Bond has increasingly come to distance himself from Brecht and, in recent times, has even accused Brechtian theatre of being 'the theatre of Auschwitz'.[459] This critique has to do with perceived acquiescence of Brecht with the East German Soviet regime ('his answer to Auschwitz is the Gulag') and to the idea that the *Verfremdungseffekt* 'creates the psychology of the death-camp' – by which Bond means an overly detached form of

[457] See Jenny S. Spencer, *Dramatic Strategies in the Plays of Edward Bond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 4-5.
[458] See Chapter Three, pp. 145-147 and pp. 150-152.
[459] See Kate Katafiasz, 'Alienation is the Theatre of Auschwitz: An Exploration of Form in Edward Bond's Theatre', *Edward Bond and the Dramatic Child: Edward Bond's Plays for Young People*, ed. David Davis (Trentham Books: Stoke-on-Trent, 2005), p. 25.

subjective consciousness (or as Adorno calls it, 'coldness').[460] Brecht intends for his *Verfremdungseffekt* to distance the audience from emotional, empathetic engagement with onstage characters, encouraging the audience to adopt a properly critical, 'scientific', understanding of a play and its historical materialist analysis of inequitable social conditions. But for Bond, Brechtian detachment does not do enough to incite committed sympathetic engagement, fostering an aesthetically distanced response that – as Bond sees it – is comparable to the silent passivity of those who failed to resist (or colluded in) the Final Solution.[461]

This is not necessarily the place to analyse the value of the critique Bond has formed against Brecht. What is at stake, however, is the notion of *engagement* – of concerted moral and political action. This underpins the critique Bond has mounted against Shakespearean, Beckettian and – since around the mid-1990s – Brechtian drama. Bond critiques all of these playwrights for a perceived failure to depict and elicit imaginative social and political engagement.

Despite his criticism of Brecht and the psychological distance created by the *Verfremdungseffekt*, I contend that the notion of engagement on which his critique rests still inheres to a relatively under-interrogated 'scientific' (Marxist) humanist conception of the historical process that Bond derived from his erstwhile theatrical master. His conception of *King Lear* is conditioned by the apparent contradiction between rational moral insight and political (dis)engagement that grows out of a humanist philosophical vision of the subject, tragedy and history. It is the same contradiction that informs his understanding of

[460] Edward Bond, 'The Third Crisis: The State of Future Drama', *Edward Bond*. Accessed 3 May 2018. http://www.edwardbond.org/Comment/comment.html.
[461] Kate Katafiasz, 'Quarrelling with Brecht: Understanding Bond's Post-structuralist Political Aesthetic', *Studies in Theatre and Performance*, 28:3 (2008), p. 247.

Shakespeare more widely, Beckett and Brecht – though not, it seems, his own position as a playwright.[462]

I turn now to analyse the way Bond understands *King Lear*, setting the scene for the way his appropriation of the play aims to ideologically 'correct' its (supposed) moral of political resignation.

2. Bond, Shakespeare and *King Lear*

Bond has a conspicuously split understanding of *King Lear*. Bond praises *King Lear* for its piercing insight into social and political injustice, stating that 'Shakespeare created Lear, who is the most radical of all social critics'.[463] Bond bases his interpretation of the social and political radicalism of *King Lear* (and Lear) on the storm scenes and the scenes on the heath, in which Lear rails against the inequality of society in his 'Poor naked wretches' (III.iv.28) speech and forms a devastating critique of all forms of authority and injustice. These scenes – which in previous performances from the 1940s provided the basis for a Christianized, redemptionist reading of the play – are secularized by Bond and interpreted from a radical Marxist-humanist perspective, in which Lear is transformed into the most powerful critic of inequality in the play, insisting on a reformed world where 'distribution should undo excess' (IV.i.78).

[462] In a 2016 interview with Mark Lawson marking his eightieth birthday, Bond reflects on his commitment to the British Labour Party under Tony Blair. Taking Bond at his word, it is hard to imagine him being sympathetic had Brecht been a steadfast Labour voter during and after the Iraq years. See 'Edward Bond: 'War Horse? Obscene. Downton? Spiteful', *The Guardian*. Accessed 3 May 2018. https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2016/may/22/edward-bond-medea-war-dea-play-sutton-interview.
[463] Edward Bond, 'Preface' to *Bingo*, *Plays: 3* (London: Methuen, 1999), p. 4.

Bond ultimately finds *King Lear* politically and ideologically dissatisfying, however: while Shakespeare endows his protagonist with acute insight, he finally allows Lear to escape into a private fantasy in which the possibility of engagement is slowly drained. This fantasy of retreat from social and political life constellates around Cordelia – with whom Lear famously wishes to share the remainder of his days in prison: 'We two alone will sing like birds i' th' cage' (V.iii.10). The problem with the private fantasies Lear withdraws into is that he finally accepts suffering and injustice as inevitable, the product of an unalterably absurd universe which is resistant to intervention. This has the tendency of turning a changeable material situation into an unchangeable and, ultimately, absurd metaphysical situation. The problems dramatized in *King Lear* are, for Bond, irrevocably 'political' – but 'the solution is not'.[464]

Not unlike Kott and Brook, Bond aligns *King Lear* with the theatre of the absurd. Only where Kott praises Shakespeare for his prescient insight into the human condition, Bond critiques his early modern antecedent for failing to advocate for changes in the social and political conditions that lead to inhuman suffering.[465] 'I don't like the absurdists', reflects Bond, 'I'm an optimist. I believe in the survival of mankind. I don't believe in an *Endgame* or *Waiting for Godot*'.[466]

Bond accepts that Beckettian drama has been read 'optimistically' as revealing the power of the human spirit, but it is a reading Bond refutes. Beckett 'is said to have shown

[464] Quoted in Patricia Hern, 'Commentary', *Lear*, p. xxvi.
[465] The year Lear was staged (1971) was the same year Brook released his film version of *King Lear*. *Lear* is far closer in its political outlook to *Korol Lir* – the 1971 film version of *King Lear* by Soviet director Grigori Kozintsev. See my 'Crowding out Dover "Cliff" in *Korol Lir*', *Adaptation*, 10:2 (2017), pp. 210–229. In his interview with the author, Barker also praises Kozintsev, though his reading of the politics of the film differs from mine. See Appendix, pp. 364-376.
[466] Quoted in '"A theatre of ruins": Edward Bond and Samuel Beckett: Theatrical Antagonists', Graham Saunders, *Studies in Theatre and Performance*, 25:1 (2005), p. 67.

that however you degrade people an unquenchable spark of humanity remains in them', with 'experience in concentration camps offered as proof'.[467] But the argument, insists Bond, is 'false': not only did those who ruled the camps fail to retain the 'spark', but even if 'the theory of the spark were true – how would that guide us through the desperately needed reorganization of society, or teach us to express our humanity in the changing world?'[468]

Bond considers *King Lear* to be beset by the same problem. Lear might provide a powerful critique of social injustice but his final acceptance of suffering as the result of an absurd cosmos retards any possibility of concerted political engagement and change. By rewriting that play, Bond aims to supplant its 'metaphysical' absurdism with a 'political' version of *King Lear* that holds out the 'possibility of revolutionary change'.[469] Bond states:

> Shakespeare took the character of Lear and I wished to correct it so that it would become a viable model for us and, I would like to think, for our society. Shakespeare does arrive at an answer […] and that was the idea of total resignation […], discovering that a human being can accept an enormous lot and survive it. He can come through the storm. What I want to say is that this model is inadequate now, that it just does not work. Acceptance is not enough. Anybody can accept. You can go quietly into your gas chamber at Auschwitz; you can sit quietly at home and have an H-bomb dropped on you. Shakespeare had time. He must have thought that in time certain changes would be made. But time has speeded up enormously, and for us, time is running out.[470]

Bond explicitly situates his response to *King Lear* in the social world of Auschwitz and post-Auschwitz European culture, a *milieu* that – far from confirming the absurdity and cruelty of existence – underscores the need for progressive social and political intervention. Bond

[467] Quoted in '"A theatre of ruins"', pp. 68-69.
[468] Ibid, p. 69.
[469] Edward Bond, *Selections from the Notebooks Of Edward Bond: Volume 2 1980-1995*, ed. Ian Stuart (London: Methuen, 2000), p. 52
[470] Quoted in Malcolm Hay and Philip Roberts, *Edward Bond: A Companion to the Plays* (London: TQ Publications, 1978), p. 18.

contends that the 'moral' of *King Lear* is to 'endure until in time the world be made right' – but it is now 'frivolous to say that a man can survive in Auschwitz and so prove the strength of the human spirit'.[471] Shakespeare is, for Bond, far from being 'our contemporary': his vision of resignation has become not only redundant but regressive and dangerous in the face of the concentration camps, the Nazi Holocaust and the H-Bomb, not 'pertinent' because of a transhistorical insight into a timeless existential absurdity. *King Lear* – as far as Bond understands it – needs revising if it is to be understood as politically 'relevant' for modern, post-Holocaust audiences – 'for ourselves, for our society, for our time, for our problems'.[472]

In the next section, I analyse the way Bond 'politicizes' the ideologically redundant vision of *King Lear*.

2.1. Politicizing *King Lear*

In his 'Preface' to *Lear*, Bond sets out his conception of the way in which modern society has developed:

> [W]e live in what is more and more becoming a technosphere. We do not fit into it very well and so it activates our biological defences, one of which is aggression [...] What ought we to do? Live justly. But what is justice? Justice is allowing people to live in the way for which they evolved […] That is the essential thing I want to say because it means that in fact our society and its morality, which deny this, and its technology which more and more prevents it, all the time whispers in your ear "You have no right to live". That is what lies under the splendour of the modern world.[473]

[471] Quoted in *Dramatic Strategies in the Plays of Edward Bond*, p 91; Edward Bond, *Selections from the Notebooks of Edward Bond: Volume One 1959-1980*, ed. Ian Stuart (London: Methuen, 2000), p. 218.
[472] Quoted in *Adapting King Lear for the Stage*, p. 124.
[473] 'Preface' to *Lear*, p. lxiv.

The rhetoric Bond uses is telling – where he refers to 'our society', with '*its* morality', '*its* technology' – as it implies that both morality and technology have become independent, divorced from the human(e) ends of 'our society'. The autonomous metaprocesses of modernity 'whisper' menacingly, insisting on the unreality, the total contingency, of the individual human being. Under the conditions of modern society, the subject is dispensable: 'You have no right to live'. Hubert Zapf writes that, for Bond, 'the "subject" of the historical process may not be humanity any more but the social constructions which it has created'.[474] The forces of history have become autotelic, turning the subject into an object of impersonal laws.

This vision of history is typified in *Lear* by the representation of the Wall. The construction of the Wall is symptomatic of history-turned-autonomous – or reification. Lear states that he is building the Wall in order to protect – and emancipate – his people: 'My wall will make you free' (I.i.3). But in a moment of obvious irony, his opening action is to shoot a worker (I.i.6) for an accident that delays the building-works, so that the (impossible) completion of the Wall takes precedence over the very lives it is supposed to protect and enfranchise. Bodice purposes to have the – as she tellingly calls it – 'absurd' (I.i.5) Wall torn down. But after taking power, Bodice comes to realize that her new-found position, far from freeing her from patriarchal authority, has turned her into a puppet of an absurdly self-perpetuating process of 'War' and 'Power' (II.v.48). 'I started to pull the Wall down, and had to stop that', reflects Bodice, 'the men are needed': 'I am trapped' (II.v.48-49). Cordelia also ultimately fails to tear the Wall down, seeing it as a way of instituting a better life for the people: 'The government is creating that new life' (III.iii.83). 'Nothing has changed! A

[474] Hubert Zapf, 'Two Concepts of Society in Drama: Bertolt Brecht's The *Good Woman of Setzuan* and Edward Bond's *Lear*', *Modern Drama*, 31:3 (1988), p. 357.

revolution must at least reform!', states Lear, with Cordelia replying: 'Everything *else* has changed' (III.iii.84).

The impersonal quality of the 'technosphere' in *Lear* also bleeds into personal relationships, so that an invisible 'wall' of cold disinterest grows between human beings, alienating people from each other and from reality.[475] There is, as Lear begins to realize, 'a Wall everywhere!' (III.ii.80) as the edifice begins to determine every aspect of human life and interaction. The notion of 'a Wall everywhere!' was powerfully realized in the original production of the play, where, in a self-reflexive *coup-de-theatre*, the Wall itself was not seen onstage until Act Three, when Lear attempts to dig it up. Up until that critical point, the actors referred to the Wall as if it occupied the same off-stage space as the audience.[476] This self-reflexive gesture (which obviously draws on Brecht) worked to break down the distanced, 'aesthetic' space of the stage and the 'social' space of the audience, reinforcing the sense of the Wall being 'everywhere' as an obstacle to more humane social relations and the underlying cause of social violence, for Bond symbolic of a wider 'cultural malaise'.[477]

It is the cold disinterest – the failure of imaginative, empathetic engagement and the petrifaction of human relations – which drives the arbitrary and yet compulsive acts of violence found in *Lear*, most obviously the horrific blinding of Lear in Act Two. This act is undertaken by an administrative official using a 'scientific device': 'This is not an instrument of torture but a scientific device' (II.vi.63). The process – in which Lear has his eyes mechanically 'sucked out' (II.vi.63) into a container filled with formaldehyde – represents

[475] So alienating is the Wall that Lear even thinks of himself as being 'buried alive': 'I am buried alive in a Wall!' (III.ii.80).
[476] See William Gaskill, *A Sense of Direction: Life at the Royal Court* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988) p. 122.
[477] *The Notebooks of Edward Bond Volume One*, p. 101.

the reification of the subject by the scientific rationality supposed to enable freedom. Even the actions of the servants who bring 'egg whites' and 'flax' to relieve Gloucester in *King Lear* (III.vii.112) are transformed into the far more perfunctory spraying of a healing '*aerosol*' to encourage the 'formation of scabs' and to 'discourage flies' (II.vi.63). The whole deportment and detached language of the functionary (who is, ironically, another prisoner) recalls Arendt and her conception of the 'banality of evil'. Arendt famously makes the case that the Final Solution was undertaken by seemingly unremarkable administrators who were able to free themselves from personal culpability by deferring to the wider demands of the Nazi hierarchical machine – an irrational psychopathology that, in the words of *King Lear*, 'Allows itself to anything' (III.vii.111).[478] Adolf Eichmann, as observed and understood by Arendt, was motivated more by the banal prospect of promotion than by a commitment to racist ideology.[479] 'This', as the operator of the 'device' in *Lear* states, 'is a chance to bring myself to notice'.[480]

The Wall is – of course – most obviously related to the Berlin Wall and the retrogression of the Soviet revolution, with Bond stating that the specific historical phenomenon informing the play was Stalinism.[481] But the authorial discourse around the play, as I have shown, also comprises the Nazi concentration camps and Auschwitz, which occupies an increasingly central place in the way Bond conceptualizes modernity and his own dramaturgy. In his powerful article 'The First Word', Bond reflects on his critical discourse:

[478] Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (London: Penguin, 2006).
[479] Ibid, p. 63.
[480] William Gaskill recalls that, in a production of *Lear* in Germany, the blinding of Lear proved 'too reminiscent of Dachau' for traumatized audiences to bear, leading to walkouts. See *A Sense of Direction*, p. 120.
[481] Edward Bond, *Edward Bond Letters, Volume 5*, ed. Ian Stuart (London: Routledge, 2001) p. 149.

> I use Auschwitz as a generic name for the various horrors of the 20th Century because it most clearly used the apparatus of modernity. It had the efficiency and expedition of a Ford production line. The raw materials received at one end were human beings, the finished product at the other end was ash. There is an easy Brueghel image for it – the locations of the human mouth and anus reversed. But the deformity is more extreme than that. Auschwitz used the scientific technology that should emancipate us […] Auschwitz is not a cancer that destroys, it is not even a disease that poses as a cure – it has infiltrated and taken over the processes of life and made *them* death.[482]

These remarks have – of course – much in common with Adorno and his conception of the deathly process of the dialectic of Enlightenment (though Bond only ever refers directly to Adorno in relation to his dictum about the barbarity of poetry 'after' Auschwitz).[483] Auschwitz, for Bond as for Adorno, becomes a metonym for the catastrophes of the twentieth century and the reifying legacy of modernity. It is a critique Bond also relates to late capitalist culture: in a distinctly Adornian observation, Bond remarks that 'When you enter a supermarket you enter the *logic* of Auschwitz' – by which Bond means the 'logic' of mass, reified society.[484]

Bond insists that – post-Auschwitz – social and political action is both possible and necessary. Lear may have his eyes surgically removed, but his blindness is, as Bond puts it, 'a metaphor for insight'.[485] The play charts the moral and social progress of Lear from an ideologically driven despot in Act One, through to insight (as in *King Lear*, through blindness) in Act Two and finally (and unlike 'King' Lear) to committed political engagement in Act Three. This culminates in his attempt to dig up the Wall, an act of intervention against the 'technosphere' and a re-appropriation of alienated human labour that undoes the

[482] Edward Bond, 'The First Word', Edward Bond. Accessed 3 May 2018. http://www.edwardbond.org/Comment/comment.html
[483] See *Plays: 3* and the 'Preface' to *The Fool*, p. 79.
[484] 'The First Word'.
[485] 'Preface' to Lear, p. lxv.

deadening 'coldness' which deforms life in the reified world: 'Work soon warms you up' (III.iv.87).

Peter Billingham contends that the image of Lear digging up the Wall remains 'one of the most iconic in post-war British theatre and even twentieth century British drama', offering an image of 'revolutionary intent and potential' in a 'radical humanist re-write of *King Lear*'.[486] It should be observed, however, that from its opening performance the final image has been as apt to cause confusion as it has the type of eulogies proffered by Billingham. The case might be made that the final image of Lear digging 'up' the Wall is as Sisyphean a struggle as anything Beckett or Camus might imagine and hardly shaped to inspire the type of moral and political engagement Bond sees as being vital after the Holocaust.

Bond seemed aware of the criticisms that might be made against his play. In his Programme Note for the 1975 revival of *Lear* at the Liverpool Everyman theatre ('Saving Our Necks') Bond defends his play against the idea that the final stand Lear takes is – ultimately – absurd:

> My Lear makes a gesture in which he accepts responsibility for his life and commits himself to action [...] [But that] gesture must not be seen as final. That would make the play a part of the theatre of the absurd and that, like perverted science, is a reflection of no-culture. The human condition is not absurd; it is only our society which is absurd. Lear is very old and has to die anyway. He makes his gesture only to those who are learning to live.[487]

Bond insists that the closing act of defiance should be understood as constituting more of a gesture made on behalf of its witnesses as opposed to an action that is in any way complete

[486] *Edward Bond*, p. 52.
[487] Quoted in David Hirst, *Edward Bond* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1985), p. 140.

in itself, which would ultimately reduce the play to the theatre of the absurd – a decadent 'reflection of no-culture'. This is reflected in the telling stage-direction in which, as Lear digs up the Wall and leaves his shovel stuck '*upright in the earth*' (III.iii.88), a worker '*looks back*' (III.iii.88) – before being hurried along offstage by a foreman to continue building the Wall. The gesture Lear makes against the Wall is intended to shape the consciousness of its witnesses. This – of course – includes the audience itself: the final image is intended to convince the audience of the necessity of engaged moral and political action, as opposed to the apathy of absurdism or the disengagement Bond believes to result from the Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt*.

This reflects the divergent understandings of tragedy and the subject in Brecht and Bond. I have shown that tragedy, as far as Brecht understands it, is too preoccupied with a single tragic 'hero', whose inability to overcome society transforms his/her demise into 'fate'. The sympathy tragedy engenders for the fate of the individual inhibits the type of detached, collective consciousness needed to bring about a more critical understanding of society and history.[488] Bond is similarly suspicious of the significance of individual action – as the final and seemingly 'meaningless' death of Lear shows. But he does see tragedy as amenable to a properly dialectical understanding of human history, where defiant action negates the inhumanity of a reified society. Bond demands from the audience a response which is at once sympathetically engaged in the individual fate of Lear *and yet* sufficiently detached to allow an objective grasp of the political necessity of collectivity. The final action of Lear is intended to address the audience as a collective entity capable of radical political action.

[488] For more on Brecht and tragedy, see Chapter One, pp. 91-92. Brecht (or rather, his 'Philosopher' figure) states that *King Lear* should be staged so that 'the audience doesn't feel completely identified with this king'. Bertolt Brecht, *The Messingkauf Dialogues*, ed. and trans. John Willett (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 56.

There is, however, another criticism that might be made of the play aside from the possible absurdity of its final image of Lear on the Wall – that Bond ultimately fails to challenge the Christian-humanist problematic that informs the pre-Kott understanding of *King Lear* and, as a result, equally fails to challenge the Enlightenment narrative of rational human 'progress' which had been so severely disabused by the war and the Holocaust. *Lear* displays an underlying faith in the forces of historical progress and the eventual control of an enlightened and 'redeemed' humanity over the abstract social-political system that it has itself created and which now destroys it. This, in itself, is not necessarily problematic. What is problematic, however, is the way that narrative overdetermines subjectivity. The result of the rational and humanistic view of historical progress Bond relies on is that *Lear* ultimately re-inscribes the subject into an overarching historical process – once again turning the subject into an object as it fulfils the teleological destiny toward a 'rational' and 'just' society.

I now turn to the contradiction between the critique Bond has formed of Auschwitz/the dialectic of Enlightenment and his continuing dependence on Enlightenment precepts of human reason and progress, which undergirds his idea of social and political engagement.

3. Bond, Humanism and the Dialectic of Enlightenment

Bond may have intensified the cruelty and violence of *King Lear*, but *Lear* also recapitulates the redemptive understanding of the play derived from Christian-humanist readings, where the 'growth' of Lear into a form of critical self-knowledge remains the central concern, even

if that 'pilgrimage' now comes to signify a 'scientific' and secularized humanist teleology. The overarching Three Act structure of *Lear* is indicative of the residual dependence of the play on a humanist understanding of the historical process. Bond writes that, in Act One, Lear is trapped in a world of 'Myth' – a false perception of reality. In Act Two, Lear 'progresses' to a correct (objective or scientific) perception of 'Reality' and, in Act Three – which Bond considered integral to his appropriation – Lear engages in rational moral and political action against a world he 'proves real' by tragically 'dying in it'.[489] The whole movement echoes the Enlightenment progression from false belief (myth) into rational knowledge (science) and into agency based on that new-found knowledge – producing an emphatic image of formal closure as Lear attempts to remove the Wall he himself had instigated.

The central pattern of the play recalls the 'sin-suffering-redemption' paradigm of pre-absurdist, Christian readings of *King Lear*, in which Lear learns through his suffering the reality of a society that is inimical human life. Lear, in a critique of His apparent resignation, states that 'If I saw Christ on his cross I would spit at him' (III.76); but Lear undergoes his own secular pilgrimage over the course of the play: 'I am going on a journey' (III.iii.85). During Act Two, Scene Seven of the original production, Lear even fell to his knees, a gesture that recalls Gielgud in 1940 and his prayer-like posture in the storm: 'I will kneel by the Wall' (II.vii.66).[490]

Undergoing a radical transformation in his perception of himself and the world, Lear engenders a dialectical synthesis between his subjective consciousness and the objectivity of reality – and society. Lear 'sees better' (*King Lear*, I.i.162) and, in doing so, acts against

[489] Quoted in 'Commentary', p. xxiv.
[490] See Chapter Three, p. 140.

the social and political oppression he is witness to. But his revolutionized (or 'enlightened') consciousness has, in the inadvertently telling words of Billingham, '*inescapably* political consequences': the digging up of the Wall.[491] The cycle of history in *Lear* has become nothing other than (tragic) fate. This is conveyed (or perhaps more appropriately, betrayed) by the foreshadowing of the final action of Act Three in Act One. During the opening moments of the play, Lear reports that displaced rural farm workers (including an 'old man') have been 'digging up the Wall' (I.i.3). Lear, in an act that reveals his cold misperception of reality, has these 'diggers' shot; but, as he grows into a more enlightened social and political consciousness, Lear finally attempts to dig up the Wall himself, before he too is shot. This foreshadowing is intended to reveal in a relatively simple way the progression from ignorance to knowledge. But it also betrays the 'inescapable' teleology of a humanist narrative form, as Lear becomes an object as opposed to the subject of the historical 'progress', moving inexorably toward 'the promised end' (*King Lear*, V.iii.277) intimated from the outset.

Despite setting his 'political' interpretation of *King Lear* in opposition to the resigned 'metaphysical' interpretation of the absurdists, Bond is similarly culpable of turning history into the type of impersonal 'mechanism' imagined by Kott, where the subject is no more than a cog in the wider machine of a historical process that is, finally, beyond his or her direct control. This – as much as the apparent impossibility of the act itself, digging 'up' a wall – is arguably the underlying reason for the final scene of *Lear* being viewed as a confused and possibly even absurdist image.[492] The deterministic conception of history and progress that underpins the form of *Lear* points to a deep-seated contradiction in Bondian

[491] *Edward Bond*, p. 49 (italics added).
[492] See Thomas Cartelli, 'Shakespeare in Pain: Edward Bond's *Lear* and the Ghosts of History', *Shakespeare Survey: Volume 55*, p. 165.

drama. On the one hand, Bond develops a conception of the historical process that is more in keeping with the dialectic of Enlightenment than it is with a more conventional Hegelian-Marxist understanding of the progress of humanity. On the other hand, Bond often seems indebted to the very problematic of social and historical progress he brings into question. Bond positions his appropriation of *King Lear* as a response to Auschwitz and the dangers of post-Auschwitz 'resignation'. *Lear*, however, relies both formally and thematically on the idealist-humanist philosophy that – for the Frankfurt theorists – lay behind the dialectic of Enlightenment and, in the most radical realization of is de-subjectifying tendencies, the Holocaust.

Conclusion

This Chapter has analysed the 1971 Bond play *Lear*. I have shown that, through his appropriation of *King Lear*, Bond develops a critique of post-Auschwitz modernity and its destruction of subjectivity. I have also shown that the notion of engagement which Bond proposes as a 'corrective' to reification and political resignation still ultimately inheres within a humanist conception of the 'necessary' progress of human history toward a more rational and enlightened state, which reifies the subject.[493] This criticism is not to underestimate the importance of *Lear*: the play remains perhaps the most well-known theatrical appropriation of Shakespeare and, in many ways, its historical relevance may be becoming more acute in an age of both symbolic and literal 'wall-building'. The notion of

[493] Bond has continued to write about, and appropriate, *King Lear* in more recent times, aligning the play with his concept of Radical Innocence. For an analysis see my forthcoming 'Beyond *Lear*: *King Lear*, Edward Bond and Radical Innocence'.

necessary progress formally inscribed in *Lear* is, however, contradicted by Catastrophist appropriations.

In *Lear*, Lear uses his status as an exile to try and evade engagement, before he comes to a fateful understanding of the necessity of revolutionary action. But for David Rudkin, exile is not merely a temporary state, which is transcended when the subject fulfils his or her (predetermined) 'responsibility' for engagement. On the contrary: for Rudkin, the state of exile is, in and of itself, socially and politically meaningful. In Chapter Five, I turn to Rudkin. I will show that, through his appropriation of Edgar, Rudkin develops an understanding of exile as a form of tragic non-identity, which in an era of totality, must be preserved at all costs.

Chapter Five

'Rudkin I Nothing Am': Edgar, Exile and Self Re-Authorship in David Rudkin's *Will's Way*

'The émigré […] is always astray' – Theodor Adorno.[494]

Introduction

This chapter will analyse the David Rudkin play *Will's Way*. The play was originally staged at The Other Place in 1984, directed by Alison Sutcliffe, with Nick Woodeson taking the role of Shakespeare.[495] The play places Shakespeare 'himself' alone on-stage to deliver a personal – and seemingly extemporized – talk on the recurring themes to be found in his plays, his imaginative 'process' and the role of the playwright in society.[496] The talk traverses a variety of plays from the canon, from the early comedies to the tragedies and the late Romance plays.

I will contend that the portrayal of Shakespeare in *Will's Way* typifies the vital concept of 'self re-authorship', as Rudkin calls it.[497] This names a process whereby the subject continually re-authors him or herself, never fully embodying any final identity, but

[494] *Minima Moralia*, p. 33.
[495] See '*Will's Way*', *Theatricalia*. Accessed 3 February 2018. https://theatricalia.com/play/h6/wills-way/production/1ys
[496] David Rudkin, *Will's Way* (Halford: The Celandine Press, 1993), p. 20. All references are to the Celandine edition. I refer to the text throughout by quoting page numbers in the main body of text. The title *Will's Way* has obvious resonances with Sonnet 135, with its punning elaboration on the various meanings of the word 'will'.
[497] David Rudkin, 'A Politics of Body and Speech', quoted in David Ian Rabey, *English Drama Since 1940* (Oxford: Routledge, 2014), p. 133.

engaged in the open-ended process of authoring new selves and subjectivities. Rudkin states that:

> It is not granted to each of us to be a hero or a martyr. But in our culture, with its benign appearance of satisfying our primary needs, and its increasingly sophisticated techniques of diverting and exhausting our essential energies, it is more and more a struggle for us, this constant process of *re-authoring* ourselves. If I insist on the vital necessity of this *self re-authoring*, it's because the impulse of political institutions is always reductive: to limit us to identities that can be mechanically satisfied, thereby 'managed' – i.e. controlled; to reduce us to identities that are predictable. I see it as our human duty to resist that reductive pressure; as our existential duty, to subvert it at every turn. I won't describe this as moral. It's a matter of survival, really.[498]

The notion of self re-authorship is not to say that Rudkin embraces the 'fluidity' of the (so-called) postmodern condition. His conception of self re-authorship should be understood as a response to the reification of the subject in the totalized world of late capitalist culture. Where modern culture ('our culture') forever strives to identify and so 'reduce' the subject, it becomes necessary, if reification is to be contested, for the subject continually to re-author the self.[499] The urgency of that undertaking is revealed by Auschwitz and its total destruction of subjectivity. Rudkin reveals in a 1964 *Encore* interview that, before he become a professional playwright, he had written an (ultimately, abortive) one-act play set inside a Nazi concentration camp. Nearly all of his subsequent plays depict similarly reifying systems of social control, which are based on 'rational' Enlightenment principles. These range from 'the Pit' in his *The Sons of Light* (1976), a vast underground system designed to achieve 'total' control over the subjects that make it up by dispelling 'The popular dogma of

[498] Ibid.

[499] There are overlaps with self re-authorship and the concept of self-fashioning, as described by Stephen Greenblatt in his *Renaissance Self-Fashioning, From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005). Greenblatt makes the case that the early modern era was marked by a newly emergent awareness 'about the fashioning of human identity as a manipulable, artful process' (p.2). Far from marking the autonomy of the subject from traditional forms of social authority, however, self-fashioning, as Greenblatt understands it, actually involves 'submission to an absolute power or authority situated at least partially outside the self' (p. 9).

the Self' – which for 'all its mystique of Dignity, Liberty, is a romantic archaism' – to the G.O.D. (Global Online Distribution) Tower in the 2012 play *Merlin Unchained*, which is purposed with stimulating conformity and productivity by dominating 'all outward life' and 'all inner life'.[500] '[W]e have', states Rudkin in his interview with the author, 'a responsibility to endeavour to integrate the Holocaust (and all its freight) into the "order" and logic of our art'.[501]

Rudkin views self re-authorship as a necessary process for the very 'survival' of subjectivity itself – but at a cost. The process of constant self re-authorship involves being expelled from any reified category – and so community – the subject may identify with. This means that self re-authoring necessarily entails a permanent state of *exile*. This is not a process with a determinate *telos*. On the one hand, the loss of identity which exile involves necessitates self re-authorship, the re-invention of the self. On the other, self re-authorship occasions a continuous exilic condition. This is something Rudkin has called 'catastrophic existentialism'.[502] The idea is that catastrophic self-loss enables new 'existential' possibilities, as the subject is exiled from an inherited social and political identity that is violently disrupted.

Rudkin is averse to applying overdetermined generic categories, but his preoccupation with exile and catastrophe is indicative of a tragic aesthetic idiom. This discourse of tragic exile also relates to Rudkin himself. Though he won the *Evening Standard* award for 'Most Promising New Playwright' for his 1962 debut *Afore Night Come*, his next play – *The Sons of Light* – would not be completed and staged until 1976 ('I knew I was going

[500] David Rudkin, *The Sons of Light* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1981), p. 26; David Rudkin, *Red Sun and Merlin Unchained* (Bristol: Intellect, 2011), p. 177. 'The Pit' might be seen as an inverse image of the wall from *Lear*, though the image of a pit also recurs in *Seven Lears*. See Chapter Six, p. 265.
[501] Appendix, pp. 348-349.
[502] Ibid.

into a lifetime in the wilderness', states Rudkin).[503] Other important plays – including *The Triumph of Death* (1981) and *The Saxon Shore* (1986) – followed, but Rudkin has spent no small part of his writerly career on the margins of the theatrical and cultural establishment – an exile, with professional stagings of his plays a rarity after the 1980s.[504] Being bisexual and half-English, half-Irish, Rudkin has not only spent his professional life on the boundaries, but also his personal life, challenging as he does conventional categories of identity and culture (heterosexual or homosexual, English or Irish – for Rudkin it is 'both-and' as opposed to 'either-or').

Such non-identity has arguably become more and not less vital in totalized society, as reflected by the renewed attention now being paid to Rudkin. The British Library acquired the Rudkin Archive in 2010 and, in 2016, there was a BFI retrospective on his writing for film and TV. Rudkin is also beginning to find his way back to the stage, after a lengthy period without professional productions: *Afore Night Come* was revived at the Young Vic, London, in 2001; *Red Sun* by the AJTC Theatre Company in 2003; and in 2017 *Ashes* was staged at the Octagon Theatre.

Will's Way is not a wholesale rewriting of *King Lear* – in the same vein as *Lear*. *King Lear* is, however, a play that Rudkin has been in dialogue with throughout his writing (and indeed, his personal) life and which has shaped his own playwriting and dramaturgy.[505] *Will's Way* is an important play in his *oeuvre* as it casts a revealing light on the profound

[503] David Rudkin, '*The Sons of Light*', *David Rudkin.* Accessed 3 February 2018. http://www.davidrudkin.com/index.php/ct-menu-item-15/ct-menu-item-19

[504] David Rudkin, *The Triumph of Death* (London: Methuen, 1981); David Rudkin, *The Saxon Shore* (London: Methuen, 1986).

[505] Rudkin describes *King Lear* in a 1964 interview for *Encore* as 'the greatest achievement of the human mind' ('An Affliction of Images: An Interview with David Rudkin', *Encore*, 11:4 (1964), p. 15).

impact which Edgar – and his self-transformations over a desolately exilic landscape – has had on Rudkin.[506]

This analysis will involve a closer reading of *King Lear* and Edgar than was possible in Chapter Two. I will also develop a close reading of *Will's Way*, while alluding to various other Rudkin plays, many of which invoke Edgar. I also draw on and analyse some of the public statements Rudkin has made in regard to his own playwriting craft. Through an analysis of his various addresses and talks, and by drawing on the original interview I have conducted with Rudkin on *King Lear* and the Holocaust, I show that Edgar, with his transformation into Poor Tom, provides for Rudkin a powerful image of self re-authoring and exile. To frame exile as a response to Auschwitz and post-Auschwitz culture, I begin with an analysis of Adorno and his theorization of – and approach to – the self-transformative experience of exile, concentrating on perhaps his most famous work, the 1951 *Minima Moralia*.

1. Adorno and Exile

1.1. 'Permanent Exile'

Exile represents a deeply formative experience for Adorno and other German intellectuals. Adorno fled Nazi Germany with other Frankfurt School thinkers in 1938, spending time as an

[506] There are also not inconsiderable parallels between *King Lear* and *The Saxon Shore*, which frequently alludes to *King Lear* and even stages the 'missing' funeral rites from Shakespeare, when the funeral brier of 'Llyr' – 'King of the Britons' – is brought across the stage (p. 22). I concentrate on *Will's Way* because of its remarkable, reflexive engagement with Edgar and his exilic subjectivity.

exile in England (at Oxford) and the United States (in New York and California) before he returned to Germany permanently in 1953, partly in response to an invitation to participate in the de-Nazification of West German society.[507] During his time away from Germany, Adorno wrote both *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944) and *Minima Moralia*, (1951). The analysis of the exiled Odysseus in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is often seen as a prelude to the more direct and sustained contemplation of the life of the homeless émigré in *Minima Moralia*, where Adorno often reflects on the 'damaged life' of the intellectual in exile. Both works shed light on exile as an experience of 'permanent change, upheaval and catastrophic loss'.[508]

Exile should not, however, only be seen as an adverse condition – an imposed state to be endured until a time of homecoming. The time Adorno spent abroad as a social and cultural 'outcast' also had a deep impact on his theoretical and political orientation. This relates most obviously to his conception of non-identity.[509] Lisa Yun Lee writes that, for Adorno,

> the painful experiences of anxiety, alienation and estrangement that resulted from emigration coalesced into a form of resistance in both his theoretical and personal life as the inability and refusal to achieve complete integration into a social system characterized by radical self-preservation and instrumental rationality.[510]

On the one hand, exile imperils the received identity of the displaced subject, whose attachments to the 'home' culture are radically disrupted; on the other, the exile can also

[507] See Theodor Adorno, 'On the Question: "What is German?"', *New German Critique*, 36, 'Special Issue on Heimat' (1985), pp. 125-126.
[508] Lars Rensmann, 'Returning from Forced Exile: Some Observations on Theodor W. Adorno's and Hannah Arendt's Experience of Postwar Germany and Their Political Theories of Totalitarianism', *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book*, 49 (2004), p. 173.
[509] Joshua Rayman, 'Dialectics of Exile: Adorno, Mann, and the Culture Industry', *Monatshefte*, 106:3 (2014), pp. 402-425.
[510] *Dialectics of the Body*, p. 2.

never 'fit' completely into the officially sanctioned social practices – and identities – of the new social order: 'He who integrates is lost'.[511] With neither nostalgic attachment to the old nor assimilation to the new viable possibilities, the exiled subject fails to integrate into any customary social and political collectivity – s/he is, as Adorno writes in *Minima Moralia*, 'always astray'.[512] The state of exile involves the 'identity' *of not having a fully culturally recognizable identity*: it is a form of non-identity, an indeterminate non-coincidence with all identity-categories.

Edward Said makes the case that exile ought to be seen as 'an *alternative* to the mass institutions that dominate modern life'.[513] Using the same word Lear uses to describe Edgar/Poor Tom in *King Lear*, Said privileges 'unaccommodated, essentially expatriate or diasporic forms of existence'.[514] Adorno typifies precisely that sort of non-identical subjectivity. Said writes that 'Adorno saw all life as pressed into ready-made forms, "prefabricated homes"'.[515] Under such conditions, it becomes necessary to consciously avoid ever being 'at home', to be 'never and nowhere accommodated'.[516] Even though Adorno would return to Germany, he self-consciously adopted a state of 'permanent exile'.[517]

[511] *Minima Moralia*, p. 46-47; Theodor Adorno, *The Stars Down to Earth and Other Essays on the Irrational in Culture*, ed. Stephen Crook (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), p. 174.
[512] *Minima Moralia*, p. 33.
[513] Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile: And Other Literary and Cultural Essays* (London: Granta Books, 2000), p.184. Said is careful to draw a distinction between his conception of intellectual exile and the state of refugees in the modern world. See his *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1994), pp. 402-403.
[514] *Reflections on Exile*, p. xxxiv.
[515] Ibid, p. 184.
[516] Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), pp. 92-93.
[517] Martin Jay, *Permanent Exiles: Essays on the Intellectual Migration from Germany to America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p. xii.

This understanding of non-identity tends to place exile within 'the constantly renewed struggle for freedom', as Horkheimer called it.[518] Where society forever tries to conscript the subject into systems of identity, exile is an *ongoing process* that must be continually 'renewed' by the subject. Roger Foster contends that, in his conceptualization of exile, Adorno issues 'a call for self-transformation'.[519] It is necessary for the subject to continually transform his/her self if the state of exile – of being outside the social totality – is to be preserved. The type of self-transformation Adorno calls for is typically understood to be catalysed by experiences of breakdown and collapse – by catastrophe. He writes of 'self-forgetting', 'being overwhelmed' and the 'dissolution of the subject' as 'moments of breakthrough'.[520] Such moments betray the contingency of an inherited identity and open out the possibility of self-transformation beyond the reified categories of the social and political totality. Catastrophe enables the type of exilic subjectivity Adorno sought to embody.

Adorno also posits a deep-seated relation between exile and the catastrophic formal fragmentation of his own literary style. Adorno remarks in the 'Dedication' to *Minima Moralia* that the situation of continuing displacements in which it was written is inscribed in the 'disconnected' and 'non-binding' quality of its 'form'.[521] The work is famously made up of fragmentary aphorisms and short essayistic pieces with ambiguous titles, from 'The Health unto Death', to 'Who is who' and 'Gaps'.[522] The precise relation between the various, diversely conceived parts is never entirely manifest; *Minima Moralia* does not have any

[518] Quoted in Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute for Social Research, 1923-1950* (Berkeley, L.A. and London: University of California Press, 1996), p. 157.
[519] Roger Foster, *Adorno and Philosophical Modernism: The Inside of Things* (New York and London: Lexington Books, 2016), p. 25.
[520] Quoted in *Adorno and Philosophical Modernism*, p. 25.
[521] *Minima Moralia*, p. 18.
[522] Ibid, pp. 58-60, 215-216, 80-81.

obvious narrative orientation, which might tie the various observations into an overarching 'argument'. This derives from a desire to avoid a holistic philosophical system, which may unify (and, for Adorno, destroy) the various individual parts.[523] But it also speaks to the experience of exile – to the continuous interruptions that come with the experience of displacement.[524] The fragmentary style of *Minima Moralia* can be seen as an imprimatur of an exilic condition.

The exilic forms Adorno uses pose a profound challenge to both conventional narrative linearity and formal closure. The fragmentary – even wandering, properly 'essayistic' – style Adorno uses does not allow for narrative progression. Adorno also describes the aphorisms of *Minima Moralia* as 'never pretending to be complete or definitive'.[525] Final aesthetic resolution is never achieved – and purposefully so. Such closure would inhibit the continuing exilic state that Adorno wanted to realize and embody by producing resolution, or 'homecoming'. Adorno opts for a form where any prospect of a cumulative synthesis is postponed in favour of a 'still developing, fragmentary, dynamic course defined by its engagement with its own internal and so necessary or essential contradictions'.[526]

These exilic forms of writing and thought are also intended to produce very specific subjective responses. Through the discontinuities and fragmentariness of his writing style, Adorno intends to displace his audience – his reader – who is never allowed to 'settle' into a progressive narrative with a decisive end, but is constantly uprooted and dislocated. By

[523] Ibid, p. 16
[524] Ibid, p. 18. Adorno writes of subverting 'the continuity of the familiar' (p. 80).
[525] 'Essay' derives from the French 'essais', a 'trial' or 'the action or process of trying or testing', an 'attempt' or 'venture'. 'essay, n.'. *OED Online*. Accessed November 20, 2017. http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/64470; *Minima Moralia*, p. 18.
[526] Quoted in *Theodor Adorno and Thomas Mann, Correspondence 1943–1955* (Cambridge: Polity, 2006), p. 84; 'Dialectics of Exile', p. 422.

violating both narrative progression and closure, Adorno seeks to catalyse aesthetic spaces of exile, of non-identity. This underpins the use of aesthetic fragmentation in Adorno more widely, where a 'radical experience of the foreign is related to the self-reflexivity which it awakens'.[527]

Exile has – of course – been both a theoretical and an aesthetic concern for postmodern thinkers.[528] Adorno, however, is a late modernist, not a postmodernist. His conception of exile does not necessarily mean embracing the 'liberating' non-places of the postmodern condition. Exile, as Adorno understands it, represents a space divorced from the recognizable practices and identities of the social order, the subversion of totalized administrative forms that would otherwise seek to interpolate the subject. This rift between the social totality and its subjects is, as I set out in Chapter One, a paradigmatically modernist trope and various critics have analysed the value of exile in modernist art, which is seen as a vehicle for resistance and autonomy.[529] This is most true of the related figures of the intellectual and artist, whose ongoing exile is understood as a refusal to 'surrender his or her radical freedom to the demands of an oppressive state or system'.[530] But if exile is a modernist trope, it is also deeply historically and ideationally related to tragedy, which I turn to in the next section.

1.2. Exile and Tragedy

[527] Esperanca Bielsa, 'Theodor W. Adorno's Homecoming', *European Journal of Social Theory* 19:3 (2006) p. 378.
[528] Fred Dallymer, 'The Politics of Nonidentity: Adorno, Postmodernism - And Edward Said', *Political Theory*, 25:1 (1997), p. 44.
[529] See particularly Mihai Spariosu, *Modernism and Exile: Liminality and the Utopian Imagination* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014).
[530] Seamus Deane, 'Imperialism/Nationalism', *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, ed. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 367.

Exile is a motif in tragic drama from its beginnings in ancient Greece, where exile is often the price paid by the tragic protagonist for his/her violation of the shared norms and values of the *polis*.[531] Jennifer Wallace writes that 'to be exiled was to be *apolis*, outside the city and, by implication, outside humanity' – a fitting punishment for those who transgress the limits of the political (and so human, as opposed to animal) order.[532] By losing his/her place in the collective, the tragic exile suffers a devastating loss of self and identity – even humanity. 'To be exiled', writes Wallace, is 'to become nobody', a 'no one, nothing' – an 'O without a figure' (I.iv.183-184).[533]

Precisely by virtue of being expelled, however, 'the order of the city, from which one might be exiled, is questioned'.[534] On the one hand, exile serves to uphold the values of the community, even providing the basis for the original creation of a community through the exclusion of the 'other'; on the other hand, the exile outside the rest of the community brings the social and political identity of the collective into question. By disintegrating the subject from the dictates of the community, exile instantiates a tragic conflict between the autonomy of the subject and the identity of the social and political order. If that order is to be reinstated, the homeward return of the exile – or failing that, his or her death – is required.[535]

Hal Duncan writes that 'the tragic hero is that part of society (that part of us) who becomes distinct from it, ceases to be a part of it and is denied, prohibited, a victim of

[531] See Sara Forsdyke, *Exile, Ostracism, and Democracy: The Politics of Expulsion in Ancient Greece* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 4.
[532] Jennifer Wallace, 'Exile and Tragedy', *Tragedy in Transition*, ed. Sarah Brown and Catherine Silverstone (Oxford: Blackwell), p. 148.
[533] Ibid, p. 148-149.
[534] Ibid, p. 150.
[535] Ibid, p. 147.

revulsion'.[536] This obviously speaks to the relationship between tragic exile and the abject, as theorized by Julia Kristeva. Kristeva shows the abject is that which causes disgust and, as a result, must be cast aside from both self and society (Kristeva cites faeces and corpses, among other provocations).[537] This conceptualization of the abject derives from tragic drama ('the true theatre', as Kristeva calls it) and its representation of exile, where exile involves expelling the *pharmakós* or scapegoat, who is cast out of society in a ritual of public purification.[538]

Through his own exile, Adorno shares a kinship with the plight of the tragic protagonist and his/her self-loss. But he also shares the status of the abject, among 'the waste products and blind spots that have escaped the dialectic' and the 'refuse heap of discarded subjectivity'.[539] This abjected position on 'the refuse heap' is conceived by Adorno as both personally emancipating and critically empowering. Adorno warns in *Minima Moralia* against reifying the position of the intellectual 'outsider', writing that the intellectual risks 'believing himself better than others and misusing his critique of society as an ideology for his private interest'.[540] But at the same time, only 'at a remove from life can the mental life exist, and truly engage the empirical'.[541] From a 'removed' (exilic, abjected) position on the margins, the intellectual can 'engage the empirical', can interpret – and subvert – the social and political totality from which s/he is outcast (Kristeva, herself an exile from her native Bulgaria, similarly writes of 'the necessity of adopting a stance of otherness,

[536] Hal Duncan, *Rhapsody: Notes on Strange Fictions* (Maple Shade NJ: Lethe Press, 2014), p. 113.
[537] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).
[538] Kristeva makes the case that Oedipus is an abject subject, 'a *pharmakós*, a scapegoat who, having been ejected, allows the city to be freed from defilement' (p. 84).
[539] *Minima Moralia*, p. 151 and p. 221.
[540] Ibid, p. 26.
[541] Ibid, p. 126.

distance, even limitation').[542] The seemingly 'degraded' condition of abjection, as Adorno and Kristeva conceptualize it, actualizes a properly negative experience of the social and political totality.

Where in tragic drama the conflict between subject and society is typically resolved, for Adorno 'no reconciliation or identification is possible for the exile'.[543] This ongoing division between subject and society obviously forecloses the possibility of tragic closure. By turning exile into a permanent condition, Adorno paves the way for a tragic form where the exile – the abjection – of the subject is retained. The way Adorno conceives exile, I would contend, potentiates Catastrophism, with its unresolved contradiction between subject and society. These reflections on Adorno, exile, aesthetic form, modernism, tragedy and the abject all have a distinct bearing on Rudkin and his appropriation of Shakespeare and Edgar. I begin by showing how Edgar/Poor Tom embodies the condition of exile, abject and scapegoat, as iterations of his tragic non-identity with the society from which he is violently outcast.

2. Edgar and/as Poor Tom

2.1 Poor Tom and Non-Identity: Exile, Abject, Scapegoat

The idea that Edgar provides an image of exile and self re-authorship revolves around his transformation into the outcast figure of Poor Tom. In the speech that ends Act Two, Scene Two, Edgar, ripped from his inherited social and political identity, responds by authoring and

[542] Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature*, ed. Leon S. Roudiez, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine and Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), p. ix.
[543] 'Dialectics of Exile', p. 421.

embodying the persona (or perhaps *persona non grata*) of Poor Tom. Edgar is not officially 'banished' from the state in the same way as Kent is (I.ii.116-117). The sentence given to Edgar is more serious: capital punishment, a result of his supposed 'plot' against Gloucester (II.ii.111-112). But for Jane Kingsley-Smith, the representation of Edgar, escaping as he does into the wilderness, is obviously indebted to the tropes of exile in Shakespearean drama, where characters, forced from a socially-sanctioned role, respond to self-loss in a process of re-authorship.[544] 'I heard myself proclaimed', whispers Edgar, as he evades capture and his death-sentence:

> And by the happy hollow of a tree
> Escaped the hunt. No port is free, no place
> That guard and most unusual vigilance
> Does not attend my taking. Whiles I may 'scape,
> I will preserve myself, and am bethought
> To take the basest and most poorest shape
> That ever penury in contempt of man
> Brought near to beast. My face I'll grime with filth,
> Blanket my loins, elf all my hair in knots,
> And with presented nakedness outface
> The winds and persecutions of the sky.
> The country gives me proof and precedent
> Of Bedlam beggars, who with roaring voices
> Strike in their numbed and mortified bare arms
> Pins, wooden pricks, nails, sprigs of rosemary,
> And with this horrible object from low farms,
> Poor pelting villages, sheepcotes, and mills,
> Sometime with lunatic bans, sometime with prayers,
> Enforce their charity. 'Poor Turlygod!' 'Poor Tom!'—
> That's something yet. Edgar I nothing am (II.ii.172-192).

There are no more powerful instantiations of the Shakespearean exile who 'must rewrite him- or her-self'.[545] Edgar responds to his outlaw status by radically re-authoring himself: his

[544] Jane Kingsley-Smith, *Shakespeare's Drama of Exile* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003), p. 128.
[545] Jane Kingsley-Smith, 'Banishment in Shakespeare's Plays' (Birmingham, Shakespeare Institute: PhD, 1999), p. 3.

catastrophic self-loss, paradoxically, opens the way for a new form of (non-)being: Poor Tom. Emerging as he does from the 'hollow' of 'a tree', Edgar even undergoes something akin to a (re-)birth.

The speech begins with a burgeoning sense of self-estrangement. 'I heard myself proclaimed' introduces a split between subject ('I') and object ('myself'): Edgar is suddenly able to hold his received social and political identity – Edgar, the son and heir of Gloucester – at a distance, in self-reflexive contemplation. This self-estrangement reaches its crescendo at the end of the speech, with the syntactically contorted declaration 'Edgar I nothing am'. The basic meaning is relatively straightforward: Edgar has lost his official self, his title as the son and heir of Gloucester. This has devolved to his bastard half-brother, Edmund. To be without that officially ratified self – that title – in the social and political totality is to become a 'nothing'. Paradoxically, however, Edgar is able to turn that nothing into a 'something': Poor Tom.

Emily Sun perceptively writes that 'To play the part of Poor Tom is to substantialize the condition of banishment as an identity': it is, however, 'the identity of not having an identity within the Kingdom'.[546] Sun does not use the phrase, but the figure of Poor Tom can be understood as a form of non-identity, a type of identity without any ratified place in the social and political totality, from which Edgar is outcast. Poor Tom represents a fundamental non-coincidence with 'any given identity', which ensures 'his radical unknowability to others and himself; his singularity'.[547] By transforming himself into Poor Tom, Edgar comes to exist outside of the normal system of cultural identification, having 'no place' – 'None at all' (I.ii.157) – in socially continuous identitarian categories. Poor Tom is not even a fully personalized identity: it is more of a generic name in the play for exilic life, which is lived

[546] *Succeeding King Lear*, p. 41.
[547] Ibid.

outside society and its totalizing system of identity (Edgar markedly refers to 'Bedlam beggars' in the plural and not to any specific 'Bedlam beggar' he has chanced across). It is in that sense that Edgar/Poor Tom truly is an embodiment of 'nothing': '*I nothing am*'. Poor Tom embodies the negation of identity. He is an amorphous 'shape' – not so much the identifiable subject of a social and political world as an unidentifiably negative 'deformity' (IV.i.64) of it.

The figure of Poor Tom might seem weirdly gratuitous. It almost seems as if Edgar discovers a dissonant, darker self in the form of Poor Tom, an unsuspected 'inner' stranger who appears out of nowhere and yet might also have been present from the outset, lurking – 'Lurk, lurk!' (III.vi.113) – somewhere on the peripheries of consciousness and reality. Edgar takes the form – the 'shape' – of Poor Tom, however, precisely because 'Poor Tom' is not a recognizable identity. If he is to continue to evade 'the hunt', Edgar must 'scape' identification, must be fundamentally *unidentifiable*. This distinguishes Poor Tom from the gruff retainer, 'Caius' – the disguise Kent adopts. Through his new identity, Kent seeks for a place in the society from which he has been exiled, offering to serve 'Authority' (I.iv.30). He also defends the *status quo* by 'teaching' Oswald to respect hierarchical distinctions (I.iv.88). By contrast, Poor Tom seems to generate only indistinction: he similarly casts himself as a former 'serving-man' (III.iv.84) but at no point seeks for an identifiable 'place' in the social totality.

The exilic condition Edgar embodies involves a spatial shift. Edgar is thrust from the (presumed) civility of the court into a desolate wilderness of 'winds and persecutions' and 'pelting villages', a world where there is 'scarce a bush' (II.ii.492). This wild scenescape is usually described as 'the heath'. It is, however, worth observing that the heath is an editorial intervention on the part of Nicholas Rowe, who introduced it as part of his 1709

edition of Shakespeare.[548] There are, in both the Quarto and Folio versions of *King Lear*, very few determinate signifiers that might serve to more firmly locate the space Edgar (and also Lear and the Fool) occupy from Act Three onwards, aside from that it is 'out o' door' (III.ii.11). The 'heath' gives determinate shape to a space that is far less defined than even that open-ended descriptor would allow. Exile in *King Lear* involves 'a new spatio-temporal dynamics', which takes the form of an 'open place, vague and frontierless, a sort of wasteland' that is 'devoid of landmarks' – truly the 'obscured course' (II.ii.166) Kent forlornly imagines: 'I know not whither' (II.ii.487).[549] This scenescape is a windswept wasteland – an exilic space. But it is also chthonic: in his transformation into Poor Tom, Edgar enacts something of a descent underground, into the primal, pre-evolutionary mud and 'grime'.[550]

The shift into exilic space also entails a radical discursive shift, from the light-hearted and self-satisfied irony of a civilized courtier – 'How now, brother Edmund, what serious contemplation are you in?' (I.ii.138-139) – to a 'roaring' voice of 'lunatic bans' and demented 'prayers'. The word 'bans' is telling: as Edgar uses it, the most obvious meaning is 'curse'; but the etymological root of 'bans'/'ban' also relates to banishment – the 'curse' of exile.[551] Exile involves a new 'lunatic' way of speaking, which takes place outside of conventional social discourse – though the allusion to 'prayers' may also adumbrate a more supplicatory form of speech that witnesses a (finally, unrealizable) desire for divine and/or

[548] See James Ogden, 'Lear's Blasted Heath', *Lear from Study to Stage*, pp. 135-145.
[549] Pascale Drouet, '"Strangered with our Oath": The Dynamics of Banishment in *King Lear*', *And That's True Too: New Essays on King Lear*, ed. François Laroque and Pierre Iselin and Sophie Alatorre (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), pp. 186-187.
[550] For more on the relation between Poor Tom and the chthonic, see Ted Hughes, *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), p. 275
[551] 'ban, n.'. *OED Online*. Accessed November 20, 2017. http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/15092?rskey=WXQg3f&result=1

social succour. It is worth recalling that Poor Tom repeats over and over again that he is 'a-cold' (III.iv.81).

If, in his transformation into Poor Tom, Edgar embodies the negative state of exile, he also embodies the abject. Lear touches on the relationship between the abject and exile when banishing Cordelia – who is 'strangered with our oath' (I.i.205) – which he thinks of as a sort of self-excision, or blood-letting, both from his own body and the body politic (I.i.114-117). Gloucester thinks in the same way about Edgar, who is 'outlawed' from his 'blood' (III.iv.162-163). The abject, as with exile, involves the subversion of usual categories; it is that which cannot be made to 'fit' into systems of identity. Being abject means being unidentifiable: Edgar even 'grime[s]' his face with 'filth' – a word which, in early modern usage, connoted various forms of excrement, which is expelled from the 'clean and proper body'.[552] Defiling his physical identity, embodied by his face, Edgar quite literally 'outfaces' – *dis-guises* – himself.

Derek Cohen has written that *King Lear* can be read as 'a secular re-enactment of a sacrifice ritual', where the 'physical removal' – by death or exile – of a subject understood to be the root of 'discord, dissension, and danger' is a necessary precondition of the 're-establishment of the cultural practices and norms that enable the supposedly peaceful continuance of social order'.[553] This subject is – of course – known as the scapegoat. Cohen picks out Oswald and Edmund as scapegoats in *King Lear*; but Edgar/Poor Tom also – and perhaps more powerfully – embodies the ritual place of the scapegoat, at one point revealing the way he has been 'whipped from tithing to tithing and stocked, punished and imprisoned' (III.iv.130-131). In Chapter One, I provided an analysis of the relationship

[552] *Powers of Horror*, p. 71.
[553] Derek Cohen, 'The Malignant Scapegoats of *King Lear*', *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*, 49:2 (2009), p. 386.

between the scapegoat (the sacrifice ritual) and tragic subjectivity, making the case that the sacrifice at once ensures the survival of the commons but also lays the foundation for the autonomy of the tragic subject – and, indeed, of the aesthetic. Cohen makes the same point: 'Every scapegoating, every cleansing in blood, is fraught with insoluble contradiction'.[554] The scapegoat figure pays witness to the 'insoluble' non-identity of the subject, who challenges the hegemony of the community from which s/he is exiled. This same contradiction is apparent in Poor Tom: his exclusion from the *polis* aligns him with the archetypal scapegoat and the autonomous tragic subject, with his/her negation of the social totality.

I have, so far, argued that Poor Tom can be thought of as embodying a form of non-identity. This, in an Adornian understanding of subjectivity, would align him with autonomy and freedom. By defying socially and politically prescribed categories, Edgar (as Poor Tom) enables non-identity and the autonomy of the subject. But is Edgar/Poor Tom free? He is certainly able to escape detection, but whether or not exile represents a state of freedom in *King Lear* is open to question. Does the exile escape identitarian determination? It is possible that the exile is not so much 'outside' of totality as circumscribed 'within' it. In the next section, I turn to the writings of Agamben to explore these fraught questions around 'bare life'.

2.2. Edgar/Poor Tom and 'Bare Life'

[554] Ibid, p. 387.

Lear, in his storm-flung ravings, identifies Poor Tom as 'the thing itself': 'Unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare forked animal as thou art'. From his encounter with Poor Tom, Lear takes away an image of bare life: of life lived outside the social and political 'accommodations' which imbue human existence with symbolic cultural value and meaning. Such life seems – to Lear – to precede cultural 'legitimation'. What he misses, however, is the way in which new systems of thought and social organization *produce* bare life in his world, a process I analysed in Chapter Two, where I provided an interpretation of Edmund and his universalization of 'base life'. Critics are not necessarily wrong to concentrate on the political 'moral' Lear draws when he meets Poor Tom – that a king and a beggar are, after all, fundamentally the same and that the 'superflux' might be shaken in the name of a more equitable society. The problem, however, is that Lear reifies human life as inherently debased, as much as Edmund does in his equalization of all human life as 'base' (or 'bare'). This is not the 'natural' state of humanity 'outside' of society; it is a condition *produced* by society. 'That all men are alike', writes Adorno, 'is exactly what society would like to hear'.[555]

Agamben theorizes the state of exile through the Aristotelian *zoē–bios* distinction, where *zoē* connotes the bare 'animal' life of the human being and bios a historical form of 'political' life.[556] Agamben famously makes the case that the state of exile, outside the *polis*, constitutes a form of bare life. But he also contends that modern bio-political society is remarkable for the complete integration (the paradoxical 'inclusive exclusion') of biological life into the political state. This reached its nadir at Auschwitz, which Agamben reads as the

[555] *Minima Moralia*, pp. 102-103.
[556] *Homo Sacer*, pp. 1-9.

catastrophic culmination of bio-politics and the total domination of the body and its 'naked life'.[557]

This interpretation of exile does partially speak to *King Lear*. It is worth noting that, in *The True Chronicle History of King Leir*, Leir and the other exiles ultimately find refuge in France – another place outside the rule of Britain. There is, however, no 'other place' in *King Lear*. Shakespeare excises France, so that exclusion – paradoxically – is internal. 'Am I in France?' (IV.vii.76) wonders Lear, as he awakens to see Cordelia in Act Four. The answer is – of course – no: Lear is in his 'own kingdom' (IV.vii.76). When he uses the legalistic language 'proof and precedent / Of Bedlam beggars', Edgar might be viewed as inadvertently betraying the comprehensive inscription of base life within the compass of the juridical-political totality. Simon Palfrey writes that Poor Tom 'prefigures the Holocaust', as the nadir of Western modernity and its bio-political regime: 'he haunts it, expects it, is unsurprised by it'.[558]

There is, however, an obvious problem with the idea of the total integration of the supposedly outlawed (legally 'bare') subject into the ambit of the state: it leaves little to no room for resistance or autonomy. Agamben – as a result – pays scant attention to the sort of social and political transgressions that might lead to a subject being exiled from the commons *in the first place*. This understanding of the relationship between subject and society, as Steven DeCarioli has contended, tends to elide tragedy.[559] The idea that bare life is integrated into the social and political totality means that Agamben cannot conceptualize

[557] Ibid, pp. 166-180.
[558] Simon Palfrey, *Poor Tom: Living King Lear* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2014), p. 113.
[559] See his 'Boundary Stones: Giorgio Agamben and the Field of Sovereignty', *Giorgio Agamben: Sovereignty and Life*, ed. Matthew Calarco and Steven DeCarioli, pp. 43-69.

the challenge the exile represents to the dominance of the *polis*; he cannot conceptualize non-identity.[560]

It is important to recall that Poor Tom is not 'the thing itself' – as a deranged Lear imagines – and so a petrified image of base life. Poor Tom is, as Edgar states, a radically indeterminate '*something*' (II.ii.192). Poor Tom is far more open-ended and undefined than Lear is able to imagine in his reifying conception of de-cultured 'base life' – 'the thing itself'. It is his status as a provisional, indeterminate 'something', as opposed to the idea of 'the thing itself', which implies that 'Poor Tom' will ultimately cede to a host of other identities. Over the course of the play, Edgar engages in a process of continuous self re-authorship, conducting a whole legion of voices and identities in and through his fissiparous 'self', from a country yokel – 'Chi'll not let go, zir, without further 'cagion' (IV.vi.231) – to a many-nosed, horned 'demon' (IV.vi.72) and, in his final triumph over his rival Edmund, a heroic knight: 'Draw thy sword' (V.iii.124-126). This self-fragmentation is physicalized by Edgar: by sticking 'pins', 'wooden pricks', 'nails' and 'sprigs' in his 'bare and mortified' arms, Edgar enacts something akin to the ritual of *sparagmos* – a form of self-rending that symbolizes violent self-dispersal.[561] What unites the various 'selves' that Edgar adopts 'post-Tom' is that they are all unnamed and 'untitled' – and even Poor Tom, as I have indicated, is more of a generic name than a fully conceived 'personal' identity. These figures can be understood as yet further embodiments – further iterations – of 'nothing'. With no name – and no 'title' – the figures Edgar transforms into over the course of the play can all be said to inhere to his

[560] It is precisely that sense of non-identity, of being somewhere else, which is captured in 'The Other Place', where *Will's Way* was originally staged (Shakespeare remarks that he 'much prefers' the space of The Other Place to 'the main stage' (7), as it is 'more me' (9)).
[561] See Bruce Lincoln, *Death, War, and Sacrifice: Studies in Ideology and Practice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 186.

self-negation ('Edgar I nothing am') and his radical subversion of normative social and political identity.

There is – of course – some ambiguity about Edgar and his transformation into Poor Tom and other figures, which may bring his apparent non-identity into question. How far does Edgar remain Edgar 'underneath' his disguises? Does the 'disguise' gain autonomy over its overwhelmed originator? These often-asked questions around Edgar/Poor Tom are no doubt important.[562] What is more important, however, is whether or not Edgar is able to enact a return to the social totality, taking up his 'lost' place in the order from which he is outcast.

The indeterminate topology of *King Lear* is, as Michel Goldman has shown, unique in the Shakespeare, in that the central characters of the play are all displaced into a vast transitional space, without any sense of a final destination – aside, perhaps, from Dover, which itself becomes a shifting and liminal (non-)place in the play, perhaps most obviously in the scene at Dover 'cliff': 'Wherefore to Dover?' (III.vii.51).[563] This representation of space fragments and suspends the onward movement of narrative progress, as characters wander about the 'heath' without any obvious purpose. It also suspends formal closure. Without any final and 'fixed place' (I.vi.261) to which the characters can 'fly' (II.i.56) or return, *King Lear* ultimately obviates resolution, whereby the 'promised end' (V.iii.261) – or indeed the Promised Land – is never realized. There is, as Kingsley-Smith has contended, no 'homecoming' in *King Lear*: the surviving characters are ultimately left stranded in a devastated landscape, ending the play 'out o' door'.[564] Edgar may seek to perform a process

[562] For competing views see Ewan Fernie, *The Demonic: Literature and Experience* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 224 and Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations* (Berkley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 94-128.
[563] Michael Goldman, '*King Lear*: Acting and Feeling', *On King Lear*, p. 43
[564] *Shakespeare's Drama of Exile*, p. 126.

of self-return through his duel with Edmund, from 'My name is lost' (V.iii.19) to 'My name is Edgar' (V.iii.167). There is, however, no final return to identity by the catastrophic end of the play. *King Lear* – as I have shown in Chapter Two – has no obvious restitution of the social and political order, to which the outcasts may return. Even if he is given the final speech, Edgar speaks from the position of 'exclusion, exile and expatriation' – not necessarily as heir.[565] Poor Tom is perhaps not as far away as he might appear in the final moments of the play: Edgar remains in a state of exile, revealing the ongoing non-identity of subject and society.

Rudkin shares the idea that Edgar cannot enact a process of self-return or social restitution, making the case that Shakespeare 'recognizes that at the ending of a play whose cosmos is so faulted and flawed, and whose pessimism is so deep, a formal promise of a "healer" will not sit well'.[566] I want now to consider the deep influence which Edgar, and his transformation into Poor Tom, has had on Rudkin. I begin by identifying the way in which Edgar informs the representation of dramatic character in Rudkin, before showing that Edgar also informs the way Rudkin conceptualizes his own self-transformative authorial 'process'.

3. Rudkin and Edgar

Rudkin has acknowledged the way in which his conception of dramatic characterization and his ideas around self re-authorship and exile are indebted to *King Lear* and Edgar. Rudkin remarks that *King Lear* sends its characters 'flying out from the centre to the extremes,

[565] '"Strangered with our Oath"', p. 180.
[566] Appendix, p. 350.

where they are rendered conventionally meaningless, and become self-performing existential figures in a void'.[567] 'Particularly formative', reveals Rudkin, is 'the transformation speech'.[568] 'Edgar invents and tries on a role in the "Edgar I nothing am" speech': 'The series of performances that thereafter constitute his journey remains influential'.[569] Rudkin typically depicts protagonists who undergo an Edgar-like process of self re-authorship, abandoning an official social self for a non-official self, which does not fit into the regulatory identity-systems of the social totality (is 'conventionally meaningless'). This can be a response to exile – and the catastrophic loss of self it involves – or can equally occasion exile, as the subject is forced from the community as a whole because of his/her contravention of culturally ratified identities. This process entails a radical physical and linguistic shift. Rudkin depicts characters that physically 'transform' themselves on stage, often through self-abasement. This is paralleled by a linguistic shift towards a type of lunatic 'bans' Edgar takes up.[570]

Many of the characters Rudkin has created in his plays – including Merlin ('Now nothing am'), Hitchcock ('Hitchcock eye; nothing am'), Amadu ('What I Amadu am?') and even Shakespeare himself ('Shakespeare I nothing am' (27)) – directly echo Edgar, typically in moments of catastrophic personal and social upheaval that challenge the presumed identity of the self.[571] The same influence can be traced in those Rudkin characters who are 'determined to play the role of a filthy "thing" pelted out onto the very margins of society and history' – the 'filthy "thing" Rudkin refers to obviously recalling Poor Tom as 'the thing

[567] Ibid, p. 96.
[568] Quoted in *Sacred Disobedience*, p. 95.
[569] Ibid.
[570] David Rudkin, 'Burning Alone in the Dark: David Rudkin Talks to David Ian Rabey', *Planet*, 114 (1995-1996), p. 93.
[571] *Merlin Unchained*, p. 81; David Rudkin, *The Lovesong of Alfred J. Hitchcock* (London: Oberon, 2014), p. 43; *Red Sun*, p. 40.

itself', while the word 'pelt' similarly alludes to those who – like Edgar – 'abide' the 'pelting of the pitiless storm' in *King Lear*.[572] These range from the 'uncertain person' of Child Manatond in *The Sons of Light*, to Athdark in *The Saxon Shore* and Gil/Giles in *The Triumph of Death*, all of whom wrestle with the negative *persona* of a 'Nobody' and a 'Not': 'This is not Not'.[573]

Rudkin states that Edgar underpins his thinking about the dramatic character 'alone on stage' (something echoed in his notion of 'self-performing' figures 'in a void').[574] Whether or not Edgar is truly 'alone' on stage during his transformation is something of a moot point. The transformation scene (as Rudkin calls it) occurs after Kent is put in the stocks – his 'shameful lodging' (II.ii.170) – and, in the Quarto version at least, falls asleep. Neither version has a scene-break – though both editors and directors have traditionally introduced a break after Kent drifts into sleep, turning the transformation scene into a soliloquy. Rudkin obviously visualizes the scene in an individualized way. This stress on existential isolation – on being 'alone' – reflects the way in which Rudkin conceives of exile and self re-authorship: as processes that individuate the subject from society. This idea of the 'void' is similarly telling: Rudkin draws on the indeterminate topology of exile in *King Lear*, where the subject is left 'alone on an empty blasted earth, beneath a polluting sky'.[575] This conception of spatiality owes something to Brook and his 1962 production. Only where the empty space of the Brook production signified an absurd, Godless wasteland where subjects were left forever paralyzed, Rudkin understands the desolate spaces of *King Lear*

[572] Quoted in *Sacred Disobedience*, p. 96.
[573] *The Saxon Shore*, p. 29 and p. 12; David Rudkin, *The Triumph of Death* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1981), p. 47, p. 20 and p. 32.
[574] Ibid, p. 96.
[575] David Rudkin, 'Being an Artaudian Dramatist', collected as part of the Conference Papers of *Past Masters: Antonin Artaud Conference, 8-10 November 1996* (Aberystwyth: Centre for Performance Research, 1996), p. 11.

through Edgar: as exilic spaces that allow the subject to cast off inherited identities and re-author the self.

In his interview with the author, Rudkin draws an intriguing distinction between 'theatre' and 'drama'. Where theatre names the physical and public space where plays take place – the institution of theatre, which Rudkin was forbad by his strict religious upbringing – 'drama' names something quite distinct: the deep 'impression' which plays 'stamp' on the individual, most obviously through the act of reading.[576] This distinction is revealing: drama seems to be an 'internal' process, which is produced by overpowering (Rudkin says 'nightmarish') images in the plays, while theatre is 'external' – involving the practicalities of staging. This distinction speaks to a wider scope of engagement between Rudkin and *King Lear*. The figure of Edgar, his self-loss and re-authoring, manifestly preoccupies Rudkin and has found a unique place in his theatrical understanding. But for Rudkin, Edgar is also related to the dramatic authorial process itself: playwriting involves a continuous process of crisis and self-transformation, 'not on the space, but for the *author* to do', so that self re-authorship – even its 'indistinguished space' (IV.vi.266) – is psychically 'internal', a form of inner exile.[577]

In his 1996 talk 'Being an Artaudian Dramatist', Rudkin offers a particularly revealing exposition of his process of self re-authorship. Rudkin provides a brief reading of his works and makes the case that 'being' an Artaudian dramatist – as opposed to simply writing Artaudian plays – means shedding old selves 'like a skin', so that 'a new self emerges': 'Again and again, one re-invents oneself'.[578] Yet while the talk putatively relates that process to Artaud, the figure that (once again) emerges, and informs the reading of Artaudian

[576] See Appendix, p. 342.
[577] 'Being an Artaudian Dramatist', p. 5.
[578] Ibid, p. 1 and p. 14.

dramaturgy Rudkin develops, is Edgar. Rudkin concludes his address by alluding to Edgar, insisting that self re-authorship ('forever re-midwifing oneself') parallels Edgar and his transformation into 'the Bedlam beggar'.[579] Rudkin also underscores the exilic state that self re-authorship necessarily involves, stating that by 'the same act, again and again, one re-exiles oneself', as Edgar similarly 'puts himself out beyond the boundaries'.[580] Through his constant self-transformations, Rudkin makes himself – as he puts it – 'indigestible' within any community, so preventing his inclusion within any 'constituency' that may reduce him to a static identity.[581]

To understand the way in which Rudkin writes his own authorial subjectivity through Shakespeare and Edgar, I turn now to analyse his conceptualization of the act of appropriation, which in his drama tends to be 'biographical' – the appropriation of past artists. I will consider some of his other appropriations of 'Shakespeare', before I analyse the way *Will's Way* thematizes ideas around exile and self-authorship through its appropriation of Edgar.

4. Rudkin, Shakespeare and Appropriation

In his remarkable 1995 interview 'Burning Alone in the Dark' – a notably exilic title – Rudkin sets out his approach to biographical writing and appropriation, which in various media has included Gustav Mahler, Dimitri Shostakovich, Antonin Artaud and Alfred Hitchcock – all figures that can be situated in the modernist tradition and who have inspired and continue

[579] Ibid, p. 14.
[580] Ibid.
[581] Ibid, pp. 12-13.

to haunt Rudkin.[582] Rudkin states that his appropriations do not develop 'a dramatic deconstruction' – a sceptical 'writing back' to a past artist from the perspective of a prescribed identity politics.[583] Rudkin recalls his disillusionment with the Gay Liberation movement of the 1970s, where he 'encountered institutionalized bigotries and prescriptivism' as 'narrow, closeted and self-stereotyped' as anything he found in the wider 'administered world'.[584] 'I would not wish to be categorized in any way which is limiting or prescriptive', states Rudkin: 'I believe that also an essential part of liberation is to confront that exile and experience of being excommunicated by one's own brethren'.[585] Rudkin reveals that, far from politically interrogatory or historically 'factual' representations, writing about the lives and work of other artists is a means of self-authorship, whereby he finds that the work of past masters 'yield questions' he discovers to be 'pertinent' to his 'own existence' and 'relevant' to his own 'inner journeys'.[586] The lives and the artistry of the figures Rudkin appropriates become, he contends, 'metaphors' for, and 'aspects' of, his 'own biography' and 'creative processes'.[587] This is not to say that Rudkin completely 'colonizes' his predecessors, reducing these figures to a mere inflection of his own biography or dramaturgy. This would be tantamount to a form of identity-thinking – a reduction of the other to the same. Rudkin is writing *through* as opposed to *over* the figures he appropriates.

Shakespeare has made appearances in several Rudkin plays, where his presence tends to thematize ideas around exile, fragmentation and self-authorship. These interwoven

[582] 'Burning Alone in the Dark: David Rudkin Talks to David Ian Rabey', *Planet*, vol. 114, Dec-Jan 1995-1996, pp. 91-99.
[583] Ibid, p. 99
[584] Ibid.
[585] Ibid.
[586] Ibid, p. 97.
[587] Ibid.

ideas can be traced back to *Afore Night Come*. The play depicts a gang of fruit-pickers who ritually decapitate an Irish vagrant called Roche, who is dubbed 'Shakespeare' by his 'fellow' workers.[588] The situation in *Afore Night Come* resurfaces in the 2012 play *Merlin Unchained*, in which the spatially and temporally displaced Merlin is misidentified as Irish and, intriguingly, as Shakespeare.[589] Rudkin also began a Shakespeare monologue in 1974, which he left unfinished. This short solo-play occurs at the end of a personal diary – much of which is comprised of early drafts of *The Triumph of Death* – that I discovered in the British Library Rudkin Archive. Shakespeare, entering the stage alone, is burdened by a raft of papers and a calculator. It transpires he is in the midst of completing his tax returns. This imposition on his writing time causes Shakespeare to reflect on the contradiction between economic and artistic production. Where economic production simply treats art as a means to an end – profit – artistic production, as Shakespeare understands it, responds to existential necessity: the need to author and re-author the self. This process turns the playwright into an inherently 'ungovernable' outsider, who provides a 'token of our freedom' in a 'corporate Age'.[590]

These appropriations of Shakespeare can all be understood in relation to *Will's Way*. The play is distinct, however, in its self-reflexive engagement with the figure of Edgar. In his address, Shakespeare dedicates substantial time to discoursing on his unique relationship with one of his more ambiguous creations. In creating Edgar, reflects Shakespeare – 'finding out how to inhabit that character on that journey', which is 'a journey, / out into the wilds' –

[588] David Rudkin, *Afore Night Come* (London: Oberon, 2001).
[589] David Rudkin, *Merlin Unchained*, p. 164. 'Alas, I live before his time', responds Merlin, alluding to the Fool in *King Lear* (p. 164); see Appendix, p. 343-344
[590] Rudkin Archive, handwritten diary, dep. 10624, folder 3 (1974). This play cannot necessarily be considered a 'draft' for *Will's Way*, seeing the play predates *Will's Way* by around ten years, with no indication Rudkin returned to the script. But there are some uncanny parallels which indicate the consistency of his thinking around Shakespeare and exile. This play also includes an abrupt exit on the part of Shakespeare ('He simply walks away').

'I fell back on myself as an author' (24, 37). Shakespeare reveals that authorship is – for him – a process of self-authorship and re-authorship. Through his playwriting and the various characters he creates, Shakespeare is able to author and re-author his self. 'As a playwright you blindly touch that unhatched self / or selves, / into life', remarks Shakespeare, so that the plays are 'myself, all broken up' into various characters, which find vicarious literary and dramatic 'life' on-stage (26, 9). Over the course of his address, Shakespeare refers to a variety of other characters drawn from the canon, from Othello to Cymbeline. But it is Edgar who embodies the authorial process as a whole, the way in which Shakespeare is 'always on the change', authoring and re-authoring his self through his playwriting (32).[591] Like his creation, Shakespeare exhibits a powerful 'negative force' (21): the ability to negate his officially sanctioned social self and embrace exilic, self-transformative change: 'Shakespeare I nothing am' (14).

Rudkin appropriates Shakespeare to reflect on his own authorship, turning Shakespeare into a sort of dramatic surrogate.[592] Shakespeare, as Robert Wilcher has contended, ought to be seen as 'a symbolic embodiment' of Rudkin, epitomizing the idea that 'the dramatist goes through a self-transforming process in the course of writing a play'.[593] The idea of a 'process' is critical to *Will's Way* and its portrayal of Edgar. In the next section, I provide a close-reading of *Will's Way*. I will concentrate particularly on the authorial process as a form of self re-authorship and its relation to a fragmentary, exilic aesthetic form.

[591] It is precisely for his unruly transformations from one identity into another that Rabey promotes Edgar to the station of 'tragic hero' in his 'Wye' plays – though by the end of the play it is Echternacht who most powerfully bodies transmutations that outrun 'the will's control'. 'I Nothing am', pronounces Echternacht in Scene Three, with a capital on 'Nothing'. See *The Wye Plays* p. 72 and p. 70.
[592] See also *Poor Tom*, pp. 10-11 and *The Demonic*, p. 228, for Edgar as a theatrical surrogate of Shakespeare.
[593] Robert Wilcher, 'Only a Bard: The Theatre of David Rudkin', *Red Sun and Merlin Unchained*, p.248.

5. *Will's Way*

5.1. The Process Play

Through his appropriation of Shakespeare and Edgar, Rudkin defines the type of playwriting he practises as 'the process play', in which he undergoes a process of continual self-transformation. Like his avatar Edgar, Shakespeare continuously authors and embodies new subjectivities – new 'selves' (39). In his thoughts on his ongoing 'process', Shakespeare observes:

> There comes a point while you're thinking all this
> when you start to say Hang on,
> the story is important
> but the story isn't the be-all and end-all of the play.
> I think a play is a,
> it has to put you through a process,
> so that at the end of it
> […] you're at a new beginning. (21-22)

The process Shakespeare undergoes in his playwriting never truly ends: every (ostensible) 'end' opens up a 'new beginning', so that the process starts over again. This obviously has implications for aesthetic form and, most obviously, for narrative (or as Shakespeare calls it, the 'story'). By drawing a subtle distinction between 'the play' and 'the story', Shakespeare reveals the play and its 'process' cannot be contained by, and tends to violate, narrative, which – in an allusion to *Macbeth* and 'Might be the be all, and the end all' (I.vii.5) – can never be the 'be-all and end-all'. Narrative closure (the end of the story) cannot not put an end ('end all') to the process Shakespeare undergoes through his plays or encompass his own constantly shifting being ('be all') – a point I touch on again when I come to analyse the

Catastrophist non-ending of the play. It is, as Shakespeare declares, not 'the story' but 'the play that matters' (38).

Rudkin created his appropriation of Shakespeare by extemporizing – and voice-recording – the talk that would become *Will's Way*.[594] This compositional technique throws light on the way Rudkin turns biographical appropriation into a form of vicarious self-authorship. But it also goes some way to clarifying the discontinuous and fragmentary style of the play, which is meant to resemble 'an unscripted personal address' (7). Shakespeare never settles into a progressive 'story', but moves unpredictably between various ideas and motifs, in a far more unpredictable and discontinuous way. The 'uneven' form of the address is perhaps most obvious in the constant delays – usually taking the form of parentheses or self-reflective 'mms' – deviations and digressions that punctuate the talk, arresting narrative progress and adumbrating other possible but untaken avenues of exposition (22). Shakespeare even self-reflexively remarks on his own violation of narrative progress – 'How did I get onto all that?' – and that various other 'directions' were possible, with 'a thousand paths' the talk might have taken: 'This is the path it took' (36, 39). This violation of narrative progress through disruptions and digressions has obvious parallels with the unsettled physical and psychic 'wandering' of *King Lear* – its errant movement through an indeterminate topology. The deformation of narrative linearity in *Will's Way* testifies to an exilic form of subjectivity, where the subject takes a more 'unpredictable' route.

Shakespeare intuits that his process – his continuous self re-authorship – inevitably makes him an outsider, an exile. He observes that his process means he can never 'fit' into society or its prescribed forms of identity. Shakespeare describes himself as a 'non-

[594] Appendix, pp. 344-345.

belonger' – he does not 'really belong' (11). Shakespeare is partially a victim of the politics of, as he calls it, 'including' and 'excluding', his status as a 'non-belonger' meaning that he is forever barred from 'being brought / Home', and being allowed 'Within, and not a stranger' (15,11). The plaintive cry of Poor Tom – that he is 'a-cold' – might also be heard: Shakespeare is also permanently stranded out of doors, exposed to the 'persecutions of the sky'. But at the same time, his experience of non-belonging – his non-identity – also 'equips' (24) him. Shakespeare remarks that his 'outlaw' (20) status, his unaccommodated form of subjectivity, is deeply formative: it allows him to avoid being 'underlined by everybody else' (10), even to exist as 'the opposite of everything' (12) – a powerful form of 'negative mischief' (33). Shakespeare embraces negation, over and above the reifying demands of social belonging.

Once again relating his self and artistry to the figure of the exiled Edgar, Shakespeare pursues the idea that the playwright ought to be 'thrust out / onto the very edges of the universe':

> And the author does in a sense live outside.
> A stranger in his own world, he has to be that,
> in order to see that world.
> And he has to be in contact with the mud at the bottom of the well.
> I mean, for all our sakes,
> it's the dramatist above all who has to have bad dreams.
> Edgar goes physically down into all of that. (24-25)

Not unlike Edgar, who subsists 'on the very edges of the universe', Shakespeare appears in *Will's Way* as an exile, a 'stranger', living 'as an alien' and occupying an exilic space 'outside' (24) society as whole. This marginalization is, at the same time, a form of chthonic 'descent' – a going 'down' into 'the mud', so as to make 'contact' with 'the darkest reaches' (24). The

spatial dynamic owes itself to *King Lear*: the conceptualization of being 'thrust' outside – 'thrust him out at gates' (III.vii.92) – obviously draws on the exilic topology of *King Lear*, while the chthonic descent Shakespeare describes – a degeneration into 'elemental excrement' – reflects the way Edgar 'goes down' into the primordial 'grime' and 'filth' ('the mud at the bottom of the well'). Shakespeare is an abject figure, found in the 'pigsties and the ashes' (34). He becomes, as Edgar does, 'utterly distorted and unrecognized' (20) in his world.

This is a necessary condition ('he has to be that') for the playwright: his outsider status provides the space for a critical perspective on the social totality ('to see that world') and allows him to bring the identity of the community – its norms and values – into question (Shakespeare compares his seemingly 'warped perspective' with 'the eyes of a foreigner' (28)). This means the playwright takes an exilic position akin to that of the tragic hero, whose ritual expulsion from society at once serves to solidify the community, but can also entail freedom from a repressive social and political order. Shakespeare even appears as something of a Christ-like, sacrificial martyr, who takes it upon himself to suffer at the hands of, but also paradoxically for, the wider community. His painful experience of marginality is represented as formative, allowing him to provide a negative critique of that order on behalf of others: 'for all our sakes'. Through his appropriation of Shakespeare and Edgar, Rudkin imagines a dramatist whose value – even universal value, '*all* our sakes' – to the world flows from a position outside society, as a determinate negation of totality. This serves to put the tragic figure of the playwright at the social and cultural 'centre', as Shakespeare calls it, where a playwright 'should be' (24). Precisely by virtue of his exile to the margins, Shakespeare is able to both 'see' and address himself to the 'centre', from

which he is outcast. 'The edge', as an unpublished Rudkin play has it, 'is where the centre is'.[595]

When he remarks that Edgar goes 'physically down' into the 'darkest reaches', the implication is that Shakespeare – as an author – is also going through a psychic process, a dichotomy that arguably speaks to the distinction Rudkin draws between 'theatre' and 'drama'. The 'well', along with the Hamlet-like 'bad dreams' – 'a king of infinite space, were it not that I had bad dreams' (II.ii.255) – the playwright suffers from, may indicate a chthonic descent into the subconscious, a 'well' where other possible but normally repressed selves are buried. This would serve to turn the process of self re-authorship into a psychoanalytic process, an engagement with the dark 'shadow' self – those aspects of the self the ego would disavow, but which can be brought to consciousness as part of a wider process of self-transformation. Rudkin has an ongoing interest in Freudian and Jungian theory – and often refers to his transformative time with the Reichian Robert Ollendorf, to whom *The Sons of Light* is dedicated.[596]

This would mean 'theatre' serves to embody the inner physic 'drama' of the playwright, as an externalization of 'inner life'.[597] Shakespeare even goes as far as to say that the continuous process of self re-authorship has a vicarious, therapeutic value for the playwright:

> I think that's the only play worth writing,
> from the author's point of view.
> The process play.
> It's the only kind of play that the writing
> is going to do him any good. (21)

[595] Quoted in Sukhdev Sandu (ed.), *The Edge is Where the Centre Is: David Rudkin and Penda's Fen, An Archaeology* (Brooklyn NY: Keegan and Cooke, 2015), p. 47.
[596] See 'Burning Alone in the Dark', p. 98.
[597] Ibid, p. 10.

Rudkin concedes that his concentration on self re-authorship and its related exilic processes might appear 'solipsistic' and that the 'constant re-emergence of new selves' might be viewed as being at risk of 'disappearing up its own arsehole'.[598] 'What is its *meaning* for the audience? For the community? Society? The world?'[599] But for Rudkin, self re-authorship and the exile it involves is profoundly political – even a means, to quote Palfrey in his analysis of Poor Tom, of '*living political*'.[600] The act of 'refusing to be, or remain, *defined*' is for Rudkin an existentially and politically 'subversive' act in the increasingly reified and administered world of post-Auschwitz culture.[601] His appropriation of Edgar-Tom should be situated as a deeply political response to that reified, post-Holocaust world and its petrified identities.

5.2. 'The Temper of the Time'

While it is valuable from the 'point of view' of the author, self re-authorship also has a public (even universal) political meaning. Shakespeare remarks that the 'conjunction / between the inward, and the public, / is vital for a dramatist to make / if his drama is to have meaning':

> If all I did as a playwright
> was stand up on stage and beat my breast
> how frightened I am, how miserable I am,

[598] 'Being an Artaudian Dramatist', p. 10.
[599] Ibid.
[600] *Poor Tom*, p. 5.
[601] 'Being an Artaudian Dramatist', p. 10.

> how confused I am, oh how I suffer:
> no one quite rightly would want to know. (28)

Shakespeare disclaims declamatory, Lear-like apostrophes to a hostile universe. He states that, while his 'creative energy' springs from personal pain and his own personal 'struggle', his process of self re-authorship has 'public' implications far beyond the life of the playwright (27-28). Shakespeare may be able to engage creatively in the act of writing; but he is also conscious of nascent socio-historical shifts that may narrow the possibilities for self-authorship and re-authorship. Shakespeare voices concerns about the dehumanizing impact of 'new social principles', paying witness to a violent epochal transition to a new dispensation:

> I think there are new social principles coming in
> which do not seem to have the same room
> for the wholeness of human nature;
> a much more mechanistic and mercenary approach to a man. (32)

This reductively 'mechanistic' and 'mercenary' approach to humanity portends the beginnings of capitalist modernity, which Shakespeare denounces as 'A whirlwind utterly without humane values, / charged with a terrible unprinciple. / A new breed of people are given license to ravage' (22). The 'new breed of people' Shakespeare rails against – recalling the language of figures from John Danby to Arnold Kettle – is principally represented by Goneril, Regan and Edmund, whose amoral intrigues epitomize the 'terrible unprinciple' that underpins capitalistic self-interest: 'a whole new generation / motivated by greed, for power, wealth, land' (22). These figures 'are muggers basically. Grab grab grab, and to hell with ethics' (22). This compulsion to 'grab' captures the fusion of Enlightenment instrumentality with capitalistic consumption, where the drive to dispel myth and make the

world fully knowable and graspable – to bring every 'thing' within the sphere of consciousness and utility – is formally commensurable with capitalist interchangeability, in which potentially everything is 'up for grabs' by virtue of being speciously equalized by market forces.

By depicting a Shakespeare who condemns the cost of capitalist modernity, Rudkin posits a dialectical historical continuum between the beginnings of the bourgeois 'revolution' and his own critique of a society in which the subject is at risk of being completely absorbed into the social totality. The critique Shakespeare provides of the 'temper of the time', as he calls it, is obviously as much a critique of late capitalist culture as it is of the beginnings of early modern capitalism. The 'temper of the time' relates to the contemporaneous Thatcher revolution and its 'reductionist and inhumane political ethos', as Rudkin calls it.[602] This critique has less to do with the loss of communal social and political values than it does with the totalization of society under the capitalist principle, which in contradiction to the neoliberal ideology of the 'free' individual, mechanically liquidates the subject.

Rudkin understands capitalist modernity as an inherently catastrophic dispensation, which has 'proved a colossal failure on a historic scale'.[603] But 'for all that capitalistic progress is a terribly convincing lie, it is comfortingly anti-paradoxical in its profession to have defined, colonized and expunged all contradictions'.[604] This idea of the 'contradiction' that capitalist reification has failed to completely 'colonize' and 'expunge' relates to the subject – and most obviously, to the exilic subject of tragedy. Rudkin writes that exile testifies to the 'limits of self-control' and reminds the 'citizens of the *polis* just how

[602] 'Being an Artaudian Dramatist', p. 11.
[603] Quoted in David Ian Rabey, 'Broken Magic? A Directors Perspective on *Merlin Unchained*', *Red Sun and Merlin Unchained*, p. 242.
[604] Ibid.

shapeless, (self-) destructive and unregenerate an individual can be in official terms'.[605] This, as Rudkin sees it, has 'universal political significance': where globalized late capitalism turns reification into a worldwide phenomenon, non-identity takes on meanings far beyond the exiled individual.[606]

Kingsley-Smith has made the case that the way Edgar transforms into Poor Tom is as significant for its 'impact on others' as it is for 'its impact on Edgar'.[607] By transforming into Poor Tom, Edgar catalyses new insights and understanding in those around him – not least Lear, who is acutely sensitive to the 'unaccommodated' state of Poor Tom and its wider social and political implications: 'Consider him well' (III.iv.111). Not too dissimilarly, the Shakespeare of *Will's Way* – and, by implication, Rudkin himself – aspires to rouse both self and others into an awareness of a common crisis through a creative and political practice of self re-authorship. I want, in the next section, to analyse the way in which Rudkin conceives of the relationship between the autonomous exilic subject, aesthetic form and audience response.

5.3. Exile, Self Re-Authorship and the Audience

Rudkin has recently set out his 'intention' for his art:

> Certainly my wish for it – my intention and purpose for it – is to address itself to, to awaken […] the *unsuspected* within the listener, viewer, auditor; to *individuate* that person. Where I feel *betrayed* – yes, I will say that – by much, much of what calls itself cinema and television and art now, is that it somehow addresses me as a

[605] Ibid.
[606] 'Burning Alone in the Dark', p. 97.
[607] *Shakespeare's Drama of Exile*, p. 130.

> member of a *homogeneous* public, which I don't think I am. So I think that art's function is to individuate and, by that same token, inevitably, to subvert […] I mean, this is not a popular view, in context, but the flight *into* forms of collective faith seems to be queuing up to have your hands chopped off […] Its [*sic*] opting into a form of slavery […"] We leave these questions for the apparatus to answer! Just tell us what we have to think; just tell us what we have to do."[608]

Rudkin understands aesthetic response in terms of exile. Whereas the Culture Industry – with its pretensions to authentic 'art' – catalyses a 'flight' into collectivity, Rudkin wants to inspire a 'flight' out of collectivity, to distantiate the subject from society. Rudkin intends for his art to displace the subject, for it to produce a state of exile from a homogenized 'public'.[609] This exilic withdrawal from the collective, is, as Rudkin sees it, a politically 'subversive' process: by exiling – or 'individuating' – the subject from all collectives, Rudkin intends to produce forms of non-identity that serve to bring the *status quo* into question. Rudkin wants to catalyse the self-reflexivity of the subject, which the Culture Industry inhibits by homogenizing audience response ('We leave these questions for the apparatus to answer!'). To simply adopt the dictates of collective faith is, as Rudkin sees it, a form of self-mutilation ('queuing up to have your hands chopped off') – or, as Adorno and Horkheimer call it, the introversion of sacrifice. So when he states that he intends for his art to arouse the '*unsuspected*' in his audience, he means the unsuspected 'inner' exile lurking, as Poor Tom does with Edgar, within the subject – or the 'stranger from within', as Kristeva calls it.[610] This shuddering 'awakening' of the unrealized is the same type of affect Adorno analyses.

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[608] *The Edge is Where the Centre Is*, p. 48.
[609] In his interview with the author, Barker similarly talks of audience response as a process of 'dislocated thought' (Appendix, p. 362).
[610] Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), p. 1.

Rudkin, as with the other playwrights under study and indeed Adorno himself, does not necessarily substantiate his claims about aesthetic response and the processes it is supposed to catalyse. With the relatively infrequent stagings of his plays in mind, it should also be observed that Rudkin has, all too often, not even had an audience to 'address'. His conception of aesthetic response is, as a result, more reliant on a theoretical understanding of form. Rudkin – in the same vein as Adorno – tends to think about the affective (and, relatedly, the political) dimension of art in terms of aesthetic form, as opposed to content (or as Rudkin calls it, 'the formal necessities of the material itself').[611] In his interview with the author, Rudkin states that he does not go 'all the way' with Adorno and his belief that Auschwitz renders all 'symphonic' (harmonious) art, not only obsolete, but indefensible. But his preferred aesthetic has some undeniable overlaps with Adorno and his understanding of fragmented post-Auschwitz art. Most obviously, Rudkin violates aesthetic closure in his plays.

In Chapter One, I observed that the autonomous tragic subject, by refusing final resolution, instantiates a type of open-ended aesthetic form. This process is obviously at work in the (non-)ending of *Will's Way*. Even at the end of his address, Shakespeare remains inscrutable, ultimately refusing to give a cumulative, closing statement on himself or his artistry. Shakespeare is only too keen to abort the talk – 'I think perhaps I should not say any more. / I should stop there' – calling for questions ('Are there any questions?') that remain unanswered as he suddenly disappears from the space, as the play ends with the stage directions calling for an abrupt '*CUT TO BLACK*' (40). Shakespeare does not fulfil any 'formal promise' of resolution. He transgresses the aesthetic limits that may constrain his

[611] Quoted in *Adorno and Modern Theatre*, p. 104.

subjectivity, preserving his restless, exilic refusal of a 'fixed' identity, which may end his self re-authorizations.

The (non-)ending of *Will's Way* also provides a compelling image of Catastrophist performance. By abruptly turning away from the audience and disappearing from the stage, Shakespeare epitomizes the type of sudden 'turn' to be found in Catastrophism, as his *volte-face* subverts both narrative and aesthetic closure. Much the same might be said of Rudkin as his avatar. At the end of a workshop for aspiring playwrights at the 1984 Birmingham Theatre Festival – the same year as *Will's Ways* was written and performed – Rudkin gave a talk on his playwriting process and its wider cultural ramifications, recorded in the film *Interrogations*. Rudkin, at the end of his talk, abruptly left the stage, without taking (or answering) any questions, in precisely the same way as Shakespeare does at the end of *Will's Way*.[612]

If the deformation of closure preserves the autonomy of the Catastrophist subject, however, it is also crucially intended to shape the type of aesthetic response Rudkin intends for his drama. By calling for – but then refusing to answer – questions, Shakespeare returns the responsibility for interpretation to the individual subject, a process Rudkin has aligned with the rabbinic tradition.[613] Where questions answered by the author may serve to unify audience response, as if there were a singular 'authoritative' interpretation to be had, Shakespeare/Rudkin intend to individuate the subject, to force the spectator to consider the play and the questions it raises for him or herself, without recourse to forms of 'collective faith' – the 'apparatus' that may otherwise answer 'for' the subject and so prescribe his or her understanding. Rudkin wants to fragment audience response. The idea – once again – is to separate the subject from a homogenous public, to distantiate him or her from forms of

[612] *Interrogations*, Central Independent Television, dir. Stephen Garrett (1985).
[613] *Sacred Disobedience*, p. 41.

collectivity and awaken the 'unsuspected' exile within. Shakespeare even goes as far as to undermine the textual and interpretive authority over the plays his position as author should grant him – 'Now do not quote me on any of this. / I am not sure that any of what I say can be found in the text' – and acknowledges that there can finally be no authoritative reading or interpretation of his work (13). By having Shakespeare deny his interpretive authority over the plays, Rudkin implicitly denies his interpretive authority over Shakespeare. It is finally left up to the individual to interpret the meaning of the play and 'Shakespeare'.

Conclusion

This chapter has analysed the David Rudkin play *Will's Way*. I have shown that the representation of Shakespeare in the play is indebted to the vital concepts of self re-authorship and exile. I have also shown that Edgar provides a paradigmatic image of a self re-authoring subject, and has had profound influence on the way Rudkin conceptualizes dramatic character and his understanding of his own authorial subjectivity and process. By drawing on the work of Adorno, I have illustrated that exile can be seen as an alternative to the reification of the subject in mass, post-Auschwitz society and culture. I have shown that Rudkin extends that conception of exile – and its critique of a reified subject – to both identity politics and the dehumanizing system of capitalist exchange, as it is totalized by a late capitalist social system. I have also sought to show that Rudkin is indebted to the 'late' modernism of Adorno and its conceptualization of aesthetic form. By subverting aesthetic closure, Rudkin instantiates a Catastrophist aesthetic that, in the same vein as *King Lear*,

retains the non-identity of subject and society. This violation of formal resolution plays a vital role in the way Rudkin understands aesthetic response: by subverting closure, Rudkin intends to fragment his audience, to individuate – or exile – the subject from collectivity and collective action.

Not unlike David Rudkin, Howard Barker has described himself as an 'exile *par excellence*' and fundamentally 'incomprehensible' to those around him, with his plays representing 'a challenge to the whole principle of enlightenment' and the ideology of 'liberal humanism'.[614] This position of non-identity, as I will show in the next chapter, is for Barker profoundly bound up with questions of ethics and morality, the idea of the 'good life'.

[614] Howard Barker/Eduardo Houth, *A Style and Its Origins* (London: Oberon, 2007), p. 25.

Chapter Six

'WHAT IS THIS GOOD?': The Ethics and Aesthetics of the 'Good Life' in Howard Barker's *Seven Lears*

'Anti-morality, in rejecting what is immoral in morality, inherits the deepest concerns of morality' – Theodor Adorno.[615]

Introduction

This chapter will analyse the Howard Barker play *Seven Lears*.[616] The play was originally staged at the Leicester Haymarket Theatre in 1989 and was amongst the first plays produced by The Wrestling School, a company solely dedicated to staging Barker plays, with Kenny Ireland taking the role of director.[617] The play is a prodigiously imaginative 'prequel' to *King Lear* that (ostensibly) portrays the 'Seven Ages' of Lear in a series of *tableaux*-like scenes, which depict Lear as he progresses from boyhood to old age – some time before the action of *King Lear* begins. The play also presents the famously 'missing' wife/mother from *King Lear*, who is given the name Clarissa.[618] Over the action of the play and its series of scenes – entitled First Lear, Second Lear and so on, with an 'Interlude' between Fourth and

[615] *Minima Moralia*, p. 95.
[616] Howard Barker, *Seven Lears and Golgo* (London: John Calder, 1990). All references to *Seven Lears* are from the John Calder edition, except where otherwise indicated. I refer to the text using scene and page numbers. Some of the text is in bold, which usually indicates a forcefully articulated idea or anger.
[617] See Andy Smith, '"I am not what I was": Adaptation and Transformation in The Theatre of Catastrophe and the Wrestling School', ed. Karoline Gritzner and David Ian Rabey *Theatre of Catastrophe: New Essays on Howard Barker* (London: Oberon, 2006), pp. 40-42.
[618] While Lear mentions his father in the play, *his* mother is – ironically – notable for her absence.

Fifth Lears that alludes to the 'interlude!' (V.iii.93) of *King Lear* – Clarissa tries to make Lear 'See better' (I.i.161) – to make him fit 'the hand of intelligence into the glove of government' (4:26). Lear, however, engages in a series of disastrous misadventures that imperil 'the tender of a wholesome weal' (I.iv.196). 'Sixth Lear' ends with the murder of Clarissa – in which the whole Lear family participates – while 'Seventh Lear' ends with the total destruction of the commons, represented in the play by a Chorus, which is finally hanged.

I will show that, in his appropriation of *King Lear*, Barker is primarily concerned with the question of morality and ethics – the possibility of the 'good life' (*Seven Lears* is subtitled *The Pursuit of the Good*). Barker appropriates *King Lear* to enact a radical interrogation of conventional philosophical and ethical understandings of the good life and the idea, which has its roots in antiquity, of the 'common good' – the notion that the common good of society takes priority over the individual and should ethically orientate his or her actions. The revised understanding of morality and ethics Barker develops through his appropriation of *King Lear* insists that the good life rests, not as thinkers from Aristotle to Kant and Rawls would have it, in conformity with the common good of life in the community, but in autonomy, in a state of non-identical deviance from that community and its 'good'.

The reading of *Seven Lears* I develop will concentrate on the way Barker re-visions Lear, whom Barker has called 'perhaps the greatest tragic figure in the modern world'.[619] I show that Barker sets out to upend a humanist reading of *King Lear* that he takes to have become routine. He does so by subverting the conventional image of Lear as an initially hubristic but finally humbled and all-too-human figure, who – through his own sufferings –

[619] *Arguments for a Theatre*, p. 154.

comes to recognize the suffering of others, reconciles with those he has wronged and even begins to provide a powerful critique of his failure to attend to the common good of his Kingdom. Barker produces a Lear who fails to 'repeal and reconcile' (III.iv.114) with others, challenging the reconciliatory figure that has often been read out of *King Lear*. This Catastrophist appropriation of *King Lear* principally involves a subversion of the storm scenes, where Lear laments his failure to provide for the common good of society and prays for the impoverished 'naked wretches' (III.iv.28). 'When Shakespeare made Lear rage did he not love him more than when, humiliated and broken by events, he brings him to the brink of an apology?'[620]

This analysis will involve a close reading of *Seven Lears* and *King Lear*. It will also involve some performance analysis of the original 1989 staging, which forms part of the Exeter Digital Archives. The recording does not comprise the whole of the play and the film is of relatively poor quality, but the recording does shed some light on the way Nicholas Le Provost (who played Lear) embodied Catastrophist 'turns' in both body and voice. I also draw on and analyse some of the critical writings Barker has produced in relation to his conception of the Theatre of Catastrophe. I will refer particularly to his *Arguments for a Theatre*, which was originally published in 1989 – the same year *Seven Lears* was written and staged. By analysing a range of critical as well as theatrical works, I want to demonstrate the vital role *Seven Lears* – and indeed *King Lear* – plays in the development of Catastrophist form. I will also draw on the original interview I conducted with Barker in 2016.[621]

Prior to developing a close-reading of *King Lear* and *Seven Lears*, it will be necessary to give a more complete picture of ethics in the writings of Adorno and the recent ethical

[620] *Arguments for a Theatre*, p. 157.
[621] Appendix, pp. 351-381.

'turn' in Adorno Studies. Barker has described Adorno as his 'philosophical master' and self-consciously echoes Adorno when he observes 'the death of Enlightenment in the ashes of Auschwitz'.[622] My analysis of *Seven Lears* will show that Barker, in producing his profoundly divergent conception of the good life, is influenced by Adorno. Most obviously, Barker takes his cue from *Minima Moralia*, a work which is preoccupied with the 'melancholy science' of the 'good life' in the 'damaged world' of post-Auschwitz culture.[623] *Minima Moralia* is the Adorno work Barker is most familiar with and indebted to, both in terms of themes and the fragmentary Catastrophist style Barker has developed (he even once said that it was, for a long time, his 'bedtime reading').[624] I will draw on both *Minima Moralia* and *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, a 1963 series of talks in which Adorno addresses questions of ethics and morality.[625]

1. Adorno and Ethics

1.1. Ethics versus Morality and the Value of *Mündigkeit*

J.M. Bernstein remarks that 'No reading of the works of Adorno can fail to be struck by the ethical intensity of his writing'.[626] Adorno is not always consistent in his usage, but he does

[622] Quoted in *Howard Barker: Ecstasy and Death*, p. 71.
[623] *A Style and Its Origins*, p. 116; *Minima Moralia*, p. 71.
[624] Quoted in Dan Rebellato, '"And I Will Reach Out My Hand With A Kind of Infinite Slowness And Say The Perfect Thing": The Utopian Theatre of Suspect Culture', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 13:1 (2003), p. 63. Barker also states: 'Adorno began as a passion for me and ended as a puzzle', p. 64.
[625] Theodor Adorno, *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, ed. Thomas Schröder, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: Polity, 2001).
[626] *Disenchantment and Ethics*, p. 1.

draw a distinction between 'ethics' and 'morality'.[627] This division broadly inheres to the Hegelian distinction between ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*) – the 'customs' (*Sitten*) and rules that make up the life, the ethos, of the community – and moral will (*Moralität*) – which connotes the moral self-reflexivity of the individual subject. Where for Adorno ethics is made up of the customary 'rules' of the community, which interpret actions and people based on prescribed standards, such as 'Right' or 'Wrong', morality denotes autonomous moral reflection, the ability to consider and critique the ethical norms and values of the community. The split between morality and ethics – between individual moral agency and a collective ethos – is the split between the subject and society, which is 'the decisive problem of moral philosophy'.[628]

The problem with post-Auschwitz culture is that it is so ethically integrated the subject has been robbed of the capacity self-reflexively to motivate and direct practical and moral orientation. The particular (subject, morality) has been completely drowned by the universal (society, ethics). This process can, in its most dangerous form, be seen to have created the conditions under which Auschwitz was made possible. Adorno contends that the Holocaust typifies the way in which individual subjects failed morally to interrogate the ethos of society as a whole – which in the case of Nazi Germany meant the total destruction of so-called inferior races for the 'good' of the Aryan community.[629] Auschwitz represents a totalized system in which subjects were completely incapacitated; but it also reveals the morally complacent and compliant response from subjects that failed to reflect on the

[627] See also Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), pp. 3-9.
[628] *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, p. 18 and p. 10.
[629] See also Jack Roth, *Ethics During and After the Holocaust: In the Shadow of Birkenau* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005). Roth observes that Nazi Germany, paradoxical as it might seem, did 'not lack a vision of the common good. To the contrary, its conception of the common good did much to unleash the Holocaust': for Nazi ideology had it that the good of the Aryan community as a whole demanded the 'world-destruction' of the Jewish people (p. 174).

'ethical' ends of the community. If Auschwitz requires a newly configured understanding of ethics and morality, it is the imperative of abandoning communitive appeals to ethical life and resuscitating a morally diminished subject undergoing 'the last surrender of his will' (*King Lear*, I.i.295).

Adorno understands the development of ethical norms and values to be imbricated in the dialectic of Enlightenment. He contends that Enlightenment thought – most obviously represented by Kant and Hegel – stresses the idea of rational moral freedom. Such thought, however, also had it that rational moral laws are socially and historically embedded in the ethical customs of the state, which institutes the common good of all. This means that freedom ultimately relapses into heteronomy, as the subject is called upon to act in conformity with already established ethical customs. Adorno does not refer to Eichmann in his writings; but, as Arendt shows, Eichmann made the case that he derived his idea of 'duty' to the ethical laws of the state from Enlightenment philosophers – even contending he was a Kantian.[630]

Adorno does not reduce the Enlightenment or its ethical philosophy to a single thinker. He does not even limit the dialectic of Enlightenment to the era of Enlightenment, but performs a foundational critique of Western philosophy from the classical era onwards, as I have shown in Chapter One.[631] This means Adorno provides a deep-seated critique of all standing philosophies that stress the dominance of communal ethical life over and above the moral autonomy of the subject. This critique comprises Aristotle, who famously insists on the 'natural priority' of society – the *polis* – over the individual subject in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, to Hegel, who similarly prioritizes the established order in his conception of the precedence which ethical life takes over the moral will and desires of the

[630] *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, pp. 135-137.
[631] Chapter One, pp. 51-52.

individual subject.[632] Adorno contends that communitarian ethics perpetuates illusions of social integration that potentially tolerate and rationalize the destruction of the individual subject – as seen in the Holocaust. The type of open-ended, moral self-reflexivity Adorno calls for does not refer to any established form of communal life. Adorno stresses subjective reflection over and above collectivist ethics or an all-encompassing plan for 'right action' and 'the good life'. He writes: 'the very possibility of the good life in the forms in which the community exists, which confront the subject in pre-existing form, has been radically eroded'.[633]

This has obvious repercussions for the way in which Adorno conceptualizes the distinction between 'good' and 'evil'. For most communitarian ethical theories, the good life involves living in alignment with society and its common good, while evil involves subverting the common good of all – most often when the individual prioritizes his/her personal advantage. But for Adorno, good and evil relate to the presence or absence of critical consciousness. Evil, as Adorno understands it, connotes the violent forms of social integration (Auschwitz is, for Adorno, 'radically evil').[634] Under the totalized conditions of post-Auschwitz culture, 'goodness' and 'the good life' begin to be understood as the ability to engage in moral reflection, to deliberate on the ethical norms and values of the collective. This experience of moral self-reflection is for Adorno 'good' *in itself*; it is not the case that the subject posits positive 'rules' that should be adhered to as part of his/her moral thinking.[635]

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[632] Aristotle, *The Politics*, trans. T.A. Sinclair (London: Penguin, 1992), p. 61; for Hegel and his idea of ethical life as it is embodied by state institutions, see *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. Stephen Houlgate, trans. T.M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).
[633] *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, p. 9
[634] For more on the notion of radical evil in Adorno, see James Finlayson, 'Modern Art, Metaphysics and Radical Evil', *Modernism/Modernity*, 10:1 (2003), pp. 71-95.
[635] Ibid, pp. 167-168.

It is, Adorno believes, the ongoing 'quest' for moral reflection that constitutes the 'good life' in post-Auschwitz culture – and indeed holds out the hope that Auschwitz will not happen again. The word that Adorno uses to signify such critical self-reflection is *Mündigkeit*. He writes that 'the single genuine power standing against the principle of Auschwitz is *Mündigkeit*', which is the 'power of reflection, of self-determination, of not co-operating'.[636] *Mündigkeit* means engaging in proper moral inquiry, in a way that places inherited ethical norms and values into question without prescribing positive 'rules' that must be obeyed. It signifies a capacity to take a critical stand, but a stand which is also vigilantly conscious of its own fallibility (and revised by continuous self-criticism) as opposed to propagating ethical laws. Bound up with the operation of critique, for Adorno morality involves

> self-conscious non-cooperation with institutionalized forms of social unfreedom and with prevailing norms and values. Adorno maintains that practical resistance to the bad is possible even in the absence of any positive or 'normative' conception of the good.[637]

This notion of the non-co-operator, of the non-corporate subject, aligns the morally reflexive subject with a figure that Aristotle calls the *azux* – the 'apolitical' being who does not contribute to the common good of the community.[638] This non-corporate subject is, for Aristotle, 'like an isolated piece in a game of draughts'.[639] But the non-co-operator is for Adorno the properly moral post-Auschwitz subject and even provides a new image of the good life.

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[636] 'Education After Auschwitz', *Can One Live After Auschwitz?*, p. 23.
[637] James Finlayson, 'Adorno on the Ethical and the Ineffable', *European Journal of Philosophy*, 10: 1 (2002), p. 6.
[638] For more on the *azux*, see Jacques Rancière, *On the Shores of Politics*, trans. Liz Heron (London and New York: Verso, 1995), p. 27.
[639] Aristotle, *The Politics*, trans. T.A. Sinclair (London: Penguin, 1992), p. 60.

Adorno makes the case that properly moral questions tend to arise in moments of crisis and disaster, when the prevailing norms of thought and conduct have 'ceased to be self-evident and unquestioned in the life of the community'.[640] This destruction of collectively ethical values is not necessarily something to mourn. On the contrary: as far as Adorno is concerned, complaints about the decay of traditional values are invariably undertaken from a reactionary position, which decries any deformation in ethical life as a public crisis of 'morality', as opposed to an opportunity for moral reflection and interrogation. Far more concerning for Adorno is the problem that outmoded ethical norms continue to 'live on'. Even as ethical customs dissolve and cease to be self-evident, such customs are even more forcefully insisted upon, diminishing the space required for the type of moral reflection that should take place when the prevailing ethos is shown to be problematic – if not insupportable. While moral questions arise when the collective ethos is no longer undisputed or commonly shared, ethics continue to stake a claim to universality – often violently.

It should hardly be surprising to find that – for Adorno – the most pernicious manifestation of outmoded ethical ideas continuing to live on is 'after' Auschwitz. Adorno contends that the universal humanist values promoted by Enlightenment thought – freedom, rationality, progress, ethics and the common good, the rule of civil and political society and so on – were revealed by Auschwitz to have an authoritarian aspect that renders such values in desperate need of moral and conceptual critique – and indeed of revision. Even so, the humanist values of Enlightenment, which dialectically reversed into total moral

[640] *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, p. 16.

catastrophe, continue to have a sort of 'zombified' afterlife and are still thought of as being universally valid.[641]

Upheavals which disintegrate the social and political order have the potential to become sites of moral self-reflexivity, even constituting an inaugural experience of morality. The problem with post-Auschwitz culture, as Adorno understands it, is that its standardization of the norm in all areas of social and ethical life means that the subject cannot engage in the type of moral reflection which the catastrophe of Auschwitz so obviously requires, meaning that the subject once again over-identifies with the ethical life of the collective. But for Adorno, spaces of moral self-reflexivity do remain: the discontinuity and disorientation that results from social and political crises can be experienced vicariously in the domain of aesthetics, most obviously in the fragmented, Catastrophist aesthetics of late modernism.

1.2. Ethics and Aesthetics

Several critics have considered the intersection of Adornian ethics and aesthetics – particularly James Finlayson and Asaf Angermann.[642] Such critics share a conviction that, for Adorno, the aesthetic sphere might elicit autonomous moral reflection. This is not because the artwork offers paradigms of moral/ethical action. It is precisely by virtue of its *failure* to restate customary ethical ideas that authentic artworks force the subject into individual moral self-reflection, without recourse to the various ethical concepts that obtain in the community. This is part of the reason that Adorno valorises fragmented late modernist art.

[641] This – as I will show below – is partly due to the repressive influence of the Culture Industry.
[642] See in particular James Finlayson, 'Modern Art, Metaphysics and Radical Evil' and Asaf Angermann, 'The Ghosts of Normativity: Temporality and Recurrence in Adorno's Ethics of Dissonance', *The Germanic Review*, 90:4 (2015), pp. 260–272.

By violating aesthetic closure, authentic works of art do not allow for a final statement of consensual ethical ideas. This allows the subject to cultivate *Mündigkeit*, to resist passively conforming to ethical precepts that proceed from 'outside' the self – and, most perniciously, from the Culture Industry.

Adorno contends that the Culture Industry is ethically regressive. It tends, as Adorno understands it, to convey already established ethical ideas that do little to inspire the moral autonomy of the subject. Perhaps more than any other cultural form, Adorno is wary of narrative. Adorno is suspicious of narrative form because he believes it shares a kinship with the Enlightenment master-narrative of the progress of reason – the idea of ongoing cultural and historical development. He also – and relatedly – argues that narrative 'reanimates' anachronistic humanist values which have been invalidated by Auschwitz. This most obviously relates to the idea that narrative closure brings an end to conflict and contradiction. Adorno contends that narrative form tends to formalize a synthesis between the individual (morality) and society (ethics). This is true not only in regards to the content of the cultural product in question; it is also true of its formal impact on the audience. The aesthetic resolution provided by narrative implicitly works to totalize audience response and enforce the (false) identity between subject and society, individual and collective. It is in that sense the Culture Industry might be considered 'Evil': it does not allow for moral self-reflexivity.

It is, Adorno declares, 'no longer possible to tell a story': Auschwitz has rendered conventional narrative continuity and closure impossible.[643] What is true in the domain of aesthetics is also true for the stylistic presentation (*Darstellung*) of philosophical thought. Adorno remarks that, for a philosophy that avoids providing universal ethical principles, the

[643] Theodor Adorno, 'The Position of the Narrator in the Contemporary Novel', *Notes to Literature: Volume Two*, p. 30.

only appropriate style is a form that eschews 'a continuous argument with all the usual stages' in favour of 'a series of partial complexes whose constellation not sequence produces the idea'.[644] The moral problem with a more conventional style of an argument, which pursues a continuous case with 'all the usual stages' before reaching a comprehensive conclusion, is that it risks producing a systematic statement, even a final plan, about the way in which good life and the good society might be realized. It involves a set of prescriptive ethical ideas as opposed to a more speculative and open-ended form of moral inquiry.

This obviously sheds light on the form of *Minima Moralia*. *Minima Moralia* is, as I set out in Chapter Five, a deeply fragmentary work made up of short reflections and aphorisms, which moves from everyday experiences to disturbing insights on the wider cultural tendencies of post-war society. The way in which *Minima Moralia* is organized (or, perhaps more appropriately, *dis*organized) is testament to perhaps its most famous insight – 'The whole is the false'.[645] The fragments that go to make up the work disallow any sense of argumentative progression or a holistic philosophical 'theory' that establishes the rules for the 'good life'. This reflects the way Adorno conceptualizes aesthetic response: his disintegrated form speaks to a desire to catalyse moral self-reflexivity, to have the subject morally engage with the problems his work poses, not passively inculcate ethical arguments.[646]

If aesthetic experience can catalyse the type of moral reflection that should attend on moments of social and political upheaval, then tragedy, with its representation of times and spaces of catastrophe, provides a viable aesthetic space for the clash between ethics

[644] Quoted in Gillian Rose, *The Melancholy Science*, pp. 17-18.
[645] *Minima Moralia*, p. 50.
[646] *Poetics of Critique*, p. 109.

and morality. I have already shown that Hegel takes up an Aristotelian reading of tragic form as the clash between subject and society, individual and collective.[647] He also takes up the conflict between the tragic hero and the Chorus to elaborate his distinction between *Moralität* – the moral will of the individual subject – and *Sittlichkeit*, or the customs and laws that make up the established ethical life of the polity. The upshot of that conflict, as Hegel perceives it, is that the subject pursues a moral claim that is overly partial – overly individual – and, as a result, imperils the universal system of rights embodied in and by the community, represented by the Chorus. Either the tragic hero realizes the partiality of his or her claim or dies. The individual must be absorbed by the universal: morality must give way to ethics.[648]

Tragedy does not, however, have formally to resolve the contradiction between moral autonomy and communal ethical 'necessity'. By prioritizing the moral will of the individual subject over and above the ethos of the community and by deconstructing narrative progress and closure, Adorno opens the way for a Catastrophist form of tragedy that insists on moral autonomy. It is precisely that morally autonomous, tragic form Barker aspires to create. I now turn to Barker and the historical and formal origins of the Theatre of Catastrophe. I show that the genesis of the Theatre of Catastrophe can be understood in terms of the distinction between communitarian ethics and subjective morality, where Barker understands the ethical and political culture of late capitalism to be moving toward an increasingly totalized consensus that compromises the moral autonomy and will of the individual.

[647] See Chapter One, pp. 89-90.
[648] See also Theodore D. George, *Tragedies of Spirit: Tracing Finitude in Hegel's Phenomenology* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2006), pp. 109-119.

2. The Theatre of Catastrophe

2.1. The Theatre of Catastrophe

Barker, who was born in South London in 1946 to a working-class family, began his playwriting career as an avowedly political writer, part (if always a distinctive part) of the wider wave of post-1968 British playwriting, which produced provocative socialist drama clearly influenced by the Marxist epic theatre of Brecht and the post-war interest in social realism.[649] Over the 1970s, Barker produced a range of startling 'State of the Nation' plays, from his landmark *Claw* (1975) to *That Good Between Us* (1977) and *The Hang of the Gaol* (1978).[650] These darkly satirical plays portray the many 'squandered opportunities of the British Left' while also critiquing 'the demagogic and atavistic tendencies of the extreme Right'.[651]

Early in the 1980s, however, Barker began to question his political outlook – or at least the notion that theatre might provide a useful vehicle for political and ethical analysis and agitation. He remarked in 1981 on a personal and artistic 'sense of overcoming' and the 'stirrings of some change in form'.[652] This formal and thematic shift would be reflected in a new preoccupation with tragedy. Over the course of the 1980s, Barker became increasingly drawn to the dramatic idiom of tragedy. In his 1986 article for *The Guardian*, 'Forty-Nine

[649] The first professional play Barker wrote was *One Afternoon on the 63rd Level of the Pyramid of Cheops the Great* (1970) for BBC Radio. See David Ian Rabey, *Howard Barker: Politics and Desire, An Expository Study of His Drama and Poetry, 1969-87* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 10-11.
[650] *That Good between Us* finds an echo in *Seven Lears* and its *The Pursuit of the Good*. So too does *The Hang of the Gaol*, given the Chorus in *Seven Lears* is made up a gaol of maltreated prisoners, which is finally hanged.
[651] Chris Megson, '"England brings you down at last": Politics and Passion in Barker's "State of England" Drama', *Theatre of Catastrophe: New Essays on Howard Barker*, p. 127.
[652] Mark Brown (ed.), *Howard Barker Interviews 1980-2010: Conversations in Catastrophe* (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2011), p. 35.

Asides for a Tragic Theatre', Barker sets out a series of aphorisms in which he (elliptically) advances his conception of a new tragic form and, crucially, its relevance to a new cultural and historical moment. Barker writes that 'Tragedy resists the trivialization of experience'; that tragedy 'restores pain to the individual'; and that 'Tragedy is not about reconciliation'.[653] Barker would increasingly identify his new tragic form as 'The Theatre of Catastrophe' over the mid to late 1980s, with *The Bite of the Night* (written 1986, staged in 1988) and a series of other plays – *The Possibilities* and *The Last Supper* (1988) and *Seven Lears* and *Golgo* (1989) – all representative of the shift towards a Catastrophist form of tragedy.[654]

Of the playwrights under study, none has theorized the role that tragedy and the autonomous tragic subject might play in the totalized *milieu* of contemporary, post-Auschwitz society as powerfully as Barker, most obviously in his *Arguments for a Theatre* (1989) and his other critical works, *Death, the One and the Art of Theatre* (2004) and *A Style and Its Origins* (2007). Barker, in the same vein as Adorno before him, believes that progressive humanist ideals, derived from the Enlightenment, have produced 'a culture of moral totality'.[655] Most of all, Barker is suspicious of liberal humanist democracy in a period of late capitalist totalization. This, as Barker understands it, represents a new consensus around which the political Left and Right have homogenized, a theme that Barker returns to time and again in his critical writings of the mid to late 1980s.[656] Barker contends that late capitalist society is dominated by shared liberal values that leave little room for proper

[653] *Arguments for a Theatre*, pp. 17-18.
[654] Barker began to use the phrase 'catastrophe' and 'The Theatre of Catastrophe' regularly in the late 1980s, as reflected by his 1988 pieces 'The Consolations of Catastrophe' and 'Beauty and Terror in The Theatre of Catastrophe'. See *Arguments for a Theatre*, pp. 51-54 and pp. 55-60.
[655] Howard Barker, 'The Sunless Garden of the Unconsoled: Some Destinations Beyond Catastrophe', *Howard Barker's Art of Theatre: Essays on His Plays, Poetry and Production Work*, ed. David Rabey and Sarah Goldingay (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), p. 208.
[656] See *Arguments for a Theatre*, p. 20, p. 49 and pp. 52-53.

moral interrogation – a collectively approved ethos that dominates the social and ethical 'ecology' of global capitalist life. This ethical consensus involves a 'by-passing of moral will' and 'moral suicide'.[657]

Barker understands the contemporary cultural moment as 'authoritarian and totalitarian in its propagation of false humanistic ideals'.[658] This totalizing ethical consensus also comprises culture and theatre. Barker, once again evincing the influence of Adorno, makes the case that late capitalist society has produced a totalizing world of administered 'mass' consumption – a Culture Industry, which propagates anodyne liberal humanist values for the public and its 'good'.[659] This even comprises politically oppositional art and theatre, with Barker identifying the prevailing orthodoxy of political art as 'liberal-humanist, left-leaning, socially progressive'.[660] Such theatre is – for Barker – guilty of promulgating already established ethical values that do little to inspire the moral freedom of the subject; it tends to emit 'normative calls to be "good subjects", "good citizens"'.[661] Barker writes: 'All mechanical art, all ideological art (the entertaining, the informative) intensifies the pain but simultaneously heightens the unarticulated desire for the restitution of moral speculation':[662]

> it is precisely the hinge between the independence of the moral will, claimed and performed [by the tragic protagonist] and the crushing imperatives of public order and its necessary pieties, that a drama of moral speculation discovers its resources, and fractures the repression of experience that characterizes a culture industry […] bent on […] seamless narratives.[663]

[657] Ibid, p. 169 and p. 168.
[658] *Adorno and Modern Theatre*, p. 114.
[659] Barker uses the phrase 'culture industry' on several occasions in *Arguments for a Theatre* (p. 99, p. 148) and also the 'leisure industry' (p. 145, p. 146).
[660] Ibid, p. 79.
[661] Mary Karen Dahl, 'The Body in Extremis: Exercises in Self Creation and Citizenship', *Theatre of Catastrophe*, p. 95.
[662] *Arguments for a Theatre*, p. 69.
[663] Ibid, p. 99.

It is the totalization of ethical and political life which underpins the turn to tragedy and the tragic subject in the Theatre of Catastrophe. 'Tragedy is the art form of resistance in an age such as ours', writes Barker, 'it resists incorporation by its very form'.[664] Barker views tragedy and the tragic as the properly critical, morally negative aesthetic form in an era of ethical totality precisely because it stages the clash between the moral will of the tragic hero and the dominant ethical norms and values of the community. Only where conventional (Aristotelian/Hegelian) tragedy usually punishes moral transgression – 'Aristotle and tragedy – nothing so great that it cannot be annexed in the interests of the social order', quips Barker – in the Theatre of Catastrophe the clash between morality and ethics is never resolved.[665] Quite the contrary: Barker insists on the continued non-identity of the tragic subject, who resists the ethos of the community and remains morally irreconcilable. The Catastrophist subject typifies the idea of *Mündigkeit* – the power of not co-operating. There is, as Barker provocatively contends, no 'possibility of the Solution': for even 'an idea as seemingly innocuous as Harmony hides within it the shadow of the torture chamber'.[666]

The way in which Barker conceptualizes moral autonomy owes an obvious debt to Adorno. In the most recent (2016) edition of his *Arguments for a Theatre*, the word 'moral' appears on forty-six occasions, as does the word 'morality'.[667] The way in which Barker uses the words moral and morality shifts. On the one hand, the word 'moral' often signifies for Barker in the same way that ethics signifies for Adorno – as the constraining precepts of the commons. On the other hand, 'moral' and 'morality' can also signify a situation in which the

[664] Ibid, p. 142.
[665] *Death, The One and the Art of Theatre*, p. 68.
[666] *Arguments for a Theatre*, p. 121.
[667] Howard Barker, *Arguments for a Theatre*, 4th edition (London: Oberon, 2016).

suspension of obligatory ethical values invites autonomous moral reflection and action. 'I am a moralist, but not a puritan', states Barker: 'By moralist I mean one who is tough with morality, who exposes it to risk, even to oblivion'.[668] Elisabeth Angel-Perez writes that Barker is 'a moral activist who paradoxically discards all set morals'.[669] This abandonment of ethics, in the service moral freedom, is something that 'Auschwitz has horrendously compelled us to realise and which is confirmed by the genocidal episodes of recent history'.[670]

Barker also draws on Adorno for his fragmentary aesthetic form. Most of all, his plays evince the profound influence of *Minima Moralia* and its miscellany of thoughts. The Theatre of Catastrophe shares with *Minima Moralia* a fractured non-narrative aesthetic. Barker tends to present, in place of an overarching 'story', a series of constellatory scenes – or individuated 'minima moralia' that speculate on various themes and ideas, often of an ethical and/or moral quality. 'Narrative itself is the principal component in the construction of moral meaning', writes Barker: 'What occurs in the form of consecutive scenes, or in real time played out on the stage, inevitably implies a moral perspective'.[671] With the totalization of ethical life in late capitalist society, Barker turns to the fragmentary, non-narrative style of Frankfurt School aesthetics in a bid to produce a more open-ended form of moral speculation.

Part of the challenge that Barker has mounted against collectivist ethics are his profoundly disorientating appropriations of plays (and other works) that have been integrated into the modern liberal humanist canon, which are typically reduced to a state of catastrophic aesthetic fragmentation. Such plays have been identified as promoting

[668] *Arguments for a Theatre*, p. 78.
[669] Elisabeth Angel-Perez, 'Facing Defacement: Barker and Levinas', *Theatre of Catastrophe*, p. 137.
[670] Ibid.
[671] *Arguments for a Theatre*, p. 121.

universally valid ethical values, which Barker sets out to subvert, opening the space for autonomous moral interrogation. These have included appropriations of Thomas Middleton (*Women Beware Women* – 1986), Thomas More (*Brutopia* – 1990), Gotthold Lessing (*Minna* – 1994), and, perhaps most notoriously, Anton Chekhov (*(Uncle) Vanya* – 1992).[672] The place that Shakespeare occupies in the Theatre of Catastrophe is, however, more fraught. I want now to consider the relationship between the Theatre of Catastrophe and Shakespearean tragedy. I will show that – for Barker – Shakespeare is the figure who stands atop the liberal humanist canon and, at the same time, represents a powerful antecedent for his own Catastrophist form.

2.2. The Theatre of Catastrophe and Shakespeare: The 'Monstrous Assault' as an 'Act of Reverence'

Barker is deeply ambivalent about Shakespeare. On the one hand, Shakespeare is the playwright that Barker has returned to and appropriated most frequently – in his 1971 satirical radio play *Henry V in Two Parts*, in *Seven Lears* and his landmark 2002 appropriation of *Hamlet*, *Gertrude – The Cry*. Barker has also identified Shakespeare as the only playwright who is a conscious influence on his writing, lamenting the 'tragedy' that Shakespeare is now a 'negligible influence on the tone of contemporary writing in Britain'.[673] On the other hand**,** Barker has dismissed outright the idea – routinely peddled by critics and dramatists alike – of a debt or an artistic resemblance to Shakespeare as 'sheer ignorance'. 'The critical class

[672] See *Arguments for a Theatre*, pp. 168-170.
[673] Ibid, p. 153.

knows nothing about creativity', moans Barker, and so is only able to make 'facile identifications.'[674]

Whenever critiquing Shakespeare, Barker seems torn between the disruptive potential that he acknowledges in the works of his early modern predecessor and the embodiment of canonical literary and ethical value that Shakespeare has come to represent. Barker states that 'Shakespeare was the last English writer who was not a moralist' and praises the catastrophic situations in which he unleashes his protagonists, stating that the distinctive feature of Shakespearean drama is a situation of 'crisis' – or catastrophe.[675] Barker is, however, also deeply suspicious of Shakespeare. While praising Shakespearean tragedy for its refusal to propagate prescribed ethical ideas – 'meaningless pain is the thing that drives Shakespeare into his highest ecstasies', writes Barker – he also contends that Shakespeare has come to embody the literary and theatrical canon, his plays turned into symbols of the presiding ethos of liberal humanist Western culture and its ideals about self and society. [676]

King Lear, as I observed in the Introduction, has displaced *Hamlet* to stand atop of the Shakespeare canon in the post-war era.[677] It has, as I have shown, been interpreted through various matrices in that time. But for Barker, it is the Christian-humanist interpretive schema, which is derived from the storm scenes and the way Lear identifies with the poor, that has come to dominate conceptions of *King Lear* in the popular imaginary, even becoming the culturally dominant understanding of the play and its 'meaning'. In his interview with the author, Barker contends that *King Lear* has been

[674] *Conversations in Catastrophe*, p. 166.
[675] Quoted in '"Watch Out for Two Handed Swords"', p. 169; *Conversations in Catastrophe*, p. 166.
[676] *Conversations in Catastrophe*, p. 98. In his interview with the author, Barker also states that he has 'no respect for Lear' as a character (Appendix, p. 357).
[677] See Introduction, p. 7.

'contaminated' with a culturally 'fixed Christian, humanist view' and 'absurd' liberal platitudes.[678]

Barker questions the prevailing humanist conception of *King Lear*. Barker sees *King Lear* as a 'savage play', which violates both aesthetic closure and conventional ethical 'meanings' – an aspect of the play typified by the violent, catastrophic deaths of Lear and Cordelia. It would, Barker observes, be 'whimsical' to try and make the case that 'the humiliation and death of Cordelia was a sacrifice to the eventual civilizing of King Lear'.[679] It is, however, precisely the 'civilizing' of Lear that – for Barker – has come to dominate common understandings of the play. *King Lear* has, for Barker, been turned from a 'savage play' into 'a placid story'.[680] This shift from 'play' to 'story' is telling: Barker makes the case that *King Lear* has been transformed from a violent and morally challenging *play* into a placid and ethically recognizable *story*, a *Bildung* narrative which charts the ethical enlightenment of Lear, from a wildly tyrannical despot to a chastened and compassionate humanitarian.

Barker, in his appropriation of *King Lear*, is less concerned to challenge the play 'itself' than to question the social and political uses it has been conscripted to serve: 'The depth of social and political investment in classic texts, ironically enhanced by apparently daring modernizations can only be properly shifted by an equivalent bravery made by a new interrogation'.[681] He writes that to 'deface a monument, to smear a public property, is an act of reverence more profound, because of the investment of will, than any common

[678] See Appendix, p. 365 and p. 375.
[679] 'The Sunless Garden of the Unconsoled', p. 209.
[680] *Arguments for a Theatre*, pp. 154-155.
[681] Ibid, p. 157.

genuflection of the uncritical believer'.[682] The act of appropriation is – for Barker – an act of desecrating violence, a 'monstrous assault'; but it is also 'an act of reverence'.[683] Barker undertakes a violent onslaught against *King Lear*, but, both 'more and less reverential' in his approach to the play, he does so in order to 'open up' its 'moral fissures', to show the play for the 'frail and naked exposition of feeling, tender and afraid, that it once was'.[684] This is a critical point: the violation of *King Lear* is, at the same time, an act of fidelity – even recovery. Barker is appropriating (or re-appropriating) a play which, despite being used to serve liberal humanist ideology, is genealogically Catastrophist in its transgression of ethics and aesthetics.[685]

This is a reading which allows for a timely reconsideration of the place *Seven Lears* occupies in the Barker *oeuvre*, while also revealing the critical role played by appropriations of *King Lear* in the development of a Catastrophist aesthetic that challenges the standardization of post-Auschwitz culture and subjectivity. The appropriations of Shakespeare that Barker has undertaken all take place at critical moments in his development as a playwright. His very early 1971 appropriation *Henry V in Two Parts* is a satirical radio play that critiques the 'war criminal' Henry from a socialist perspective, while Barker has identified the 2002 play *Gertrude – The Cry* as a formative moment in the development of the Art of Theatre, with its fascination for the sacred and death.[686] While it has drawn some attention from critics, however, *Seven Lears* has often been overlooked in Barker Studies in favour of *Gertrude – The Cry*, which is usually taken to be the more

[682] Ibid, p. 153.
[683] Ibid, p. 28.
[684] Ibid, p. 154, p. 156 and p. 157.
[685] See also Elisabeth Angel-Perez and Vanasay Khamphommala, 'Les 7 Lears de Barker: pour une Généalogie de la Catastrophe', *Shakespeare en Devenir*, 1 (2007).
[686] For the Art of Theatre and the sacred, see Peter Groves, 'Sacred Tragedy: An Exploration into the Spiritual Dimension of the Theatre of Howard Barker' (Warwick University: PhD, 2014).

'significant' Shakespeare appropriation – a valuation endorsed by Barker himself, who describes *Gertrude – The Cry* as his 'greatest play'.[687] But while *Gertrude – The Cry* has usually been considered the key Shakespeare appropriation, *Seven Lears* represents a formative moment in the development of Catastrophism and the way Barker conceptualizes aesthetics and morality.

The most obvious intervention that Barker makes against the Christian-humanist interpretation of *King Lear* is his transformation of Lear himself, who fails to fit into a narrative of redemptive enlightenment. I will show that, in *Seven Lears*, Barker purposefully sets up the prospect of a politically-motivated feminist interrogation of *King Lear* (and Lear) which is subverted, as his play revolves around Lear and his morally transgressive bid for autonomy.

3. *Seven Lears*

3.1. 'I am not what I was': 'De-Humanizing' *King Lear*

In the 'Programme Notes' for the original 1989 production of *Seven Lears*, Barker gives a short introductory statement on *King Lear* and its 'missing mother', which, though it appears in the 1990 John Calder edition, is missing from 2005 Oberon *Barker: Plays Five* edition:

> *King Lear* is a family tragedy with a significant absence.
> The Mother is denied existence in *King Lear*.
> She is barely quoted even in the depths of rage or pity.

[687] *A Style and Its Origins*, p. 19.

> She was therefore expunged from memory.
> This extinction can only be interpreted as repression.
> She was therefore the subject of an unjust hatred.
> This hatred was shared by Lear and all his daughters.
> This hatred, while unjust, may have been necessary.[688]

This short introduction is typical of Catastrophist form and its subversion of expectations. Everything about the Introduction to *Seven Lears* indicates a politically interrogatory feminist interpretation of *King Lear*: the idea that the play is 'a family tragedy'; that the 'absence' of the wife/mother – and the apparent failure to 'quote' her – is symptomatic of 'repression'; and that she was the victim of an 'unjust hatred'. It would seem Barker is intending to write the missing mother back 'in' to *King Lear* in order to interrogate the play and its privileging of male subjectivities. The final remarks in the Introduction, however, subvert the idea of an ideologically feminist hermeneutics: for while the 'hatred' is deemed 'unjust', it 'may have been *necessary*'. The idea of a 'hatred' which is unjustified but 'necessary' nonetheless complicates the idea of socially unjust familial and patriarchal 'repression'. Barker writes that his appropriation of *King Lear* is not undertaken with a prescribed identity politics in mind, or 'prompted by a spasm of feminist sensibility'.[689] Such a concept of political identity would – as Barker perceives it – be part and parcel of a socially progressive form of theatre that aims at some form of public 'good'. Despite its professed prioritization of the mother figure, *Seven Lears* concentrates on the character of Lear, for whom Barker has an 'unhealthy curiosity'– a reversal that has drawn the ire of some feminist critics.[690] Barker is drawn to the missing mother because – as far as he sees it – the silence around her is a 'dark space' that betrays a profound moral transgression, a

[688] 'Introduction', *Seven Lears*, p. ii.
[689] *Arguments for a Theatre*, p. 154.
[690] Ibid. See in particular Susan Bennett, *Performing Nostalgia*, pp. 50-51.

transgression that complicates normative understandings about the nature of 'goodness' and 'necessity'.[691]

By writing a prequel and calling it *Seven Lears* – which recalls Jacques from *As You Like It* and his famous 'Seven Ages of Man' speech, though it may also echo the 'seven stars' (I.v.21) of the Fool in *King Lear* – Barker implies that his Lear-play will portray something akin to a *Bildungsroman*, a coming-of-age that represents the ethical and spiritual development of the hero. Barker, however, offers something far less predictable – and a far less predictable Lear. The play, far from providing the progression of conventional narrative form, is made up of a series of individuated scenes, from the 'First' iteration of the Lear figure to the final 'Seventh' iteration of Lear. These fragmentary *tableaux* all depict Lear as he violates his personal and political obligations for the good life of the Kingdom, his 'citizens' and – indeed – his family. These range from initiating a disastrous war without any obvious purpose in Third Lear – 'disaster was not the failure – but the purpose of the War!' (3:16-17) – to inventing a flying machine that requires an immense and catastrophic diversion of resources, which are desperately required elsewhere, in Fourth Lear – 'For this a hundred children starved' (4:28) – to attempting to drown the infant Cordelia in a barrel of gin, only to 'rescue' her from death at the final moment: 'Oh, was that a good thing, hey?' (6:46).

From the inordinately sensitive 'child' Lear in First Lear to the ageing and increasingly senile 'Lear' in Fifth, Sixth and Seventh Lears, the 'Seven' Lears presented in the play might represent Lear as he 'progresses' from boyhood to old age, but that hardly covers the

[691] Appendix, p. 353.

vertiginous volatility which Lear embodies.[692] Barker is – as I set out above – most concerned to contest the image of Lear derived from the storm scenes. These scenes famously depict a raving Lear who, deprived of the usual 'accommodations' (IV.xi.84) that attend on his position, is reduced to the same state as the 'Poor naked wretches' that make up his Kingdom. Based on his discovery of his own common, suffering humanity and the empathy for the less fortunate his pain engenders, Lear begins to regret his past 'blindness' and even begins to develop a more humane conception of the social and political community he rules over, which he suddenly recognizes he has taken all 'too little care' (III.iv.33) of:

> Take psychic pomp
> Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
> That thou mayst shake the superflux to them
> And show the heavens more just. (III.iv.33-35)

These scenes, as I demonstrated in Chapters Two, Three and Four, have been critical in various Christian, liberal humanist and also Marxist readings of *King Lear*. Once thrust out into the storm, Lear discovers that he is not 'everything' – is not 'ague-proof' (IV.vi.104) – and begins to understand that he has blindly abnegated his responsibility for the Kingdom. This leads him to a new political vision of the basis of the common good of the community as a whole.

It is not necessarily wrong to read *King Lear* as a humanist play. But as David Lowenthal shows, such a reading of *King Lear* ultimately invokes a classically Aristotelian

[692] In the original production of the play at the Leicester Haymarket in 1989, the 'child' Lear and the 'aged' Lear were both played by Nicholas Le Provost, without any attempt to alter his apparent age, undermining any sense of maturation/progression.

interpretation of the nature of the good life, in which Lear engages with the fundamental questions of 'good political order and life in a community and the principles and activities that make that life good'.[693] Lear sets out the foundational principles of the good life of the community – the way in which the *polis* may be (re)organized so that the political question of the good life, or of the good society, may be addressed and resolved. Even in politically radical readings of *King Lear* that underscore the apparent *Bildung* of Lear, critics are – as Lowenthal shows – recycling conceptions of the common good that stretch all the way back to classical antiquity.

Barker engages with the Aristotelian precepts that underpin the Christian-humanist interpretation of *King Lear* by turning the 'poor naked wretches' Lear imagines in the storm into a Chorus – a figure more familiar from classical Greek than Shakespearean tragedy. The Chorus – notably described in the stage-directions as '*a Chorus of the poor*' (5:37) – appears in the form of a gaol of neglected and ill-treated prisoners, who continually intervene in the action of the play to remind Lear of his pressing ethical responsibilities and of the social injustice to be found in the Kingdom: '**Injustice yes / That is the word for it**' (2:7). This Choric 'voice' is, as Jens Peters also shows, the voice of the social and political community and ethical consensus, which repeatedly harangues Lear for his various perceived failures and misunderstandings: '**For every child that dies a kite is flown / Lear / Are you not blind with kites?**' (5:36).[694]

The clash between Lear and the Chorus is established from the outset of the play – First Lear – in which Lear and his brothers originally 'discover' the gaol and its suffering

[693] David Lowenthal, *Shakespeare and the Good Life: Ethics and Politics in Dramatic Form* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997), p. xi.
[694] Jens Peters, 'Crowd or Chorus? Howard Barker's *mise-en-scène* and the Tradition of the Chorus in the European theatre of the Twentieth Century', *Studies in Theatre and Performance*, 32:2 (2012), pp.305-316.

prisoners. In the opening moments of the play, Lear and his brothers Arthur and Lud – both named, in the same vein as Lear himself, after mythic pre-modern English Kings – stumble across a (Rudkin-like) '*Pit*' in which the 'enemies' of the Kingdom are gaoled – '**THE DEAD WHO ARE NOT DEAD YET**' (1:1). Arthur and Lud complacently identify the prisoners as 'bad' – even abject, 'filthy' – confirming themselves as 'good' (and, indeed, 'clean'): 'We are clean children and our mother loves us' (1:1). But while Arthur and Lud make superficial distinctions (good/bad, clean/dirty, pure/smelly, light/dark) based on the ethical norms of the Kingdom, Lear has a more reflexive response. Lear intuits that 'something bad is *happening*' (as opposed to merely contained) in the Pit and even echoes *Hamlet* in his conviction that the Kingdom – for Hamlet famously nothing *but* a 'prison' (II.ii.233) – is founded on 'something rotten' (1:1): 'Something is rotten in the state of Denmark' (I.iv.95). The allusion to *Hamlet* adumbrates a dawning socio-political consciousness on the part of Lear: the 'badness' of the prisoners becomes the 'badness' ('rottenness') of the socio-political system as a whole, manifest in its failure to inculcate 'goodness' in 'ordinary people' (1:2).

The discovery of the gaol in the opening moments of the play re-stages the equally revelatory discovery Lear makes of the destitute and wretched masses that go to make up his own Kingdom – with its unequal distribution of wealth and power – in *King Lear*. The language that First Lear uses in his response to the gaol alludes to and reimagines the language used in the storm scenes. The 'poor naked wretches' who 'abide' the 'pelting' of the storm are reimagined as the 'poor wet things' (1:2) of the gaol – the prisoners have 'no sheets' (1:1) and so suffer the same 'looped and windowed raggedness' (III.ii.31) that Lear bewails – while the rattling '*keys*' (1:1) the princes use to open the gaol similarly revises the words of the Fool: 'Fortune, that arrant whore, / Ne'er turns the key to th' poor' (II.vi.45-

46). 'I never knew', reflects Lear on discovering the gaol, 'the ground was so full of bodies' (1:2). Like his Shakespearean antecedent, First Lear comes to a realization of the suffering of others – '**Lear is thinking of our pain tonight**' (4:25) – and the (ostensible) obligation to put an end to that suffering: 'I shall not be King, because I am not the eldest but…if I were King…for one thing…I would put a stop to this!' (1:2). The storm scenes are even recalled in the way that Lear 'unbuttons' (III.vi.107) in *Seven Lears* by '*Taking off his shirt*' (1:2) and removes the 'lendings' that furnish otherwise 'Unaccommodated man' (III.vi.106) – though as his shirt is taken off to provide a '**penalty spot**' (1:2) for the game of football Arthur and Lud insist on, the gesture represents less of a spontaneous identification with the 'poor' so much as it wittily parallels a speech on the 'proper approach' for the 'correct punishment' of 'bad actions' (1:2).

On the basis of his discovery of the gaol and his empathy with its seemingly unwarranted suffering – **'Whatever it did / Whatever it was / How could it justify this?'** (1:1) – Lear begins to formulate a philosophical response to the question of the way 'government' might be used to promote the 'good life' of the community. 'The function of all government must be –', Lear reflects, as he tries to talk to his unresponsive siblings, 'the definition of, and subsequent encouragement of goodness, surely?'. 'You would', Lear goes on:

> define goodness in such a way that ordinary people – who at the moment are so horribly attracted to bad things and immoral actions – would find it simple to appreciate and consequently act upon – (1:2)

In First Lear, Lear has the insight that 'government' should work to make people 'good' (or, at the very least, 'better') so that the type of punishment meted out in the gaol would no

longer be 'necessary' (1:2): 'No criticism of our father, but I wonder if it is necessary…' (1:2). It is – as far as Barker perceives it – the same role that modern humanist theatre has allocated itself, which, as Barker puts it in *Arguments for a Theatre*, is driven by the ostensibly selfless desire to 'make people better' – something that Barker sees as being offensively paternalistic.[695] Lear begins *Seven Lears* as a rationalistic and 'enlightened' – 'They have no light!' (1:2) – liberal-humanist reformer: his belief that the state might be used to 'improve' people articulates a vision of the common good in which a simple and shared understanding of morality – of 'goodness' – prevails in the ethical life of the community.

The problem with the humanistic plan that Lear begins to formulate is that, by 'defining goodness' in a 'simple' way that 'ordinary people' can 'understand' and 'consequently act upon', the autonomous practice of moral reflection on the part of the very same subjects putatively made 'good' is necessarily inhibited. This, as Adorno writes in *Negative Dialectics*, is the 'supreme *injuria* of the law-making subject': the universalization of ethical norms that, far from providing subjective autonomy, come to dominate the subject as a form of heteronomy, so that subjects are unable to self-reflexively motivate moral reflection and action. [696] Without the struggle – the 'pursuit' – of goodness, there would be nothing to motivate the will, as the subject simply comes to conform to ethical dictates that proceed from the social totality. The way in which Lear formulates 'goodness' – in other words – denies and diminishes the subject: the rational programme of ethical enlightenment that Lear proposes in First Lear partakes of the dialectic of Enlightenment, becoming a form of domination that incapacitates the subject. It is, as I show above, such a situation that Adorno sees as being so acutely dangerous 'after' Auschwitz: as Lear devises

[695] *Arguments for a Theatre*, p. 72.
[696] *Negative Dialectics*, p. 250.

it, 'goodness' would simply produce unthinking norm-conformity and a homogenized subject.

Lear, however, quickly abandons his burgeoning humanist ideals. In a flash of '*inspiration*' – typical of his mercurial changeability – Lear ditches his plan to find a way of instituting a shared vision of the good life of the community, coming to an understanding of the good that requires the autonomy of the subject, as opposed to diminishing it. He declares:

> (*He stops. He is inspired*.) No! No! That's wrong! The opposite is the case! That's it! You make goodness difficult, if anything. You make it apparently impossible to achieve. It then becomes compelling; it becomes a victory, rather as acts of badness seem a triumph now. (1:2)

Lear refuses any communal understanding of the good life that would allow 'ordinary people' simply to comprehend and obey prescribed rules. By making goodness not 'simple' but virtually 'impossible to achieve', Lear prioritizes the moral autonomy and agency of the subject. Lear intertextually recalls the language of some of the Barker plays that precede *Seven Lears*: *Victory* (1983) and *The Castle*: *A Triumph* (1985). The 'victory' and 'triumph' of the subject in *Seven Lears* involves nothing less than resisting the unifying forces of ethics in pursuit of autonomous morality. Lear instantly forsakes his '**civic sense**' (4:31) and denies '**responsibility for all**' (3:23). He identifies the good with the moral empowerment – the 'substantiation' (3:23) – of the subject, even where that imperils the well-being of the commons.

This irreconcilable contradiction between Lear and the Chorus, between morality and ethics, complicates received ideas around the nature of good and evil and, indeed, the nature of the human animal itself. These are the problems I turn to in the next section,

where I analyse the questions *Seven Lears* poses around morality and the idea of human commonality.

3.2. Good, Evil and the Human in *Seven Lears*

Lear is not slow to recognize that his 'pursuit' of goodness and the good is ethically ambiguous – to say the least. 'The nature of beauty, as of goodness, rests in its power to substantiate the self', reflects Lear in Third Lear, 'Which is not goodness at all, is it?' (3:23-24). By prioritizing the subject over and above the common good of life in the community as a whole, Lear allows the Kingdom to crumble, and partakes in acts that range from attempted infanticide to various war crimes: 'Burn the villages! Massacre the infants!' (3:13). '**I think I am evil!**', howls Lear in Third Lear: 'Evil because… / Evil accommodates every idea' (3:23).

The way Barker appropriates the word 'accommodates' is typical of the way he transforms *King Lear*. Lear uses the word in his identification with the 'unaccommodated' poor, damning the 'accommodations' (IV.xi.83) – the 'Robes and furred gowns' (IV.xi.158) – which obfuscate the identity of a King with a beggar and that forestall a conception of the common needs and interests that all of suffering humanity shares. But turning 'the word itself and against the word' (*Richard II*, V.iii.121), Barker uses the word 'accommodation' to adumbrate the non-coincidence between Lear and the good life of the *polis*, as Lear accommodates 'every idea' no matter of its 'consequences' (4:28) for others. 'Think of the people, the people will deduce –': '**I decline, I decline, I decline – and all deductions pox**' (2:10).

Lear recognizes that his understanding of the good is paradoxically close to the conventional understanding of 'evil': if the good life reckons the common interest, evil – as the opposite of the good – conventionally means abrogating the common good, or stressing the priority of the subject over and above the needs of the commons. The distinction between good and evil becomes hard to disentangle – as apparent in First Lear, when Lear states that treating the good as a 'triumph' of the will makes acts of goodness akin to 'acts of badness' (1:2). Lear collapses the usual ethical distinction between good and evil, where the 'evil' of a subject free of the obligations of the *polis* becomes – paradoxically – a form of 'good'.

This fraying of the boundaries between good and evil is something that also troubles Aristotle in his definition of life 'outside' the communal authority of the *polis*, which would require a subject 'either too bad or too good, either subhuman or superhuman'.[697] The *azux* – the non-co-operator – cannot for Aristotle be said to be entirely 'human'. If humanity is, as Aristotle famously contends, the political 'animal', the non-co-operator – by virtue of not partaking in the human community of the *polis* – wants some basic quality of the human condition.[698]

These questions around the relationship between good, evil and the human pertain to *Seven Lears*. Lear not only denies inclusive notions of the common good, but even the whole notion of human(e) commonality itself, which should form the basis of the good life of the *polis*. In Fourth Lear, Barker once again rewrites the action of the storm scene and its humanist vision of communal ethics. This time, however, Lear comes face-to-face with a Poor Tom-esque beggar, whom Lear completely repudiates. 'I do think it is funny, that you and I have nothing in common', Lear tells the beggar, 'Less even than a cow and a crow. Or a

[697] *The Politics*, p. 59.
[698] Ibid.

worm and a horse. Less than them, even' (4:26). This catalogue of non-human animal life – which recalls *King Lear*, as Lear cradles the corpse of Cordelia, 'Why should a dog, a rat, a horse have life / And thou no breath at all?' (V.iii.30-31) – is produced to deny that Lear and the beggar even belong to the same kind – the same species. The beggar responds by paraphrasing Michel de Montaigne ('Kings and philosophers shit – and so do ladies') and insists that both he and Lear 'shit' and 'piss' – though Lear denies the supposed 'obviousness' of a shared mortality and its related elimination of the inhuman and the 'uncommon' (3:14). 'Perhaps', Lear plaintively tells the beggar, 'you are immortal?' (4: 27).[699]

Where in Shakespeare Lear identifies with Poor Tom – 'Thou art the thing itself. / Unaccommodated man' (III.vi.103) – in *Seven Lears* Lear disclaims any sense of basic human commonality and, with it, any notion of the common good, of shaking the 'superflux' to the less fortunate. Lear may arbitrarily promote the beggar to the aristocratic rank of Gloucester, but it is not with the selfless intention of making sure 'each man has enough' (IV.i.79): Lear – tellingly – ignores the mute beggar the newly-risen Gloucester tramps with (who, in his mutilated and dependant state, ironically recalls the blinded Gloucester from *King Lear*) and tells him that 'This is a journey you must make alone' (4:27) – a haunting echo of Kent: 'I have a journey, sir, shortly to go' (V.iii.340). The scene reverses the action of *King Lear*: by denying any 'shared' (4:27) identity with the beggar, Lear disallows any notion of a common ethos or an inclusive understanding of the good life – and even questions the hidden motivation for his supposed acts of 'charity', which in a distinctly Nietzschean reversal is a form of '*cruelty*'. 'I cannot stick it!', the beggar wails when faced with the unrelenting 'generosity' of Lear, who keeps providing him with more and more money.

[699] Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, trans. M.A. Screech (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 1231.

'What is it?', asks the beggar, 'Torture?' (4:27). Lear quite literally 'enforces' his 'charity' (II.ii.191); it is an image of 'distribution' that inverts humanist and Marxist interpretations of *King Lear*.

While he denies ideas about the commonality of the human, in his radical pursuit of the 'good' Lear is nevertheless admired and abetted by others. These include the Bishop, who provides Lear with some of his anti-ethical (anti-*Bildung*) 'education' (1:2) and insight, and Prudentia, the mother of Clarissa, who has a sexual relationship with Lear that pre-dates his marriage to her daughter. Both tend to facilitate Lear, while other characters – most notably Horbling, Kent and, most powerfully, Clarissa – echo the Chorus.[700] These figures all variously castigate Lear for failing to govern – 'Come out and govern the world!' (5:36) – and strive to 'correct' Lear of his unruly waywardness and his ethically baffling contrariness: 'Why do you not give the people bread? I cannot understand it. There is bread enough' (5:34). The notion of the common good is, however, frequently shown to be problematic – most obviously when the 'good' characters engage in, or directly and/or indirectly, support acts of bloody murder, designed to promote and enable the good life. In the next section, I will show that ideas about the common good are often used to sanction the destruction of individual subjects, while also sublimating deeply personal motivations.

3.3. Speaking 'for' the Commons

Not unlike the Fool in *King Lear*, the Fool in *Seven Lears* often admonishes Lear for his apparent failures. Barker, in a witty play on his conservatism, transforms the Fool into

[700] Until the penultimate Sixth Lear – in which Clarissa discovers the gaol and asks Lear to 'Free them' (6: 47) – only Lear and the Bishop interact with the Chorus, sharpening the sense of a clash between particular and universal, subject and society.

Horbling – a reforming Government minister whom Lear arbitrarily 'promotes' (2:10) to the station of court Fool. Horbling has a series of Soviet-style 'five' and 'ten' year plans for the improvement of the Kingdom, which go unheeded, leaving him to reflect that 'Humour is the grating of impertinence upon catastrophe' (3:16). But while he does make half-hearted attempts at humour – '**I so hate comedy it makes men cruel!**' (4:29) – more often than not Horbling tries to encourage others to assassinate Lear so that his plans for the 'improvement' of the Kingdom might be enacted: 'Stab him now! I have the policies. I have the plans' (3:15). Horbling keeps his unused plans under his Foolscap – though by the end of the play these plans have disintegrated into '*tatters*', resembling the way in which the map of the Kingdom is often torn apart in productions of *King Lear*: '*He drags off his cap and takes out the now decaying papers*' (6:46). Preoccupied with instituting his plans, Horbling calls for the murder of Lear, in the name of the common good: 'There he sits! Eliminate the bloody oppressor of widows!' (5:34). The idea that such murder might 'perchance do good' (V.iii.199) is deeply problematic: it involves the destruction of the subject in the name of society.

Where Horbling only calls for the assassination of Lear – never doing the 'required' deed himself – Kent and Clarissa both murder those who abet Lear – the Bishop and Prudentia. In the 'Interlude' between Fourth and Fifth Lears, Kent confronts and kills the Bishop, whom Kent accuses of 'legitimizing' (33) every thought that Lear pursues: 'They say you spoiled the King' (32). Kent rationalizes his murderous intent by recycling conventional notions of the common good. By killing the Bishop, Kent aims to remove a wholly negative influence on Lear and so encourage his sovereign to act in conformity with the material and ethical well-being of his subjects as a whole: '**We must protect the weak against the cunning**' (33). The twisted 'logic' (33) of Kent is, however, mercilessly ridiculed by the

Bishop, who pours scorn on the notion that Kent acts selflessly, all in the interests of the community. 'Who are you doing this for?', wonders the Bishop: 'Everybody? I do love that! You are smothering your personal dislike for violence in the interests of the community!' (32). The notion that Kent abrogates his own will in murdering the Bishop is impossible to countenance: by the end of the scene, in which the bloated corpse of the Bishop returns posthumously to harangue his murderer, Kent confesses to the Bishop that he would 'walk over the mouths of the poor of the world to grab you by the –' (34) and admits that his bloodied victim is his 'superior in perception' (34). The notion of the common good is – for Kent – a pretext, a means by which he may enact his own usually smothered desires and satisfy his hatred.

In Fifth Lear, Barker re-stages the action of the Interlude, as Clarissa confronts and – ultimately – sanctions the murder of her mother, Prudentia. Once again, the murder is undertaken with the putative rationale of reversing the decline of the Kingdom by 'removing' a negative influence on Lear: 'Out there is all starvation and mismanagement and you encourage him!' (5: 38). 'I so hate lies', remarks Clarissa, 'But, look, the poor!': 'I so hate subterfuge. But, look, the destitute!' (5:37). In the same vein as Kent, however, Clarissa struggles to disentangle her own personal motivations from her apparently disinterested desire to improve the lives of the poor naked wretches of the Kingdom, confronting her mother with knowledge of the affair she has conducted with Lear: '**I think you lie in bed with my husband and –** No! No! Do what you wish, I am not censorious' (5:38). Her outburst and sudden about-turn are indicative of the way a reified conception of the common good in *Seven Lears* sublimates deep-seated personal motivations – motivations which may ultimately have little to do with the well-being of the *polis*, or for which the good life acts as a pretext.

The gaol negates the divided motives driving Clarissa, in its most telling intrusion into the action:

> **Oh, good!**
> **She is evil, if the word has meaning**
> **Oh, good!**
> **We do hate punishment but some it must be said**
> **Deserve**
> **Oh, good!**
> **In such a case human dignity cries out for**
> **One of those rare occasions when everybody must**
> **Agree**
> **Collectively we must respond.** (5:39-40)

With its repeated cry of 'good', the designation of Prudentia as 'evil' and its allusion to 'human dignity', the gaol reinforces conventional ethical dictates on the notion of the good life – but does so in the name of murder. The repressive heteronomy of the Chorus is only too clearly indicated by its insistence that the goodness of the murder is something on which 'everybody must' (not can) agree and that the 'collective' requires (or once again, 'must' have) a common 'response', subsuming the particular (subject) under the universal (society). But while Clarissa may agree that the murder of Prudentia is an ethical necessity, she also subverts the notion of the same 'absolute morality' for which she kills. When she appears in the Interlude to remove a young Goneril from the lethal fight between Kent and the Bishop, Clarissa remarks that 'I never thought I would give thanks for murder, but I must not hide behind the fiction that all life is good. How simple that would be. How simple and intransigent. Such absolute moralities are frequently the refuge of misanthropy' (33). The murder of the Bishop ironically prompts Clarissa to abandon the (supposedly) 'absolute moralities' for which the murders of both the Bishop and Prudentia are conducted: the idea of the common good.

By virtue of her desire to '**correct**' (6:48) and 'improve' Lear, Clarissa (who Barker describes in his interview with the author as 'an intolerably, unbearably moralistic person') is an intertextual analogue for the famously truth-telling Cordelia.[701] In Second Lear, Clarissa recycles the language and action of the love-test, telling Lear that it would be wrong 'If I praised things merely to please you': 'so I will say – as best I can – only the truth' (2:11). Clarissa obviously echoes Cordelia in her conviction of the possibility of 'truth without contradiction' (3:25) – a possibility that, in *Seven Lears*, Lear disclaims – and of the ethical righteousness of truth over falsehood: 'She does not put on lipstick, Clarissa. Or any false thing' (6:46). But the name Clarissa is also an intertextual echo of the 1748 novel *Clarissa* – or, *The History of a Young Lady* – by Samuel Richardson.[702] The novel is typical of the type of conventional *Bildung* narrative of personal and ethical development that Barker believes *King Lear* has been reduced to, in which the hero or heroine achieves a form of ethical knowledge and self-identity (in the novel, Clarissa remains utterly virtuous, against all the odds of her situation).

Clarissa is counterpointed to Lear throughout the play: where Lear engages in a series of transgressive self re-authorizations – 'But that was another Lear' (3:15) – Clarissa insists on a principle of ethical self-identity: 'I like to be myself' (2:12); where Lear engages in rhetorical 'bollockry' (3:18), Clarissa speaks only the 'truth' and refuses 'gesture and false movements' (3:19); and where Lear ignores the needs of the Kingdom – 'What, brothers, no clinic? No warm house? No hot dinners?' (4:26) – Clarissa insists on the need to 'pity the poor' (5:38) and on the absolute necessity of following her 'conscience' (5:38) in reprimanding the waywardness of Lear: 'You should not do that because in governors extremes of emotion are not liked!' (2:9). It would not be stretching the point to say that

[701] Appendix, p. 355.
[702] Samuel Richardson, *Clarissa, or, The History of a Young Lady* (London: Penguin, 1985).

Barker purposefully alludes to *Clarissa* in his appropriation of *King Lear* to instantiate a conflict between the narrative of ethical self-development that typifies the novel form and the far less predictable, non-narrative subjectivity that typifies his own morally speculative Catastrophist form.

The clash between Clarissa and Lear is perhaps most apparent in Third Lear, in which Lear undertakes an utterly disastrous war with a rival state, before retreating under the protection of Clarissa and her Second Army (the way Cordelia leads the French troops into Britain to save Lear in *King Lear* is an obvious parallel). Clarissa upbraids Lear for his disastrous leadership – but Lear refuses the idea that there is an ethical 'lesson' to be taken from his apparent failure: 'It is not the circumstance, it is the exposure, it is not the subject but the experience which –' (3:16). Clarissa, however, repeatedly interrupts Lear to insist on the idea that the failure of the war offers an opportunity for ethical education and reformation:

> You must be sensible, and hear advice. You must regard the judgement of others as equal to your own. I think if this is to be a happy Kingdom you must study good, which is not difficult, and do it. I will help you. I will criticise you, and I will say when you are childish or petulant, and you must try to overcome the flaws in what is otherwise, I am sure, a decent character! (3:17)

'You are often amusing, which is surely a sign of goodness!' (3:17), Clarissa concludes, in an incurably optimistic reading of the 'decent character' of Lear. Such 'advice' about the inculcation of 'goodness' and the good life – 'the happiness of the Kingdom' – has its precedent in First Lear, in which Lear also ponders the possibility that goodness might be 'defined' and 'taught', so that those now 'horribly attracted' to acts of 'badness' would find goodness 'simple to appreciate and consequently act upon'. Yet as Adorno contends, 'to

impute that one ever knows, unproblematically and without doubt, what the good itself is is, one might say, already evil'.[703] It is in such a way that Clarissa might – in Adornian terms – be thought of as evil: she insists on universally binding ethical principles – which she overconfidently proclaims are 'not difficult' – in a way that dominates and deprives the subject.

Clarissa persists in her desire to support Lear in overcoming his tragic 'flaws', but Lear produces a response that Clarissa (and, indeed, Lear himself) is finally unable to provide an answer for:

> **Clarissa**: What was good in me, through seeing, is now more good. What was less good, there is less of.
> **Lear**: **WHAT IS THIS GOOD?** (3:17)

This – arguably – is the most decisive moment in the play: the question '**WHAT IS THIS GOOD?**' typifies the foundational critique of ethics that Lear enables in *Seven Lears*. His transgressive actions are a catalyst for a properly moral inquiry into normative ethical mores and beliefs – into the 'first principles' of ethics – which may otherwise be precluded by prevailing hegemonic understandings of the good life that stretch from antiquity to the modern day.[704] Like various characters during the action of *King Lear*, Clarissa encourages Lear to 'See better' (I.i.161) – yet ultimately it is Clarissa who has a superficial understanding of morality, constrained as she is by received ethical norms which she fails at any time to question.

Graham Saunders makes the case that *Seven Lears* dramatizes the 'slow moral decline of Lear', who fails in his responsibilities as ruler and comes to realize that Clarissa

[703] *History and Freedom*, p. 365.
[704] *Arguments for a Theatre*, p. 54.

would have made the more capable – indeed the more ethical – monarch: 'No, she is exemplary, and I should commit suicide': 'She should govern' (3:18).[705] What Saunders misses, however, is that the ethical disintegration of Lear is *the point*. The play does not allow for a determinate ethical frame through which to condemn Lear for his morally transgressive actions, even if Lear lapses into self-doubt. Saunders also overlooks the Catastrophic finale of the play, in which the rest of the Lear family conspire in the murder, not of Lear, but of the ethically '*pristine*' (2:11) Clarissa, forestalling any sense of narrative or ethical 'closure'.

This murder is driven principally by Cordelia. 'I have', Cordelia tells her mother, 'a deep and until today, an unstirred hatred for you' (6:48). The language that Cordelia uses alludes to the Introduction ('She was the subject of an unjust hatred / This hatred was shared by Lear and all of his daughters'). Clarissa is all too conscious of the apparent injustice of her assassination – 'Someone must do good and of all people I have done least to –' (6:48) – but the vital word in the prologue is 'necessary' – or the way in which the need is reasoned, to paraphrase *King Lear*. Where the murders of Prudentia and the Bishop are understood to be 'necessary' to facilitate the common good of the commons, the murder of Clarissa – the personal motivation for which is stated quite openly – would seem to derive from a completely distinct sense of 'necessity': that of obviating absolutist appeals to ethics that are unfeasible and which serve to endanger the properly moral autonomy of the subject.

Even in the final Seventh Lear, Lear remains implacably resistant to the common good of the *polis*: in a reversal of the usual action of classical tragedy, it is the Chorus, as

[705] Graham Saunders, '"Missing Mothers and Absent Fathers"', p. 404.

opposed to the transgressive tragic 'hero', that ends up dead: '**HOW COULD WE BE ALLOWED TO LIVE?**' (7:49). With the figures of the Chorus dead about him, Lear is discovered – in the same vein as Ferdinand and Miranda at the end of *The Tempest* – playing a game of chess with Kent, in which both participants have been openly cheating. The image provides a profound inversion of the usual early modern understanding of chess as a symbol for astute statecraft.[706] There is no resolution – no synthesis – of the contradiction between individual and collective, morality and ethics at the end of *Seven Lears*. It is not for Lear to institute the common good and finally 'pluck the common bosom on his side' (V.iii.50).

Throughout his performance in 1989, Nicholas Le Provost, who played Lear, relied on constant shifts – constant 'turns' – in both voice and action: 'Time to unlock the gaol! Or maybe not! (3:16). When Lear originally discovered the gaol in First Lear, he paced from left to right, his head often in his hands, while he contemplated the way in which government might be harnessed to make people 'good'. But when he is 'inspired' to take another view – when his 'wits begin to turn' (III.ii.67) – Le Provost physicalized the shift with a violently sudden turn, as he threw his hands down and changed direction in an abrupt *volte-face*. This turn, which also saw Le Provost shift into a more antagonistic vocal range, subverted narrative progress and the movement toward a 'conclusion' of the ethical ideas Lear was in the process of developing, creating both a physical and intellectual space for a more open-ended form of moral self-reflexivity.[707] It was a performance style that contrasted strongly

[706] See Bryan Loughrey and Neil Taylor, 'Ferdinand and Miranda at Chess', *The Cambridge Shakespeare Library, Volume II: Shakespeare Criticism*, ed. Catherine Alexander (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 30-35

[707] In his interview with the author, Barker states that '"…when I sense the appearance of a cliché, I'll do anything to evade it. I'll take a sharp turn away". Nothing that happens is really predictable' (Appendix, pp. 373). Barker also describes his writing, and his non-linear 'development' as a playwright, in terms of 'sharp' catastrophic turns that deny more 'predictable' routes.

with the Chorus, which both moved and spoke in a shared, rhythmic fashion. This gave the interventions and indictments of the Chorus a strong collective force; but at the same time, the presentation of the Chorus – who were all dressed in draped grey costumes, which obscured the features of the various actors involved – indicated a homogenized 'mass' where the individual was obscured. The production created a striking visual and aural disparity between Lear and the Chorus and contradictory conceptions of the moral basis of the 'good life'.

This contradiction between subject and society reflects a radically reconfigured understanding of the role of theatre (and tragedy) in an age of cultural and ethical totality – to free spectators into autonomous moral reflection, as opposed to prescribing shared ethical meanings. Barker writes that his theatre aims to 'return the responsibility for moral argument to the audience itself' – or perhaps more precisely, to the 'audience in its individual, atomised form'.[708] This most obviously relates to the suspension of closure in Catastrophist theatre. By refusing to align with the commons – by remaining morally non-cooperate, with his constant turns away from more predictable forms of thinking and action – Lear forestalls the final confirmation of shared ethical values for the common good. This transgressive violation of ethical values means that the audience becomes – for Barker – as fragmented as the play, forced morally to 'wrestle' with the 'meaning' of the play alone, without the crutch of collective values: 'in tragedy, the audience is disunited. It sits alone. It suffers alone. In the endless drizzle of false collectivity, it restores pain to the individual'.[709] In his interview with the author, Barker states that, with catastrophic death of Cordelia in *King Lear*, 'something is released in the audience': 'an innate sense of chaos', something that he thinks 'theatre can liberate all the time but which conscience-driven […] theatre

[708] *Arguments for a Theatre*, p. 52 and p. 111.
[709] Ibid, p. 19.

continually represses and tries to replace by enlightenment'.[710] This individuating 'liberation' from the 'dominant pattern of thought of our time' is the same affect Barker wants to catalyse in his *Seven Lears*, a shuddering distantiation from collective ethical ideas and values.[711]

Seven Lears is, without doubt, an ethically problematic play. Lear resists calls for the common good in his radical bid for moral autonomy and, as a result, the commons is finally destroyed. But for Barker as for Adorno, artworks should pose moral problems, not ethical solutions. *Seven Lears* instantiates a contradiction between moral autonomy and ethical collectivity, a contradiction sorely absent during some of the worst catastrophes of the twentieth century.

Conclusion

This chapter has analysed the appropriation of *King Lear* in *Seven Lears* and shown that, through his appropriation of Shakespeare and his subversion of the conventional humanist image of a 'humbled' Lear, Barker produces a foundational critique of normative understandings of the ethics of the good life. This critique parallels Adorno and his own deep-seated interrogation of the good in post-Auschwitz culture in *Minima Moralia*, a work of philosophy that informs both the themes Barker develops in *Seven Lears* and the constellatory form which the play takes. I have shown that, for Barker, *King Lear* is at once a regressively humanist play and, at the same time, provides a vehicle for his own ethically and aesthetically Catastrophist form. This serves to situate *King Lear* as a vital intertext in

[710] Appendix, p. 361.
[711] Ibid, p. 369.

Catastrophism and the way Barker challenges the ethical totality of post-Auschwitz culture and society.

Sarah Kane often cited Barker and his Catastrophist form as an influence on her own playwriting. In the next chapter, I turn to Kane. I will show that, like both Rudkin and Barker, Kane creates spaces of non-identity through her appropriation of *King Lear*. These spaces are understood as transcendent of a totalized material reality, creating a metaphysical rift in society.

Chapter Seven

'Thought you were dead': Dover Cliff, Death and 'Ephemeral Life' in Sarah Kane's *Blasted*

'The course of history forces materialism upon metaphysics, traditionally the direct antithesis of metaphysics' – Theodor Adorno.[712]

Introduction

This chapter will analyse the Sarah Kane play *Blasted*, which debuted at the Royal Court Upstairs in 1995.[713] The original production of the play was directed by James McDonald, with Pip Donaghy taking the role of Ian – a terminally-ill alcoholic, who writes salacious articles for the tabloid press – and Kate Ashfield taking the role of Cate, his far younger former girlfriend, who suffers from intermittent fits.[714] *Blasted* was met with notoriously histrionic reviews, due to its depiction of violence.[715] The play, which is set in a hotel room in Leeds, is split into five scenes: in between Scenes One and Two, Ian rapes Cate, before Cate plaintively – and without warning – declares that there is 'a war on' (2:33) in the city. Shortly after that declaration, an anonymous Soldier (played in the 1995 production by Dermot Kerrigan) makes his way into the hotel room, before the room is hit by a mortar blast and reduced to rubble. The Soldier goes on to rape and blind Ian in Scene Three,

[712] *Negative Dialectics*, p. 365
[713] Sarah Kane, *Blasted, Complete Plays* (London: Methuen, 2001). p. 2. All references to the play are to the Methuen edition. I give references to the scene and page number in the text.
[714] Ibid.
[715] For an astute analysis of the rather prurient critical 'controversy' around *Blasted*, see Elaine Aston 'Reviewing the Fabric of *Blasted*', *Sarah Kane: In Context*, ed. Laurens de Vos and Graham Saunders (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), pp.13-27.

before he kills himself. Ian also tries to commit suicide in Scene Four, only for Cate to intervene. In Scene Five, Cate leaves the room to try and find some food, while Ian is seen in various states of physical and mental degradation. Ian finally buries himself under the floorboards of the room, with only his head visible, before 'dying'. Ian, however, suddenly returns to life – with a declaration of 'Shit' (5:60) – before Cate returns to offer him some sustenance.

I will show that Kane, not unlike Rudkin and Barker, dramatizes the crisis of the post-Auschwitz subject, who is trapped in a totalized system that destroys autonomy. Unlike the drama of Rudkin and Barker, however, Kane does not tend to depict self-authoring figures in her plays.[716] Her drama testifies to a 'fading of the subject', as Gritzner eloquently calls it, a process that, for Gritzner, is intensified in the plays *Crave* (1998) and *4.48 Psychosis* (1999).[717] Kane dramatizes a world where any hope there might be for transcendence – of a world 'beyond' – is hanging by a thread. Kane understands the crisis of the subject as a *metaphysical* crisis, as the waning of anything beyond the seemingly endless horizon of late capitalist modernity.

This metaphysical conception of post-Auschwitz culture and subjectivity both informs and is enabled by the way Kane appropriates other texts. Most prominently, a metaphysical conception of post-Auschwitz subjectivity both informs and is enabled by *King Lear*. The appropriation of *King Lear* in *Blasted* is not instantly obvious: Kane herself revealed that she only became aware of the kinship between the plays toward the end of the drafting process, slowly coming to the realization that she was – in part – motivated by

[716] The possible exception to the rule is Hippolytus in *Phaedra's Love* (1996) who self-consciously transgresses conventional social and moral norms in a suicidal bid for experiential 'authenticity'.
[717] Karoline Gritzner, 'The Fading of the Subject in Sarah Kane's Later Work', *Consciousness, Theatre, Literature and the Arts*, ed. Daniel Meyer-Dinkgräfe (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2006), p. 249.

'a subconscious drive' to 'rewrite' *King Lear*.[718] 'When I was writing *Blasted*', Kane revealed in a 1998 interview, 'there was some point at which I realized that there was a relationship with *King Lear*'.[719] This intertextual 'relationship' can be seen in the various palimpsestic traces of *King Lear* perceptible in *Blasted* – not least the depiction of Ian and his combined embodiment of the physical (Gloucester) and mental (Lear) blindness of *King Lear*; the putrefying 'stink' (1:8) caused by his terminal illness, which means he 'smells of mortality' (IV.vi.129); the operation he alludes to where his lung was removed – a 'rotting lump of pork' (1:11) – which literalizes the proposed 'anatomization' (III.vi.73) of Regan; and his constant 'love-testing', where Cate refuses to 'heave' (I.i.91) her heart into her mouth and tell Ian she loves him simply because he (repeatedly and belligerently) asks her to (1:6). Even the title of *Blasted* can be interpreted as an allusion to *King Lear*: Kane chose '*Blasted*' because of the representation of drunkenness throughout the play; it was only after the event that she came to realize it also alludes to the 'blasted heath' depicted in the storm scenes of *King Lear*.[720] These are only some of the points of contact between the plays that might be proposed by an intertextual reading. To trace the way in which her appropriation of Shakespeare enables Kane to interrogate post-Auschwitz subjectivity, however, I concentrate squarely on the penultimate and final scenes of *Blasted* – Scene Four and Scene Five.

[718] Sarah Kane, interview with Graham Saunders, quoted in '"Out Vile Jelly"', p. 76.
[719] Sarah Kane, 'Brief Encounter', Platform, Royal Holloway College, London, 3 November 1998.
[720] See '"Out Vile Jelly": Sarah Kane's *Blasted* and Shakespeare's *King Lear*', p. 76. Of course, the heath is, as I show in Chapter Five, an editorial intervention: the 'blasted heath' Kane refers to in her interview with Graham Saunders is a direct quote from *Macbeth*: 'Say from whence / You owe this strange intelligence, or why / Upon this *blasted heath* you stop our way / With such prophetic greeting?' (I.vi.76-79; italics added). *King Lear* undeniably provides the principal Shakespearean intertext for *Blasted*, but the play also contains not insignificant allusions to *Macbeth*. *Macbeth* is also echoed in the way Ian talks about his ex-wife, Stella, who Ian calls a 'witch' (1:19) due to her starting a relationship with another woman. Stella has – as far as Ian is concerned – become part of a 'coven' (1:18). It is a homophobic designation that recalls *Macbeth* and its own 'coven' of witches, who similarly represent a threatening and shadowy all-female presence on the periphery of the play.

I begin by analysing the way Kane appropriates the Dover 'cliff' scene from *King Lear* in Scene Four of *Blasted* to interrogate the prevailing immanence of totalized society, which by trapping the subject, seems to disallow any possibility of transcendence, of anything 'other' than the world 'as it is'. This interrogation involves the deconstruction of both metaphysical and material worldviews – propounded by Cate (metaphysical) and Ian (material) in the scene. Both are shown to be flawed and unable to challenge the dominance of the social totality. This analysis will involve a close-reading of both *King Lear* and *Blasted*.

I go on to analyse Scene Five of the play and the puzzling moment where Ian 'dies', only to simply go on 'living'. This has been taken, by several Kane critics, to dramatize his continued entrapment within a prevailing immanence; however, I contend that, by deconstructing both conventional materialist and metaphysical understandings of the world in Scene Four, Kane forms a space for transcendence in Scene Five.[721] Both alive and dead, Ian is at once bound 'in' the material world and yet also thrown metaphysically 'beyond' it. He is, as I will show, also both 'in' and catastrophically 'out' of tragic closure. This paradoxical subjective condition, I contend, appropriates the liminal, even ecstatic, states 'between' life and death that Shakespeare dramatizes time and again in *King Lear*. This will again involve a close reading of *King Lear* and *Blasted*, though I will also analyse aspects of the original performance and its relationship with the 1993 Max Stafford-Clark production of *King Lear* at the Royal Court. I will also consider the cultural 'afterlife' of the image of the dead-alive Ian.

[721] I review some criticism of the scene in the section 'Thought you were dead', below.

To read the final scene of *Blasted*, I will utilize the notion of 'ephemeral life', propounded by Adorno.[722] Ephemeral life names for Adorno a form of immanent transcendence, a state both in the material world and cast beyond it. It reflects the way in which Adorno, in a move similar to Kane, re-conceptualizes the metaphysical as antithetically distinct from the material.[723] Before developing a close reading of *Blasted* and its appropriation of *King Lear*, I want to analyse the way Adorno challenges the inherited philosophical distinction between the material and the metaphysical in the wake of Auschwitz. I concentrate particularly on *Metaphysics: Concepts and Problems* – a series of lectures delivered over 1965 and posthumously published in 2000 – and the 1966 *Negative Dialectics*.

1. Metaphysics 'After' Auschwitz: Materializing the Metaphysical

While he has often been viewed as the progenitor of a purely negative critical philosophy**,** towards the end of his life Adorno began to engage with the metaphysical tradition in both classical philosophy and in German idealism. The *OED* defines 'metaphysics' as 'that branch of knowledge concerned with first principles' such as 'being, knowing, identity, time and space'.[724] Metaphysics is the form of philosophy concerned with determining 'ultimate' or 'absolute' values, addressing deep-seated questions of ontology and epistemology. Adorno observes that the desire to determine ultimate metaphysical values meant that classical philosophers (most notably Plato) were required to imagine a numinous 'other place' or

[722] *Negative Dialectics*, p. 156.
[723] See Alistair Morgan, 'Mere Life, Damaged Life and Ephemeral Life: Adorno and the Concept of Life', *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, 19:1 (2014), pp. 113-127. I will cite and analyse the work of Morgan again below.
[724] 'metaphysics, n.' *OED Online*. Accessed 30 August 2015. http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/117346?rskey=mFUd06&result=1

world 'beyond' where the disturbing state of flux wrought on and by the temporal material world is suspended. This meant that metaphysics became, Adorno contends, 'the philosophical theory of all that pertained to the Beyond', as opposed to the immediacy of the material world, and a theory of the 'transcendental in contradiction to the sphere of immanence'.[725]

This is not to say that Adorno naïvely subscribes to the notion that there is a pure and immutable world 'beyond' the material world, which exists outside of 'fallen' historical time and provides a meaning for immanence – whether it be the realm of the ideal imagined by Plato, the heaven of Christianity or even the Utopia of Marxism. His own version of metaphysics is, paradoxically, transient and related to the 'most fragile of experiences'.[726]

Developing many of the insights found in *Metaphysics*, in his 1966 work *Negative Dialectics* and its famous final chapter, 'Meditations on Metaphysics', Adorno makes the case that, while most contemporary philosophy – most particularly the 'logical' positivism of his contemporary Ludwig Wittgenstein – has set out to completely overturn metaphysics, his own analysis of the metaphysical tradition seeks to revivify metaphysics precisely by abandoning its most fundamental presuppositions. Adorno understands his own, idiosyncratic conception of metaphysics arising from the transformation – even the decay – of the fundamental concept of traditional metaphysical thinking: the notion of a world beyond or behind the material world that imparts meaning to immanence and where the 'true' (and 'good') life is possible. Adorno states that his own conception of metaphysics has

[725] Theodor Adorno, *Metaphysics: Concepts and Problems*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Oxford: Polity, 2000), p. 3.
[726] Ibid, p. 141.

'its basis in the total suspension of metaphysics'.[727] Such thinking, however, is 'in solidarity with metaphysics at the moment of the demise of metaphysics'; it will allow a new metaphysics to develop that, by breaking with the idea of a pure world beyond, can merge with materialism.[728]

The 'course of history' most obviously refers to the genocidal horror unleashed during the Holocaust. The need to rethink metaphysics is for Adorno particularly acute in the face of Auschwitz. Adorno contends that the traditional conception of a metaphysical beyond where 'existing suffering is done away with' and finally 'revoked' becomes untenable in the face of the irredeemable horror represented by the concentration camps.[729] Even more ominously, however, Auschwitz can also be said to realize the immutable and unchanging realm 'beyond' the 'normal' world posited by traditional metaphysical thought. Adorno argues the camps instituted a world apparently 'outside' the unstable exigencies of historical time, a world that transformed (material) particularity to (metaphysical) universality. This, as Adorno contends, has become the organizing principle of modern society as a whole, which by violently colonizing every form of otherness, admits of nothing beyond its own borders and takes on the disconcerting guise of a metaphysical absolute.[730]

On the one hand, Auschwitz represents the horrifying culmination of metaphysics, where the 'bare harsh remnants of the living' take on 'the appearance of the Absolute'.[731] On the other hand, it also urgently calls for the possibility of transcendence, where 'the

[727] Ibid, p. 112.
[728] *Negative Dialectics*, p. 408. See also *Metaphysics*, pp. 112-119.
[729] *Negative Dialectics*, p. 400.
[730] See 'Metaphysics', Espen Hammer, *Adorno: Key Concepts*, ed. Deborah Cook (Oxford: Routledge, 2004), p. 66.
[731] *Negative Dialectics*, p. 362

electrified barbed wire surrounding the camp' might be 'escaped from'.[732] Under the daunting historical conditions of post-Auschwitz culture, the classical philosophical conception of metaphysics has, Adorno contends, to be rethought. For transcendence to be possible in the face of the totalized world of Auschwitz, metaphysics must be stripped of its traditional conceptual ties to the *mundus intelligibilis* notions of the ideal, the absolute and the universal.

Not unlike Benjamin, Adorno makes the case that transcendence should be sought, not in the order of the immutable *à la* classical metaphysics, but in those moments that betray the false totality of modern social life and adumbrate something 'beyond' the ostensibly interminable horizon of modern culture, which otherwise 'tolerates nothing outside itself'.[733] Adorno argues that the apparently 'closed' world of immanence represented by post-Auschwitz society 'is nevertheless interspersed' with 'the breaks which give the lie to identity' and prompt the question: 'So is that all?' – a question that, for Adorno, opens up the possibility that there might be something other than the 'unalterably existent, the world'.[734]

Adorno contends that metaphysics is intimately related to the possibility of subjectivity and freedom; it represents a moment of transcendence from totalized material conditions that constrain the subject and limit his/her experience. Such moments transpire, for Adorno, when the subject is confronted with something non-identical, fragmented and transient, which interrupts the otherwise unchallenged reign of identity in contemporary damaged life. Breaks in the total identity of society are, as I have set out in previous chapters, typically to be found in moments of crisis and catastrophe, when the prevailing

[732] Ibid.
[733] Ibid, p. 378. For more on Benjamin and metaphysics, see Eric Jacobson, *Metaphysics of the Profane: The Political Theology of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).
[734] *Negative Dialectics*, p. 404.

order is ruptured. But for Adorno, the aesthetic – and particularly late modernist aesthetics – should be also seen as both materially and metaphysically momentous. This is not because the artwork depicts 'another world', but because in its fragmentariness and dissonance the modernist artwork resists identity, undoing its own reifying inscription into the social totality. What in *Aesthetic Theory* Adorno calls the 'spiritual dimension' of the artwork means its negation of empirical reality, which holds out the possibility that the world may be otherwise.[735] He writes that 'in the negation of that world the possibility of another world which does not yet exist becomes conceivable'.[736] It is through its negation of the 'known world' that the artwork – however fleetingly – produces a semblance of freedom for the subject, showing the world as it is to be contingent, not the absolute totality it appears to be.

It is the subjective experience of something beyond the horizon of the closed totality of post-Auschwitz culture that Adorno calls 'ephemeral life'. It is, however, worth pausing to recognize that ephemeral life is not necessarily a notion that is fully developed or rigorously applied by Adorno (he enigmatically states in *Negative Dialectics* that 'there is no origin save ephemeral life').[737] This is perhaps because Adorno came to metaphysics towards the end of his life, without having the chance to fully develop his re-interpretation of the metaphysical tradition. The notion of ephemeral life has, however, been fleshed out in the ground-breaking work of Alistair Morgan, who provides an astute analysis of the various forms of 'life' conceptualized by Adorno. He states that Adorno understands 'mere life' as 'self-preservation in nature'; 'damaged life' denotes the reified life of late capitalist society; and

[735] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 123. Adorno writes: 'Only as spirit is art the antithesis of empirical reality as the determinate negation of the existing order of the world' (Ibid).
[736] *Negative Dialectics*, p. 380.
[737] Ibid, p. 156.

'ephemeral life' means the fleeting moment of transcendence that happens within damaged life.[738] Morgan writes

> the term ephemeral life refers to a […] bid [on the part of Adorno] to give an interpretation of the possibility of metaphysical experience, a metaphysical experience that contrary to the tradition of metaphysics will lie in the particular, the transitory and the non-conceptual.[739]

Morgan makes the case that, for Adorno, any experience of the beyond must also and necessarily make the subject cognizant of the closed totality of modern life, drawing attention to a world of pure immanence. Adorno, in other words, rehabilitates metaphysics within a framework of a critical materialist theory of society, where the metaphysical consists in the possibility of experiencing some form of alterity and otherness. Espen Hammer writes that 'metaphysical experience is Janus-faced: while tracing a moment of transcendence, it also makes us aware of the negativity of immanence'.[740] Such experience is critical: without moments of ephemeral life it would not be possible to confront and resist the radical societal 'evil' the totalized world of Auschwitz both embodied and, ultimately, exposed. Within a totalized world that itself takes on the semblance of the absolute, metaphysics remain, as Hammer observes, 'relevant for ethical orientation and political struggle'.[741]

Adorno may not develop the idea of ephemerality in his writings, but it is vital, both for 'ethical orientation and political struggle'. I want to develop the notion of ephemeral life by using the concept in a reading of *Blasted*. I will show that ephemeral life epitomizes the

[738] 'Mere Life, Damaged Life and Ephemeral Life', p. 115.
[739] Ibid.
[740] 'Metaphysics', p. 73.
[741] Ibid, p. 75.

impossible position that Ian, in the beyond and yet also interred in immanence, occupies at the end of *Blasted*.

Prior to developing a reading of her appropriation of Shakespeare, I want to consider the way in which Kane conceptualizes and practises the act of literary/theatrical appropriation. This evinces the political position she adopts in her playwriting. Kane is less concerned with identity politics – and the contestatory approach to the canon it has informed – than with the crisis of subjectivity precipitated by contemporary totalized society.

2. 'Last in a Long Line of Literary Kleptomaniacs': Kane, Appropriation and Identity Politics

While she was initially branded (and derided) in the British press as the *enfant terrible* of a radical new form of theatrical practice – variously designated as the 'New Brutalism', 'Smack and Sodomy Theatre' and 'The Theatre of Urban Ennui' – that broke radically with past forms, Kane positioned herself as a product and appropriator of the European canonical tradition, acknowledging her debt to Shakespeare, Ford, Büchner, Ibsen, Eliot, Camus, Artaud, Huxley, Beckett, Bond, Barker and Crimp.[742] The speaker in the 1999 Kane play *4.48 Psychosis* memorably refers to her/himself as the 'Last in a long line of literary kleptomaniacs', where 'Theft is the holy act / On a twisted path to expression'.[743] While the theatrical voice of *4.48 Psychosis* cannot be identified with Kane herself, Kane undoubtedly saw the appropriation of past works as a way of developing and abetting her own literary

[742] See also Antje Diedrich, '"Last in a Long Line of Literary Kleptomaniacs": Intertextuality in Sarah Kane's *4.48 Psychosis*', *Modern Drama*, 56:3 (2013), pp. 374-398. For more on 'The New Brutalism', see Graham Saunders *'Love Me or Kill Me': Sarah Kane and the Theatre of Extremes* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), pp. 4-8.
[743] Sarah Kane*, 4.48 Psychosis,* in *Complete Works*, p. 213.

and theatrical 'expression'. Kane did not always acknowledge her referent texts, but it is hard to avoid the implication of *4.48 Psychosis* that Kane herself is engaged in various acts of literary 'theft'.

The idea of literary 'theft' recalls, of course, the Latin root of appropriation in *propruis* – meaning, as I set out in the Introduction, 'belonging to', the 'property of' – with the 'a'-prefix denoting 'an approach towards'. Theft would indicate that appropriation is the seizure of 'property' that belongs to another, but her 'approach' towards literary theft indicates that Kane is not only engaged in acts of violent proprietorial seizure; for her, appropriation is also a 'holy' act imbued with sacred reverence – almost as if Kane were a bowed penitent approaching a religious icon that she is, paradoxically, planning to steal. From the words of *4.48 Psychosis*, it would seem that there is something sacred about the (more often than not, canonical) works Kane appropriates and about the act of appropriation itself, which Kane imagines in *4.48 Psychosis* 'a time honoured tradition'.[744] There are obvious parallels with Barker and his paradoxical conception of appropriation as violation/reverence.[745]

Her indebtedness to the canon and its appropriation caused Kane to remark that her plays 'certainly exist within a theatrical tradition', even if that is at the 'extreme end of the tradition'. [746] This obviously relates to the idea of being 'last in a long line' of other appropriators; but it also speaks to her particular indebtedness to the more *avant-garde* end of the modernist tradition, which places Kane, I contend, as a late modernist.[747] Kane

[744] *4.48 Psychosis*, p. 213. Perhaps appropriately, appropriation seems to have originally come into usage to denote the requisition of land and resources by the ecclesiastical authorities of the Medieval Church – so appropriation might be said to have always been an act of 'holy theft', 'appropriation. n.', *OED Online*.
[745] See Chapter Six, pp. 258-259.
[746] Quoted in *'Love Me or Kill Me'*, p. 26.
[747] *Blasted* also shares it title with the short-lived Vorticist journal *BLAST!*, edited by Wyndham Lewis, which had two editions in 1914. See Paul Edwards and Jane Beckett, *Blast: Vorticism, 1914-1918* (London: Ashgate, 2000).

was careful to state, however, that, while she appropriated past works, her plays are not about interrogating other works or the cultural politics of 'representation' whether that is based on feminist, post-colonial or queer politics.[748] Kane viewed appropriation as a way of aligning herself with the canon and enabling the development of her distinct but canonically informed 'vision'.[749]

This approach to the canon and its appropriation is part of a more pervasive refutation of modern day identity politics. Kane did not set out to represent the cause of marginalized identities in her playwriting and was suspicious of the way identity-categories are produced. 'Class, race and gender divisions are symptomatic of societies based on violence or the threat of violence, not the cause'.[750] The divisions which contemporary identity politics seeks to address and redress are not, Kane insists, the cause of violence, but are the result of societies *based* on violence. Underlying the divisions of class, race and gender is, for Kane, a more systematic violence, through which divisions are produced: identity-thinking.

In *Blasted*, Ian typifies the prescriptive and intrinsically violent nature of identity-thinking. Ian spends much of the play pinning others to predetermined, categorized identities, epitomized by the classist – 'scum' (1:19) – racist – 'wog' (1:3;6) – sexist – 'witch' (1:19) – homophobic – 'lesbos' (1:18); 'cocksucker' (1:19) – and ableist – 'spaz' (1:5) – ascriptions he directs against Cate and the unseen 'characters' both he and Cate refer to in the play. So pervasive is the violent and abusive language Ian uses to identify others that it finally disarms a reading that would seek to advance a particular identity politics and

[748] Quoted in, *Rage and Reason: Women Playwrights on Playwriting*, ed. Natasha Stephenson and Heidi Longridge (London: Methuen, 1997), p. 134.
[749] For a less canonical intertext for *Blasted*, see my forthcoming *Contemporary Theatre Review* article on Kane and arcade games, 'Sarah Kane and *Blasted*: The Arcade Game?'.
[750] Ibid, pp. 133-134.

adumbrates the presence of a deeper 'rationale' underlying his unrepentant racism, sexism, ableism and various other 'isms' – the rationale of identity-thinking. It is worth noting that Ian is not only a racist, a sexist and a homophobe – though he does undeniably embody all of those bigotries and more – but that he is also the representative of an 'enlightened' and avowedly 'scientific' (4:56) worldview, which has little truck with the more 'mythic' worldview espoused by the religiously-inclined Cate.[751] These ostensibly divergent characteristics are not incidental: the racism, sexism and ableism represented in *Blasted* is tied to a character that stands for modern scientific reason. The violent language Ian uses to identify others is symptomatic of the dialectic of Enlightenment: Ian typifies the way in which the discursive categories that Enlightenment rationality uses to produce knowledge about the world invariably result in domination and even a 'mythic' and irrational fear of the 'other'.[752]

It is not the case that Ian goes unchallenged in the play. During the various dialogic 'battles' that inform the opening scene of *Blasted*, Cate often confronts Ian over his language-use, uncomfortable with the universally hostile way in which he categorizes others. The way Cate challenges Ian, however, betrays the inadequacy of identity politics. The more sensitive language Cate uses, which is intended to minimize prejudice and discrimination, fails to challenge the underlying rationale of identity-thinking by ultimately failing to challenge the 'category' to which Ian and Cate are – in the end – both referring. In the opening moments of the play, Ian tells Cate that he now hates Leeds, which 'stinks' because of the 'Wogs and Pakis' that are 'taking over' (1:5). Not untypically, Cate challenges

[751] It is not overly schematic to say that Ian represents rationalized Enlightenment modernity and Cate a more atavistically mythical worldview, *pace* Adorno and Horkheimer. Both are shown to be fundamentally flawed in the play.

[752] Such a dialectic can also be seen in the 1998 Kane play *Cleansed*: the play is set in a university – a seat of enlightened knowledge and learning – that has turned into a concentration camp, a totalized world the characters cannot seem to escape from.

Ian; but she only contests the words he uses, not the underlying *principle* of categorization itself:

> **Cate**: You should not call them that.
> **Ian**: Why not?
> **Cate:** It's not very nice. (1:5)

The use of the words 'should not' implies a linguistic consensus to which Ian should adhere; but revealingly, the 'them' (1:5) Cate uses in the dispute indicates that she is still talking about the same 'others' referred to by Ian, even if she is trying to advocate for a more 'politically-correct' language-game. The referent 'them', grammatically speaking, is still the 'Wogs and Pakis' Ian identifies, so that Cate is saying that 'Wogs and Pakis' should not be called 'Wogs and Pakis' any longer, as society now deems it is 'not very nice'. What the dialogue reveals is that a preoccupation with language-use – however well-intentioned – does not necessarily challenge and is even *complicit* with the oppression it aims to mitigate, as it fails to interrogate the underlying categories that are used to discriminate between and divide human beings.

The suspicion that identity politics serves to pin subjects to prescribed identities is something that Kane publicly addressed, particularly insofar as identity politics might constrain her own authorial intentions. Kane bristled at the critical presumption that, as a 'female playwright', it was her duty to represent contemporary sexual and gender politics, insisting that she had 'no responsibility as a woman writer', with its attendant obligation to write about 'sexual politics'.[753] Kane steadfastly refused to become 'a representative of any social category to which I happen to belong', repudiating the prescriptive designation of 'a

[753] Quoted in *Rage and Reason: Women Playwrights on Playwriting*, p. 134.

woman writer'.[754] Kane addressed questions that – as she put it – 'concerned all human beings'.[755]

This shift from identity politics to questions relating to human existence in its widest possible sense might seem at best politically retrogressive and at worst hopelessly naïve, implying that there are 'universal' problems faced by 'all human beings' regardless of the culturally determined distinctions of class, race, gender or sexuality. This, however, is precisely the political vision that informs *Blasted.* Far from setting out to represent the 'cause' of women or any other identifiable subjectivity *in* society, in *Blasted* Kane puts into question nothing short of the immanent and homogenized 'totality' of contemporary society *itself*, which by violently erasing any conception of something beyond its borders – and by pinning subjects to homogenized forms of identity – confines and deforms 'all human beings'.

Dan Rebellato contends that, in an era of late capitalist globalization, Kane was deeply suspicious of 'the totalizing ideological forces whose power over reality had never seemed more complete', precipitating a move away from 'the categories of political identity and action that had been developed in the 1970s and 1980s' toward an interrogation of the (apparent) totality of social and political reality itself.[756] This is typified in *Blasted* by the culturally homogenized space of the hotel room, where the action of the play takes place. The stage directions famously begin with an unmistakable sense of spatial specificity – '*a hotel room in Leeds*' – but go on to completely erase that specificity by stating that the room is of the kind '*so expensive it could be anywhere in the world*' (1:7). Kane begins *Blasted* by presenting a culture that has, to use the term preferred by Adorno, become totalized – the

[754] Ibid.
[755] Ibid.
[756] Dan Rebellato, 'Sarah Kane Before *Blasted*: The Monologues', *Sarah Kane: In Context*, p. 42.

culture of globalized late capitalism. So firmly pinioned is the subject within the social totality in *Blasted* that no other reality seems remotely possible and there is 'nowhere to go' (4:53).

This situation is not, of course, simply 'equivalent' to the concentration camp. *Blasted* is, however, a play that has the Holocaust – and its relationship with contemporary totalized society – on its 'mind', most obviously as the concentration camp was brought back into popular and artistic consciousness by the horror of the Bosnian War and the death-camps at Srebrenica and Omarska.[757] Ian tells Cate in the opening scene of the play that Hitler was 'wrong about the Jews' and that it is the 'queers' and 'wogs' he should have 'gone after' (1:19) – proclaiming the benefits of a new industrial-military genocide: 'Send a bomber over' (1:19).[758] *Blasted* is a play haunted by spectre of the totalized world of Auschwitz.

The shift from identity politics to a political vision that sets out to interrogate contemporary totality is enabled by the way Kane appropriates other texts – and most notably the way she appropriates *King Lear*. In the next section, I provide a close reading of Scene Four of *Blasted* and its appropriation of Shakespeare. I show that, far from pursuing a politically or ideologically corrective approach to the appropriation of *King Lear*, Kane re-deploys the play to confront the immanence of totalized, post-Auschwitz society and its damaged subject.

[757] A TV report on the Bosnian War famously inspired some of the action of *Blasted*. See '*Love Me Or Kill Me*', p. 48.
[758] In some of his most provocative observations in *Metaphysics*, Adorno writes that 'genocide, the eradication of humanity, and the concentration of people in a totality is which everything is subsumed […] *are the same thing*; indeed that genocide is absolute integration' (p. 108).

3. 'Rewriting' the Dover Cliff Scene: Problematizing the Material and the Metaphysical

While *Blasted* contains various allusions to and palimpsestic traces of *King Lear,* perhaps the most consistently realized and sustained appropriation of the play in *Blasted* is its re-imagining of the Dover cliff scene in Scene Four, where Ian – reprising Gloucester – tries to kill himself, only to have Cate – reprising Edgar – intervene to stop the suicide, afterward claiming that divine forces have miraculously 'stepped in' to save Ian from committing a grave sin. When asked about the scene, Kane called it 'a blatant rewrite of Shakespeare': 'as simple as that'.[759]

Kane is drawn to the scene at Dover cliff due to its existential and metaphysical questions pertaining to human suffering, suicide, the possibility of divine 'intervention' and of a world beyond the material world – a decision that reflects her desire to interrogate a homogeneous and 'other-less' present. In the next section, I provide a close reading of *King Lear* in order to pave the way for an interpretation of the way that Kane appropriates the 'cliff' in *Blasted*.

3.1. The Shakespearean Cliff

In the scene from *King Lear*, Edgar extemporizes a wholly imaginary 'chalky bourn' (IV.vi.49) for Gloucester to pitch himself from, in a bid to rekindle some of his faith in the benevolent intervention of God (or in the pagan world of *King Lear*, 'the gods') in human life and in a world 'beyond'. 'Why I do trifle thus with his despair', claims Edgar, 'Is done to cure it' (IV.vi.33-34) – though it is hard to avoid the suspicion that a vengeful Edgar is punishing

[759] Quoted in '"Out Vile Jelly!"', p. 77.

Gloucester by making him 'suffer' more life, as Ian alleges against Cate: 'I know you want to punish me, trying to make me live' (4:55). Of course, the audience is 'in' on the trick Edgar is pulling – at least by the time Gloucester has taken his grotesque 'fall' onto the stage. But while Gloucester does accept the version of events Edgar narrates, the way in which the scene is scripted constantly undermines the narrative of divine intervention and salvation Edgar proposes.

Once he has dispassionately watched his father fall flat on his face, Edgar – dropping the persona of Poor Tom in favour of an anonymous passer-by – tells his prostrate father that his life is 'a miracle' (IV.vi.55) and, with troubling cynicism, ascribes his survival of his deathward fall to the intervention of the 'gods' (IV.v.61-64) who have interceded to save him. Gloucester is initially distraught to find that the gods are even cruel enough to deny him death:

> Is wretchedness deprived that benefit
> To end itself by death? 'Twas yet some comfort
> When misery could beguile the tyrant's rage
> And frustrate his proud will. (IV.vi.61-64)

His prolonged existence is for Gloucester less the miracle Edgar says it is than a curse: Gloucester imagines immanence as a 'tyrannical' (Adorno would say totalized) regime, where even death falls outside the 'will' of the individual and any hope that 'things may change, or cease' (III.i.7) has been crushed. But while the language Edgar uses is patently at risk of giving the game away by implying that faith is simply a form of wishful thinking – 'think that' (IV.vi.62) – Gloucester ultimately takes the moral/theological lesson on board,

resolving to 'bear / Affliction till it do cry out itself / "Enough, enough" and die' (IV.vi.75-77).[760]

There is, however, an obvious ambiguity in the wording. On the one hand, Gloucester seems to be saying that he will bear suffering until affliction 'itself' dies. On the other hand, there is nothing to indicate that Gloucester imagines himself *surviving beyond* the 'death' of his affliction: it may be that Gloucester imagines affliction ending when he dies – as he ultimately does when, as Edgar relates to Kent, his heart bursts 'smilingly' (V.iii.198) on finding that his 'legitimate' (but once 'no dearer' (I.i.19) for that) son is still alive. It is not necessarily the case that 'all sorrows' are 'redeemed' (V.iii.264) by the promise of future happiness – in life or in the afterlife. It might only be the human lot to stoically endure 'going hence' as 'coming hither' (V.ii.10) – without the promise of transcendence.

While his conceit of the cliff-face is intended to impart a 'miraculous' experience and prove to Gloucester that there is another world beyond that inhabited by a 'poor, bare, forked' (III.vi.105-106) humanity, the metatheatrical trick Edgar pulls only goes to show that the universe is as 'dark and comfortless' (III.vii.84) as Gloucester fears, that there is no metaphysical beyond nor a benevolently intervening divinity that shapes human ends. This collapse of any metaphysical beyond, as I touched on in Chapter Three, prompted Jan Kott to contend that *King Lear* should be read as a prototypical piece of absurdist theatre, an *Endgame* of the early modern era that foreshows the Godless universe dramatized in the plays of Beckett. Dover cliff depicts for Kott a fundamentally absurd impasse, where any kind of metaphysical beyond that might provide human life (and suffering) with meaning

[760] In his analysis of the scene, the 'Shakespeare' of *Will's Way* states that Gloucester learns to accept 'the rightness of living on' (p. 25). This more 'positive' reading of the scene on the part of Rudkin may reflect his own desire to embrace 'life' in all its struggles and vicissitudes as a means of 'self re-authorship' and rebirth.

has collapsed, God (or the gods) are shown not to exist and faith relies on artifice.[761] Gloucester calls upon the gods to witness his 'tragic' leap into the abyss – 'O you mighty gods / This world I do renounce in your sights' (IV.vi.34-35) – but Edgar (and the audience) is the final and indeed only witness as a duped Gloucester absurdly slumps onto 'even' (IV.vi.3) ground. Quite simply, the gods (God) do not exist: the immanent world is all there is.

By showing the 'cozened and beguiled' (V.iii.152) Gloucester falling flat on his face, Shakespeare dramatizes, in the words of Kott, 'a parable of universal human fate': the scene at Dover cliff is a 'total situation' in a cosmos where God has died or gone unanswerably missing, so that there is 'nothing' (IV.vi.9) beyond the world which might suffuse life and the suffering it engenders with meaning.[762] The upshot is an interminable imprisonment within immanence, which Kott takes to be metaphorically rendered through the (apparent) impossibility of death in the play. Kott makes the case that, in the Dover cliff scene, Shakespeare portrays a situation where it is not only impossible to 'die bravely' (IV.vi.194) – or tragically – any longer, but even to die *at all*.[763] Kott believes that the impossibility of death in Beckett and *King Lear* witnesses the impossibility of tragedy: where tragedy relies on a metaphysical plane and the possibility of transcendence, even if that possibility is thwarted, absurdism allows no way out of a situation because there is no metaphysical beyond to which protagonists can truly 'call' or aspire.[764] This world is, it seems, all that

[761] *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, pp. 100-133.
[762] Ibid, p. 117.
[763] 'Break heart, I prithee break' (V.iii.329) begs Kent, ostensibly urging Lear to finally die but perhaps also willing his own – ultimately deferred – death.
[764] *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, pp. 130-133.

really exists – an all-encompassing 'immanent barrel' from which *even* the 'out' of death has been cruelly banished.[765]

This reading of *King Lear* has some intriguing parallels with Adorno and his own conception of death in Beckett. Beckett portrays for Adorno the impossibility of transcendence in Auschwitz and post-Auschwitz culture – an imprisonment in immanence. 'Even the experience of death', writes Adorno, 'does not suffice as something final and undoubted, as metaphysics'.[766] Adorno contends that, in the totalized world of Auschwitz, a sort of purgatorial non-existence was created, 'inhabited by living skeletons and putrefying bodies' – perhaps not unlike the 'stinking' and 'rotting' (1:11) body of the terminally ill Ian, who might be said to resemble a sort of *Muselmann*, or walking corpse.[767] Only where Kott seems to accept that 'there is no escape', for Adorno such a stance 'renders absolute the entrapment of human beings by the totality, and so sees no other possibility than to submit'.[768] It is for precisely that reason Adorno seeks to provide a critical space for transcendence by problematizing the usual philosophical distinction between the material and metaphysical.

Few if any dramatists influenced Kane as profoundly as Beckett, so it should hardly be surprising to find that her appropriation of the Dover cliff scene has parallels with the absurdist reading of *King Lear* famously proposed by Kott. In 'The Beckettian World of Sarah Kane', Saunders makes the case that the legacy of Beckett is 'all pervasive' in the plays of Kane, stating that 'from *Blasted* onwards the plays utilize a variety of dramatic techniques that evoke a Beckettian atmosphere', 'manifested through direct or indirect quotation, the

[765] Ibid, p. 111.
[766] *Negative Dialectics*, p. 361.
[767] For more on the figure of the *Muselmann* (or Muslim) and related ideas around bare life, see Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 2002), pp. 41-86.
[768] *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, p. 133; *Metaphysics*, p. 112.

use of pseudo-couples, the recycling of familiar Beckettian imagery and dramatic motifs and the integration of linguistic and rhythmic echoes'.[769] Beckett casts his shadow over *Blasted* and its appropriation of the Dover cliff scene: Saunders notes that, in a reinterpretation of *Endgame* and its famous response to the vexing prospect that God does not exist – 'the bastard', Hamm famously blasphemes (2:119) – the appropriation of the Dover cliff scene ends with Ian calling the God he does not believe exists a 'cunt' (4:57).[770] Kane – herself a lapsed evangelical Christian – deploys a re-versioned take on the Dover cliff scene in *Blasted* to depict a world where any notion of a pure metaphysical beyond has become untenable. This is not to say, however, that Kane is 'rewriting' the Dover cliff scene solely in order to portray an absurdist Beckettian impasse, where there is no metaphysical beyond and death has been rendered impossible by the uninterrupted reign of immanence. Kane appropriates the Dover cliff scene in *Blasted* to set up a philosophically inflected dispute between material (Ian) and metaphysical (Cate) worldviews. She does so to produce a space for the transcendent, tragic freedom that Kott takes to be dispelled in the closed worlds of absurdism. I will now provide a close reading of the appropriated 'cliff' scene in *Blasted*, showing that her appropriation allows Kane to undermine the positions adopted by both Ian and Cate.

3.2. 'A blatant rewrite': The 'Cliff' in *Blasted*

[769] Graham Saunders, 'The Beckettian World of Sarah Kane', *Sarah Kane: In Context*, p. 68.
[770] See '*Love Me or Kill Me*': *Sarah Kane and the Theatre of Extremes*, pp. 59-60.

In her 'rewrite', Kane puts a Chekhovian spin on the Dover cliff scene, replacing the cliff with a misfiring pistol.[771] Shortly after his rape and blinding at the hands of the Soldier, Ian asks a reluctant Cate to find his gun so that he can shoot himself, which Ian thinks of as simply 'speeding up' (4:56) his terminal illness. Cate, however, removes the bullets from the gun (4:54) before passing it to Ian, afterward imputing his 'miraculous' survival to divine intervention:

Ian: End it.
Got to, Cate, I'm ill.
Just speeding it up a bit.
Cate: (*Thinks hard*.)
Ian: Please.
Cate: (*Gives him the gun*.)
Ian: (*Takes the gun and puts it in his mouth*.
He takes it out again.)
Don't stand behind me.

He puts the gun back in his mouth
He pulls the trigger. The gun clicks, empty.
He shoots again. And again and again and again.
He takes the gun out of his mouth.

Ian: Fuck.
Cate: Fate, see. You're not meant to do it. God –
Ian: The cunt. (4:56-57)

This ostensibly 'fateful' turn of events is contrived to prove to Ian that 'It is wrong to kill yourself' (4:54) because, as Cate plaintively puts it, suicide is a sin and 'God would not like it' (4:55). Ian, however, remains as staunchly atheistic as he was before his 'cliff' moment, telling Cate that it is pointless to pray for the baby she brings to the room in the hope that it does not go to 'bad places' because 'it is dead' (4:58) – and so going nowhere. Despite his lingering hope that Cate will pray for him (4:58) – which perhaps says more about his desire

[771] I touch on the significance of the pistol again below.

to be remembered by Cate after his death than it does about a nascent religiosity, typical of his growing neediness in the play – Ian does not progress through his brush with death beyond his previous scepticism, where he treats the notion of God with characteristically derisory scorn:

> **Ian**: There isn't one
> **Cate**: How do you know?
> **Ian**: No God. No Father Christmas. No fairies. No Narnia. No fucking nothing.
> **Cate**: Got to be something.
> **Ian**: Why?
> **Cate**: Doesn't make sense otherwise.
> **Ian**: Don't be fucking stupid, doesn't make sense anyway. No reason for there to be a God just because it'd be better if there was. (4:55)

What the intervening Cate syllogistically proposes to Ian is a theodicy: there has to be 'something' (4:55) to 'make sense' (4:55) of the fallen world and of evil – represented, most urgently, by death – otherwise life is meaningless and irredeemable. Unlike his Shakespearean prototype Gloucester, however, Ian remains stubbornly unconvinced, producing a nihilistic 'nothing' in the face of the 'something' propounded by Cate – a dichotomy that, of course, surfaces time and again in *King Lear*: 'Can you make no use of nothing, Nuncle?' (I.iv.117-118). Ian, not without due cause, declaims that it is 'stupid' (4:55) to believe in a metaphysical world beyond simply because it would be 'better if there was' to redeem life and the world in the present. God is, as far as Ian sees it, no more than a story told to children, keeping the same ontological company as 'fairies' ('Fairies and gods / Prosper it with thee' (IV.vi.29-30) says Gloucester, making the same mystical analogy) and 'Narnia' (4:55).

Ian is convinced that there is no beyond and that, to try and wring some meaning from existence by appealing to 'something' other than the world as it is, is at best misguided

and at worst downright idiotic. It is a view he shares, in part, with Adorno: in words that echo the 'cliff' scenes dramatized in both *King Lear* and *Blasted*, Adorno writes in *Negative Dialectics* that

> if someone who is in despair and wants to kill themselves asks whoever is faithfully trying to persuade them not to do so what the meaning of life is, the helpless helper will be unable to provide him with one; as soon as he tries to, it is to be spurned, the echo of a *consensus omnium* which comes down to the dictum that the emperor needs soldiers.[772]

The fallacious 'dictums' used to try and vindicate life inevitably 'condemns to mockery any conception of a meaning for immanence, a meaning which might radiate from some affirmatively posited transcendence'.[773] The type of metaphysical beyond that Cate posits has patently become untenable, relying on the completely specious reasoning – 'no reason' (4:55) – that there has to be 'something' other than the fallen world because otherwise life would be unlivable, 'condemning' her faith to the 'mockery' of Ian. It also relies on a deliberate sham: it is, after all, Cate herself who removes all the bullets from the pistol, not God.

But at the same time, the strictly materialist stance represented by Ian is equally problematic. 'Everything', Ian confidently pronounces, has 'a scientific explanation' (4:56) – though there is an obvious contradiction between his conviction that 'everything' is scientifically explainable and that the world simply does not 'make sense' (4:55). Even more problematically, by dismissing without hesitation anything outside or beyond the existent material world as 'nothing', Ian inevitably ends up turning the world into nothing less than

[772] *Negative Dialectics*, p. 377.
[773] Ibid, p. 161. This reflects perhaps the most dire charge Adorno lays against metaphysics: that it is 'essentially affirmative', serving to 'excuse rather than uncover and oppose societal evil' (Hammer, 'Metaphysics', p. 68).

'everything'.[774] Ian, in a paradox no doubt lost on him, transforms the world as it is into a metaphysical 'absolute' – the type of permanent, unchangeable and 'final' realm imagined by the metaphysically inclined thinking he ostensibly sets himself against. This, as Adorno recognizes, is the danger inherent in completely abandoning metaphysical thought, which risks irreversibly turning the 'existent into the absolute'. 'Leaving nothing remaining but the merely existent, it recoils into myth, into metaphysics. For it is nothing other than the closed totality of immanence of that which is'.[775] The embodiment of a homogenized rationality, Ian cannot conceptualize *otherness*: his unreflective commitment to identity-thinking means that anything which falls outside of the categories posited by rationalized enlightened thought cannot truly be said to 'exist'. For him, 'what is rational is actual and what is actual is rational'.[776]

But while an otherwise desperate Ian articulates his position with undimmed rhetorical force, he ends up (unknowingly) undermining himself. By inadvertently using the double-negative of 'No […] nothing' (4:55) in his debate with Cate, Ian produces a weakened affirmative, implying there might be something (or at least, not 'nothing') beyond the world as it is – and perhaps even beyond death – after all. The 'no-nothing' inadvertently posited by Ian is clearly not the positively affirmed 'something' propounded by Cate, but it upends his stated conviction that the world he and Cate occupy is 'everything'. It is a negation of a totalized world which appears as 'everything' that also refuses to posit 'something' beyond in the way Cate does – perhaps trying to fortify Ian against suicide, or perhaps cruelly denying him the release which should (but of course, does not) come with death. What may

[774] Lear conceives the loss of the all-encompassing metaphysical authority which should be founded in 'the King himself' (IV.vi.83-84) in a not too dissimilar way, damning the flatterers who told him he was 'everything' (IV.vi.104): ''tis a lie' (IV.vi.104) ruminates Lear, who without his Kingly status begins to resemble 'an O without a figure' (I.iv.178) – a type of embodied 'nothing'.
[775] *Negative Dialectics*, p. 402.
[776] *Outlines for a Philosophy of Right*, p. 14.

lie beyond the world as it is remains in *Blasted* completely open-ended, arising only through the inadvertent – but nonetheless telling – negation of the 'known world'. Adorno writes that 'metaphysics rests in the conception of something which is not' – but 'something which is also *not only* not'.[777]

By reworking the constant allusions to 'something', 'nothing' and 'everything' found in *King Lear*, Kane undermines the material and metaphysical worldviews that are voiced by Ian and Cate. She also echoes the philosophical invocation of 'not-nothing' in *King Lear*. Howard Caygill contends that, in his plays, Shakespeare interrupts the conventional philosophical distinction between being and nothing, so that the question 'To be, or not to be' *(Hamlet*, III.i.56) offers only a limited conception of the way in which Shakespeare thinks about ontology. Caygill notes that 'Shakespeare often "negates the negation", but does so *without* arriving at an "affirmation of being"'.[778] He writes that Shakespeare typically makes 'nothing' substantive, speaking of it as it had its own peculiar 'being' ('Edgar I nothing am' (II.iii.21) – the contorted, negatively exilic ontology that so preoccupies Rudkin – is a prime evocation of that principle in *King Lear*) and plays (not unlike Kane) with 'double-negations' that leave 'both something and nothing suspended'.[779] It is, contends Caygill, patently not right for Lear to declare that 'nothing will come of nothing' (I.i.90); however, in *King Lear* the 'negation of the negation has no definite result', so that the 'monster of nothing' is a type of '*not nothing*', the 'impossible and perhaps even unthinkable state of a nothing that is something'.[780]

[777] *Negative Dialectics*, p. 396.
[778] Howard Caygill, 'Shakespeare's Monster of Nothing', *Philosophical Shakespeares*, ed. John Joughin (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 105.
[779] Ibid, p. 108.
[780] Ibid.

Despite his perspicacious reading, Caygill – perplexingly – does not refer to Adorno, choosing to bring Shakespeare into a philosophical dialogue with Hegel and Heidegger. But his analysis of the something-nothing of Shakespearean drama might indicate a deep homology between the 'performative evocation of not-nothing' in Shakespeare and the negative dialectics proposed by Adorno, which does not imagine a positive 'something' arising from the 'negation of the negation', but retains a sense of openness – or non-identity, as Adorno calls it.[781] The type of negative dialectical philosophy Adorno proposes does not terminate in a positively affirmed and identifiable 'something'; instead, it results in precisely the same species of indefinite 'not-nothing' that Caygill sees Shakespeare invoking in *King Lear*.

By invoking the 'not-nothing' of *King Lear*, Ian raises the open-ended prospect of something other than the world as it stands, adumbrating the possibility that reality itself is not as enveloping as it might seem – and can even be transcended. Far from settling on a final perspective, the appropriation of Dover cliff in *Blasted* leaves both metaphysical and materialist worldviews destabilized. This lays the ground for the transformed understanding of the metaphysical and material – and the possibility of ephemeral life – in Scene Five of *Blasted*. It is to Scene Five that I now turn, with its uncanny image of the simultaneously dead and alive Ian.

4. 'Thought you were dead': Death in *Blasted* and *King Lear*

4.1. Death in *Blasted*: Metaphysical or Material?

[781] Ibid, p. 105.

The tension between metaphysics (Cate) and materialism (Ian) in *Blasted* revolves around the question of whether or not there is 'life' after death. This is a question that runs throughout the whole action of the play and may even be considered its most enduring theme. From the outset, Ian is in no doubt as to the irresolvable negativity of death, which in his Hamlet-like belief that the fundamental ontological 'question' is 'To be, or not to be' (III.i.56), he calls 'not being': 'Death. Not being' (1:10). Ian, in words that will come back to haunt him, tells Cate that it is not possible to 'die and come back. That's not dying, it's fainting. When you die, it's the end' (4:56). Ian reiterates his belief (or rather, his unbelief) in the face of opposition, telling Cate he has 'seen dead people': 'They're not somewhere else, they're dead' (4:55).

Ian is in little doubt that corpses are no more than 'dead meat' (1:9) – or as Lear puts it, 'dead and rotten' (V.iii.283). Cate, however, resists his scepticism, making the case for God – 'I believe in God' (4:55) – and for another life in the beyond. 'People who've died and come back say they've seen tunnels and lights' (4:55-56). Cate also likens her fits – which, as I will contend in the penultimate section, resemble the 'undead' state of Ian – to the experience of death and 'waking up' in the afterlife: 'You fall asleep and then you wake up' (1:10). Cate does have moments of doubt – as when she prays for the dead baby 'in case' (5:58) and tells Ian it is pointless to pray for him (5:58) – but, for the most part, she is convinced that death is a transition to 'better places' (1:3) beyond the 'bad places' (5:58) of the fallen world.

Once again, however, the play complicates both positions. At the end of *Blasted*, Ian is depicted in a series of *tableaux*-like moments, as, fleetingly illuminated by flashes of light that interrupt a prevailing darkness, he is seen masturbating, defecating, sleeping and suffering from a nightmare, trying (once again) to commit suicide, hugging the corpse of the

dead Soldier for warmth and comfort and, finally, cannibalizing the infant brought into the remnants of the hotel by Cate – perhaps not unlike the 'barbarous Scythian' of *King Lear*, who 'makes his generation messes / To gorge his appetite' (I.i.117-119). This series ends with the final death of Ian; however, while he does not ascend to a pure and immutable Christian beyond, death is also far from the unqualified 'end' Ian imagined. Ian dies at the end of *Blasted*, but the demise of his material body is not the wholly negative state it should be:

> *A beat, then he climbs in after it* [the baby] *and lies down, his head poking out of the floor.*
>
> *He dies with relief.*
>
> *It starts to rain on him, coming through the roof.*
>
> *Eventually*
>
> **Ian**: Shit. (5:60)

Ian (Pip Donaghy), dead and alive. 1995 Royal Court Upstairs, dir. James McDonald. Photograph: Tristram Kenton.

The audience might be forgiven for saying, as Ian does to Cate: 'Thought you were dead' (1:10).

This strange moment – and the scenes of degradation that precede it, where Ian is depicted in various states of physical 'wretchedness' (*King Lear*, IV.vi.61) – has attracted sustained critical attention. Readings have tended to fall into distinct camps: humanist interpretations (Greig, Saunders) and absurdist interpretations (Carney, Soncini, Rabey, Gritzner). Both tend to read *Blasted* intertextually by interpreting its final scene through the prism of other playwrights – most notably Shakespeare and Beckett. For both David Greig and Graham Saunders, Kane depicts 'Shakespearean anatomy' of 'a reduced man', akin to 'Lear on the heath and Timon in his cave'.[782] Ian is able to rediscover his otherwise 'lost' humanity through his suffering, becoming for Greig 'a human being, weeping, shitting, lonely, broken, dying and, in the final moments of the play, comforted'.[783] Saunders similarly contends that – not unlike his intertextual forebear Lear – Ian undergoes a 'painful journey' towards 'self-awareness', turning from 'perpetrator' and 'bystander' into 'victim' (*4.48 Psychosis*, 231).[784]

The other trend in Kane criticism has been to read the final image of the undead Ian through the prism of Beckettian absurdism – most obviously the image of Winnie in *Happy Days*, who is buried up to her neck, and Nag and Nell in *Endgame*, whose heads pop intermittently out of the barrels (the Kottian immanent 'barrel') the pair are interred in. Sean Carney contends that *Blasted* 'resembles the tragedy of the absurd', as by failing to die – 'Away, and let me die' (*King Lear*, IV.vi.48) – Ian embodies the impossibility of metaphysical transcendence.[785] The same point is made by Sara Soncini, who refers to the 'unmistakable visual quotation' of the (quite literally) earth-bound Winnie in *Happy Days*,

[782] David Greig, 'Introduction' to *Complete Plays*, p. x.
[783] Ibid.
[784] '*Love Me Or Kill Me'*, p. 68.
[785] Sean Carney, 'The Tragedy of History in Sarah Kane's *Blasted*', *Theatre Survey*, 46:2 (2005), p. 283.

and Gritzner, who contends that *Blasted* ends in 'a Beckettian domain'.[786] David Ian Rabey similarly states that the final image of the undead Ian is a 'mockery of desecrated absolutes' and 'a *tour de force* of the tragedy of the grotesque', with its total denial of metaphysical transcendence.[787]

The problem is that critics are relying on conceptual categories which the play *itself* is challenging and deconstructing. The absurdist take on the play relies on a philosophical distinction between the material and the metaphysical to insist that Ian remains interred within a totalized immanence, while humanist readings ignore the way the dead-alive Ian challenges the material limits of the human. Both miss that Kane provides a philosophical 'frame' through which to interpret the image of the undead Ian in her appropriation of Dover 'cliff', which destabilizes the inherited distinction between the metaphysical and material.

Through its final image of the 'undead' Ian, *Blasted* precludes the possibility of forming a simple dichotomy between the material and the metaphysical, the 'here-and-now' and the beyond. Ian is at once dead and alive, 'in' the material world, and yet also metaphysically 'out' of it, a position that is both transcendent and experiential. The material and the metaphysical is not an either/or in *Blasted*, but a both/and. Ian attains a type of transcendence that, at the same time, reflects the totalized immanence of the material world. His sudden return to life and presence in negation is a powerful moment of Adornian ephemeral life.

It would be hard to overstate the status of the image of the undead Ian to *Blasted*. The image, as Carney has also shown, has even come to metonymically 'stand' for *Blasted*

[786] Sara Soncini, '"A horror so deep only ritual can contain it": The Art of Dying in the Theatre of Sarah Kane', *Other Modernities*, 4:10 (2010), p. 123; '(Post)Modern Subjectivity and the New Expressionism', p. 335.
[787] David Ian Rabey, *English Drama Since 1940* (London: Longman, 2003), p. 205.

itself, often being used to identify or promote the play: it is the front cover of the original Methuen edition of the play; it appears in the 'defence' mounted by James McDonald in *The Independent*; it is on the front cover of the *Blasted* edition of the *Modern Theatre Guide*; it is printed (along with other images) with the play in *Theater*; and it featured in promotional material for the 2001 Royal Court staging.[788] It is an image that might be said to embody the unique 'rationale' at work in the play, which in the suspension of conventional notions of a metaphysical beyond, pushes towards the conception of a material/immanent transcendence.

Critics have tended to read *Blasted* intertextually, but, by analysing death in *King Lear*, I want to show that the strange moment where Ian dies but also simply continues living has parallels with the '"now dead, now alive"' pattern – as Booth calls it – found in *King Lear*.[789] I demonstrate the parallels between the plays to show that, in its violation of death, or 'the end', *Blasted* shares with *King Lear* a Catastrophist violation of aesthetic and generic closure.

4.2. Dying 'Indeed': Death in *King Lear*

For some critics, *King Lear* is a play that dramatizes the 'futility' of 'escape from Being through death', where the apparent inability of characters to 'Fall, and cease' (V.iii.262) is symptomatic of the impossibility of transcending a prevailing immanence. [790] Sean Lawrence states that Shakespeare portrays a world where death is (often permanently) deferred. *King Lear* depicts for Lawrence nothing short of the 'horrifying tragedy of inescapable being' – a

[788] 'The Tragedy of History', p. 277. Carney only cites the original Methuen edition and the 2001 restaging, but his point – as I have shown – can be extended to other appearances.
[789] *King Lear, Macbeth, Indefinition and Tragedy*, p. 34.
[790] Sean Lawrence, 'The Difficulty of Dying in *King Lear*', *English Studies in Canada*, 31:4 (2005), p. 37.

reading that might align the play more closely with absurdism than with the 'tragedy' posited by Lawrence.[791] It is a (somewhat nihilistic) reading shared by Joseph Wittreich and Frank Kermode, who makes the case that *King Lear* depicts the 'tragedy of sempiternity', where 'everything tends toward a conclusion that does not occur' and 'even personal death is terribly delayed'.[792]

Such readings can broadly be said to conform to the Kottian reading of *King Lear*, where the impossibility of death speaks to the impossibility of transcending immanence, of going beyond the world as it is. Yet the ostensible impossibility of death in *King Lear* can be – and has been – overstated. It is not that death has become impossible; instead, the play dramatizes the apparent impossibility of determining *the distinction* between death and life, being and not being. This is apparent in the 'resurrection' of Gloucester after his 'fall' from Dover cliff; the flickering uncertainty about the final state of Lear; and, perhaps most pressingly, the ambiguity surrounding the untimely 'death' (or otherwise) of Cordelia at the end of the play.

Gloucester 'revives' (IV.vi.47) after (apparently) plummeting from the top of Dover cliff; yet there is some question as to whether Gloucester really might have died in his 'fall'. 'Alive or dead?' (IV.vi.44-45) wonders Edgar with shocking impassiveness, as he looks down on his father, concerned that his 'conceit' (IV.vi.42) of the cliff face may have been so convincing that it might have robbed the 'treasury of life' (IV.vi.43). 'Gone, sir; farewell' (IV.vi.42) remarks Edgar after Gloucester falls, seemingly moving 'off' (IV.vi.30) as his father demands but perhaps also anticipating that Gloucester may 'pass indeed' (IV.vi.47). The word 'indeed' is both an intensifier and a metatheatrical pun ('in-deed'): on the one hand, it

[791] Ibid, p. 41.
[792] Joseph Wittreich, *'Image of that horror': History, Prophecy, and Apocalypse in King Lear* (San Marino, CA: Huntington Library, 1984), p. 101. Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 82.

indicates that Gloucester really may have died; on the other hand, it indicates that death in the theatre is and can only ever be in-deed – that is, a performance, a point I touch on again below.

The same ambiguity occurs in the final moment of the play, where Lear finally dies. Or does he? 'O he is gone indeed' (V.iii.314) laments Edgar, repeating the same pun on 'indeed' and insinuating doubt about the death: 'Vex not his ghost' (V.iii.331). Edgar even believes that Lear only 'faints' (V.iii.310) – aligning his death to the fit-induced 'fainting' (1:9) that afflicts Cate in *Blasted*, a state that she compares to death. Kent tells Edgar to let Lear 'pass' (V.iii.312) but, by using the present tense, Kent only throws more doubt on the death of Lear: has Lear passed, or is he still passing? What is the distinction? In the Folio, the stage direction '*He dies*' occurs after Lear insists that those few survivors gathered around him 'look' to Cordelia; yet in the Quarto, no stage direction occurs, leaving the question of precisely when (if?) Lear dies potentially open to question (the 'O, o, o, o' (V.iii.309) of the Quarto is, as R.A. Foakes writes, traditionally understood to be a dying groan, though it does not have to be).[793]

The most intense ontological scrutiny falls on Cordelia, who seems – at least to Lear – to float precariously between the states of life and death, even putting into question whether these ostensibly distinct states can ever be finally and absolutely distinguished. 'I know when one is dead and when one lives. / She is dead as earth' (V.iii.274-275) howls (V.iii.270) Lear in the crushing finale to the play; and yet, Lear instantly undermines his own certainty with the hope that Cordelia still 'lives': 'Lend me a looking-glass. / If that her breath will mist or stain the stone, / Why then, she lives' (V.iii.275-277). The ontological uncertainty surrounding Cordelia is, of course, a famed aspect of *King Lear*; yet the apparent

[793] R.A. Foakes, 'The Reshaping of *King Lear*', *King Lear: New Critical Essays*, p. 114.

unknowability – at least to Lear – of her final state is a single moment amongst many where the question of whether a character is dead or alive remains disconcertingly open to interpretation.

This 'now-dead, now-alive' pattern is literalized at the end of *Blasted*. Kane appropriates the uncanny states somewhere between dead and alive in *King Lear*, where a dead character seemingly 'returns' to life or does not quite finally and fully 'die', hovering between the world and the beyond in the (often rapturous) moment of 'passing'. She does so to produce a moment of ephemerality that places a world of totalized immanence into question. This ideational kinship between *King Lear* and the final image of Ian in his contradicted dead-alive state is also evidenced by the visual parallels between *Blasted* and the 1993 Max Stafford-Clark production of *King Lear* at the Royal Court (where Kane was already working by 1993). This production, as various critics noted at the time, visually echoed the Bosnian War, with its *Blasted*-like images of gun-toting soldiers, brutalizing the 'poor naked wretches' Lear prays to.[794] The production also included a character buried up to his neck – Kent, when he is put in the stocks by the 'fiery' (II.ii.281) Duke of Cornwall and Regan:

Kent (Philip Jackson) in the stocks. 1993 Royal Court, dir. Max Stafford-Clark. Photograph: Peter Hartwell.

[794] See *Performing King Lear*, pp. 178-180.

The image has obvious resonances with the end of *Blasted*. It is a speculative point, but it is almost as if Kane amalgamates the image of the partially buried Kent with the recurrent images of dead-and-alive characters in *King Lear* at the end of *Blasted*, to produce her vision of ephemerality.

By denying the finality of death, both Shakespeare and Kane resist positing a final 'status', allowing the dialectic between discrete states (dead or alive) to remain open-ended – in other words, a negative dialectic. The ostensible 'death' of Ian is inherently ambiguous and refuses definitive interpretive closure; but it also, I want to contend, refuses conventional *aesthetic* closure. If in the final moments of *Blasted* Kane produce a 'negative' dialectic, her theatrical aesthetic can be thought of as structurally homologous with the Theatre of Catastrophe. It is the fragmentary form of *Blasted* that I consider in the next section.

4.3. Death and the Theatre of Catastrophe

Ken Urban notes that, not unlike Barker, Kane does not provide any sense of formal 'resolution' in her plays. By 'dramatizing moments where comfortable designations break down and everything must be rethought' – as in the strange 'death' of Ian, which seems to suspend the 'comfortable designations' of life and death – Kane 'literally recasts dramatic form', obliterating the usual generic criterion by which a play may be interpreted.[795] Kane was deeply indebted to Beckett, but she also cites Barker as having a profound influence on her conception of form, and even drew parallels between Shakespeare and Barker, who she

[795] Ken Urban, 'An Ethics of Catastrophe: The Theatre of Sarah Kane', *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*, 23:3 (2001), p. 46 and p. 40.

called 'the Shakespeare of our age' (Kane also played Bradshaw in a student production of the 1983 Barker play *Victory*, while studying at Bristol University).[796] *Blasted* shares with Catastrophist form the violation of tragic closure, aligning the play with both Barker and *King Lear*.

One of the ways in which *King Lear* suspends aesthetic closure is by suspending 'the promised end' (V.iii.261) of death, which, as I have shown, is never quite as definitive – never quite as final – as it appears to be. The same is obviously true of *Blasted*: Kane appropriates the irresolvable tension about 'when one is dead'/ 'when one lives' to push beyond the containment of generic closure, where tragedy typically ends in death.[797] Ian, in his contradictory state, is both in and out of the totality; but he is also both in and out of conventional tragic aesthetics. This liminal position testifies to the way in which Ian preserves a form of (tragic) autonomy – freedom. Ian is not finally bounded by the social totality. Neither is he finally bounded by the (deathly) closure of aesthetic form. This aligns Ian with both the Lear(s) of *Seven Lears* and the figure of Shakespeare/Edgar in *Will's Way*: all finally outstrip generic closure and, in the process, retain the possibility of subjective freedom.

In Chapters Five and Six, I demonstrated the way in which sudden, performative 'turns' serve to violate both narrative progression and formal closure, opening the space for subjective autonomy. Ian, however, is immobilized in a makeshift grave, so that an actor is not necessarily able to embody the type of Catastrophic turn seen in Rudkin and Barker (which leads some critics to align Kane with the incapacitated subjectivities of absurdism).

[796] Kane described playing in Barker as 'an unusually brilliant experience': 'I think I loved him all the more because none of the teaching staff seemed to share my enthusiasm'. Quoted in Aleks Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), p. 91.
[797] The preternatural 'survival' of the Bishop in *Seven Lears* is another point of comparison.

Nevertheless, I would make the case that his sudden return (re-turn) to life still inheres to the idea of the Catastrophic 'turn'. It is an abrupt turn in events that violates narrative development, where from the outset Ian is terminally ill and so 'dying', and the possibility of aesthetic closure.

The indeterminacy is only amplified in performance. Unlike the play-script, which provides the stage direction '*He dies*', without some change in the *mise-en-scène* it is not necessarily the case that a theatre audience will comprehend that Ian has died. What– precisely – has happened to Ian is inherently ambiguous in performance. In his analysis of the 2001 revival of *Blasted* at the Royal Court, Urban remarks that the actor playing Ian let out a final Lear-esque ('O, o, o, o') groan, 'as if he was finally passing on, but nothing in the physical reality of the space – the lighting, sound or set – connoted a transition from one world to another'.[798] The performance provided no obvious illustrative shift through which to interpret the apparent 'death' of Ian. What has happened to him remained completely open-ended.

Part of the way in which *Blasted* achieves its formal openness is by constantly undermining its own theatrical illusion, so opening up the dialectical tension between sign and substance, showing and being, illusion and reality that shapes theatrical space. By having Ian preternaturally 'survive' his own end, *Blasted* suspends its own verisimilar play-world, undermining the representation of a 'realistic' theatrical death. Kane is drawing attention to the way in which death in the theatre can only ever be, as Edgar says in *King Lear*, 'an image of that horror' (V.iii.262). The same has been said of *King Lear* and its

[798] Quoted in '"A horror so deep"', p. 124.

interrupted deaths, which self-reflexively dramatize the 'foundational impossibility' of death in theatre.[799]

This obviously ties the death and resurrection of Ian to the catastrophic bomb blast that shatters the realistic setting of *Blasted*, which begins in the recognizable and realistic theatrical space of a hotel room, but ends up fragmenting beyond recognition. The choice of a pistol in *Blasted* is also revealing. Shakespeare critics have been drawn to the Dover cliff scene because of the way it problematizes early modern conventions of stage space and representation. By verbalizing the scene from a clifftop, Edgar is providing a piece of rhetorical 'scene-painting' in order to elaborate the unadorned, flat space of the early modern stage into a realistic narrative illusion.[800] This space is shown to be a chimera. But, for Kott,

> In the naturalistic theatre one can perform a murder scene, or a scene of terror. The shot may be fired from a revolver or a toy pistol. But in mime there is no difference between a revolver and a toy pistol: in fact neither exists. Like death, the shot is only a performance, a parable, a symbol.[801]

By having Ian repeatedly fire his ammunition-less pistol, Kane subtly draws attention to the purely symbolic nature of stage space, in the same fashion as Shakespeare with his 'cliff-face'.

Perhaps most critically, the final image of the undead Ian also has parallels with the fits which Cate intermittently suffers from – fits she memorably likens to death. The fits that disturb Cate throughout the opening scenes of the play also suspend 'normal' material reality, showing the world that Cate (and Ian) usually inhabit to be provisional and

[799] *Poor Tom*, p. 238.
[800] See also Jonathan Goldberg, 'Perspectives: Dover Cliff and the Conditions of Representation', *King Lear: Contemporary Critical Essay*, pp. 145-157
[801] *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, p. 116.

contingent, not absolute. Such fits mirror the way an audience experiences *Blasted*, which by constantly undermining its own representation of a 'realistic' dramatic world brings the ostensible integrity of reality itself into question. I want finally to show that, by disrupting its own artistic semblance of reality, *Blasted* precipitates the (fit-like) aesthetic affect Adorno calls the shudder.

5. Fits and Shudders: Formalizing Ephemeral Life

The way in which Ian dies before being (inexplicably) resurrected finds a parallel in the deathly fits that Cate suffers from whenever she is put under duress. These fits represent a transcendent experience that is at once material and metaphysical, in time and space but also beyond it: 'Don't know much about it, I just go. Feels like I am away for minutes or months sometimes, then I come back just where I was' (1:10). Cate likens her fits to the experience of dying and resurrection in the afterlife – though of course she, like Ian, does not ascend to heaven but ends up 'just where I was': 'You fall asleep and then you wake up' (1:10).[802]

Cate also draws a parallel between her fit-induced state and the deathly self-loss precipitated by ecstatic *jouissance* – which is in sharp relief to the shallow and unfulfilling 'enjoyment' the terminally ill Ian claims he finds in gin and cigarettes, an enjoyment which is spatially and temporally constricted to the 'here-and-now' ('Enjoy myself', states Ian, 'while I am *here*' (1:12; italics added)). When Ian tells Cate that she takes him to 'another place', Cate – uninterested in his advances – responds: 'It's like that when I have a fit' (1:22) and

[802] These fits resemble the 'tranced' (V.iii.217) state in which Edgar says he leaves Kent, where 'the strings of life / Began to crack' (V.iii.215-216).

when she 'touches' herself: 'Just before I am wondering what it'll be like, and just after I am thinking about the next one, but just as it happens it's lovely, I don't think of nothing else' (1:23). [803]

Her fits and *jouissance* endow Cate with a kind of negative existence somewhere between being and not being: 'I am not, I am not' (1:9). Cate is fighting back against Ian and his belittling insults about her being 'stupid' (1:8), but the contradictory declaration of being ('I am') and not being ('not') might also reflect her conflicted ontological status – the same status Ian occupies when he is both alive ('I am') and dead ('I am not): 'I am, I am not' (1:8). In her most expansive insight on her fits, Cate reproduces the same contradiction between 'being' and 'not being', telling Ian that the world appears 'the same', but that it is also negated:

> The world don't exist, not like this.
> Looks the same but –
> Time slows down
> A dream I get stuck in, can't do nothing about it (1:22)

The world 'is' but also 'is not': the fits that Cate suffers from happen in the world but also take her out of it, so while the world 'looks the same' it is also radically (if temporarily) negated: 'The world don't exist / not like this' (1:22). Through her deathly fits, Cate undergoes a transcendent experience that, by transitorily taking her beyond everyday quotidian reality, suddenly brings the solid self-evidence of that reality into question: 'That was real?' (1:9). Kane observes that, with the bomb blast that rips through the hotel room, *Blasted* formally 'degenerates' into a Cate-like 'fit', where normal reality is (violently)

[803] By contrast, the 'Scouse tart' whom Ian condemns for 'spreading her legs' is 'not worth the space' (1:13).

negated and 'don't exist, not like this'.[804] This negation of conventional stage space serves to self-reflexively deconstruct 'reality' and forms a space for ephemeral life. It is not simply that Kane wants to portray the ephemeral transcendence of reality in *Blasted*; it is also part of its intended *affect*.

Adorno, as I set out in Chapter One, uses the phrase 'the shudder' to capture his conception of aesthetic response.[805] The shudder, as Adorno perceives it, is intimately related to transcendence, to ephemeral life. By virtue of the shudder the subject is (momentarily, but ecstatically) shifted out of a totalized social world, gaining a semblance of freedom. Such affect is, for Adorno, precipitated by works of art that are formally inharmonious.

Kane draws on a modernist aesthetics of fragmentariness, indeterminacy and ambiguity in order to precipitate something akin to the type of transcendent, metaphysical experience that Adorno relates to the shudder. This – as with the other playwrights under study – is not something Kane necessarily substantiates. Her conception of aesthetic response is an ideal, not a consistently realized reality. But it obviously fits with her political conception of late capitalist totality and its denial of autonomy. Kane strives to empower a subject, dimly imprisoned in the socially sanctioned intuition that the world is all there is, to conceive of the idea of something more than the existent, beyond the totalized 'immediacy of the "reality principle"'.[806] She does so, as I have shown, by appropriating Shakespeare and *King Lear*.

[804] Quoted in *Love Me Or Kill Me*, p. 48.
[805] See Chapter One, p. 85.
[806] *Negative Dialectics*, p. 397.

Conclusion

This chapter has analysed the appropriation of *King Lear* in *Blasted*. I have shown that Kane appropriates the infamous Dover cliff scene from *King Lear* in Scene Four of *Blasted* in order to interrogate the unbroken immanence of late capitalist society, which has become as pervasive as to have taken on the guise of a 'metaphysical' absolute. This appropriation evinces a concern with the crisis of subjectivity at the so-called end of history, where the subject is pinioned within the totality of post-Auschwitz culture in a way that compromises freedom. I have also shown that Kane, by problematizing conventional metaphysical and materialist positions in a way that has parallels with Adorno, re-forges the possibility of transcendence. I have also analysed the final scene of the play and made the case that the strange moment in which Ian dies but also ostensibly 'returns' to life can be seen as a moment of ephemeral life – a form of material transcendence. This 'now dead, now alive' pattern self-reflexively draws attention to the type of bifurcated presence that is unique to stage space, pointing to the representational dichotomy of sign (death) and substance (the still living body of performer) that informs the theatrical aesthetic. It does so, I have contended, to formalize ephemerality and produce the 'aesthetic comportment' Adorno calls the shudder.

My chosen case studies analysed, I turn now to provide a conclusion to the thesis. This will be split into a postscript, in which I consider the legacy of Catastrophe post-1997, before I give a conclusion to the thesis as whole, in which I state the significance, and originality, of the research I have undertaken into Catastrophist appropriations of *King Lear* 'after' Auschwitz.

Conclusion

'The current amazement that the things we are experiencing are "still" possible in the twentieth century is *not* philosophical. This amazement is not the beginning of knowledge — unless it is the knowledge that the view of history which gives rise to it is untenable' – Walter Benjamin.[807]

1. Catastrophist Legacies

Drawing on Benjamin, Adorno insists that any study of the past forms a constellation with the present in which it is re-memorialized.[808] This research has taken place against the backdrop of an increasingly catastrophic age, from climate change and the destruction of the natural environment to refugee crises caused by conflicts on a scale which have not been seen since the Second World War. Perhaps most concerning is a resurgent far-right, which has taken hold not only in Europe and America, but also other parts of the world. Since the economic dislocation of 2008 and the so-called credit crunch, late global capitalism has taken an alarmingly fascistic turn – cueing the type of un-philosophical amazement that 'such things are "still" possible', not only in the twentieth century, but also the twenty first.[809]

Jean-Luc Nancy, drawing on Adorno, contends in his *After Fukushima: The Equivalence of Catastrophes*, that 'the general equivalence' rendered by the commodity-form has now absorbed 'all the spheres of the existence of humans, and along with them all

[807] Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Ardent (London: Pimlico, 1999) p. 249.
[808] For more on the constellation and Benjamin, see Steven Helmling, 'Constellation and Critique: Adorno's Constellation, Benjamin's Dialectical Image', *Postmodern Culture* 14:1 (2003), pp. 32-47.
[809] For an analysis of the recent 'post-truth' phenomenon, see my forthcoming '"'Retailed to All Posterity": "Post-Truth", Oral History and the Popular Voice in *Richard III*'.

things that exist'.[810] The Fukushima disaster – which is a geological, biological, social, economic, and political disaster – reveals that 'the interdependent totality of our rationalized world' is a world of human creation and at the same time 'a world to which virtually all beings are entirely subjected'.[811] My analysis of *King Lear* 'after' Auschwitz has comprised the period from 1939-1997, from the outbreak of the Second World War to the election of New Labour, which I take to represent the hegemonic victory of late capitalist ideology. I have shown that Catastrophism can be understood as a response to late capitalist culture, which represents the global totalization of capitalist society and the reification of ever more inclusive areas of human life. This, however, brings up a final question. Late capitalist dynamics, as Nancy observes, have only intensified in recent times – often with catastrophic (and fascistic) outcomes for humanity. What then is the legacy of Catastrophism? By way of a postscript, I want briefly to consider the 1999 play *Five Day Lear*, by the Sheffield-based company Forced Entertainment, and the 2010 Dennis Kelly play *The Gods Weep*.

1.1. *Five Day Lear*

Five Day Lear was performed for the first (and last) time in early 1999 at the Lantern Theatre, Sheffield, the work of perhaps the best-known experimental performance company in the UK – Forced Entertainment, founded in Sheffield in 1984 by Tim Etchells.[812] The

[810] Jean-Luc Nancy, *After Fukushima: The Equivalence of Catastrophes* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), p. 5.
[811] Ibid, p. 31.
[812] For a history of Forced Entertainment, see Patricia Benecke, 'The Making of…From the Beginnings to *Hidden J*', *Not Even a Game Anymore: The Theatre of Forced Entertainment*, ed. Judith Hemler and Florian Malzacher

project involved a week-long workshop on the play, which culminated in a 40-minute long video, called *Mark Does Lear*, where Etchells had his brother Mark try and re-tell the plot of *King Lear*, and the performance of *Five Day Lear* itself. The aim of the workshops – and the final performance – was, as Etchells remarks, to reduce *King Lear* 'to rubble', to pound the play into a state of ruination and see if anything 'new and strange and beautiful' emerged from the 'devastation'.[813] The play took the form of a staged reading where fragments from the play were enacted, interrupted and played over again in various discontinuous ways, interspersed with video cuts and audio recordings from the abridged, 1962 BBC radio version of *King Lear* from the 'Living Shakespeare' series – the same year as the Brook production.[814]

Forced Entertainment have often been viewed as pioneers of a non-text-based, post-dramatic theatre form, which eschews an original text for a more open-ended and intertextual approach to performance, where various found materials intertwine with allusions to canonical plays and fragments from a constantly shifting consumer and media culture.[815] It is an aesthetic which has often been aligned with postmodernism, where there is nothing to be found in a performance that is not 'a quotation of something else'.[816] *Five Day Lear* is unusual in that it represents a sustained engagement with (and appropriation of) a single (Shakespearean, no less) text. But the fractured and fragmented aesthetic of *Five Day Lear* – along with a wider discourse around ruins, rubble, and devastation – also has obvious overlaps with the late modernism of Adorno and his conception of a post-Auschwitz

(Berlin: Alexander Verlag, 2012), pp. 27-50. This analysis is indebted to Robert Shaughnessy and his *The Shakespeare Effect*: *A History of Twentieth Century Performance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), pp. 182-193. Shaughnessy was present at the only performance of the play.

[813] *The Shakespeare Effect*, p. 188.

[814] Ibid, p. 187.

[815] This – at least – is the interpretation provided by Lehmann in his *Postdramatic Theatre*. See pp. 1-12.

[816] Quoted in *The Shakespeare Effect*, p. 183.

aesthetic of catastrophe, whereby *King Lear* is appropriated for the purposes of a writing of the ruins.

The idea of reducing *King Lear* to a state of ruination so that something 'new' may emerge has obvious resonances with the intertextual poetics of Barker, who similarly sets out to 'desecrate' the play – though he does so as a paradoxical act of 'reverence'. The idea can also be found in the work of Rudkin, whose conceptualization of subjectivity and authorship relies on the idea and aesthetics of catastrophe. But most of all, *Five Day Lear* shares its Catastrophist aesthetic form and its historical concerns with Kane. Robert Shaughnessy writes that the relationship between *King Lear* and *Five Day Lear* should be seen 'in terms of bombing and being bombed'.[817] The play, which had its single performance on 9 April 1999, took place at the end of a fortnight of NATO bombing in the former Yugoslavia, in a conflict that involved the ethnic-cleansing of Albanian Kosovans.[818] Forced Entertainment had turned to *King Lear* at a time when Europe had (once again) lurched into a genocidal ethnic war, the violent shudders of the same conflict that had inspired Kane to appropriate *King Lear*.

During the action of *Five Day Lear*, allusions were often made to the conflict, the scale of collateral civilian casualties and 'the refugee crisis' which it had provoked.[819] Near the end of the performance, the performers gave a halting 'update' on the plight of the refugees:

[817] *The Shakespeare Effect,* p. 188.
[818] See Judith Armatta, *Twilight of Impunity: The War Crimes Trial of Slobodan Milosevic* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010).
[819] Quoted in *The Shakespeare Effect*, p. 192.

> Forty thousand refugees have gone missing. Thirteen thousand of them are reported to … be … fine. Ten thousand of them are still … it is still unknown … of their whereabouts … The United States will take – [820]

The performance ended with the final speech from *King Lear* while, in the background, the video shifted to a bloodied Gloucester, silently mouthing the words. Finally – 'from beneath the rubble of the play' – the sound of a baby crying was heard.[821] It was an ambiguous *dénouement* that at once signified suffering innocence and the possibility of hope. *Five Day Lear* was left somewhere between nihilistic despair ('We came crying hither') and a more Christian-humanist interpretation of *King Lear* that insists on the redemptive possibility of new life.

1.2. *The Gods Weep*

The Gods Weep, staged in 2010 at Hampstead Theatre, sought to provide a macro-view of the capitalist process and its impact on subjects – a view obviously inspired by the worldwide economic crash of 2008.[822] The play itself is a wholesale rewrite of *King Lear* which takes place over Three Acts.[823] In the play, Lear is transformed into Colm (played originally by Jeremy Irons) – the founder and CEO of a vast international company. In Act One, Colm reveals his decision to step down – but to keep the title of 'Chairman', splitting the power and duties of the CEO between his mutually antagonistic subordinates, Richard

[820] Ibid.
[821] Ibid, p. 193.
[822] RSC Interview with Dennis Kelly, 'Dennis Kelly talks about *The Gods Weep*', *YouTube*. Accessed 4 February 2018 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vnpdWgsV5CI
[823] Dennis Kelly, *The Gods Weep* (London: Oberon, 2010). All references are to the single Oberon edition, which I refer to with act and page numbers.

and Catherine. Colm also states his intention to retain control of Belize, where the company is involved in 'food security' (1:35) – which entails leasing out the fertile farmland found in the country to Western nations.[824] The plan is scuppered by Jimmy – the wastrel son of Colm – and undermined by both Richard and Catherine who, disgusted to find that Colm intends to use his control of Belize to sell produce back to the local population at a reduced rate, plan to seize control of the country. The united front presented by Richard and Catherine does not last, however, with an Astrologer prophesying the company is 'going to war' (1:37).

This prophesy of infighting comes literally – and bloodily – to pass at the start of Act Two, as the battle between Richard and Catherine degenerates, without warning, into a civil war fought over an indeterminate territory, with Nazi-type war-crimes committed by both camps. While the rival factions destroy each other, an increasingly demented Colm finds refuge living in anti-pastoral isolation with Barbara, the daughter of a man he once ruthlessly destroyed. Over the course of Act Three, Colm and Barbara scrap a subsidence life, while Colm holds out hope that his suffering might deliver 'absolution' (3:172). At the end of the play, Barbara is suddenly shot, as Jimmy – who seems to have prevailed in the war – comes to find and 'rescue' Colm. Jimmy tries to address himself to Colm and enact reconciliation, but Colm has been left totally 'broken': 'We should put him out of his misery' (3:180).

For the most part, the play met with underwhelming – and often hostile – reviews, while Kelly himself described the original five-hour version of the piece 'a total fucking

[824] Recent eco-critical readings of *King Lear* have also touched on the issue of food security. See Jayne Archer *et al*, 'The Autumn King: Remembering the Land in *King Lear*', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 63:4 (2012), pp. 518-543. For another recent eco-critical work on *King Lear*, informed by climate change, see Jennifer Mae Hamilton, *This Contentious Storm: An Ecocritical and Performance History of King Lear* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017).

mess'.[825] Critics seemed most aggrieved at the sudden transformation of a drama seemingly about corporate capitalism into scenes of a mass conflagration with parallels to the atrocities of the Second World War, complaining of the 'explosive disorientation' which took place at the start of Act Two, which calls for '*Soldiers. Militia, noise*' (2:83).[826] Charles Spencer admitted to having found Act One 'moderately entertaining' for 'an anti-capitalist soap opera'; but the 'fantastic shift' in Act Two – where 'the suits are discovered in battle fatigues', with 'interminable scenes of shooting, torture and atrocity' – seemed 'unmotivated'.[827]

Spencer is in little doubt as to who is to blame for the apparent formlessness of *The Gods Weep*:

> This is a piece strongly influenced by the grim, preachy dramas of horror and catastrophe that were dished up for so long by Edward Bond and Howard Barker. I thought we had more or less banished their baleful influence from our stages, but now up pops Kelly like some unstoppable, living-dead monster in a horror movie intent on wreaking further havoc.[828]

It would seem Spencer has not seen much Bond of late – and possibly any Barker at all, who could never be described as 'preachy'. He is, however, not necessarily wrong to point out the parallels between *The Gods Weep* and Catastrophist anti-form. Most of all, the sudden shift from a claustrophobic boardroom to a full-scale war has obvious resonances with

[825] Quoted in Charles Spencer, 'The Gods Weep, RSC', *The Telegraph*. Accessed 4 February 2018. http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/london-shows/7472953/The-Gods-Weep-RSC-Hampstead-Theatre-review.html,
[826] Ibid.
[827] Ibid.
[828] Ibid.

Blasted, which has its own abrupt war and mortar blast. Like *Blasted*, the play suddenly collapses the formal and physical perimeters between a reifying late capitalist culture and fascistic violence. This obviously perplexed critics – but the formal fragmentation of *The Gods Weep* can be placed in a wider genealogy of Catastrophist appropriations of *King Lear* 'after' Auschwitz.

This is not to collapse the distinction between *Five Day Lear* and *The Gods Weep* and Catastrophism. Both plays remain formally open-ended, providing little sense of closure. Neither piece, however, is necessarily concerned with the type of autonomous, tragic subjectivities found in Catastrophism. The plays both appropriate *King Lear* to interrogate recent (and genocidal) catastrophes, producing a critique of reification; but the autonomy which – for Adorno – is so vitally needed to contest a totalized post-Auschwitz culture is absent.

2. Summary of Findings

This thesis has analysed Catastrophist appropriations of *King Lear* in post-war British playwriting, concentrating on the plays of David Rudkin, Howard Barker and Sarah Kane. I have shown that *King Lear* has played a vital and often formative role in Catastrophism – a form of tragic playwriting and drama that does not seek to resolve the contradiction between subject and society, but which retains the autonomy, the freedom, of the tragic subject. This is a response to the withering of the subject in modern society – something which found its nadir at Auschwitz. I have shown that Catastrophism is deeply influenced by

Theodor Adorno, whose theories around aesthetic fragmentation have informed post-Auschwitz appropriations of *King Lear*, as have his ideas around 'the nullity demonstrated to subjects in the concentration camps', which has 'overtaken the form of subjectivity itself'.[829] Adorno, as I set out in Chapter One, does not necessarily support the idea of a post-Auschwitz tragic drama, but his conceptualization of the dialectic of Enlightenment and his theory of non-identity nevertheless imply a theory of the tragic for the post-Holocaust era. I have also analysed the formal and thematic features of *King Lear* that have made it so pivotal for Catastrophist drama and writing. Chapter Two shows that *King Lear* not only represents the catastrophic shift into modernity, but also violates its own formal closure – or in early modern usage, the catastrophe. This aligns the play with the type of catastrophic, formal fragmentation Adorno calls for in post-Auschwitz art. Its open-endedness also invites creative response – appropriation – and licenses interrogations of tragic closure and non-identity.

Since the Second World War, *King Lear* has not only toppled *Hamlet* as the Shakespeare play for 'our times'; it has also been used in criticism, performance and playwriting to variously reflect on, respond to and 'write' the disaster of the Holocaust. Catastrophist appropriations of the play are, as I set out in Chapter Three, embedded in a wider discourse around *King Lear* and Auschwitz and are not only responsive to the play 'itself'. This discourse has comprised post-war Christian and humanist readings of the play and is also apparent in the absurdist understanding of the play that emerged via Jan Kott and Peter Brook in the 1960s. It also relates to Edward Bond and his landmark 1971 play *Lear*, in which Bond appropriates *King Lear* in response to the Holocaust and the

[829] *Minima Moralia*, p. 26.

catastrophes of modernity. This play, as I show in Chapter Four, is torn between rival conceptions of history: a Marxist-Hegelian conception of the historical process as the universal development of human emancipation and a more disillusioned interrogation of all enlightened ideals about the possibility of personal and historical progress. This leads to a contradiction, where the tragic subject is supposedly free to act, to engage with the world and its injustice, but whose engagement can only take place within a pre-established teleology.

My case studies on Bond, Rudkin, Barker and Kane all bear out the various forms of creative intervention and practice that appropriation can entail, whether that means a wholesale rewrite of the 'original' play (Bond), sequels or prequels (Barker), the appropriation of a single character or of an author (Rudkin), or the appropriation of a scene or motif (Kane). These playwrights appropriate *King Lear* to interrogate post-Auschwitz society and form spaces for non-identity. My analysis of Rudkin in Chapter Five shows that Edgar – and his transformation into Poor Tom – underpins the way in which Rudkin conceptualizes subjectivity and his own exilic status as an author, which entails a process of self re-authorship. With his 1989 play *Seven Lears*, Barker writes a prequel to *King Lear* that challenges a conventional Christian-humanist reading of Shakespeare. His play, as I show in Chapter Six, subverts the storm scenes from *King Lear* to challenge the idea that the common good is a universal ethical 'rule' to which the subject is supposed to subscribe. His appropriation insists on the moral autonomy of the subject – something both Adorno and Barker view as critical after the atrocity of Auschwitz. My final case study on the 1995 *Blasted* shows that Kane appropriates the scene at Dover 'cliff' to deconstruct the conventional philosophical distinction between materialist and metaphysical worldviews.

She does so to carve out a space for transcendence in a violently totalized late capitalist system.

This study is the first to analyse appropriations of *King Lear* in post-war British playwriting, making a distinctive contribution to the critical literature around the play and its post-war reception. This study is also the first to bring various appropriations of the play into dialogue, to show that *King Lear* has played a vital historical role in various ideational and dramaturgical responses to the Holocaust in post-war playwriting. This – until now – has not been fully appreciated in Shakespeare Studies or in post-war British Theatre Studies, meaning the unique status of the play in post-Holocaust drama has been neglected. By concentrating on the plays of Rudkin, Barker and Kane, I have shown that Catastrophism represents a compelling iteration of post-war British playwriting and its response to – and appropriation of – *King Lear* in the aftermath of Auschwitz. These playwrights have been neglected in Shakespeare Studies, partly due to the ongoing influence of Cultural Materialist criticism and its politicized conception of appropriation. To neglect the Catastrophists, however, is to neglect a vital part of the cultural and artistic 'conversation' around *King Lear*, the Holocaust and the status of the human subject 'after' Auschwitz. Part of the reason for providing a postscript that analyses some more recent appropriations is to show that Catastrophism continues to have an influence on the way contemporary playwrights approach *King Lear*. This, I suspect, will continue to be the case far beyond *Five Day Lear* and *The Gods Weep*.

This study is not only relevant to the fields of Shakespeare Studies, post-war British Theatre Studies and Holocaust Studies, however; it is also a timely intervention in our own historical moment. The unnerving lurch to far-right politics in Europe and across the world

have, I believe, made *King Lear* and Catastrophist ideas around disaster and autonomy all the more urgent. Ours is an age in which people are more and more being treated as 'things' – where subjects are reduced to objects – and where nationalist movements are sweeping up ever increasing sections of the population. Under such conditions, the necessity of autonomy – of freedom from reifying institutions and oppressive systems of thought – may perhaps be more critical than at any time since the early twentieth century. This is a study that, not unlike Catastrophism, does not 'end', but opens out into an uncertain future.

Appendix

Written Interview with David Rudkin

25 August 2016

DR: As I think is well known, my Revivalist upbringing forbad me theatre – my first encounters were with **drama** rather: Shakespeare in the classroom, and because I was doing Classics, Greek Tragedy. I remember meeting Gloster's [*sic*] blinding, and *Lear*'s lasting impression on me, of extremity and wildness. Even struggled through in Aeschylus' monstrous Greek, Kassandra's visions in *Agamemnon* (the horned bull in the net…) were stamped upon me (still are) as living nightmare; and in *The Bacchae* the rending of Pentheus was a haunting image of transgressive enormity that I was to exorcise only when I ventured to reconstruct the appalling passage missing (?suppressed by Byzantine monks?) from the Greek, for my radio piece *Macedonia* three years ago. Such were a Revivalist boy's exemplars of 'theatre'.

Your questions.

RA: Shakespeare has, at times, been something of a ghostly presence in your drama: he makes a vicarious appearance in your first play, *Afore Night Come*, where the Irish vagrant Roche is given the nickname 'Shakespeare', and he also makes a spectral appearance in your 2012 play *Merlin Unchained*, where at one point the bardic

'wonder worker' Merlin is called 'Shakespeare'. These (mis)identifications are very intriguing – not least in *Afore Night Come*, where Roche/Shakespeare is violently sacrificed by his 'fellow' fruit-pickers. Why do you think these plays remember – and dismember – 'Shakespeare'?

DR: Brahms was once asked – by a critic, was it? or perhaps a younger and much less circumspect composer – why did he not approach writing a first symphony until in his 40s, and at opus 68? 'Can you imagine,' Brahms replied, 'how it feels to presume to write a symphony, and have that giant Beethoven breathing down one's neck?' Sh(akespeare) does – or should – exert a chastening presence on anyone who presumes to write for the space. I write as I must, Sh or no; but I acknowledge him, seriously, and in my own relaxed way.

The documentary dimension of *Afore* is drawn directly from the pear orchard where I worked in Sept 1959. Roche is taken from the life there, name and all; because of his Irishman's natural 'poetry' of speech – and in a second language, to boot – the foreman inimically dubbed him 'Shakespeare', and it stuck. The two boy outsiders in the play are disallowed their own names too; as are the homosexual, and the 'little' man. It's a way tribalism has, of disauthenticating individuals who don't belong. I had met it in the army a few years before.

Deep readers of *Afore* will have a field day interpreting 'my' murder of 'Shakespeare'. But I had no issue with Sh then; I did not yet consciously think of myself as a 'dramatist'. *Afore* was the play in which I discovered that I was; and in it, a lot came roaring out from my unconscious, and my intellectual right hand did not know what my demonic left hand was writing. (There are things in that play that only now I understand. But those are for me.) One never recaptures that awful innocent veracity.

The reference in *Merlin* is more, as I remember, a veiled revisiting to that first play. In the Garganel scenes, set today, Merlin is speaking an Irish English, not a Welsh (=British) as in the 'earlier' landscape of the play. The Irish Merlin rather resembles Roche, and I permitted him to. He is something of a crazy king enthroned on a dunghill – which brings King Lear into the frame (Edgar, too, you might say…)

RA: Shakespeare appears as 'himself' in your 1984 monologue *Will's Way*. How did *Will's Way* come about?

DR: RSC asked me to write a lunch-time piece for a Youth Festival, to be done in the old Other Place. I knew that space well – and almost immediately thought of Sh himself, giving one of those regular Saturday morning talks that were then (1980s) a popular tradition there. Over one afternoon, in my caravan studio in a neighbour's orchard, I thought the whole piece aloud into a cassette recorder. With a character like Sh, you

don't surround yourself with critical volumes, and check and double-check and cross-check every word in fear and trembling. You take a run at it. If I'd done it the next morning, it would have been a different piece. I think the piece itself says something like that.

RA: In *Will's Way*, Shakespeare talks at some length about *King Lear* and Edgar, who memorably transforms himself into the figure of a roving bedlamite – 'Poor Tom'. The 'Edgar I nothing am' speech seems to echo throughout your writings – from Merlin ('Now nothing am'), Hitchcock ('Hitchcock eye; nothing am'), Amadu ('What I Amadu am?') and to Shakespeare himself ('Shakespeare I nothing am'). What, for you, is significant about Edgar's speech?

DR: Mainly, the drastic syntax. There's a catastrophic existentialism in it. I never forget Albert Finney in the Laughton *Lear* (c. 1958). He began the physical transformation of himself during the speech, almost entirely by acting and voice; and when he tried out 'Poor Turleygod', his face seemed visibly to crack. At 'I nothing am' it was as if that facial fissure had become the rending earth itself, and into that chasm we were all about to descend and be lost. (Some poor critic, I remember, wrote that Finney 'does the best he can with the unaccountable part of Edgar' – one reason why I haven't read critics in over 40 years.)

RA: You have spoken in the past of the existential necessity of 'self re-authoring', particularly in a society that – as you put it – seeks to mechanically 'reduce us to identities that are predictable'. Do you see Edgar as the type of 'self re-authoring' figure you mean?

DR: I don't think of Edgar as adopting 'self-reauthoring' as a philosophical programme. I think later in the lecture you quote, I say 'it's a matter of survival, really'. Always *existential*, these choices; never theoretical.

What interests me in the 'Dover Cliff' scene is how Edgar is functioning as a dramatist here – and an Artaudian one: leading his father into and through a traumatic experience, *i.e.* the logical moral outcome of his father's suicidal ideation, to a second chance, to learn, and grow. Artaud spoke of the necessity for our theatre to be 'an operation without anaesthetic'.

RA: In *Will's Way,* Shakespeare remarks that he authors (and indeed re-authors) his own self through his theatrical creations, and picks Edgar-Poor Tom as a figure who – like himself – re-authors himself through a 'character'. How far are you 'authoring' your own self through Shakespeare in *Will's Way* – and do you similarly identify your own playwriting process with Edgar and his restless self-transformations*?*

DR: I felt that in my own much lesser way I was experimenting with 'being' Sh in his domestic and carnal and professional dimension, and in his imaginative process. It was 'my' Sh (whose else could it be?) – or one of them. As I say above (and in the piece), written or given the next day it would have turned out very different.

RA: I believe I am right in saying that you directed an amateur production of *King Lear* in the mid-1960s, at Bromsgrove. What did you take from your experience directing the play, both in terms of your own ideas about theatre and about the play itself?

DR: It was a very minimalist staging – much informed by the Peter Brook *Lear* of 1962. I don't remember any great revelations. I was more exercised by how to make the moral meaning of each moment physically visible. I do remember some details. I schooled Edmund (at Edgar's first entrance) to sing his *Fa Sol La Mi* not as F G A then down to E (which is ineffective) but on up to B natural, which also in that melodic context *Mi* could denote. Sung so, that phrase spans an interval traditionally (for reasons to do with mediaeval harmony) heard as transgressive, and known as *diabolus in musica*: an angular interval of the augmented 4^{th}, ever since then conventionally used in Western music (Berlioz, Liszt, Wagner *et al*.) as the devil's signature, and in Victorian and Edwardian music-hall too, when the villain appeared. Another venturesome reading I remember was of Kent's 'None of these rogues and cowards But Ajax is their fool.' As it is, that's puzzling, I think: but say it 'a jacks [=a

shit can] is there full', and you hear why he gets put in the stocks. I've not seen either of these readings adopted in any other *Lear*.

I kept my production text, heavily annotated, and interleaved with diagrams and sketches; but some 12 years later, in a depression, I burned it.

RA: It is only after the Second World War and the catastrophe of the Holocaust that *King Lear* began to widely be considered 'the' great Shakespeare play, toppling the previously ascendant *Hamlet*. The Holocaust can – in many ways – be seen as the harrowing but 'logical' outcome of a social process you have often critiqued: the 'mechanical' reduction of human beings to disposable objects. In *Will's Way*, Shakespeare talks about *King Lear* in terms of 'new social principles' that take a 'much more mechanical, mercenary approach to a man', lamenting that 'I think people will come to matter less'. I am interested in how far your response to *King Lear* may be informed by historical events like the Holocaust. Do you think the play speaks to the catastrophes of the twentieth century – and beyond?

DR: Adorno has pessimistically argued that the Holocaust makes any future orderly 'symphonic' art irrelevant. (He seems, surprisingly, to be overlooking Mahler's Sixth, which paradoxically uses positive symphonic process to demonstrate a negative result.) I don't go all the way with Adorno. I think, rather, that we have a responsibility to endeavour to integrate the Holocaust (and all its freight) into the

'order' and logic of our art. I feel that to align *Lear* with any exclusive historical resonance, is to risk reductivism. The Holocaust can be characterised in many ways: in one sense, it's the ultimate manifestation of German Romanticism, a cultural self-idealising that repudiates its own 'shadow'; in another, it's an expression of the psychopathology of capitalism – a denial of human excrementality. Horrifyingly enough, it's latent in so-called 'fundamentalist' Islamism – which I see as not 'radical' at all, but psychologically regressive. As Nazism was/is. Worse than the Holocaust is already on its way. We humans are feeble creatures driven by an urge to catastrophe for ourselves and abjection for others, and to an infantile fantasising of the universe: and in the chasm into which that will plunge us, *Lear* shall always speak. If any of us survive to hear it.

RA: Finally, the political situation at the end of *King Lear* is very unclear, but in the Folio version of the play at least it seems that Edgar has become the designated King of Britain. Given the way Edgar constantly transmutes himself over the course of the play, embracing human indeterminateness, open-endedness and freedom, do you read the end of *King Lear* optimistically – as the promise, to quote the play, of a 'better way' for society?

DR: Sh's 'ideal' king, Henry V, prepares himself for kinghood by inhabiting the lower depths of his kingdom-to-be. But he's essentially a tourist there. Edgar does likewise – but in a more existentialist way: he becomes an abject. It's a characteristic Sh

ending, the emergence of an uncontaminated new young king, who'll sort things out. That optimism is always formal; it's not a happy ending as such, it's to restore the positive centre. The inference is inescapable, that Edgar is on his journey to be king. But Sh does not give us his usual upcoming coronation, and that has to be significant. I think Sh recognizes that at the ending of a play whose cosmos is so faulted and flawed, and whose pessimism is so deep, a formal promise of a 'healer' will not sit well. He left that to the Nahum Tates of this world.

One-to-One Interview with Howard Barker

Brighton, 26 August 2016

RA: I just wanted to start by asking you about the genesis of *Seven Lears*. Obviously, it was staged in 1989 and you had already rewritten a Shakespeare play.

HB: Did I? What was it?

RA: *Henry V in Two Parts*.

HB: Oh god!

RA: Yes, a radio play [*laughter*].

HB: Oh, nearly my first radio play, yes. I didn't think anyone knew about that.

RA: Yes, David [Ian Rabey] alerted me to it, in fact. I just wanted to ask, as I say, about the genesis of *Seven Lears* and what prompted you to return to Shakespeare at that point in the late 1980s.

HB: I can't remember why, as you put it, I returned to Shakespeare. It's the play I know best of Shakespeare. I can't remember what rewrites I'd done to that point. You mentioned that *Henry V* one which is a very early piece. I've also done it with Lessing and I've done it with Middleton. I can't really remember the order of that. I do it quite often. I did with Chekhov. These interrogations, which is an elegant way of putting it, of these classic authors has occurred throughout my writing life; as some

painters go back and repaint great art by Velázquez and so on. It's respectful. It may not seem so to you reading it but it is an act of...a mixture of homage and contempt [*laughter*]. What had always struck me about Lear is that there is no woman. There is no wife. I learned about five years after writing that I wasn't the first person who'd had that thought, of course. I can't have been and someone had written a play called *Lear's Wife* in the 1940s or 1950s?

RA: I think it was in 1910s, *King Lear's Wife*, by Gordon Bottomley.

HB: Anyway, it's a thought that would occur to anyone who was interested. I couldn't understand, for the life of me, why he'd left it out. It didn't make sense because anyone who's lived in a family, as you and I have, this kind of reference to the absent person and saying, 'If your mum was here...' I've heard my dad say that. 'If your dad was in the room, you wouldn't say that'. Whatever the phrase is, it's part of the discourse of family life. She's not quoted, I believe, at any point at all. You're going to correct me? If so, I don't know where.

RA: It's just a very brief reference and it happens a lot in Shakespeare where a father will impugn his wife's fidelity. It's a similar thing here but you're absolutely right and it's the only time.

HB: It must be tiny.

RA: It's a really more a generalized statement about wives and not his wife specifically. He tells Regan that if she weren't glad to see him it might be that his wife's tomb is 'sepulchring an adulteress'.

HB: Okay, so it's a bit odd. You could say (because writers do this) he just couldn't be bothered. He overlooked it. I prefer to think there was a reason for it; a sort of repression going on of some sort. It was such a big accident, it began to look conscious, so I thought, 'Maybe there's a history one could imagine that would solve that absence and make a certain sense of it' and so I filled it in, as it were. That's a dark space in the play, in my opinion, and it's filled in by me with a suggestion which ties in with something else. King Lear's an idiot which, in some ways, makes you wonder why it's a great tragedy because normally, one doesn't have feelings of tremendous pity for idiots. The actual Fool is always calling him a fool and Lear says, 'Yes, I am a fool'. I thought, 'How can he have been a powerful monarch if he was a fool. It makes no sense. Fools don't last in history for very long', so I came up with a conceit that he had been, on the contrary, so acutely self-conscious and thoughtful that it gave him agony and he wanted to dispose of his own self-consciousness...the pain of existence, as he conceived it. That is the process of the 'Seven Lears' and how he strips himself of thought and tries to hide in idiocy. That would lead right into Shakespeare's piece because his behaviour in the first scene is transparently idiotic. I made a bridge, as it were.

RA: That's fascinating. Over the course of your play, he absolutely goes from that incredibly insightful, sensitive, eloquent figure into someone that, at the end, can barely formulate a sentence, can barely speak.

HB: Yes. I thought that was a way of leading into *King Lear*, as an explanation for this man's barbaric and idiotic behaviour.

RA: It's interesting when you say about the consciousness of the removal of the mother figure, because in the play that *King Lear* is based on, *The True Chronicle History of King Leir*...

HB: You've read that?

RA: Yes, it's not a great work [*laughter*] but it's explained from the outset that the Queen has just died and, therefore, the daughters need to be married and obviously, Shakespeare wanted that explanation gone. It seems very purposeful.

HB: In the original text, there is a Queen but she dies at what age?

RA: I don't think the age is specified but as the play begins, she has just died and the fact of having to marry the daughters off is explained more. None of the daughters are married at the beginning of the play.

HB: So it's about that, as opposed to inheriting property.

RA: Exactly, it's about the fact that the mother has gone, so therefore the daughters now need to go out...

HB: Need to be looked after.

RA: Yes [*laughter*].

HB: He obviously decided to ditch all that and just do his own version and quite rightly. Why shouldn't he?

RA: I'm interested, as you say, in the missing mother being the catalyst for your interrogation. It seems to me that it's not a feminist gesture…

HB: Not at all.

RA: ...in a strict sense and more perhaps to do with a moral transgression, which is why she's not there in Shakespeare. She ends up being murdered by the whole family.

HB: Oh, I see what you mean. Yes, the fact is Lear can't bear her. In my piece, she's an intolerably, unbearably moralistic person and that maddens him and drives him to murder her with the children, as it were, semi-participating. I'm sorry not to have read my piece again but I've a feeling Cordelia is up for the murder, as they say.

RA: Very much so, yes [*laughter*].

HB: Also, of course, in my piece there's a sense in which she has a rather sad affair with Kent. As Kent is in the Shakespeare, he's a man of tremendous moral sensibility and rectitude and his feelings for her are, as much erotic life is, developed from pity for her and her vulnerability. I made everything crossover and tie up, I think, quite well. I don't think I left anything hanging. Sure, of course, the piece almost opens with the boy, Lear, being educated by the Bishop, who's an immoralist, already trying to save him from his own sensibility and giving up some Machiavellian rules by which to rule the country. That's the function of this figure who gets murdered later.

RA: I was going to mention that murder because it's driven, apparently, by Kent and Clarissa's desire to remove this figure so that Lear can be a better person. Obviously,

they seem to struggle with that apparent contradiction between their own assumption of moral goodness and the fact that they have had to murder this man.

HB: Yes, it's one of those Stalinist 'Isn't it a pity but we have to kill you' thing.

RA: Yes [*laughter*].

HB: It's the Bishop who parodies that kind of Stalinist argument and says, 'Oh, what a shame. I have to die' or something like that, doesn't he?

RA: Yes.

HB: His political insights are reactionary but brilliantly acute, I hope.

RA: Yes, absolutely, and he is the 'education' for Lear as well, as he describes himself.

HB: Does Lear go along with what the Bishop says? I don't think he does intellectually but he kind of carries it out actually, when it comes to it.

RA: It seems almost, as you say, that he's always resisting his own insight, particularly if the Bishop articulates something close to it. It's not simply blindly following.

HB: He doesn't appear to absorb it. No, no, he quarrels with him.

RA: Yes, absolutely.

HB: In fact, he gets into a position where I think he does become mad in which he plays this against that and that against this and for everything that happens, he manages to find a counter argument. It may happen when they go to attack the other country and burn it and he says, 'Yes, of course, it may *seem* bad but...' and then he concocts

a perfectly argued reason why it was quite a good idea to set light to someone else's country. It's that sort of super-sophisticated mind that I think he has to shed in order to become King Lear, the idiot we know from Shakespeare.

RA: Just on that topic about the kind of changes that Lear goes through, obviously, in *King Lear*, the common idea about the play is that, while he might start as incredibly stupid and misguided, he does undergo some kind of personal, moral growth and starts to be a better person. How would you respond to that?

HB: Yes, but I'm not interested in that.

RA: [*Laughter*].

HB: I can't bear that. I don't know quite where it comes from. I suppose some Christian...

RA: Absolutely, yes. I think so.

HB: It's odd and it's not entirely related to that but I'm not sure I can write another tragedy myself because I've begun to think, maybe earlier this year, that you can't write a tragedy about someone you don't respect, to some extent. I've no respect for Lear, so I'm not really interested in what happens to him. The treasures I've written, and I'm thinking of *The Europeans* in particular, like Katrin's agonies, Gertrude's sensibilities...these are people I like but their projects are impossible of fulfilment. They cannot be done in the world and so they're doomed. I suppose I feel if I can't carry through the – I'm being a bit dismal here – but if I can't carry through the project, or they can't, then probably there's no point in the tragedy. I'm not sure. I'm not being clear. I'm just saying I've run out of steam for that. I find *Hamlet* a

great play because I esteem the wickedness of Hamlet but I can't really rate Lear because he's too stupid. What must one say about Shakespeare? It's all in the poetry and you can't fuss around with the motivations.

RA: I think so.

HB: Whereas, I think I construct better than he does.

RA: I'm really interested in what you said about the 'wickedness' of Hamlet and being attracted to that. Are you attracted to the demonic side of Hamlet's character?

HB: Yes, absolutely. His wit, I suppose.

RA: Do you think that Lear, perhaps, lacks that demonic aspect to his character?

HB: Yes, he does. Most Shakespeare characters are witty: Shakespeare must have been a self-consciously witty person. That's all very brilliant. I've forgotten the question really.

RA: I'm thinking just in terms of the demonic, perhaps Edgar has a kind of demonic, almost…

HB: Edmund.

RA: Edgar...

HB: Is it?

RA: ...where he's 'possessed' by Poor Tom.

HB: He's just dressing up and playing, isn't he?

RA: Possibly [*laughter*].

HB: No, it's Edmund who's the interesting one, it seems to me [*laughter*] – the moral tragedy of Edmund.

RA: So you think he has a more demonic character?

HB: Absolutely. His desire to seduce both sisters and to kill without mercy. I think he's vastly more interesting but, of course, he's a minor character and we're never going to feel sympathy for him, and anyway he does what so many Shakespeare characters do which is grovel and apologize at the end. Doesn't Edmund do that?

RA: He does, yes.

HB: I don't like that.

RA: Yes, he says, 'Some good I mean to do before I die'.

HB: Yes, it's terrible.

RA: [*Laughter*].

HB: Really, really terrible.

RA: Do you feel like he's contained by the play, in that he's unleashed and then put back in a box?

HB: Yes, I think so. I can't talk about Shakespeare's psychology because I've not studied it but he's obviously drawn to wickedness. *Macbeth* is tremendous. He always has to capitulate in the same way because he plays for a public. I don't ever think of what the audience thinks. I think Shakespeare probably did and he wanted to satisfy them in a conventional way. There are other satisfactions, of course…

RA: I think there was certainly more of a commercial aspect to his theatre, which he seems to have recognized in some of his plays. He writes quite insultingly about theatre audiences on occasion, with a sense of resentment and frustration [*laughter*]. Just on that topic about the idea of Edmund being, perhaps, unleashed and then contained, in terms of the fact that your own 'Theatre of Catastrophe' resists resolution and reconciliation...

HB: Reconciliation is the word, yes.

RA: ...and *King Lear*, in its own way, does violate the anticipated ending, or what would have been the original, anticipated ending, which is Lear and Cordelia reconciled and going off into the sunset together. Instead of which, Shakespeare kills her.

HB: I approve of that because life is arbitrary. There's an arbitrary moment in my play, which the audience, to my pleasure, always finds surprisingly amusing – when I've seen it as it's not been produced much. It's where Lear says to a herdsman who's passing, 'Have you seen a woman? I'm looking for my mistress. Have you seen her?' I can't remember how but Lear gives him a knife. Anyway, the herdsman comes back and says, 'Actually, I've changed my mind. I will do the murder you've asked me to do'. Lear says, 'No, too late now' and sticks it in him and kills him. It's entirely a

whim, arbitrary, and this is the sort of thing that's forbidden in conscience-driven, English, leftish, radical theatre. Arbitrary acts which, to them, seem to be only instinctive are simply not allowed but when you let that happen (and it was wonderfully played) something is released in the audience. It's probably an innate sense of chaos which I think theatre can liberate all the time but which conscience-driven, Royal Court theatre continually represses and tries to replace by enlightenment. To go back to Shakespeare's death of Cordelia, I must applaud that. It seems to be perfectly right she's dead.

RA: To me, it seems more of a logical conclusion.

HB: It wouldn't then be a tragedy, would it, if she was fine?

RA: Of course, it would be…

HB: Father restored to daughter. Not interesting.

RA: Yes, with regard to that, I wonder if you see *King Lear*, perhaps, as having its own Catastrophist...potential, perhaps. Maybe you're recuperating that aspect of its moral chaos in *Seven Lears*?

HB: Well yes, except essentially, the balance between good and evil is very well preserved in *King Lear*. There's never much chance, in a Shakespeare play, of the chaos getting out of hand. The unpleasant daughters are killed, aren't they? Both of them are strangled or something.

RA: Yes, one kills the other, and then kills herself.

HB: Is that right?

RA: Yes [*laughter*].

HB: The good girl dies which is Catastrophic, perhaps, yes but on the whole, everything is reordered. The whole point of the Theatre of Catastrophe is that it is never ordered and so in a way, the audience goes home from a play by me, unlike Shakespeare, with dislocated thought. I'm not trying to do that but it's probably the effect. There's no assurance in it. The only assurance comes from the play and from the text. Do you know what I mean? Not the text as meaning but the text as sound, visuality and so on. I've always said there are no rewards in my plays, except the reward of the performance of the roles, which must be done in a way that's hypnotic, thrilling, and this comes out of the language. Of course, I'm not a poet in the same way as Shakespeare but it is poetic discourse and played properly, it's riveting. To me, that's the contract between the stage and the audience. They're not going to get any enlightenment from it.

RA: It was the first play of yours I read.

HB: Oh, was it?

RA: In my own personal experience, I felt deeply disordered by it [*laughter*]. I read it three or four times, I think, after that first time.

HB: Well, maybe that's why it's not done very much, Richard. I think students do it sometimes. I haven't heard of a professional production for decades. It somehow offends, especially the English who are wretchedly moralistic people.

RA: Particularly that moment you mentioned with the herdsman, where in *King Lear* – and talking about that kind of that soft leftist reading – Lear strips naked and reaches the same status as the poor. In your play, he meets the herdsman and says, 'I have nothing in common with you'.

HB: That's right. They can't talk. They have nothing to say. It's very offensive to everything that humanism is about. Isn't that my life? That is my life, in art. I set myself against liberal humanism as a governing principle in the theatre. I'm not talking about society but theatre. I don't want to be dealing with values like that with an art form which, in any case, repudiates it from the outset.

RA: And always has?

HB: I think always has, despite the fact the Christian Church was forever trying to annex it, or the Communist Party was trying to annex it, or David Hare and the National Theatre are trying to annex it. You can't do it. It writhes. It hates. It's instinct it likes.

RA: I remember in *Arguments for a Theatre* you say that '*King Lear* has been turned from a savage play into a placid story'.

HB: I can't remember saying that but I might have done.

RA: I mean David Hare directed *King Lear* at the National in 1986…

HB: So I believe.

RA: I just wonder if you had any views, in terms of *King Lear*, on it being appropriated or recruited for that kind of liberal humanism. Did you have a specific instance of that in mind?

HB: No, I didn't. I'm not sure I've even seen it on stage actually. I have seen the Russian version on film, which is like the *Hamlet*, by Kozintsev.

RA: Kozintsev, yes.

HB: I think that's sensational.

RA: Yes, an absolutely brilliant film.

HB: Totally brilliant and you know now, it's sad to say, the English can't do it anymore. It's gone, but those people can and I touch wood and pray the Russian culture stays what it is. Russia is a great culture and they can really deliver intensity, by instinct. The man who plays Hamlet, [Innokenti] Smoktunovsky, is incredible.

RA: Yes, it's a remarkable performance.

HB: It's witty and it's full of sex and we have no ability to perform sex here.

RA: Just the images from those films as well are unbelievably striking.

HB: Yes, they are.

RA: Hamlet's father's ghost is projected as this huge shadow, while Hamlet is a tiny figure walking along the battlements.

HB: There are nice details that other people have copied so much, like the horses going a bit berserk, in the ghost scene. And every bloody role is fabulously played, as if by an ensemble. There's no rubbish; even the third porter from the right [*laughter*]. I mean that's sensational. There's the marker for me. *Hamlet* and *King Lear* are contaminated by that absurd kind of humanistic attitude we suffer from here. If it's cruel, it's cruel.

RA: And *King Lear* is very cruel.

HB: So is Hamlet. When Claudius says, 'What have you done with Polonius' body?' Hamlet simply issues a string of contemptuous remarks about the corpse. It actually makes me laugh. It ridicules conscience.

RA: I completely understand what you say about that demonic energy...

HB: When I made *Gertrude – The Cry*, I felt compelled to humiliate Hamlet as a moralist which, of course, he half is and half isn't [*laughter*], as always, but I took against the side of him which was precious and disapproving of his mother because I dislike like the scene in which he attacks his mother. Who am I to like it or not like it? It's there but do you know what I mean? It doesn't appeal to me because his attitude to his mother is... prosaic, without imagination, adolescent, obviously. There's not an inch given in *Hamlet* about why Gertrude and Claudius ended up as lovers. It wasn't his method, and it is mine.

RA: Even the way that Hamlet replays the affair between them, in his own 'play', is morally troubling...

HB: Oh yes.

RA: ...and very crass. In the dumb show, Gertrude is seen to be won over by being given gifts and material possessions [*laughter*].

HB: He renders what, in my version, is a very sophisticated passion into something which perhaps a man of 16 or 17 might feel. It's somewhat coarse but then it would be a different play if it wasn't, so there you are.

RA: I tend to agree. In my reading, it's the less attractive side of his character, certainly; a kind of patrician remoteness from the body.

HB: Yes. The Russian version takes care of that by having him very, very physical with Ophelia, or at least very menacing towards Ophelia, which you wouldn't be allowed to do in a production now [*laughter*]. If you look at the way the actor plays that to her, it's very, very masculine, but also neurotic, as masculinity is.

RA: I think the way that Ophelia is played as well, the actress is so stiff and so puppet-like. I think the first scene you see her...

HB: Fantastic scene.

RA: ...where she's just dancing mechanically to the music.

HB: Yes. It's incomparable and we'll never see the like of it again, I shouldn't think.

RA: I wonder if you've seen the Peter Brook film of *King Lear*?

HB: No, I haven't.

RA: It's worth seeing. For me, it doesn't rate with those.

HB: Who's the actor in that?

RA: Paul Scofield.

HB: I like him.

RA: He gives a fantastic performance in that film. It's a very different type of film. It's more self-consciously absurdist, I think, in its take.

HB: In that day?

RA: Yes, I think so. There are lots of very extreme close-ups on Lear's writhing face. It's worth seeing.

HB: I'll get it.

RA: Just to pick up on the fact that *Seven Lears* hasn't been staged as much as it might have been. Obviously, over that era, you were writing plays like *The Possibilities*, *The Last Supper* and *The Bite of the Night* as well. I wonder if you could elaborate on how you think *Seven Lears* contributes to the Catastrophist aesthetic that you were developing around that time.

HB: No, I can't [*laughter*].

RA: Okay [*laughter*].

HB: I can't think what was going on at the time.

RA: Do you think that perhaps the play has been overlooked, in terms of your own *oeuvre*?

HB: Well, they're all overlooked [*laughter*]. You named four there, I think, and only one of them has been performed since. *The Last Supper* has never been restaged. Hardly surprisingly, perhaps, the one about Helen of Troy [*The Bite of the Night*] has not been done. No one can deal with them. In fact, they can't deal with my work at any time at all, except for the one – *Scenes from an Execution*, which has become almost an embarrassment to me because it's not my best play by a long, long chalk. It's rationalist. It's got some very beautiful moments but basically, it's so easy to put a key in and to lock it. We get the story; we get the argument; it's all over. There's no agonizingly, contradictory experience at all. It's not a tragedy, is it? It's sad but it's not a tragedy.

RA: I suppose you think that's probably why it has been taken up?

HB: Yes, because it's a humanist play. It's about the State being naughty; the Church being backward and reactionary; while the artist challenging the State has a monopoly on morality. It's like *The Guardian*; you pick it up and you know exactly what you're going to get from it. I've got a big production of it in Lyon. It will be a wonderful show but I'm not sure I can even go and see it because I can't watch it now. If I was to direct it, I'd make the Church powerful. I'd force them into a different sort of conflict. That's the only one that gets turned over and over again, apart from *The Possibilities*, fortunately, yes. It plays in Europe quite a lot.

RA: Those are fantastic.

HB: They're all contradictions, but why a play like *Seven Lears* is not taken up, I couldn't say, except for that dominant pattern of thought of our time.

RA: I think even in the world of Barker Studies, reading through academic criticism on your work, it seems to me to be oddly overlooked. I really value that play.

HB: Thank you. Some people do. I have met others [*laughter*].

RA: Yes, [*laughter*] of course. I get the feeling I already know the answer to this question but you talk about conversations with dead poets. I just wonder if there's a sense in which you feel yourself, in any way, part of a wider conversation around that play with other playwrights that are interested?

HB: Not really.

RA: It's your personal interest.

HB: Yes, I think it was an A-Level text of mine, so I knew it for a long time. I don't engage with it now at all. I haven't read it recently. No, it's just the simple fact of seeing a hole in a text and trying to widen it and understand why it exists, has been allowed to exist.

RA: It's interesting that *King Lear*, in criticism and in performance, after the Second World War gains more and more interest…

HB: I didn't know that.

RA: From the Holocaust onwards. It seems to just gather…particularly in Shakespeare criticism...critics after the war will often say, 'Now that we've lived through the wars

and Auschwitz, *King Lear* seems the most important play to us'. I just wonder if you would...

HB: Why that play? Because it's a world of chaos? Because it's a misguided world driven by a mentally unstable person? I don't know. You could say *Macbeth* would work as well; the idea of slaughtered innocence.

RA: Absolutely, yes but certainly, before the Second World War, *Hamlet* seems to be 'the' Shakespeare play and then the interest shifts towards *King Lear* – but I think you're right; it's something to do with a sense of moral anomie, I guess…the camps.

HB: I think we're getting a sense that there are really only the two that matter and that's *Hamlet* and *King Lear*.

RA: I guess, in terms of *King Lear*, the idea of catastrophe and the wider sense of social and political catastrophe continues to resonate.

HB: Yes, I suppose so but one point about Lear's world, surely, is its whimsicality. Is Hitler whimsical? Well, you could say so. They get crazy ideas and they carry them out. Think of Stalin measuring the battlefront with a ruler on a globe. He put the ruler on the globe and said to the Red Army Commander, 'You've got to get there by Thursday'. They are bizarre figures and I suppose in the sense that they all seem crazy, you would say that maybe Lear was a crazy King…But everyone's mind is blown after the War and consequently you get all that absurdist theatre which is such trash in actual fact. The intellectual class can't deal with so much irrationality. The intellectual class slides into complete impotence. It cannot explain that degree

of malevolence and inhumanity and it must explain things. The whole Enlightenment Project has collapsed. We're trying to dig it up now again and peddling it [*laughter*] but everything that happened from 1789 – more or less – led to the camps. No wonder they had to retreat into absurdism. Only if you were an irrationalist would you be able to answer some of that or not answer, but respond to it. There are three volumes behind you by [E.M.] Cioran. Do you know Cioran?

RA: No, I don't.

HB: Grab one from a shelf. Don't take mine. I can't part with them! People like Cioran originate from the other side of European culture, where I come from where, I would argue half of Shakespeare. He's half a Jesuit, in my opinion. I have no evidence for that. Who can do it now? After Shakespeare, nothing in the English theatre touches instinct and irrationality. I mean nothing interesting happens until you get to me. It's rationalist, on the one hand, it's comic, on the other. You get Bernard Shaw with his relentless rationalization. You care for nothing in a Shaw. You're then up with Pinter and now David Hare who are the official artists of humanism. There is no dark force in English theatre after Shakespeare.

RA: *King Lear* was often seen as being a kind of prototypically absurdist play in the post-war period.

HB: What? In 1945-1947?

RA: Probably a bit later, from the 1960s.

HB: I don't think it's absurdist at all. I think you could treat it as a realist play. You could treat it thoroughly realistically, couldn't you? That's how I'd do it.

RA: I tend to agree. It does seem, for me, that someone like Beckett is a kind of frustrated Christian or humanist. That if life doesn't make sense in terms of God or human progress then it doesn't have any meaning.

HB: He's also terribly likable, isn't he?

RA: I do like many of his plays [*laughter*].

HB: I put him alongside Chekhov really. They're good for a night out because you go to the theatre to see *Uncle Vanya* (which I loathe) and it's all about impotence; so he can't have the girl; so he fires a gun; it misses; so it's all a bit sad and they end up doing some knitting. Fine and it's all beautifully expressed. Of course, it has to be beautiful so we all go home thinking, 'Well, it's alright that I'm such a failure because that's life'. I think that's exactly what Becket does. It's witty. It's consoling because it is witty; no other reason. It's witty and 'life's like that'. That's it. A perfect prelude to dinner.

RA: In your plays, and I suppose this is why tragedy...

HB: It's the reverse. I think it's the reverse.

RA: Yes, the tragedy is so important, because it's the opposite of impotence.

HB: It's restless. I don't know how you could have a nice dinner after a play of mine. I'm sure you could but...I know people have told me when they've seen it, 'I came away

and I wasn't able to digest…[*laughter*] accommodate it'. Believe me, Richard, I'll tell you, I'm not *trying* to do that. It's not an *effort*.

RA: Do find it's just whether...?

HB: ...I have a reactionary brain. By which I mean, I react.

RA: Do find it's the logic of when you're writing, perhaps, as well, it just takes you to these...?

HB: It drives itself. It's what Joseph de Maistre said about the French revolution…once it starts, you can't stop it. With me, I don't know what I'm writing next. I never know what the outcome is. I've probably said this. I don't know where it's going. It comes on its own each day or maybe it doesn't but it has its own velocity. The characters have integrity, they are independent.

RA: It follows its own way.

HB: It does. If that continually offends, I don't care. I have no desire to offend but I do offend, it would appear. I'm following the trajectory of the collisions and emotions.

RA: I guess the motivation for those characters as well, have their own kind of independent drive?

HB: It might even be boredom I think. Someone said, 'How do you write each bit?' and I said, 'It's very unconscious but when I sense the appearance of a cliché, I'll do anything to evade it. I'll take a sharp turn away'. Nothing that happens is really

predictable. I do not know but I doubt there's much in *Seven Lears* that you could say, 'I saw that coming' because you can't, can you?

RA: No, at no point.

HB: No, and that's partly effort but it's also partly instinct.

RA: On that topic of sharp turns and the unpredictable…I must say that when I first read *Seven Lears*, I had read *King Lear* many times and I always thought of it as being a proto-socialist play.

HB: *King Lear*?

RA: Yes, and...

HB: Because of his solidarity with the poor?

RA: Exactly, exactly. When I came to read your play and Lear has that moment of enlightenment, if you like, right at the beginning of the play, where he discovers that the prison...

HB: The corpses and the dead…

RA: ...Yes, and he has a moment of sympathetic identification and talks about the need to reform his society to make it better…

HB: It's only brief…!

RA: Yes, it is – but I remember thinking at the time, 'Yes, this is absolutely right' and identifying with that idea and being...

HB: Wounded?

RA: Wounded, yes, definitely.

HB: Yes, because later on, he decides they have to stay down there, doesn't he?

RA: He does. He refuses to align his own...

HB: Soul with that. There you are; you've put your finger on it. The theatre is governed by people who are humanist and they can't tolerate dissonance. They think it's mischievous. I do think, in their contemptuous way, they think I'm being mischievous.

RA: Just on the topic, I just wanted to ask you about the full title of *Seven Lears*. It's *Seven Lears: The Pursuit of the Good* and yet obviously, over the play, Lear would seem to be – and at points describes himself – as being 'evil'.

HB: Yes, but I don't think he ever renounces the idea that what he's trying to get to is good. He just keeps redefining what good is which is, after all, what society does, doesn't it? What was good in 1914 is certainly not good now. Goodness is an unstable commodity, isn't it? That's what he does. He starts off with a very fixed, Christian, humanist view of pain and then, as he moves on, he accommodates pain into another kind of system of his own creation and moves the word 'good' around.

RA: The fact Clarissa is murdered at the end...

HB: Oh, Clarissa is good. Nauseatingly good. He says so.

RA: ...but also has a very strict understanding of what good means and should be and tries to impose that on those around her. The word that I was really interested in is in the prologue to the play is 'necessary'. It talks about the family hatred toward the wife/mother and says that, while it is 'unjust', it may have been 'necessary'. That word 'necessary' is obviously very morally ambivalent [*laughter*].

HB: Yes, it's asking for trouble, isn't it? Necessary to preserve his sanity, I suppose, even though the play is about his loss of sanity. Clarissa's a very, very pitiful figure. I wouldn't bestow the word 'tragic' on her, but she's terribly sad. She's not a bad woman at all. She's conventionally the opposite. She wants to be loved and she wants to love him but he continually writhes away from it because everything she says offends something in him; some deep sense of truth which he thinks she is overriding or ignoring and she maddens him. That's why I think it's necessary that either she goes or he does.

RA: I see.

HB: He decides it's her.

RA: So it's the idea you've talked about before, where you have these intimate relationships that finally terminate in...termination [*laughter*].

HB: Yes, though it's scarcely a passionate relationship which most of the love affairs of my plays tend to be; after all, it's her mother he loves. He's obsessed by the mother and not the girl. His marriage to Clarissa seems to be very dynastic and innocent.

RA: Similar to Hamlet's marriage, I guess, in *Gertrude – The Cry*.

HB: Oh yes, absolutely sexless.

RA: Yes, and talking about it being almost a national duty [*laughter*].

HB: My emphasis is always on desire having its own legitimacies. My short piece *Dog Death in Macedonia*…

RA: Yes, I saw that.

HB: Did you?

RA: Yes…I was thinking about that, actually, where Euripides is pissed on at the end, I seem to remember.

HB: Yes, his mistress pisses on him. Well, she tries and doesn't, actually. She's too anxious to piss.

RA: I thought, in a way, that where you talk about something that seems to be somehow degrading towards another writer or another presence is actually an act of respect.

HB: Yes, although I wasn't even thinking of him as a fellow writer at that point. I was just thinking of him as a person who happened to wash up in this place Macedonia [*laughter*] and was hating his life, and how her act is a gesture of love. Why shouldn't it be? But this is England. Oh god, it's England [*laughter*].

RA: I loved that line where Euripides declares, 'Blame Plato for everything' [*laughter*].

HB: Don't we all? [*laughter*].

RA: I just wanted to ask you, perhaps, one last Shakespeare question which is about the distinction between *Seven Lears* and *Gertrude – The Cry* and your development as a playwright. *Seven Lears* was originally staged the same year [1989] the first edition of *Arguments for a Theatre* was published, while *Gertrude – The Cry* – 2002 I think was the first staging – precedes *Death, the One and the Art of Theatre*, which appears few years after [2004]. I was just wondering if, perhaps, these plays...it's very reductive to say this… but perhaps can be seen as...if *Seven Lears* is more of a Catastrophist play, then perhaps *Gertrude* is more akin to the 'Art of Theatre' as you would come to define it?

HB: Oh gosh! I didn't think there was much of a development between my Art of Theatre and Catastrophe [*laughter*].

RA: I suppose in terms of the even more intense focus on ideas of death and eroticism.

HB: Yes, they are more intense in *Gertrude*, of course. When you are younger, you are wittier. There's a lot to be found simply in terms of wittiness in *Seven Lears*. It is cruel in that way. It feels quite a young man's play, but by the time I get to *Gertrude – The Cry*, I think I'm...Oh, I don't know...more concentrated at every level. I will not use the word 'pessimistic'. There's a curse hanging over the characters in those later texts.

RA: It also seems that perhaps *Gertrude* is more claustrophobic, in the sense that in *Seven Lears* you have quite a sense of a wider society.

HB: Yes, and places alter.

RA: Yes.

HB: The siting of *Gertrude – The Cry* is intensive. It could be just one room. There's a funeral scene and a scene in a park, but it's much tighter. It's also more obsessed with death. In *Seven Lears*, Lear talks of death a great deal but it's the way a younger man would talk about death as being something that's only *possible* [*laughter*]. It's the slow, determined appearance of death in *Gertrude* which distinguishes it. Claudius draws death onto himself and understands, at last, that's where he must go and why he's going there and that she, for all her magnificence is the means by which he must get to it. The real beauty of that play, and I think it is a beautiful play, is the way she helps him die at the end. She has two very long speeches where she says, 'I'll do this. I'll do that. I'll marry this other man and we'll fuck. Oh, you're still alive. I'll give you some more' and she lays on more of this pain on him. It's a considered murder.

RA: As if she is inducting him into it.

HB: Yes, and I think that's beautiful and I don't think I've ever known that to happen in a play. I think it's both original and very beautiful. To talk a man to death for love.

RA: For Lear, it's more a philosophical conundrum; whereas, for Claudius, it's a driving...

HB: Yes, it's beyond philosophy. It's instinctive but what fuels Lear is what I always think a clever, young student should be, as you probably are. This idea smashing into that idea. I think it's a celebration of... I hate that word [*laughter*]... youthfulness. It shows what I think is beautiful about youth, even though it's often wrong and he's

often wrong. The joy with which he receives an idea and proclaims it, before exchanging it for another, is pure youth, I think.

RA: I think he describes himself as a child at one point, doesn't he?

HB: He does.

RA: It's a constant probing of limits, all the time.

HB: Now I'm talking about it, I think it's a good play.

RA: Just, perhaps, one last question, I don't want to intrude too much on your time but...

HB: No, keep going if you want.

RA: ...are your Conversations with Shakespeare ongoing? *Macbeth* obviously interests you.

HB: I don't think they'll be ongoing. I'm seventy now and I write continuously, as you probably know, but I don't know that I want to negotiate anything with an existing text anymore. I can't be sure.

RA: So it's a conversation that's had a full stop?

HB: I can't be sure. No, maybe or certainly a dot, dot, dot...

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(For ease of reference, I have separated works by and relating to Edward Bond, David Rudkin, Howard Barker, Sarah Kane, Shakespeare and *King Lear* from a more general bibliography.)

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