

On King Lear and the "Avoidance of Love"

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I. The World and the Stage

The Worldly Poet

Shakespeare is our most worldly poet. This much seems to be a point of convergence among critics. But what does this mean? For Thomas Carlyle it meant that Shakespeare's poetry was "broad" rather than "deep". Shakespeare was a poet of *the* world, rather than *a* world. By contrast, Dante exemplified a "deep" poet. The final referent of Dante's poetry was not the world but eternity, and his world vision was distinctly that of the medieval epoch. Dante's greatness was to refine this vision to the point of perfection. For Carlyle, this was partially a result of Dante's political misfortune, which occasioned in his earthly homelessness. "The earthly world had cast [Dante] forth, to wander, wander; no living heart to love him now; for his sore miseries there was no solace here."

The deeper naturally would the Eternal World impress itself on him; that awful reality over which, after all, this Time-world, with its Florences and banishments, only flutters as an unreal shadow. Florence thou shalt never see: but Hell and Purgatory and Heaven thou shalt surely see! What is Florence, Can della Scala, and the World and Life altogether? ETERNITY: thither, of a truth, not elsewhither, art thou and all things bound! The great soul of Dante, homeless on earth, made its home more and more in that awful other world.

Carlyle describes the "depth" of Dante's vision by reference to the poet's psychological "intensity." To the modern eye, Dante's seems "a narrow, and even sectarian mind: it is partly the fruit of his age and position, but partly too of his own nature. His greatness has, in all senses, concentrated itself into fiery emphasis and depth. He is world-great not because he is worldwide, but because he is world-deep. Through all objects he pierces as it were down into the heart of Being."

Cast in relief against this image of a "world-deep" Dante, Shakespeare emerges in his modernity, as a "worldwide" poet. Rather than penetrating through all things "down to the heart of Being," Shakespeare's poetry steadfastly, at times maddeningly (both literally and figuratively), limns the surface of things; thus he conjures great poetry from the ordinary, ephemeral frictions of human existence. He was the first great secular poet. "The Christian Faith, which was the theme of Dante's Song, had produced this Practical Life which Shakspeare was to sing." But, emphatically, the subject of Shakespeare's poetry was "Practical Life." His nature was not deep but broad; his gift was not intensity,

but intellect. "Two fit men: Dante, deep, fierce as the central fire of the world; Shakspeare, wide, placid, far-seeing, as the Sun, the upper light of the world."

Even as he praises Shakespeare's "divine" intellect, and likens the poet to a prophet (Mohammad), Carlyle censures the incipient tendency to "idolize" Shakespeare. He heaps fulsome praise on the bard's incomparably worldly astuteness, yet he suggests that it depends on otherworldly inspiration: "there is more in Shakspeare's intellect than we have yet seen. It is...an unconscious intellect; there is more virtue in it than he himself is aware of." Even as Carlyle insists on the distance between Dante's eternal depth and Shakespeare's worldly breadth, he entertains the thought that this breadth may yet be the substance of a renovated religion of nature:

We called Dante the melodious Priest of Middle-Age Catholicism. May we not call Shakspeare the still more melodious Priest of a *true* Catholicism, the "Universal Church" of the Future and of all times? No narrow superstition, harsh asceticism, intolerance, fanatical fierceness or perversion: a Revelation, so far as it goes, that such a thousand-fold hidden beauty and divineness dwells in all Nature; which let all men worship as they can!

In the almost two centuries since Carlyle uttered these words, the incomparably worldliness of Shakespeare's art has become a matter of almost unanimous assent. The same cannot be said of his apocalypse of nature, of course. And the implications that follow from Shakespeare's agreed-upon worldliness remain the subject of disagreement and controversy. Writing a century later, T.S. Eliot's view was not far from Carlyle's. For Eliot, the chief difference between otherworldly Dante and worldly Shakespeare is that the former had a "philosophy" (by which he seems to mean, a doctrine regarding eternity and the conduct of life,) while the latter lacked one. Lacking a philosophy, Shakespeare's worldly poetry has little to teach us about the conduct of life. Thus "it is a little irony," writes Eliot,

that when a poet, like Dante, sets out with a definite philosophy and a sincere determination to guide conduct, his philosophical and ethical pattern is discounted, and our interpreters insist upon the pure poetry which is to be disassociated from the reprehensible effort to do us good, And that when a poet like Shakespeare, who has no 'philosophy' and apparently no design upon the amelioration of behaviour, sets forth his experience and reading of life, he is forthwith saddled with a 'philosophy' of his own and some esoteric hints towards conduct. So we kick against those who wish to guide us, and insist on being guided by those who only aim to show us a vision, a dream if you like, which is beyond good and evil in the common sense ("Introduction" to G.W. Knight, *The Wheel of Fire*).

George Orwell ("Lear, Tolstoy, and the Fool") held a similar opinion of Shakespeare's worldliness: "Shakespeare was not a philosopher or a scientist, but he did have curiosity, he loved the surface of the earth and the process of life... Of course, it is not because of the quality of his thought that Shakespeare has survived... His main hold on us is through language."

By “language,” Orwell means poetic language. At the extreme, poetic language needs no referent. “Evidently,” Orwell surmises, “pieces of resounding nonsense ...were constantly appearing in Shakespeare’s mind of their own accord, and a half-lunatic character had to be invented to use them up.” This “resounding nonsense” is the sense in which poetry, in particular, can be worldly or can even comprise a world unto itself, “beyond good and evil in the common sense.” For Tolstoy, who was a great enemy of Shakespeare, such mellifluous nonsense held out precisely the danger of transporting its auditors to a world “beyond good and evil,” and subverting ordinary morality in the process. Shakespeare’s worldliness betrays the moral purpose of art. Tolstoy “would...have rejected the whole notion of valuing poetry for its texture—valuing it, that is to say, as a kind of music.” And if it could be shown that mellifluousness is the cause of Shakespeare’s popularity, this would only confirm Tolstoy’s judgment of the world’s fallenness, be “one more proof of the irreligious, earthbound nature of Shakespeare and his admirers. Tolstoy would have said that poetry is to be judged by its meaning and that seductive sounds merely cause false meanings to go unnoticed. At every level it is the same issue—this world against the next: and certainly the music of words is something that belongs to this world.”

Leaving aside, for now, Tolstoy’s “religious” question, let us consider briefly various contemporary critics’ interpretations of Shakespeare’s worldliness, and in particular, of his most worldly play, *King Lear*. At the most mundane (in the ordinary sense) end of the spectrum is Stephen Greenblatt’s view. For Greenblatt *King Lear* is a play about the anxieties of retirement for a suburbanite. “It was not a matter of mistrust—[Shakespeare] seems to have loved and trusted one his daughters at least. It was a matter of identity. If *King Lear* is any indication, [Shakespeare] shared with his contemporaries a fear of retirement and dread of dependence upon children.”

Marjorie Garber offers a more interesting thesis that Shakespeare’s dramatic compositions have the almost magical power to mirror the world in which they are received. Rather than emphasizing the musicality of Shakespeare’s poetry, Garber chooses a visual metaphor: “Like a portrait whose eyes seem to follow you around the room, engaging your glance from every angle, [Shakespeare’s] plays and their characters seem always to be ‘modern,’ always to be ‘us.’” Still, it is Shakespeare’s *language* that is to account for this effect. “[I]f Shakespeare seems to us in a surprising way so ‘modern,’ it is because in a sense his language and his characters have created a lexicon of modernity.” To illustrate the point Garber sets forth a brief history of the reception of *King Lear*:

King Lear as written and performed in its original historical context was concerned with pressing questions for the seventeenth century, like absolute monarchy, and royal succession and the obligations of vassals. For most citizens of the twenty-first century, “king” is an archaic title, as it emphatically was not for the subjects of James I, under whose patronage

Shakespeare's company, the King's Men, performed and prospered. Mid-twentieth-century-readers often translated "king" into "father," seeing the drama as centered on the family rather than the realm. Lear's railing against the heavens has often been understood as existential. At various moments, Lear became a sign of male power, of the pathos of aging, even of the end of an actor's career. "King Lear" is a cultural icon, cited by philosopher, legislators, and politicians, as well as literary scholars—and gerontologists and therapists. The character has a cultural life derived from, but also distinct from, the play.

Perhaps the most provocative and influential twentieth-century interpretation of *King Lear* has been that of Jan Kott. Like Garber, Kott accentuates the historicity of the play. But, unlike Garber, Kott focuses on the play's world more than its characters. More significantly, whereas Garber stresses the plasticity of the play's world, its capacity to mirror the worlds of its audiences, Kott emphasizes the obduracy and absurdity of *King Lear's* world, in all its mechanical indifference to personal reality. Indeed, for Kott, the worldliness of *King Lear* is so thorough that it could only reveal itself wholly to an audience living in the most worldly of epochs, the late twentieth century.

Kott's essay, "*King Lear, or Endgame*," basically equates the world of *King Lear* with the absurdist world of Beckett's plays. "The image of history attributed to Shakespeare is static, all powerful, absolute, what Kott calls the 'Grand Mechanism': 'For Shakespeare history stands still. Every chapter opens and closes at the same point'" (Lieblein, 41). There is no moral significance to this absolute power, "[the] absolute is not endowed with any ultimate reason; it is stronger, and that is all. The absolute is absurd" (Kott, 133). Nonetheless, it remains necessary for the hero to act; and the inevitability of his death does not render it unjust or unfair, for it, too, is only necessary. "The hero has to play even if there is no game. Every move is bad, but he cannot throw down his cards. To throw down the cards would also be a bad move" (135). This focus on the necessity of choosing in spite of one's powerlessness to affect the inevitable outcome is a point of similarity between ancient tragedy and the modern absurd. The hero's fate is inevitable, but not unjust, because it occurs according to the obdurate mechanism of the world. "In its game with Oedipus fate does not invoke the help of the gods, does not change the laws of nature. Fate wins its game without recourse to miracles... The game must be just, but at the same time must be so arranged that the same party always wins; so that Oedipus always loses" (136).

However, modern tragedy differs from ancient tragedy in its substitution of history for "fate, gods and nature":

History is the only frame of reference, the final authority to accept or reject the validity of human actions. It is unavoidable and realizes its ultimate aims; it is objective "reason", as well as objective "progress". In this scheme of things history is a theatre with actors but without an audience. No one watches the performance for everybody is taking part. The script of this grand

spectacle has been composed in advance and includes a necessary epilogue, which will explain everything. But, as in the *comedia dell'arte*, the text has not been written down. The actors improvise and only some of them foresee correctly what will happen in the following acts. In this particular theater the scene changes with the actors; they are constantly setting it up and pulling it down again (138 – 139).

Kott's interpretation of Shakespeare may be overly existentialist, but his theatrical interpretation of modern historicism does explain *King Lear's* special relevance to our epoch. Northrop Frye explains this relevance by comparing *King Lear* and *Hamlet*. *Hamlet* was the play of greatest interest to the nineteenth century, says Frye, "because it dramatized all the central Romantic and nineteenth-century problems: the conception of consciousness as the assassin of action, the sense of the disharmony of inner and outer worlds, the role of the creative imagination in overcoming the disharmony, and the obstacles and failures that the creative impulse meets with" (204).

The nineteenth century's version of *King Lear*, however, was still bowdlerized to avoid depressing the audience with its unhappy ending. Moreover, on the stage, the use of props and effects detracted from a true presentation of the world of *King Lear*, which in Kott's opinion, is typified by the minimalism and pantomime of Gloucester's suicide scene (144). But the nineteenth century was not ripe for *King Lear*.

The leitmotif of *King Lear* that explains its resonance with late-twentieth century audiences derives from the vision of history Kott describes, above; as Frye puts it: The Stage Is All the World. "All the world is a stage" may be Shakespeare's most popular line, but Frye reminds us that this sentiment is uttered in soliloquy and belongs to

what we, in this age of Brecht, might call, an alienation speech. It reminds us that we are watching a play, or rather a play within the drama of the world, and a remarkably artificial and withdrawn dramatic scene at that... An actor has a life apart from his acting, [but to identify] life with a series of actor's roles is really what is alienating [about this notion]. [This identification implies that man] is simply an acting mechanism, a mechanism that soon wears out (202-203).

Hamlet displays "how the axiom of the world as a stage can take on tragic form." Hamlet finds himself imprisoned in his own identity, which is defined by "the limitations of his role-playing powers." Unable to come to terms with this, and hemmed in not by his past so much as his future, defined by the duty of vengeance, Hamlet's "frustration becomes claustrophobic." What results, dramatically speaking, is "perhaps the most impressive example of a titanic spirit thrashing around in the prison of what he is, longing for death but suspecting that suicide will not release him any more than murder did his father" (203).

Frye detects the stage-is-all-the-world metaphor in Lear's remark: "When we are born, we cry that we are come / To this great stage of fools" (206). In Shakespeare's day, Frye tells us, "the universe was assumed to have been intelligently designed by its Creator and intelligent meant having some relation to human life" (204). In the Christian *mythos* in particular this "intelligent relation" took the form of divine providence. As a result, Shakespeare's audience had an unconscious blind spot for a really tragic vision of the world. In the most vulgar expression of providence, God "was a composer of sentimental domestic comedies... Providence would never go in for a [tragic, ironic] story" (205).

"The story of the salvation and redemption of mankind is a comedy because it comes out right and ends happily for all those whose opinion of the matter counts. Secular ideologies [also], whether progressive or revolutionary, are mostly comic plots imposed on history" (205). The revocation of any such providence is what makes *King Lear* a world-stage of fools, accounts for its popularity among paramours of existentialism, and renders essential the King's and Cordelia's deaths. "Absurd meant among other things that the providential God who kept gimmicking his way through human history to some kind of future happy ending was dead as anything that had never been alive can be" (207).

In the wake of twentieth-century *dogmatomachia*, then, the vision of a world without providence had finally ripened. "The world-stage of fools in *King Lear*...is the theater of the Absurd, where no hidden benevolent design becomes manifest, where rebellion, obedience, courage, loyalty, acceptance or rejection of religious belief, all seem to be without direction in a world set up largely to benefit the Gonerils and the Cornwalls." (207)

Theater as Second Reality

One way of looking at the difference between *Hamlet* and *King Lear* is in terms of distinction between character as an "acting mechanism"—all the world's a stage—and the world, as "Grand Mechanism"—the stage is all the world. *King Lear* presents the latter view. For the world of Lear may be bereft of providence, "set up largely to benefit the Gonerils and the Cornwalls," but it is still a "world" and is "set up" in a certain (intelligible) way. Just as we see Hamlet thrashing about in the confines of his own identity, we see at the other extreme, in *King Lear*, a world that acts while we in the audience watch the characters try to keep up. Kott compares the effect of *King Lear* to a "'barrel of laughs'...a score or more people try to keep their balance while the upturned barrel revolves round its axis. One can only keep one's balance by moving on the bottom of the barrel in the opposite direction to, and with the same

speed as, its movement... The more violent [the characters'] gestures and their grip of the walls, the more difficult it is for them to get up and the funnier they look" (140).

In literary criticism, the "world" of a play is referred to as its "structure." This structure is distinguished from the play's characters. This structure, the play's world, is comprised of words. As Orwell says, this poetic world exists unto itself, "beyond good and evil in the common sense." As Stanley Cavell observes at the outset of his essay on *King Lear*, the trajectory of Shakespeare criticism runs from an interest in the plays' characters to their "structure." Notably, this trajectory parallels the transition from *Hamlet* to *King Lear* discussed above: nineteenth-century critics were interested in Shakespeare's personages, and twentieth-century critics, in his poetry.

Cavell wants to challenge this tidy division between character and structure, however.

Like most intellectual maps, this one is not only crude but fails worst in locating the figures one would like best to reach: Can Coleridge or Bradley really be understood as interested in characters *rather than* in the words of the play; or are the writings of Empson and G. Wilson Knight well used in saying that they are interested in what is happening in the words *rather than* what is happening in the speakers of the words? It is, however, equally easy and unhelpful to say that both ends of the tradition have been equally interested *both* in characters *and* in their words, first because this suggests that there are two things each end is interested in, whereas both would or should insist that they are interested only in one thing, the plays themselves; second, because there is clearly a shift in emphasis within that tradition, and a way of remarking that shift is to say that it moves away from studies of character into studies of words, and because such a shift raises problems of history and of criticism which ought not to be muffled in handy accommodations (267-268).

On the occasion of his essay on *King Lear*, then, Cavell announces his intention to deconstruct the "crude" division between character and structure in literary criticism, which amounts to an effort to reconcile the characters with their worlds and vice versa. This reconciliation is not a matter of "[putting] words back into the characters speaking them, and [replacing] characters from our possession back into their words. The point is rather to learn something about what prevents these commendable activities from taking place [and to learn] what it is one uses as data for one's assertions about such works, what kinds of appeal one in fact finds convincing" (270). Cavell wants to challenge the dichotomy between character and structure and simultaneously to acknowledge the significance of the shift (from character to structure) as an event in the history of criticism. It is implied that a diagnosis of this event itself would be a step toward reconciliation.

The crucial issue here is the relationship between language and the world. As Cavell recognizes, that question has both aesthetic and political valence. My aim in this section is to construct a dialogue between Cavell's aesthetic project and Eric Voegelin's political thought, by way of the concept of

“second reality.” Thus at times I shall discuss Cavell’s approach to the question of how language relates to the world using the Voegelinian idiom of second reality. Cavell’s approach involves a fusion of Wittgenstein’s and Austen’s philosophy of language with Heidegger’s existential ontology, circumscribed by Cavell’s allegiance to the American Philosophical tradition of Emerson and Thoreau. In spite of their significant differences in approach and subject matter, Voegelin, too, is a figure at the intersection of analytical and continental thought, drawing on both traditions but contained by neither. I proceed on the conviction that Cavell’s sensitivity to the history of drama, combined with Voegelin’s sensitivity to the drama of history, will shed greater light on the world of *King Lear* than either would alone.

Cavell’s emphasis on the problematic nature of the data we use for assertions about poetic works is identical to the emphasis found in ordinary language philosophy on the fact that language is the data for all sorts of assertions (philosophical and otherwise). But words always are spoken by particular people in particular circumstances, and so meaning is a function of both the accepted use of the term and the sense intended by the speaker. Even deeper difficulties arise from the fact that, when pressed, often we cannot say what we mean or supply the meaning of what we have said, and yet we go on talking anyhow. “Because the connection between using a word and meaning what it says is not inevitable or automatic, one may wish to call it a matter of convention. But one must not suppose that it is a convention we would know how to forego” (270-271).

Ordinary language, then, is both a means of representation (a convention), and a kind of reality that we cannot get behind (we would not know how to forego it). When it comes to everyday talk, it seems possible to adumbrate some of the rules of our “language games” by appealing to the pragmatic circumstances in which speakers use certain words. However, the case is different with poetic language. Poetic language involves “forms of words whose meaning cannot be elicited in this way...because there is no ordinary use of them, in that sense. It is not, therefore, that I mean something *other* than those words would ordinarily mean, but rather than what they mean, and whether they mean anything, depends solely on whether I am using them to make my meaning” (271).

One might say that a poetic world constitutes its own “language game,” and for this reason, poetic language is not “ordinary” but “extraordinary.” I want to suggest, first, that this capacity for extraordinary language is the condition of the possibility of second reality. Not all poetic representations are second realities, but all second realities are dependent upon extraordinary language. Secondly, as a corollary, the allure of second reality involves intoxication with (the use of) poetic language. Philosophers have long been aware of this sort of “intoxication”. Voegelin points out, “for instance, [that] the term *magic*, in the sense of the magic of the word, appears for the first time in a production

by Gorgias the sophist...where he speaks of the magic of the power of Paris in persuading Helen to come along with him." Both Gorgias and Plato compared this magic to drugging. "Plato, in the *Laws*, where he also speaks of the crime of drugging somebody...subdivides the problem...into drugging by chemicals and drugging by words." And this interest in the magic of language is not confined to philosophy, of course: it was Shakespeare, in *Antony and Cleopatra*, who gave us the term "brainwashing" (Voegelin, DOH: 382-383).

Two sets of issues are implicated in the notion of second reality. First are general questions of representation and reality: Why do we represent reality, and what makes for a good representation? Must all representation refer to some object (beyond itself), and to what extent does representation construct its object? Obviously, these and related questions belong to the highest realms of speculation.

A second set of issues, posterior to the first, belongs to the more narrow construction of "second realities." Here, I define second realities as intoxicating representations that (falsely) purport to be transparent to the "primary," common, or shared reality of man in the world. As a socially designating a space for the poetic representation of reality, the stage is at least neutral with respect to such constructions. No reasonable person mistakes the stage for reality in the way one might mistake Hegel's or Marx's laws of history for the real "drama of humanity."

The very existence of a theater sets aside the generic questions of representation of reality. When we enter a theater we enter a space for the presentation of second reality as such. For Tolstoy, this was reason enough have misgivings about theater, and his indictment of Shakespeare is a projection of these concerns. But in fact, it is indispensable to have such a space, as Tolstoy recognized by composing drama himself. If it were easy to tell the difference between primary reality and second reality *outside* of the theater, then the critique of ideology as "second reality" would be as easy to mount as Tolstoy's attack on Shakespeare; but in the same measure, the analysis would be less promising as a diagnosis of "derailed" states of order.

By taking what seemed to be the clearer path of identifying theater and second reality, Tolstoy blinded himself to the greatness of *King Lear*. Poetic drama can have the effect of drugging, but a play like *King Lear* is sobering in way that only poetic drama can be. Indeed, our greatest modern tragedy should not be described as cathartic, so much as sobering. But Tolstoy's reading demonstrates that this sobering effect is not possible if one fails to participate in the reality of the drama.

Theater is the site of our participation in drama. Theater domesticates "second reality." Much to the chagrin of the Merry Pranksters, the conventions of theater—like those of novel reading or museum-going—only make sense if the stage is a place apart from reality as experienced outside its

precincts. (Not literally outside: Greek tragedy may have been performed outdoors, but it always transpired within a sacred precinct.) The conventions of the theater permit the stage to be a world unto itself. Authorized by the “suspension of disbelief,” all is permitted on the stage. But by the same token, the “world” of the play is never identical with the world in the broader sense. Thus it is only a trivial fact that the world of any play is a second reality. As far as this goes, Dr. Johnson “is right in dismissing ...the idea that we need to have what happens in a theater made credible, and right to find that such a demands proceed from a false idea that otherwise what happens in a theater is incredible...that our response to the events on a stage is neither to credit nor to discredit them” (Cavell, 327).

But Dr. Johnson fails to ask the question “re-raised” by Hume: “Why should [theater] provide entertainment?”—let alone the questioned resurrected by “Rousseau, for whom the theater was important: What is the good of such entertainment” (327)? As Shakespeare was well aware, the aesthetic distance from the common world provided by theater is not merely a license for inventiveness; it is also an opportunity to reflect on the boundary between reality and semblance as such. And as Voegelin suggests, “great literature” seizes this opportunity. In addition to being consummate creations, Voegelin insists, “one shouldn’t forget that great works of art also have a content referring to man’s existence, and that they should be viewed under that aspect, and be valued under that aspect, and read under that aspect.” (383)

But is not art a matter of *escaping* reality rather than participating in it? Is that not precisely why we construct *other* worlds? If so, then, as Cavell observes, the real mystery is explaining why anyone would want to see *King Lear* (319)! Still, to assert for theater the possibility of being more than an escape to alternative worlds is to challenge the familiar modern dichotomy which posits a separation between the “real world,” public, systematic, accessible to knowledge by objective methods—discovered by science, not created by poetry—and a realm of mere representation—a private, arbitrary, subjective space comprised of poetic fancies. As Cavell’s observation implies, the trouble with this dichotomy is that it renders “serious” drama (like philosophy) at best useless, and at worst dangerous. In such a Tolstoyan reality the moral and psychological effect of serious drama would be homeopathic, at best.

To answer Tolstoy we need to do more than psychoanalyze him or compare the merits of his “religious” doctrine unfavorably to Shakespeare’s “humanistic” one. We need to answer the question: What is the reality of poetic drama? Here Cavell offers a reply—poetic drama is a meeting of “worlds” that transpires in a shared present.

Kant tells us that man lives in two worlds, in one of which he is free and in the other determined. It is as if in theater these two worlds are faced off against one another, in their intimacy and their mutual inaccessibility. The audience is free—of the circumstances and passion of the characters, but that freedom cannot reach the arena in which it could become effective. The actors are determined—not because their words and actions are dictated and their future sealed, but because, if the dramatist has really peopled a world, his characters are exercising all the freedom at their command and specifically failing to. Specifically; not exercising or ceding it once for all. They are in a word, men: and our liabilities in responding to them are nothing other than our liabilities in responding to any man (Cavell, 317).

This meeting is not a merger, but the two worlds—the audience and the stage—do share a present. For Cavell, *King Lear* exemplifies this effect with the greatest intensity: “this play works on us differently from other modes of theater...it is dramatic in a way, or at a depth, foreign to what we have come to expect in a theater, even...essentially dramatic in a way our theater and perception does not fathom” (320).

Poetic, musical, language is constitutive of this “essential” drama. It is the substance of the present shared by audience and actors. The essential experience of poetic language is that “first...one hears its directedness; second...one hears only what is happening now” (321). In virtue of these qualities, the world of the poetic word imitates human reality, an essential characteristic of which is “that life is lived in time” (321). Such a drama, then, demands more than passive spectatorship, it calls for active participation:

The perception or attitude demanded in following this drama is one which demands a continuous attention to what is happening at each here and now, as if everything of significance is happening at this moment, while each thing that happens turns a leaf of time. I think of it as an experience of *continuous presentness*. Its demands are as rigorous as those of any spiritual exercise—to let the past go and to let the future take its time; so that we not allow the past to determine the meaning of what is now happening...and that we not anticipate what will come of what has come (322).

For Cavell, *King Lear* fully exploits this potential meeting of Kant’s two worlds by addressing the possibility opened up by modern skepticism (and only later addressed philosophically by Kant), that reality itself is merely semblance. It is important to emphasize the theatricality of the skeptical proposition. Ancient skepticism never cast the world itself into doubt; but this is the essence of modern skepticism, as is made most clear by Hume. Of course, Humean skepticism is not a matter of denying reality outright. It is a matter of seriously entertaining the thought that the intelligible world (for Hume, the world of cause-and effect) is an illusion. If ancient skepticism denied the world of appearance in order to appeal to reality, modern skepticism denies this appeal by asserting that even reality is mediated by illusion. The irreversible effect of skepticism was not to deny the reality of the world but to

demonstrate the impotency of reason to confirm the world. Thus in a strict sense, skepticism merely “entertains” the emptiness of the world but does not affirm it. In this sense, skepticism is theatrical. It entertains, without affirming, the notion that all realities are second realities and can go no further than to acknowledge the paradox that, if this were the case, the very notion of reality is without sense. The stage is all the world.

***King Lear* and the Victims of the Vacuum**

The poetic substance of *King Lear* is ancient; thus it is compared to classical tragic drama. The intelligible form is modern; thus it is compared to the absurd or the grotesque. The combination yields a sobering spectacle rather than a cathartic one, because it addresses a world intoxicated by notions rather than by passions.

As Cavell suggests, *King Lear* displays the tragedy of modern skepticism, which amounts to the loss of the common world. Cavell titled his interpretation of *King Lear*, “The Avoidance of Love.” On the surface, the “avoidance” in Cavell’s thesis refers to Lear’s aversion to (especially Cordelia’s) love. Lear disowns his daughter for the same reason he retreats from his title: in order to obviate the gaze of “recognition” that is the condition of personal love. But it is no accident that Cavell employs the language of “avoidance” rather than “aversion,” because he sees the wider significance of *King Lear* in Shakespeare’s confrontation with modern philosophical skepticism’s “avoidance” of the world. The ironic tragedy of modern skepticism is that in its attempt to achieve a total grasp of reality intellectually, it results in evacuating the common world of significance. This radical a-voidance of the world’s meaning amounts to the loss of its immediate presence. As Cavell puts it:

in the unbroken tradition of epistemology since Descartes and Locke...the concept of knowledge of the world disengages from its connections with matters of information and skill and learning, and becomes fixed to the concept of certainty alone, and in particular to a certainty provided by the (by my) senses... [The] world normally present to us...is brought into question and vanishes, whereupon a connection with a world is found to hang upon what can be said to be ‘present to the sense’; and that turns out, shockingly, not to be the world. It is at this point that the doubter finds himself cast into skepticism, turning the existence of the external world into a problem.

The skeptic does not gleefully and mindlessly forgo the world we share, or thought we shared... He forgoes the world for just the reason that the world is important, that it is the scene and stage of connection with the present: he finds that it vanishes exactly with the effort to make it present. If this makes him unsuccessful, that is because the presentness achieved by certainty of the senses cannot compensate for the presentness which had been elaborated through our old absorption in the world (323).

What lies beyond this diagnosis? Is there a remedy? In its ordinary significance, the very notion of *dia-gnosis* implies that understanding alone will not remedy the illness in question. Diagnosis is necessarily a first step. And what if, as in both Voegelin's and Cavell's case, diagnosis reveals that the failure, or limitation, or inadequacy of *gnosis* is the root of our problem?

Indeed, the primary shared concern Voegelin's and Cavell's philosophy is a diagnosis of the limits of *gnosis*, or "knowing." To press, as they do, the limits of knowing, is not to endorse irrationalism. Rather it is to assert, as in their very different ways both thinkers have, that knowledge is not enough to save us. Voegelin, early in his career, diagnosed modern ideological mass-movements as manifestations of latter-day "Gnosticism." These movements were "political religions" promising immanent salvation through knowledge of the laws of history, or of human nature. Voegelin emphasizes that the appeal of such movements is not merely idiosyncratic, particularly when see the movements attract a mass following. But the ability to attract a mass following is no proof of the truth of an ideology. For Voegelin in particular the mass appeal of ideological second realities is a datum of the loss of the common world; the collapse of *homonoia*, which for many people in the modern period, issues in *paranoia*.

To elaborate on this point and its relevance to literature, let me take recourse here to Voegelin's brief comments on Thomas Pynchon's novels. In reading Pynchon, Voegelin was struck by the author's "almost classic examination of the pathological situations created by alienation and *paranoia*" (379). Voegelin emphasizes the diagnostic quality of Pynchon's art: "It is not only an interpretation that I am giving of a novel by Pynchon, but he knows it himself: He speaks of those people who are in the state of *paranoia* as 'the victims of the vacuum,'—the vacuum being the spiritual and intellectual vacuum with the loss of tension toward the beyond" (380).

The "tension toward the beyond" is a Voegelinian expression for (philosophical or theological) love as a world-ordering phenomenon. Since providence is the form this love assumes in the Christian *mythos* and in theology, in the post-Christian context of modern culture, "the loss of the tension" takes the form of an evacuation of divine providence. In other words, "the vacuum" has definite contours; it is a hole in the shape of divine providence. The victims of the vacuum try desperately to fill this hole. Ideologues and ideologies supply them with the means to do so. Voegelin elaborates:

[The] fundamental structure involved...is connected with the general problem of ideologies as conceptions of order in history, which has a determinate nature into which you have to fit. Now, where do such ideas as an order of history—with a determinate course, going to a certain end—come from, except from certain Christian and philosophical contexts of a creator who creates a world and is in foreknowledge of what that world is doing? He has providence, he has the *pronoia*...And if you have a *pronoia* conception, and this *pronoia* conception is perverted in the sense that it is imagined as a human foreknowing...then when you get [the] alienation of being

immanentized, you believe still in the *pronoia*, in the providence, only you assume that the providence is supplied by human beings. (380)

Reading *Gravity's Rainbow*, Voegelin observes that Pynchon "[details] in a massive casuistry" the paranoid symptomology of "the victims of the vacuum." Most significantly, Voegelin identifies a link between Pynchon's diagnosis of "the vacuum situation" and the rising purchase of ideological second realities. "[The] vacuum must be filled with some sort of reality; and if it isn't the real reality, you get second realities... And the second reality is the substituted reality, which you imagine [...] if the real reality is lost in a state of alienation... At the back of [this state of alienation] is, of course, generally [...] a being thrown out of a context in which life makes sense." (381)

Cavell emphasizes the connection between modern skepticism and world-alienation, but Voegelin would insist that the advent of modern skepticism is not the first, nor the only event that rescinds "our old absorption in the world." Indeed, Voegelin consistently emphasized that alienation from the world is not a specifically modern experience. It arises generally under circumstances of crisis, political disorder, dislocation or cultural change. For example: "You have these problems already appearing in the third century B.C. with the Stoics in the wake of Alexander's conquest with the destruction of ethnic cultures."

Voegelin likens such "established cultures" to "the house in which we live." When these dwellings are destroyed by historical events, then an emptiness and alienation may occur. One response to this crisis is to build "second realities as a protective house" to substitute for the lost context of significance. However, not all cultural contexts are the same, and so for instance the vacuum diagnosed by Pynchon, and its paranoiac symptomology, are particularly modern manifestations of the second-reality phenomenon.

There are two distinct features of the modern, post-Christian vacuum which are especially relevant. The first specific feature is the ascendancy of secular ideologies—Frye's "comic plots imposed upon history". The contemporary forms of alienation and paranoia in question "are not simply individual problems, but they dominate the contemporary scene in the form of the various ideologues, who always want either to persecute somebody, or feel persecuted by somebody else, or mostly both at the same time" (379).

The second specific feature involves a consistency in the structure of these modern ideologies, regardless of differences in their content. Modern ideologies exhibit the same basic structure. That structure begins with misconstruing "the world" as an absolute reality rather than an idea which depends for its significance on its relation to two other ideas: God and man. "What happens in the

modern period is the erection of the idea of the world into an absolute, as if the world existed in itself, which it does not" (220).

This point requires further discussion, as it is the crux of Voegelin's diagnosis of modern second realities. In the state of "our old absorption," which Voegelin would refer to as "cosmological" consciousness, the "world" as such cannot be named—if one could name it one would not be absorbed in it. So the symbol "world" is a register of the alienation arising from the appearance of self-consciousness. Voegelin designates this event "the epiphany of man." The idea of the world is one of the "three universals," a new symbol-complex engendered by this epiphany:

[Man] is the one who has consciousness—other things in the world do not have consciousness in this sense. So the universal idea of man appears, man and mankind. Then at the pole of transcendence there now appears the idea of a universal divinity under which all men live, becoming man by their presence under universal divinity. Then the rest of the world, now with the exception of man and divinity, is a world common to all—we have a universal idea of the world in that sense. These three universal ideas must be kept in balance. You cannot isolate one against the other because as soon as you isolate the one or the other, the other two become senseless. Only the three together are an adequate description of the reality that formerly was experienced in the primary form of cosmic experience, and now, on the level of consciousness, splits into these three universals, which cover all of reality. On the level of consciousness, the intactness of the tension, the balance of the tension, you might say, is the condition of [keeping] all reality in proper balance (220).

Thus the generic structure of modern second realities involves an imbalance among these symbols in the conscious representation of reality. In every case the world is erected as an absolute. Furthermore, in every case, modern second realities assume the following form: "man becomes a function of the world, and God becomes a function of man" (221).

One cannot fail to notice in Voegelin's adumbration of the *pronoia-paranoia* structure some of the fundamental issues of *King Lear*. The erection of the word into an absolute and the evacuation of providence is what Frye refers to when he says that an "absurd" world is one in which "the providential God...[is] as dead as anything that had never been alive can be." As *King Lear* shows us, an empty throne is not the same as the absence of monarchy. To advance a most general conclusion, then, the world of *King Lear* is a world where *homonoia* has collapsed, but it is also a world in which each of the characters, when not insane, clings to some "*pronoia* conception [that is]perverted in the sense that it is imagined as a human foreknowing." Again, Frye's description of *Lear's* stage of fools is apropos:

The word *fool* is applied to practically every decent character in the play. The characters who are not fools are Goneril, Regan, and Edmund particularly: for them the world is "nature," and nature is a jungle in which the predators are the privileged class. But Albany is called a "moral fool" by Goneril because he is unwilling to accept such a world; Kent is a quixotic fool because of his loyalty to an outcast king; the Fool himself is a "natural" who illustrates the

proverb “Children and fools tell the truth.” There is also a sense of the word that seems to be peculiar to Shakespeare: the fool as victim, as the kind of person to whom things happen. In this sense, Lear calls himself “the natural fool of fortune,” and it is in this sense, or a closely related one, that he speaks of the world as a stage of fools. Various characters make comments on the meaning of events that occur to them: they are foolish comments in the sense of being the cries of victims who can’t see their tormentors. Gloucester, at one point, speaks of the gods killing men for their sport; Albany, a well-meaning if rather weak man, keeps noting signs of a providence that will work out an approximate justice in things; Edgar searches for moral explanations of tragic events that make some sense when applied to Gloucester but none when applied to Lear (206).

II. The World of *King Lear*

As a place designated for the performance of other worlds, the stage is just the space to entertain the vision of a non-Christian, non-classical world, in which, nonetheless, some people entertain classical and Christian beliefs. This combination of world and characters might resemble our “post-Christian” epoch, except that *King Lear* transpires in a *past* time, *before* the emergence of self-consciousness and the loss of our old absorption in the world. The significance of this point is lost if one assumes that primary reality is a world-stage. Thus it is important to emphasize the point, discussed above, that “the world” is a symbol which registers the loss of absorption. “That is perhaps a problem difficult to grasp because we are so accustomed to speaking of ‘the world in which we live,’ or the world of physics,’ or ‘the universe of physics,’ and so on. We take it for granted that there is such a thing” (Voegelin DOH, 220).

Forgetting the difference between the stage and the reality beyond its precinct is a symptom of hypostasizing the symbol, “the world.” For precisely the same reason that it is misleading to speak of “the world in which we live,” however, it is perfectly appropriate to speak of “the world” of a play. The poetic drama of *King Lear* addresses a reality that exists before “the world”. In other words, by transporting us back in time, *King Lear* invites us to entertain reality prior to the naming of “the world.”

Even the indecent characters—those who are not “fools”—credit their wisdom to nature, rather than worldly knowledge. Like Machiavelli, perhaps, their appeals to nature *simpliciter* may imply a denial of the notion of “higher” nature represented by “imagined principalities,” but in the imagined principality of Lear’s Britain, the un-foolish characters could just as easily be ignorant of the notion. For, absent the tensional structure between transcendence and immanence that gives rise to the symbolism of “God,” “man,” and “world,” *King Lear*’s world also lacks a distinction between a “higher” and “lower” sense of “nature.” Consequently, while love is a theme in *King Lear*, transcendent love is withdrawn, leaving only natural (biological) passion. And while providence, also, is a theme of *King Lear*, it is merely

human providence—and of course it fails utterly. The avoidance of love, as an absence of tension between transcendence and immanence, emerges in these two themes.

Love and Anger

There was a time when men did not recognize a distinction between “higher” and “lower” senses of love. It is worthwhile for us to look back to this time; for Shakespeare refers us to it by setting *King Lear* in just such an ancient realm.¹ The phenomenon ancient Greeks called *orge*, a familiar presence in Athenian tragedy, offers a glimpse into this compact, primordial experience of “love”:

Orge was a complicated phenomenon encapsulating an emotion that could lead to destructive quarrels and competitions and also an emotional and cognitive experience associated with fertility, sweetness, and the “melting moods” of sexual desire. As anger, *orge* concerned penal prosecution and the breakdown of human relationships... There was no tidy division between the elements of the human constitution that produced erotic desire, anger and mental activity. These sprang up together. What mattered was whether the liquid tumult of the passions was kept under proper control, a matter that the city as well as the individual saw to (Allen, 59).

The passion of *orge* was both central to, and problematic for, ancient political life. For this reason *orge* was a constant preoccupation of tragedy, as well as a theme of the *Iliad*, the great Homeric epic of war and revenge. In the *Iliad*, the phenomenon of *orge* manifests in the *cholos* of Achilles. As Aristotle reminds us, Achilles’ *cholos* is a sensation simultaneously excruciating and “sweeter than dripping honey.”

Kent’s confrontation with Oswald may be the clearest display of *orge* in *King Lear*. The scene transpires before Gloucester’s castle. Kent, having been banished for protesting Lear’s disinheritance of Cordelia, has returned, in disguise, to serve his erstwhile king. Oswald happens upon Kent, alone, and asks where to stable the horses for Regan and Cornwall’s retinue; whereupon Kent provokes an entirely avoidable scuffle with Regan’s servant, responding, “I’ the mire.”

OSWALD

Prithee, if thou lovest me, tell me.

KENT

I love thee not

OSWALD

Why, then, I care not for thee.

¹ Cavell, p. 287, notes that, according to renaissance psychology, pride is the root of anger. Pride begets anger, then revenge, and finally, shame. “But in *King Lear* shame comes first, and brings rage and folly in its train. Lear is not maddened because he has been wrathful but because his shame brought his wrath upon the wrong object.”

With this confrontation, the atavistic logic of *orge* is set to work. Kent's love for Lear is indistinguishable from his thirst for vengeance against Lear's daughters' houses. Evidently unaware that the disguised Kent is a loyal servant of Lear's house, Oswald solicits him, "Why dost thou use me thus? I know thee not." Replies Kent, "Fellow, I know thee." When Oswald asks, "what for," Kent draws his sword as he hurls at Oswald what seems to be every base insult available in Elizabethan English. The servants' fight continues until they are stopped by the greater personages of Regan and Cornwall.

Even then, Kent persists in his intransigence, vociferating against Oswald, Cornwall and Regan. One insult in particular sums up his estimation of the vacuous character of Oswald and his ilk: "a tailor made thee." Oswald is a non-person. Reiterating the sentiment, Kent later calls Oswald "whoreson zed...unnecessary letter," and proposes to grind him into mortar. Here, Cornwall interrupts (recall that Kent is disguised as a vagrant), saying "Peace, sirrah!"

You beastly knave, know you no reverence?

KENT

Yes, sir; but anger hath a privilege.

CORNWALL

Why art thou angry?

KENT

That such a slave as this should wear a sword,
Who wears no honesty. Such smiling rogues as these,
Like rats, oft bite the holy cords a-twain
Which are too intrinse t' unloose; smooth every passion
That in the natures of their lords rebel;
Bring oil to fire, snow to their colder moods;
Renege, affirm, and turn their halcyon beaks
With every gale and vary of their masters,
Knowing nought, like dogs, but following.

...

No contraries hold more antipathy
Than I and such a knave.

Cornwall exclaims that Kent is "beastly" and "without reverence." Both charges only make sense in reference to the distinction between higher and lower natures. That such a distinction will avail nothing in this world is implied by that fact that the charges are brought by one of the most perfectly indecent character in the play, the man who will in due time evacuate Gloucester's eye sockets. But rather than accepting the collapse of higher and lower, and the ascendancy of sheer force, implied by Cornwall's disingenuous charge, Kent clings madly to the distinction—a distinction in which he seems to

have a newfound conviction in the wake his own fall from the heights of power. As if it will make a difference, Kent insists on true villainy of those who, like Oswald, would “bite the holy cords a-twain / Which are too intrinsic to loose” and by flattering their masters, aid in the triumph of evil. Kent proceeds to exercise anger’s privilege by insulting everyone present, lustily, and in superlative terms. The effect of this scene is to render the tension between higher and lower nature indistinguishable from the personal antipathy between Kent and Oswald.

Over the objections of Gloucester—ostensibly the man of the house—Regan has Kent put in the stocks for the night. After the others leave, Kent declines Gloucester’s offer to press his case, hinting at the sweetness of unjust punishment. Alone he prays, not to God, but Fortune, for Cordelia’s return.

This row between Kent and Oswald, oscillating between Kent’s expressions of rage, borne of loyalty to the King’s house, and his later mood of mad reassurance as he lay defeated in the stocks dreaming of Cordelia’s return, foreshadows Lear’s oscillations between lust for vengeance against his sons-in-law—“kill, kill, kill, kill, kill”—and his final desire to pass away in jail with his beloved daughter—“No, no, no, no! Come, let’s away to prison.” It presents in miniature one of the grand themes of the play, the collapse of transcendent love.

From the perspective of political thought, this collapse severely compromises political order. In the tradition of political philosophy, the idea of transcendent love as a source of order in society is symbolized by *homonoia*, “like mindedness.” From its earliest articulation in Platonic and Aristotelian political science, *homonoia* has symbolized man’s participation in divine reason (*nous*), the substance of the political order.

Classical political science rests on the assumption that there is one common *nous* for men and through participation in that one common *nous*, every man is ordered in orientation toward that *nous*. That order in the relation between men constitutes the order of society... That society substance is called the likeness of reason, the *homonoia*; all have the likeness of reason... It was taken over by Saint Paul to designate the common *nous* in all the Mystical Body of Christ, with Christ functioning as the common *nous*. In that capacity it has gone through Christian history into the present and acquired secular form [in the work of sociologists such as Giddings or Dewey]... If one doesn’t have that [common reason present in all men], if the love within the community is not based on the divinity of reason in the other man, you do not have the *philia politike*... *Philia*, the love among men from one to the other because they are all the same in divine reason, is the basis of all political theory.

As “Nietzsche saw...very well...if you surrender that classical basis of the common reason, there is no particular reason to love anybody” (Voegelin 216-217).

Renunciation

Another occasion for exploring the themes of ruptured *homonoia* and the limits of political order is Lear's renunciation of the throne. For, in the symbolic order of monarchy, the king is the representative of the common *nous* just as Christ is the head of the Mystical Body of the Church. There is of course a radical difference between the City of God and the City of Man. Still, the parallelism suggests a role for human (kingly) providence as a terrestrial or secular analogue to divine providence. The king's resignation and its sequel submit this analogy to maximum stress. As such, it would seem to address the question of just how far the human order of political justice—the domain of human providence—can approximate the transcendent source of order in divine love. But it is the renunciation of this worldly estate that sets off the play's action. So, before treating the theme of providence, it is necessary to address the question of renunciation.

As Orwell wrote, "The subject of *Lear* is renunciation... Lear renounces his throne but expects everyone to continue treating him as a king. He does not see that if he surrenders power, other people will take advantage of his weakness: also those that flatter him the most grossly...are exactly the ones who will turn against him." For Orwell, the lessons Shakespeare wants us to draw from Lear's fate are two, one explicit and one implicit. The explicit teaching is contained in "the common sense moral drawn by the Fool: 'Don't relinquish power, don't give away your lands.'" The other, implicit lesson is demonstrated by Lear's end: "'Give away your lands if you want to, but don't expect to gain happiness by doing so. Probably you won't gain happiness. If you live for others, you must live *for others*, and not as a roundabout way of getting an advantage for yourself.'"

The proximate target of Orwell/Shakespeare's second lesson is Leo Tolstoy. Orwell's essay on *Lear* was written in response to Tolstoy's scathing renunciation of Shakespeare. For Tolstoy, Shakespeare was a vacuous poet, a master of imposture, the precise opposite of a true artist. Shakespeare intoxicates us with his words. Our love of his poetry is misplaced, fanatical, and superficial' altogether too worldly. For Tolstoy Shakespeare's persistent popularity can be explained only by a sort of collective madness of the English, later perpetuated by German professors.

Tolstoy compares the Bard's inflated reputation to that of Dutch tulips in the sixteenth century. Call it a "Shakespeare bubble." The Shakespeare bubble, like all bubbles, is the result of mistaking surface for substance: in truth his poetry is an elaborate house of cards. Tolstoy recognizes that Shakespeare achieved new heights of poetic technique, but in doing so he manifests the worst, most corrupting tendencies of poetic drama. For Tolstoy this is especially galling because theater is the purest, the most powerful, and so potentially the most dangerous sort of *mimesis*. Tolstoy emphasizes the

origin of theater in religious ritual. Only a religious purpose can redeem theater. Shakespeare's theater is irredeemably worldly, however, and so it is worse than frivolous. Ultimately, Tolstoy concludes, Shakespeare is on the side of Cornwall, imparting such Machiavellian lessons as "that one may be too good...that the end justifies the means."

King Lear is the central exhibit in Tolstoy's indictment of Shakespeare, his most spectacular and least redemptive work. Like most critics, Orwell sees Tolstoy's indictment of Shakespeare as insubstantial on the merits. Nonetheless, it is of interest as a reflection of Tolstoy's own philosophy and ambitions as an artist. In the end Tolstoy claims that the test of a true work of art lies both in its craftsmanship and in the sincerity of its author. As Orwell observes, neither of these claims is amenable to proof or disproof. The real question of interest is why Tolstoy found Shakespeare insincere, and in particular, why his animus against Shakespeare was focused on *King Lear*. Orwell finds a clue in the uncanny resemblance between Lear's story and Tolstoy's biography, combined with the uncomfortable lesson of *Lear*. That lesson is that one cannot be a saint and be guaranteed earthly happiness at the same time.

Tolstoy was not a saint, but he tried very hard to make himself into a saint, and the standards he applied to literature were other-worldly ones. It is important to realize that the difference between a saint and an ordinary human being is a difference of kind and not of degree. That is, one is not to be regarded as an imperfect form of another. The saint, at any rate Tolstoy's kind of saint, is not trying to work an improvement in earthly life: he is trying to bring it to an end and put something different in its place. One obvious expression of this is the claim that celibacy is "higher" than marriage. If only, Tolstoy says in effect, we would stop breeding fighting, struggling and enjoying, if we could get rid not only of our sins but of everything else that binds us to the surface of the earth—including love, then the whole painful process would be over and the Kingdom of Heaven would arrive.

What Orwell sees at the heart of Tolstoy's dispute with Shakespeare is a conflict between the "religious" and "humanistic" visions of life. Tolstoy's religious vision, inflected by Christianity, "ultimately...is...self-interested and hedonistic, since the aim is always to get away from the painful struggle of earthy life and find eternal peace in some kind of Heaven or Nirvana." In contrast, Shakespeare's "humanist attitude is that struggle must continue and that death is the price of life." The two attitudes may not always be in conflict, but in the final analysis they are irreconcilable: "one must choose between this world and the next. And the enormous majority of human beings, if they understood the issue, would choose this world." For Orwell, this is the lesson of Lear's fate, and the same lesson is imparted by Tolstoy's biography: one cannot renounce worldly things and expect to achieve happiness while still on this earth as a result.

Orwell's antithesis between the religious and humanistic viewpoints is questionable. It is not at all clear that the question of renunciation is dealt with simply by appealing to doctrinal differences—if it were, then he is quite correct to say that “the majority of human beings” would be human-ists. But one does not have to be as intelligent as Orwell to recognize the impossible or absurd consequences of the ideal of saintly virtue for a man (not “humanity”) who must front the conditions of life in the world (or, “the rest of reality”). And men even more intelligent than Orwell have chosen sainthood. The real puzzle is to understand why the saintly ideal has purchase. The obvious distinction between saintly self-abnegation and human delight in the world is of little help in this respect. However, Orwell's emphasis on the incompatibility between the transcendent demands of sainthood and the mundane necessities of “ordinary human” life is what gives traction to his distinction between Christianity and Humanism; this is what makes his reading of *King Lear* persuasive.

Renunciation clearly is a central theme of *King Lear*. What is more, the problem of renunciation in *Lear* takes precisely the shape of a renunciation of worldly majesty for the sake of a transcendent love. As we shall see, renouncing his kingdom is absolutely necessary if Lear is to possess what he most desires: knowledge, in this world, of Cordelia's true affection. But the fact the Lear is neither a saint nor an ordinary man, but a king, is an essential circumstance of his renunciation. So Orwell's opposition must be reformulated if we are to grasp the question posed by *King Lear*. The question is not simply whether a man can be a saint, but whether a king can be a saint.

Human Providence

One might interpret the play's opening scene as an enactment of this theme. Many interpreters have puzzled over why Lear stages a love-contest among his daughters to determine the distribution of his realm, even though he clutches a map which predetermines that distribution. On the one hand, the contest might be taken as a mere pretense of Shakespeare's, and one might see Lear's reneging as a way of alerting us to his madness, as in Coleridge's and Bradley's interpretations. On the other hand, one might insist, with Harry Jaffa, that the contest is a pretense of Lear's (not Shakespeare's), and conclude that the opening scene displays the paradoxical relationship between justice and truth which is at the heart of the play's significance.

Jaffa agrees that Lear's love-test is a pretense. However, like kingship itself, it is an essential pretense. Strictly speaking, the authority of even the best kingship rests on opinion, power and display, not on truth and knowledge. The substance of this worldly authority may be convention, even illusion.

But the political (monarchical) convention is a necessary condition for the provision of worldly justice. So regardless of whether *truthfulness* is superior, “even to justice...on the level of political action, there need be no distinguishable difference between superiority to the claims of justice and rank injustice.” Kingship is the ultimate symbol of human, worldly justice, and so its limits are coterminous with the limits of political life. The limits of political life are the play’s lesson, for political life is the terrestrial condition of both ordinary human delight and “saintly” virtue. “Human life, we might say, is set in motion by the demands of human virtue. These demands require political life, but the full demands of virtue transcend political life. In a sense, they transcend human life.” (426; 427)

Jaffa’s reading of the opening act elucidates the tension between the otherworldly virtue of renunciation and the worldly virtue of justice, which calls for a sort of worldly providence on the part of the king. The monarch impersonates justice. Ideally speaking, as the earthly figure endowed with absolute worldly power, the king should also be in possession absolute worldly knowledge. (That he actually lacks this knowledge is one reason why semblance or hypocrisy is a necessary aspect of political life). This knowledge is properly called “providential” because the supreme exercise of kingly virtue is not the creation of a regime, but its perpetuation. For Jaffa, then, the opening scene, the division of the kingdom, presents the supreme test of kingly virtue. Moreover, since Lear is Shakespeare’s greatest king, the scene presents an ideal version of this test.

Jaffa infers that Lear is an ideal king because at the outset of the play we see him “at the head of a united Britain (not merely England), and at peace not only with all domestic factions, but with the outside world as well.... Never in the histories does Shakespeare represent his native land at such a peak of prestige and political excellence: in *King Lear* alone do we find actualized the consummation devoutly wished by all other good Shakespearean kings” (405). Because Lear is an ideal king the failure of his plan cannot reflect a flaw in his “providential” design to perpetuate harmony in the kingdom. According to Jaffa, the original plan to distribute lands would establish a balance of power among the three daughters with Cordelia (and her father, retaining his title) in the pivotal position (410). There could be no better plan. So the fact that even Lear fails at the task of perpetuating the regime is an object lesson in the limits of political life as such.

Lear’s outburst in response to Cordelia’s rebuff does not reveal the flaws of the man who is king so much as the problematic fact that kings, too, must be men. For it is as a king, not as a man, that Lear demands displays of love from his daughters as a condition of the redistribution of his realm. But as Cordelia’s actions reveal, the exigency of being in the role of king is what prevents Lear from having certain knowledge of his daughters’ love. In establishing the partition before the speeches are made and

guaranteeing the best share, and the last speech, to the beloved Cordelia, the King becomes, merely, Lear. "To Cordelia it must have been clear that the test was a trick devised in her interest and that Lear, far from demanding that she heave her heart into her mouth, was making his own protestation of love to her. In truth, Lear was not asking Cordelia to flatter him" (418).

In psychological terms, this move puts Lear in the role of Cordelia's lover, not her beloved. In political terms, the result is that Cordelia assumes sovereignty. Lear expects that Cordelia will exercise her newfound, "natural" sovereignty in the manner of a "conventional" monarch. That is, he expects her to play along just as he would in the same situation, since he sees in her a reflection of his own kingly virtue. However, what follows is a tragic scene of misrecognition that hovers over the entire world of the play. "What the love-test discloses is the impossibility that Lear can ever have knowledge [of his daughters' love] as long as he remains upon his throne" (420). This is knowledge Lear craves as a man, but his godlike role as monarch stands in the way of possessing it. As a great man, or paragon of political virtue, Lear is cognizant of the imposture that his role demands. "Lear, we might say, is compelled by the nature of his situation to pretend to perfection he does not possess in order to actualize a perfection he does possess" (421). Cordelia, the sovereign by nature, is under no such constraint. Lear saw his own image in Cordelia. "Cordelia...showed herself in her intransigence unlike her father. But it is the appearance of unlikeness, rather than the appearance of disobedience, that made a mockery of [Lear's] plan" (423).

Consciously Lear's plan provides for justice, a just (re)distribution of the realm. Unconsciously what Lear desires is truth. The paradoxical relationship between justice and truth is pushed in this scene to its tragic limit. Justice, a worldly virtue, must compromise with imposture. Truthfulness, a human virtue, reaches out beyond the world of pretense that is the very element of terrestrial justice. As a man, Lear's final demand is a human one, to know the truth about whether he is loved.

Cordelia can be the cause of that love which Lear's great soul needs, only if Lear removes himself from, or removes from himself, every vestige of monarchy in the world... Lear, acting to discover the truth about his daughters' love does what would have been foolish as a political action of it were not a pretense; yet it is not foolish in its deeper, non-pretending meaning, because it is no longer a political action. For Lear's action but not Lear himself, is thoroughly rational in the rejection of Cordelia. For reason could not have devised a more straightforward way than that actually taken by Lear to divest himself of all the attributes of worldly monarchy (426).

Lest my reading of Lear's renunciation be mistaken for a religious allegory, let me emphasize here that Cordeila is not a Christ figure.² Her love may be world-transcendent in the sense that it is beyond the grasp of Lear's knowledge so long as he is king, and in this way she symbolizes a (desire for the knowledge of) love incompatible with the burden of worldly authority. However, being Lear's favorite daughter, it is not clear whether, as the object of his love, she represents a transcendent good that draws him out beyond the demands of worldliness, or a filial devotion that pulls him beneath his worldly obligations. With Cordelia, again, we encounter the difficulty of distinguishing higher love from lower.

Moreover, there is no reason to exempt Cordelia from association with the other characters in her generational cohort, each of whom tends to reject convention and the authority of the fathers on behalf of a new doctrine of nature. According to this doctrine, any distinction between higher and lower senses of nature is illusory, and those who believe in such a distinction are "fools." Most often, this new idea of nature takes a Machiavellian shape. "The word *fool* is applied to practically every decent character in the play." Yet, ironically, "the Fool himself is a 'natural,' who illustrates the proverb 'children and fools tell the truth'". That Cordelia, too, may be a natural in the latter sense is illustrated by her own truth-telling and by Lear's remark at the play's close, "Alas, my poor fool is hanged," which may apply to either the Fool or Cordelia.

This comparison with the Fool is not the only possible view of Cordelia as a "natural." Jaffa, in passing, suggests the possibility that Cordelia is a natural in the former sense:

Consider the consequences of her boldness: she was the intended bride of the "waterish" Burgundy; but, losing her dowry she loses a poor lover and gains a superior one, France.... [France] is a king in his own right and, as we quickly learn, one who has no intention of abandoning his bride's claims. Accordingly, Cordelia's course could be interpreted, not only as a sacrifice of public interest to private happiness, but as a clever scheme to become queen of France and England, thus defeating Lear's just policy, which is national and patriotic. Goneril and Regan were shallow hypocrites, but how could Lear know that Cordelia was not a clever one?" (420)

Certainly Shakespeare intended Cordelia's character to be open to both these interpretations of her naturalness. Her part as the object of Lear's love and the cause of the play's action is unmistakable, which is to affirm Jaffa's view that Lear cannot possess both his kingdom and certain knowledge of Cordelia's love. But the ambivalent nature of that love, and by implication, of the "humanistic" love of nature or the world, also is reflected in her character.

² Cavell discusses Cordelia's role on pp. 290-305.

Love and Justice

The figure of Cordelia distillates many of the ambiguities in the higher and lower senses of “nature,” and the higher and lower senses of “love.” Earlier we observed that in tragic culture a distinction between the faculties of love and anger was not recognized: affection and desire and wrath, procreation and vengeance, were attributed to a single passion, *orge*. It is also significant that such cultures were only beginning to elaborate a notion of “political” authority. Before the rise of the *polis*, justice was a matter of reciprocity among great families, and the logics of filiation and vengeance ran parallel. The world of the *polis* brought a new notion of justice that put public arbitration in the place of personal vendetta. Plato was the first thinker to treat this new conception of justice; and, as Voegelin reminds us, “fratricidal wars...were a political fact that must not be forgotten as the background of the *Republic*” (375).

The structure of the just city in the *Republic* of course is modeled on the analogy with the soul that is well-ordered according to nature. The argument depends on a dual sense of “nature”: both the soul and the city have a proper order “by nature,” and actually existing souls or cities, if they are to be happy or just, ought to conform to that structure as far as possible. Plato constructs a hierarchy according to which higher and lower urges are equally natural, in the sense that they are physically or biologically or psychologically given, yet the lower urges must be subordinated to the higher to achieve harmony with the paradigm established by “nature” in the higher sense.

A crucial foundation of Plato’s construction is the bifurcation of *orge* into a lower, appetitive passion, associated with sustenance and procreation and a higher, “spirited” or thumotic drive, which (ideally) enlists the passions of loyalty and vengeance on behalf of the whole *polis*. In other words, before Plato could construct the ideally just *polis* he had to posit a hierarchical distinction within the soul between two faculties of love. The violence of *orge*, in particular, had to be firmly aligned, as *thumos*, with the *polis* and not the family. In the Athenian context, this amounts to a truly radical (or, in Voegelin’s language, “progressive liberal”) project. “The Athenian world view (and other Greek world views like it) could not be truly unsettled without an attack on *orge*, the force that drove the system of reciprocity in the city and that was also central to the city’s political organization” (Allen, 251).

As Voegelin shows, the development of such tensional constructions was not an isolated characteristic of Plato’s political philosophy or of the Hellenic political context. It belongs to a more global civilizational phenomenon that Voegelin called “the epiphany of man.” Nor is it a merely noetic development: in addition to the rise of the *polis*, the pragmatic development of “ecumenic empire” brought about further political dislocations and contributed to a sense of alienation (DOH: 314-315). It is

in response to these historical phenomena that philosophers like Plato were compelled to develop new symbolisms of order. The complex of “universals” in tension—“man,” “world” and “God”—is the legacy of this philosophical response. The problem of *King Lear* is the breakdown of this legacy, what Voegelin calls “the revolt of man.”

The “coming to consciousness of self-consciousness” arising from noetic insight and cultural dislocation, is “disastrous” to the “experience of the cosmos in the primary sense.” Out of a condition of unreflective and uncritical life there emerges a critical “dissociation of the cosmos into the world-transcendent God and the world that does not contain God” (201). The Epiphany of Man is the event that makes it necessary to designate a “world” as distinct from the cosmos. “There is a correlation between the terms *consciousness*, *transcendence*, *immanence*, *transcendent God*, *immanent word*, and so on, which must not be broken” (203). To break that correlation is to mistake “humanity” for man. What follows this rupture is the inevitable failure of man to know his own humanity, a failure that leads in turn to the mistaken conclusion that our ideas of humanity, and of God, were merely projections arising from our condition in “the world.”

The Real Fool

Why did Plato construct these patterns? If Voegelin is correct, Plato’s aim was to reply to the real fool. The Epiphany of Man wreaks havoc on our old sense of absorption. For those sensitive to it, this event prompts a re-symbolization of order. Consequently, it gives rise to the problem of “meaning.” As new symbolizations are formed, and old ones altered under the pressure of the new experience, disagreements develop among people who respond differently to these changes.

There are three types of response to the emergence of self-consciousness. “The person who is living in the old type of the myth is a mortal, a *thentos*.” The second type is “the spiritual man...a term introduced by Plato.” The spiritual man is “engaged in the process of immortalizing [himself]” through philosophy. The third type is the real fool: “If you are not up to that understanding of what is now happening through philosophy as an action of immortalizing, then you are a fool, an *amathes*.” The real fools are those who neither remain in the myth nor engage in philosophy, and so remain closed in relation to divine reality. “There are now three social types: the old type, who doesn’t catch up; the new type—the spiritual man—(the *spoudaios* of Aristotle, for instance); and the people who resist” (313).

The problem of foolishness, then, is the necessary referent for understanding the origin and limits of philosophical and theological dogma.

One cannot understand a dogma or doctrinal form concerning the gods or God at all if one does not recognize a share of foolishness... [I]f there is no fool you have to ward off, you don't have to engage in the positive dogma at all... We [today] don't realize that the problem of the fool is what you might call the positive problem in the whole: Because there are fools, we negate their negations and get positive doctrines that otherwise would not be necessary—if we were not living in a society in which a lot of people can be fools. The term fool is not used, in the critical sense, as name-calling but as naming a human potentiality: Men can be fools (319).

Voegelin emphasizes that Plato's positive constructions reply to a certain kind of Sophistic foolishness. In particular, Plato's positive theology corresponds to the negative dogma he attributes to the sophists. According to Plato, the content of this sophistic dogma is: "1. The gods don't exist; 2. If they exist they do not care what men are doing; 3. If they care what men are doing you can bribe them by sacrifice." Gorgias gives a similar formulation of these negative propositions, this time with an ontological address: "1. Nothing exists; 2. If it exists, it is unknowable; 3. If it is knowable, it is incommunicable. (In this way you get rid of the whole of being!)" Plato's reply to sophistic foolishness took the form of a positive dogma: "The gods do exist; they do care about man; you cannot make them accomplices in your crimes by pacifying them with offerings out of your profits. On that occasion Plato uses the term theology and calls these two types of triads [the negative and the positive] 'the types of theology'" (318).

If dogmatism originates as a response to the problem of the real fool, this would also imply that there is a limit to dogmatic knowing. If the function of dogma merely is to ward off foolishness, then dogmatic teaching cannot correct the fool or eliminate foolishness as a human potentiality. No proofs will avail for the positive propositions any more than the negative ones. If knowing is a matter of certainty with regard to the propositional content of a language-symbol, then strictly speaking, one cannot know that God exists, takes interest in human affairs, and cannot be made one's accomplice. By the same token, one cannot prove or disprove the existence of humanity or the world. And it is not the point of propositional dogma to prove these things.

Cavell writes: "What we forgot, when we deified reason, was not that reason is incompatible with feeling, but that knowledge requires acknowledgment." Parenthetically, he continues, "[t]he withdrawals and approaches of God can be looked upon as tracing the history of our attempts to overtake acknowledgement by knowledge; God would be the name of that impossibility." (347). Cavell's distinction between knowing and acknowledging is remarkably close to Voegelin's analysis of the problem of doctrinalization in terms of the limited capacity of propositional language to address

experiences of reality expressed in mythopoeic symbolization. Moreover, for both thinkers, there seems to be a special relationship between drama, especially tragedy, and mythopoeic expression.

For Plato, the construction of philosophical and theological dogma answered to the need to ward off sophistic foolishness brought about by the disintegration of cosmological myth. By Shakespeare's day, however, the ostensible "content" of religion itself was practically identical with theological dogma. The new worldly philosophies of Machiavelli and Hobbes, too, assumed doctrinal form. And so, by now, we have arrived at a point in which one speaks dogmatically of "the world in which we live" in complete ignorance that such a "world" does not exist.

Voegelin lists a series of dogmas of nature or the world that have been ascendant since the early modern period, all of which are discredited today, including: the competitive balance of economic self-interest; the political balance-of-powers; the class struggle; the evolutionary struggle; the struggle between races; the balance of instincts or psychological urges; and, finally, "complicated philosophies of history" (225-226). Twentieth-century absurdity must in some measure be attributable to the proliferation, and the contemporary intellectual exhaustion, of the ideological second realities built up on these dogmas. Today our earthly fate is presided over by the zombies of these worldly doctrines. "We have [today] only the epigonal forms of latecomers who, in bureaucratic or other institutional fashion, exploit ideologies that were created in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries" (227).

Cavell ascribes this paradoxical loss of the world to the rationalistic effort to grasp it with certain knowledge. The "unbroken chain" of rationalist epistemology still has a grip on us. But, for Cavell, modern rationalism invites a misreading of modern skepticism: "[W]e think skepticism must mean that we cannot know the world exists, and hence that perhaps there isn't one (a conclusion some profess to admire and others to fear). Whereas what skepticism suggests is that since we cannot know the world exists, its presentness to us cannot be a function of knowing" (324).

The tragedy of *King Lear* lies in the balance between our responsibility as political beings to know the world providentially and our ambition as moderns to know it wholly. The political lesson of the play is that, as self-conscious and self-responsible beings, we are fated to know, if imperfectly. The psychological lesson is that to acknowledge, or "know" the world in a higher sense, requires a willingness to forego knowing. The epistemological lesson is to question "the idea that knowing the world exists is to be understood as an instance of knowing that a particular object exists" (324). "What exist are the single things in the spatio-temporal existence that surround us... But the world is not an existent thing in time and space" (Voegelin, DOH: 221). For us the world exists in the theater alone.

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