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On performance and selfhood in Caryl Churchill

Theatre is born in its own disappearance, and the offspring
of this movement has a name: man.

Jacques Derrida¹

In 'The Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction', Walter Benjamin argued that technologies of mass reproduction had undermined the work of art's 'originality', rendering ideas of its 'authenticity' and its 'authority' increasingly irrelevant, however nostalgically they might be mourned.² These ideas concatenate in Caryl Churchill's play *A Number*, whose Bernard worries about human identity under threat from cloning technology. Having met his genetic double – one, he learns, of a number – Bernard frets that 'someone else is the one, the first one, the real one', neatly tying together essence, origins and authenticity. Salter answers, 'no because ... I'm your father'.³ He guarantees Bernard's uniqueness with a *sui generis* paternal authority, merely by reiterating the son's patrilineage. But unsurprisingly Salter's balms turn out to sting rather than soothe. Of course, all of the clones are genetically descended from him; in fact, Bernard is not 'the first one'; and, in time, Salter's paternal succour will fail even the first one, also Bernard, who turns up in the play's second scene and who eventually ends his own existential conflict in suicide.

Throughout her career, Churchill has married thorny theoretical content (whether colonialism and sexual politics in *Cloud Nine*, social regulation in *Softcops*, or the logic of terror in *Far Away*) to stunning dramatic form, using the language of the stage – words, but also living bodies – vividly to conjure, in her words, 'worries and questions and complexities'.⁴ Here I consider five plays, each from a different decade, whose central dramatic impulse is the difficulty of self-knowledge – 'How do I know who I am?' – that has long preoccupied Churchill. I trace her interrogation of 'identity' through *Identical Twins* (1968), *Traps* (1977), *Icecream* (1989) and *Blue Heart* (1997). These plays' complexities we might see as postulates for the conclusion she reaches in *A Number* (2002): that the problem of identity is shadowed by the problem of performance and thus best contemplated in the evanescent realm in which performance resides.

Identity, subjectivity, uniqueness

A *Number* situates itself in a long tradition of domestic dramas that interrogate the family structure, whose role in identity construction is as fundamental as it is problematic; like Hedda Gabler, chafed by her ill-fitting role as Tesman's wife, Bernard 2 falls prey to a crisis of self. Identity hinges on a subject-position, and, as Hedda knows too well, we begin as sons and daughters. The twentieth century's most compelling articulations of subjectivity show that the subject originates in, and is reinforced by, its difference from others. Thus, the family proves crucial, since the 'I' that anchors the subject is produced early, either by linguistic opposition to 'you' or against the mother whose unlikeness the child recognizes as a necessary precondition for language.⁵ In other words, the subject is fundamentally defined in relational and negative terms, against what it is not.

The conceptual difficulties these terms present are laid bare in Churchill's radio play *Identical Twins*, first broadcast on 21 November 1968 on BBC Radio 3. The title characters, Clive and Teddy, find their processes of subject-formation impeded precisely because of a lack of difference: they are identical. Churchill amplifies the claustrophobia of the twins' early childhood by vacating it of other characters – particularly significantly, their mother, whom the play invokes only by two references. The first is Teddy and Clive's dual declaration that she couldn't tell them apart; the second, their memory of her three-way mirror:

TEDDY AND CLIVE When I was very small I would stand with him in Mum's triple mirror. If we stood very close we could almost shut it round us. There were hundreds of reflections, all the same. (*Clive's voice gets fainter*) Then I was terrified to move (*Clive silent now*)

TEDDY not knowing which reflections would move with me.⁶

Rather than seeing himself as whole, each twin sees himself (as Bernard 2 comes to) as a number of identical reflections. Thus, his process of individuation is thwarted rather than facilitated – a thwarting perpetually reinforced by the reflection that does indeed 'move with' each: Teddy for Clive, Clive for Teddy. Churchill captures this existential crisis not only by perpetually overlaying Teddy's 'I' with Clive's 'I' – much of their text is shared, delivered in unison – but also by asking that the twins be played by the same actor.

Containing no other speaking characters, the play gives the twins no space of difference against which to define themselves, which manifests in a desire to harm the reflection that begins in childhood ('every day, with bricks in our playpen and knives once when we were sixteen') and continues into adulthood ('I leapt at him and we fell on the pavement and rolled over and over into the road, I wanted to hurt him.').⁷ Their identical voices remind us that 'I' and

'him' are functionally useless both in their lives and in the radio play's reception; like Teddy and Clive, the audience struggles to keep separate track. Appropriately, then, and as their tandem monologues make clear, violence offered to the other twin is expressed and experienced equally as violence offered to the incomplete self. The situation reaches a climax in the play's suicide scene, in which the two sit at a table contemplating a bottle of sleeping pills. With only one bottle between them, the two finally find a twisted sort of individuation, marked materially on the page as the text splits, for the first time, into parallel columns:

TEDDY

Clive takes more pills. This is one of those stupid things you regret later. I go on watching. Then I get up without a word and go straight out for a walk, the night is quite mild as the day has been and I feel better for some fresh air.

CLIVE

I take more pills. This is one of those stupid things you regret later. I take some more pills. And some more. Then I lean over the table and hide my face in my arms and hope I'll go to sleep quickly and whether it works or not is out of my hands now.⁸

Clive thereafter disappears from the play, as his fading voice in their shared monologue about the mirror had portended. Teddy seems, at last, to have singly claimed the 'I' that will anchor his subject position and his identity.

However, the play's events leading up to this climactic moment make clear that suicide will not fully resolve the twins' identity crisis; it offers only false hope, like earlier plot incidents that seemed to provide a basis for identity-consolidation. For example, when we learn that 'when I was twelve I was seduced by an oaf of sixteen', Teddy and Clive narrate in unison, finally noting that 'a friend told me the same boy had done the same to Clive/Teddy [each says the other's name] that same summer'.⁹ The twinned *sames* aggregate the joint failure of their sexual initiation. Similarly, the twins recount that '[a]t seventeen I began to be myself ... The day I came nearest to feeling fond of him was when I realised we were both separately planning to run away from each other.'¹⁰ Their shared delivery and shared 'I' enfeeble the act of 'be[ing] myself', as does their collective and unsettling insistence on the adjective *both*, which corrodes the adverb *separately*. They go to the station together, effecting a physical but not psychic separation.

While they flee to find difference, to city and country respectively, in adulthood their notions of identity continue to be unsettled precisely because of its relational nature. Defined too similarly as husbands, lovers and fathers of two children each – a reminder of the role ideology plays in defining relationships – the twins inexorably drift towards reunion and, eventually, the mitigated success of Clive's suicide. Teddy takes Clive's mistress and children and moves into his country home, asserting not individuality but

lack of difference. And the play ends with Teddy considering his own suicide. 'Sometimes I think I'll make one effort, not to kill myself', he declares.¹¹ The phrase, spoken by a solo voice, emphasizes its unitary nature, its uniqueness: it will be 'one effort'. But the interposed negation 'not' disquiets, a shadow of the negative terms on which identity is founded and a reminder of the peculiar psychodynamics of his brother's death. Clive needed Teddy not to save him. Who will not save Teddy?

Identical Twins prefigures the schizophrenic world of Churchill's *Schreber's Nervous Illness*, visiting the existential question 'How do I know who I am?' by figuring it as 'How do I know I am not someone else?' (Or, as Salter puts it in *A Number*, 'if that's me over there who am I?')¹² The troubled uniqueness Teddy possesses at the play's end he procures by metaphorically smashing the mirror, by systematically honing doubles, as *A Number*'s homicidal Bernard 1 will attempt. Two wives become one when Clive's depressive spouse, Janet, kills herself; two mistresses become one when Teddy's tenant, Dawn, is abandoned; two twins give way to one. But Teddy is still an identical twin, and the play's final lines draw the contours of his attenuated accomplishment. On the one hand, these lines remind us that his single house and mistress are Clive's, and that he is still haunted by the play's remaining set of doubles, the children. (His own live in the city while he raises his brother's.) On the other hand, the lines suggest that his children have made possible the very difference which the triple mirror had denied. 'Clive's children are sweet and I'm fond of them but my own are the ones I love', he says, his *ones* marking their unitary distinctness from their shadows in the country.¹³ Thus *Identical Twins* ends by reiterating the centrality of family relations in establishing a unique identity. It ties this establishment directly to patrilineage, an idea whose vexations *A Number* will theatricalize with particular brilliance.

Family relations and citationality

The relationship between selfhood and patrilineage provides the dramatic impetus for *Icecream*, first staged by Max Stafford-Clark at the Royal Court in 1989. Whereas the picture Churchill paints in *Identical Twins* represents identity as mired in the deep psychoanalytic terrain of subject-formation, the picture in *Icecream* reflects 'identity' off the shallow surfaces of a postmodern landscape, bereft of psychology. This difference resonates generically. *Identical Twins* is an unsettling psychic drama about one split character; *Icecream* is a satire about family relations, as announced in the character list, which folds 'Lance and Vera' and 'Phil and Jaq' into two units: 'husband and wife' and 'brother and sister'.

Icecream burlesques the search for identity by employing the hoariest cliché of self-discovery: the road trip. Lance, whose existential anxiety is figured as his lack of 'history' as an American, travels to England in a quest to find familial roots, which he imagines as stretching back before 1066. But early in the play, as he surveys a castle with Vera, she precisely diagnoses his epistemological error: 'Just because someone doesn't know who their grandparents are doesn't make them not exist.'¹⁴ The proliferating negation in her phrase ironically traverses the fraught terrain of any quest for identity even as it refuses its corollary, positive, claim: knowing one's grandparents doesn't necessarily make one exist, either. Nonetheless, Vera is along for the ride, a genealogical blank patrilineally attached to Lance. 'If it's mine it's yours', as he puts it.¹⁵ Indeed, when third cousins, Phil and Jaq, are located in East London, Vera naturalizes her familial bond with Phil, explicitly brushing aside his caveat 'in law' and thus making possible the mock-flirtation with incest that will serve as one of *Icecream*'s many red herrings. '[W]hat's Lance's is mine', she jokes.¹⁶

The scene in which Lance and Phil uncover their shared 'origins' is the play's funniest, as the two men compete to articulate their ostensibly natural bond:

LANCE So great aunt Dora was my great /

PHIL was your greatgrandfather's -

LANCE grandmother's brother's daughter - , mother's, great / grandmother's -

PHIL - mother's, right,

LANCE she was my greatgrandmother's brother's daughter and your
greatgrand / father's

PHIL father's

LANCE brother's daughter.¹⁷

Churchill's satirical register reveals itself both in the text ('I think it was Madge. Unless it was Elsie. Let's go for Madge')¹⁸ and in its delivery, with the two men's accents - a mark of their cultural and class differences - wrapping together like the ancestral roots they struggle to separate. Churchill's trademark overlapping dialogue here serves the precise opposite of its function in *Identical Twins*. The American and the Briton could scarcely be more dissimilar, and the bond they forge is as unnatural as their two-dimensional images of one another's countries: Lance adores England's fields, accents and pubs, while Phil derides America's hamburgers and television. (He does admire, however, America's fanciful icecream flavours and concedes: 'The idea of Oregon, the word, just the word Oregon really thrills me.')19

Their tenuous bond is cemented not by the money that Lance begins almost immediately to lend his 'cousin', but by the intrusion of a more brute material

reality: after Phil kills a man, Lance and Vera must help him and Jaq dump the body in Epping Forest. 'You don't go to the police about your own family', Lance reasons.²⁰ The image's ironies ripple. Having come to England to explore his family tree and to uncover kin, Lance ends up in a dark forest, covering a dead (and, significantly, *unidentified*) body with fallen leaves – before being quickly shuffled back to America for the second act. Finally, Lance is a tourist and without roots, whatever his genealogical claims. Identity as he sought it fails. This failure is reflected in the unmoored plot of Act II and especially Lance's increasingly erratic characterization. 'Lance', like 'Vera', 'Jaq' and 'Phil' – none of whom has any other family, either – coheres only as one more shifting image in the kaleidoscope that constitutes *Icecream*, a territory whose simulacral similarities to his 'Britain' and Phil's 'America' unsettle. Identity seems a series of citations, a string of clichés like those Vera unapologetically celebrates.

Critics have described the play as *sparè*, but this assessment is entirely wrong. In a postmodern trick, Churchill keeps *Icecream* uncharacteristically busy: a theme-park panorama of hollow attractions. Spanning twelve speaking parts, seventeen settings and twenty scenes in under seventy-five minutes, the play deploys its dramatic and cinematic tropes with a kitchen-sink glee. Homecomings, recognition scenes and voyages of discovery come and go alongside Vera and Phil's drunken entanglement and other red herrings. Indeed, as Una Chaudhuri has noted, Churchill kills off not only Phil's victim but Phil himself (in an 'accident', between scenes, after he and Jaq follow their new relations to America) entirely without motive, dramaturgical rationale or dramatic consequence. Critics who identify the dead man as Jaq and Phil's landlord or who claim that Phil dies from looking the wrong way while crossing the street, connect dots that Churchill has left unconnected with a wilful offhandedness.

Veering from the story to the question of the story's meaning, the second act opens with Vera in mid-monologue, confessing to her 'shrink' – the word is Churchill's; his character name, Shrink – her role in the murdered man's disposal. '[N]obody ever did find him', she reports, adding tellingly, 'Didn't he have a family?' 'Go for the police. I'm a murderer', she demands.²¹ The psychiatrist's response turns on the inter-relationship of family and selfhood:

The man in the wood is your dead ancestors, your unborn children and the part of yourself you fear to have discovered. When you ask me to go for the police you are asking me to discover this self and help you to face the consequences. Which is what I am trying to do now.

Pause.

The man in the wood is also me.²²

In this metatheatrical moment, Churchill shifts her focus to *Icecream*'s audiences by figuring the Shrink as their onstage surrogate. Having heard the story that we have seen represented in Act I, he provides an earnest reading. Thus Churchill can ironize two tendencies of spectatorship. The first is the longing to make coherent meaning, to find depth, even as it is what it is. (Chaudhuri delightfully calls it a 'burial for burial's sake'.)²³ After all, Vera's confession is neither symbol-laden dream nor fantasy but a straightforward admission that leads nowhere, just as *Icecream*'s settings and characters remain steadfastly two-dimensional. The second tendency Churchill ironizes is the impulse to identification, so central to our dramatic tradition, that runs parallel to our longing to make meaning.

In Aristotelian dramatic theory, theatrical identification serves precisely to consolidate the subject-position of the spectator. Acknowledging his similarity with the hero, the spectator fears; recognizing his difference, he concomitantly pities. Since we learn as we look, in Aristotle's immortal formulation,²⁴ presumably the theatregoing impulse inheres partly in the desire for a refined self-knowledge, gained in contemplation of the theatrical Other. In *Icecream*, the psychiatrist claims to interpret the dead body but actually deduces that the story is all about him. That he is male is of course no accident; the vast majority of the theatrical tradition, as various feminist thinkers have shown, is decidedly masculinist – perpetually reinforcing its male-centred perspective and thus its male spectators' subjectivity. A feminist playwright might then offer an alternate perspective, as Churchill does in *Top Girls*. Here, however, ridiculing the audience surrogate, she flouts the possibility of anchoring any perspective at all on *Icecream*, whose spotlights on 'identity' reveal it to be in flux, perpetually displaced, lost in citation. Jaq puts it this way: 'I feel I'm in a road movie and everyone I meet is these interesting characters'.²⁵

We could read this revelation as allegorizing women's subjectivity in general, remembering Simone de Beauvoir's formulation that 'He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other'.²⁶ And indeed, Chaudhuri finds hints of a new kind of identity, implicitly feminine, in the play's final encounter, when at the airport returning to England Jaq meets a 'South American Woman Passenger' who urges her to '[c]hange your destination'.²⁷ The play's second act has been largely preoccupied with Jaq's American road trip. After her brother's death, and shorn of the familial identity Churchill's character list had assigned her, Jaq has remained literally in transit – in Lance and Vera's car, which she steals – and dramaturgically in freefall, shown in unsatisfactory engagement with a series of mismatched scene partners: a hitch-hiker, his mother, a professor who offers sexual violence. (That he teaches history, Churchill's slyest joke, reminds us of the opening scene. Jaq pushes him off a cliff.) But what new basis for identity her airport encounter might offer

remains entirely unclear, and the South American Woman Passenger proves just another implausibility in two dimensions: *Icecream* offers new flavours, new travels, all the time. Ricocheting from setting to setting, its dramaturgy untethered to any discernible logic, the play provides no more grist for the spectator's self-knowledge than it provided to Lance, just a reflection of its characters' perpetual disconnection.

Space and time

In *Icecream*'s opening scene, Lance and Vera mangle the song 'The Heather on the Hill' from *Brigadoon*. It is a particularly cunning citation, not only because Lerner and Loewe's musical concerns two American tourists but also because it so casually thematizes extreme temporal dislocation. (Churchill's Americans aren't even in *Brigadoon*'s Scotland, another wry joke that amplifies the spatial dislocation of the scene's setting: in a car on the 'Road to the Isles'.) In the play's closing scene, Jaq hesitates in the transitional space of the airport's departure lounge, destined for somewhere uncertain. These two moments, bookends to the play, remind us that another dimension to identity follows on its relational fluxes. Benjamin explicitly links the death of originality to the loss of time and space. And the answer to the question 'Who am I?' depends on where and when 'I' is, the very contexts which the postmodern *Icecream* denies. This postulate is the central subject of Churchill's still-startling *Traps*, first staged by John Ashford at the Royal Court in 1977.

Traps announces its concern with identity early, when Reg arrives at the living room that is the play's only set. He is looking for his brother-in-law:

ALBERT Jack isn't married so how could he have a brother-in-law?

REG I'm the one that's married.

ALBERT If Jack's got a sister.²⁸

The exchange encapsulates the central trick of the play's opening scene, which appears straightforward on the surface but in fact obeys its own deep unreality. We read Albert to be stating the obvious: Jack, if unmarried, cannot have a brother-in-law unless he has a married sister. (The character list does announce that 'JACK is CHRISTIE's younger brother, and REG is her husband.')

However, we soon come to understand Albert's more troubling propositional logic: Reg, the 'brother-in-law', ceases to exist if Jack hasn't got a sister, and Jack both may and may not have a sister at any given moment, just as, in the famous thought experiment, the cat may both live and not live within Schrödinger's box. For the ontological world of *Traps* is one in which 'the characters can be thought of as living many of their possibilities at once', as Churchill puts it in her author's note and as the play's central emblem, a

Möbius strip, makes clear. She likens the play to an image by Escher, 'impossible in life'.²⁹

Traps' ruptured ontological space – the setting is both city flat and country house – is governed by a ruptured time. To choose just one example, Syl speculates about whether she'll have a child in the next five years mere minutes in stage time after she has put her baby down to sleep. Churchill has experimented with time in this way elsewhere, folding both past and future into a continuous present in *Moving Clocks Go Slow* and compressing time radically in *The Skriker*. But *Traps* ties its impossible space-time much more explicitly to the question of identity, returning again and again to the impossibility of imagining a self outside of its spatial and temporal locations.

Existing in the skewed ontology that they do, the characters become functionally unintelligible: one minute Syl is a mother, the next she is not; Jack announces he's gone when he is manifestly present; the door opens or does not open irrespective of whether it is or is not locked. The play's opening image, Syl and Jack with a baby, promises a recognizable context – again, a family structure – within which we will be able to orient ourselves and their identities. But the promise is immediately revoked by Albert's entrance. Indeed, in the course of the play, we see evidence of romantic relationships between Syl and Jack, Syl and Albert; Albert and Jack, Albert and Del; Del and Christie, Del and Jack. (The play's one, fully past-tense relationship is between Christie and Jack. 'Do you find incest a worry?' asks Del. 'We did all that a long time ago. We weren't all that good together', answers Christie – to which Jack adds, 'We were very young.')

These simultaneous relationships collectively result neither in a radically new family structure nor a communal bisexual harmony like that ironically promised in *Cloud Nine*'s second-act orgy scene. After all, as Del reminds us, 'Utopia means nowhere', and no-one lives nowhere.³¹ Rather, it is of a piece with the play's Escher-like unreality. Moreover, the traps of their shared life keep revealing themselves: Syl and Christie's 'many possibilities' seem startlingly limited and conventionally gendered; the pain which Reg needs to 'know he's alive' disturbingly seems to leave bruises on Christie's back,³² and, in a world outside time, the ironing needs doing even more often than in our own.

Like their Pirandellian counterparts, the six characters are trapped; and Churchill's intertextual engagement with *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, which Elin Diamond has identified elsewhere, is substantial.³³ She opposed the world of reality, including its actors and directors, to the truer world of illusion, represented by the six characters. She opposes the world of theatre, with its pre-scripted lines and cues, to the truer world of performance. This opposition begins in the play's prefatory notes in which Churchill explains the play's card trick, whose false magic is governed by predetermining the

cards' order. Stacking the deck is theatre – as when Jack can be sure that Christie 'will be' 'here' precisely because the text has scripted her entrance two lines later.³⁴ The card trick contrasts the jigsaw puzzle, which sits onstage throughout to be worked on at will by the performers. Its near-completion by the play's end – its movement from disorder to order – defies the putatively out-of-joint time. The card trick is to the jigsaw puzzle as *Six Characters* is to *Traps*. Pirandello ends his play with the Child drowned in the onstage fountain, whereas Churchill's six onstage bodies get naked and bathe in the same bathwater. The drowning is an act of make-believe, of theatre, of non-subjectivity: no-one really dies. The bath is the world of the real, of performance: naked bodies and dirty water. In the baptismal present of performance, subjects become themselves. To be, argues Churchill, people require a world around them – a material situation, a space and time.

In this way, the bathing scene resolves the fractured ontology of *Traps*, both its insecure setting and its puzzling atemporality. Unlike staged actions such as locking the door, which are disconnected from either causes or effects, the bathing ritual celebrates its tethers to past choices and future consequences. Bodies, marked by mud (Albert) or ersatz bruises (Christie), get wet and, once clean, get dry, aided by the other bodies who wash backs and dispense towels. The temporal limbo of the set's inhabitants gives way to the real time marked by an onstage clock. The setting shifts. The ontologically unstable country-room/city-flat cedes to the material reality of the stage-as-stage, the stage itself, populated not with theatrical properties but real objects: the bath and its water; biscuits, peas and bread; the toenail clippings Jack removes.

A pivotal exchange during the first act of *Traps* serves as synoptic, sounding an alarm about a central feature of subjectivity:

JACK What are you frightened of?
 CHRISTIE Time.
 JACK What else?
 CHRISTIE Space.
 JACK What else?
 CHRISTIE Me.
 JACK What else? What are you frightened of?
 CHRISTIE You.³⁵

The passage encapsulates *Traps*' central theoretical insights, tying time and space to the positions of 'I' and 'you' that make identities possible. If identity is relational, as *Icecream* explored in its own lampooning terms, then identity is impossible within *Traps* until 'Jack' and 'Christie' give way to the performers who play them, sloshing around and threatening to soak the audience. Our failure to understand the characters' relationships to one another at the

play's beginning turns out to have reflected the characters' own impossible self-knowledge. As Del alleges, twice, they 'don't correlate'.³⁶

Body and language

The final moments of *Traps*, filled with concord, privilege the body as the site of subjectivity, as 'each separately, they start to smile'.³⁷ (The grammatically consonant 'each separately' recalls its dissonant double, 'both separately', in *Identical Twins*.) But it is the notion of a script, and not language itself, that has been left behind. Subjectivity houses itself in the body but anchors itself in language. Churchill returned to the complicated relationship between the two with a dazzling precision twenty years after *Traps* in *Blue Heart*, first staged by Stafford-Clark at the Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh in a production that opened at the Royal Court in September 1997. The play's bifurcated structure epitomizes its interests in body, language and their conjunction. The first half, 'Heart's Desire', is driven by physical action; the second, 'Blue Kettle', is told with increasingly challenging linguistic play; and the intricate kinship between the two plays mimics their shared theme of family relations.

'Heart's Desire', about a mother and father awaiting the homecoming of their daughter, revisits two aspects of *Traps*, one ontological and one epistemological. In its perpetual stopping and starting – it goes off-track and resets itself twenty-six times – the play calls attention to itself as a play, and it likens its own setting to a stage or rehearsal room populated by absurd repetitions, some unnaturally fast and some with incomplete lines. This metatheatrical play with ontology also involves a generic component, as the text's derailments repeatedly send it lurching into territory foreign to the genre, domestic drama, indicated by its opening stage directions, which announce the setting as Brian and Alice's kitchen. Churchill's attention to ontology may be amplified by the 'ten foot tall bird' called for in one interruption, which obliterates the line between theatre and performance as in the old Futurist stratagem: like the dog in Francesco Cangiullo's 1915 *Non c'è un cane*, a bird cannot know it is acting. (In Stafford-Clark's production, he opted for a representation: an actor in an ostrich costume.)

The play's derailments, such as that caused by the large bird, work twofold. By taking the play off-track, as announced by the restarting that they necessitate, they help the audience to outline what it will understand as the contours of 'Heart's Desire'. For while the different possibilities of *Traps* unfolded simultaneously, 'Heart's Desire' is rigorously teleological; each time the play resets, it returns to an earlier, stable moment and then proceeds along its 'correct' course. Churchill of course writes the play to include all of its errors, but our conditioned apprehension of a 'correct' plot effects her

metatheatrical trick: she draws our attention to our viewing practices, the standards – whether generic constraints or, indeed, lived conventions – by which we judge ‘natural’ or ‘deviant’ behaviour. Consider the play’s second correction: Brian enters donning a tweed jacket only to exit and return, on the same repeated cue, donning an old cardigan. The cardigan marks him more effectively as ‘father’, establishing his relationship to the woman invoked over and over in the play’s repeated first line, ‘She’s taking her time.’³⁸ We are made aware that we will know who ‘she’ is by reading the citation. This particular bit of knowledge will be effectively tested later, when Brian answers the door and returns with a nameless young Australian woman. In staging, his body language, and that of Alice and Aunt Maisie, will alert us well before the text does that the woman is not the long-awaited ‘she’. Moreover, the playwright reminds us of the iterative process by which we naturalize such semiotic conventions in the first place. She replays the donning of the old cardigan eight additional times. *Icecream*’s citations are revisited in less sardonic terms.

Churchill here thematizes performance and knowledge, asking ‘How do we know who they are?’ and recalling the signifiers that marked Syl and Jack as ‘parents’ at the top of *Traps*. As in that play, by doing so Churchill trains a spotlight on performance and self-knowledge, posing the question ‘How do they know who they are?’ as well as its existential twin, ‘How do we know who we are?’ *Traps* makes plain the inter-relationship between these two questions – and indeed, in their metatheatricality, both *Traps* and *Blue Heart* serve to theorize the absolute primacy of recognition and misrecognition tropes in Western theatre history, which stretch back at least as far as *Oedipus Rex*’s pierced heel. But ‘Heart’s Desire’ foregrounds Churchill’s particular phenomenological stance. She accents the ways in which we constitute our identities and relationships through all manner of signs; she foregrounds that we recognize someone – that is, determine an identity – by watching that someone in the act of doing things that have been done before. Indeed, she clarifies that we become someone by doing, by acting from a subject position located in time and space. One moment is emblematic: the wordless embrace between Brian and Alice that precedes Susy’s first entrance, which consolidates their positions, for us and for them, as effectively as the daughter’s appellative first line: ‘Mummy. Daddy. How wonderful to be home.’³⁹

Like ‘Blue Kettle’, Susy’s appellation directs us to the question of language and its central role in identities such as ‘mother’. In the second half of *Blue Heart*, we observe Derek convincing each of four elderly women, Mrs Plant, Mrs Oliver, Mrs Vane and Miss Clarence, that he is the biological son she had given up for adoption four decades before. As the play progresses, correct

words – i.e., words that convention leads us to expect – are replaced by ‘blue’ or ‘kettle’. Such substitutions multiply, so that by the eighth or ninth scene meaning is imperilled. A line such as ‘I know it’s not the kettle but why is it not the kettle, blue is the kettle’ can only be made intelligible to an audience by the performances of the actors.⁴⁰ Thus we are reminded of the two foci of ‘Heart’s Desire’: the regulation of normalcy and deviance, here linguistic, and the nature of performance, both constitutive and disruptive. The formal interest in language in ‘Blue Kettle’ relates directly to its undisguised concern with genealogical identity and the problem of self-knowledge. In one scene, Mrs Oliver talks Derek through a family tree, illustrating with photographs. Doing so ostensibly serves to reintroduce him to his family, but it quickly reveals itself as salve for the epistemological anxiety she betrays with the phrase ‘I mean I look at you and you could be anyone.’⁴¹ This precise uncertainty, of course, has facilitated Derek’s exploitations in the first case.

In the penultimate scene, Derek exploits the relational aspect of identity, using false subject-positions as Iago uses Desdemona’s handkerchief, to engender epistemological certainty. Upping his stakes, he enlists each of the unwitting Mrs Oliver and Mrs Plant to play biological mother to the other’s adoptive mother. The presence of the latter, he wagers, will consolidate the former; and thus in one deft manoeuvre he may solidify his own position as ‘son’ relative to each ‘mother’. But his gambit unravels. Mrs Oliver has authenticated her identity as his ‘real’ mother by means of documents Derek claims to have. But Mrs Plant has been thus authenticated too. ‘No I’m that’, she says.⁴² This crisis elicits an ironically maternal response from Mrs Oliver – ‘I’m getting a horrible kettle from this situation, Derek. I think you need to blue us what’s kettle on’ – and, chastened, Derek plays the child’s role and dodges responsibility: ‘There’s been a kettle in the documentation.’⁴³

Critics have connected the faltering language of ‘Blue Kettle’ to the disintegration of identity as Derek’s ploy gradually fails. But this misreading projects the audience’s own disconnection from the stage back onto its characters. Note the precision with which the scene moves to greater clarity in spite of the linguistic play. Each of Mrs Plant and Mrs Oliver in fact knows exactly what she and her scene partner say – and, indeed, the actors playing the roles must behave as if they have said the semantically ‘correct’ words and not *blue* or *kettle*. The epistemological concord clarifies the plot-level misunderstanding, setting up the scene’s pivotal final line, which positions Mrs Oliver as wronged outsider and Mrs Plant as lovingly scolding parental authority: ‘What have you done to the poor woman, Tommy?’⁴⁴ Perversely, Derek’s ruse seems to have cemented his relationship with Mrs Plant, who addresses him not as Derek or as Tom – the name of the son she gave up for adoption – but as Tommy, its familiar diminutive. This linguistic act

facilitates the denouement, in which the two bond as he comes clean, or at least seems to: while travelling, he met a photographer, John, who was searching for his biological mother; when John died, Derek thought to find the woman, Mrs Plant (whom he meets first in the play's action), but ended up devising his cuckoo plan. With his confession, a relationship of mutual benefit is promised. As 'blue' and 'kettle' substitute for any number of words, she substitutes for mother and he for son.

Two facts gnaw at this resolution. First, their symbiosis rests on a lie, as Derek claims that his own mother is dead: 'The died ket I ket a child.'⁴⁵ She is not. Senile, she is merely incapable of playing the maternal interlocutor he desires. Second, the audience is denied access to the communication that Mrs Plant and Derek share, as Churchill gradually reduces the script to phonemes. 'T b k k k k l?,' Mrs Plant asks, and Derek responds, 'B. K.'⁴⁶ We were better able to understand the ravings of his biological mother in the geriatric ward than the words of Mrs Plant, which suggest the communicative babbling of a mother to her infant. She and her surrogate son speak a language that is foreign to the audience, left in the dark. But it is not a private language. As Ludwig Wittgenstein argued, no language is private, since it must signify to at least two people for it to be language at all. And, crucially, the meaning exchanged between Mrs Plant and Derek is clear not only to the two characters but to the two actors who play them. Not blood but the dialect of blue kettle bonds these actors, too, an insight that returns us to the question of performance.

Identity as performance

More directly than its predecessors, *Blue Heart* explores the philosophy of language – the capacity of 'Oregon' to 'thrill' – keenly aware that its problems relate to identity and self-knowledge. Wittgenstein adumbrated this connection himself in his concept of 'family resemblance', by happy coincidence a good name for Churchill's central preoccupation in *A Number*, in which she returned to the theme of parent/adult child relationships. Wittgenstein sought to understand how a word could have meaning if no essence unites the many things to which it refers. These many things, he explained, might not be the same, but analysing them would reveal a pattern of similarity, a 'family resemblance'. Wittgenstein's view therefore allows us to speak meaningfully about things, and about people, without lapsing into essentialism – the precise victory of *A Number*'s purview on identity. In another happy coincidence, Wittgenstein demonstrated his idea with a 'number', too:

Why do we call something a 'number'? Well, perhaps because it has a – direct – relationship with several things that have hitherto been called number; and

this may be said to give it an indirect relationship to other things that we call the same name. And we extend our concept of number as in spinning a thread we twist fibre on fibre. And the strength of the thread does not reside in the fact that some one fibre runs through its whole length, but in the overlapping of many fibres.⁴⁷

To consider the many threads of a 'number' is to map the complex terrain of *A Number*. A number is a series of individual things as well as their aggregate, a quantity not exactly defined, and a grammatical category (Bernard or Bernards: singular or plural?) – as well as a distinct performance within the greater show: Churchill's next number after *Far Away*. The title's indefinite pronoun 'a' suggests what most unsettles Bernard, whose number haunts him as Clive haunted Teddy in *Identical Twins*: he worries about authenticity in a world dominated by reproductions. This anxiety derives from an essentializing mind-set, which Churchill aligns with a patrilineal logic – an alignment insinuated by Benjamin, for whom 'uniqueness' is 'inseparable from its being imbedded in the fabric of tradition'.⁴⁸ 'I got the impression there was this batch and we were all in it', Bernard frets, and Salter reassures him: 'No because you're my son.'⁴⁹ His logic tracks that of Teddy, and it will be similarly prone to collapse. A time and space may be necessary for authenticity, as Benjamin theorized, but such a location can be found without recourse to the patriarchal platitudes that govern 'originality'.

A Number rebukes Salter's claim to Bernard that 'they've damaged your uniqueness, weakened your identity'.⁵⁰ For in Churchill's picture, the art of human identity bears no family resemblance to Benjamin's work of art, whose essence Benjamin likens to its 'aura'. Rather, it is like performance, which represents without threat of reproduction.⁵¹ It continually constitutes and reconstitutes itself through words and deeds in a process that unfolds moment by moment but which is tethered to its history and future. It coheres in the present as an aggregate of acts that necessarily disappear into the past, as *Traps*' bathing ritual makes clear and as Derek in *Blue Heart* claims to understand: 'If you didn't have any [memories] you wouldn't know who you were would you.'⁵² Lance sought fake memories in the castles of England. However, anchored in the citational chain of lived experience – most palpably that of the rehearsal room – performance honours its memories by coming into being anew, night after night in space after space as the curtain rises. Since 2002, *A Number* has been performed in Australia, Canada, Italy, Japan and Russia; in Brazil as *Um Número*, the Czech Republic as *Řada*, France as *Un grand nombre*, Germany as *Die Kopien*, and Spain as *Una còpia* (but in Argentina as *Copias*). The list is inexhaustible. In the US, *A Number* was the fifth most-produced play of the 2005–6 theatre season.⁵³

In other words, like Bernard, *A Number* proliferates. Its iterations share a family resemblance; they are akin but unique, like Bernard, Bernard and Michael Black tied together by a shared DNA. The clones are independent units familiarly entwined, a relationship that finds its grammatical analogue in the script, whose near-absence of other punctuation throws into relief its hundreds of commas, splicing independent clauses like genes. The first comma splice appears in the set instructions: 'The scene is the same throughout, it's where Salter lives.'⁵⁴ The specifics of this spare setting will be expressed differently by each of *A Number*'s stagings, whose myriad variations will reflect the contexts from which they emerge, the spaces and times in which they are performed and thus come into being. Churchill's disdain for didascalia – there are zero stage directions – highlight a lesson of *Blue Heart*: performance provides the supplement that brings the textual DNA to theatrical life. That play had another anti-essentialist emphasis, exposing the codes that govern performance as learned and iterative. In *A Number*, Churchill shadows each of her characters with echoes of the others. To cite only one example of many, Salter ('do you get asthma do you have a dog') unwittingly mimics Bernard 2 ('do we get asthma but what do you call your dog') as he talks to Bernard 1.⁵⁵

In this way, *A Number* surveys the relational terms of identity with less dread than *Identical Twins* and *Icecream*. After Bernard 2's murder and Bernard 1's suicide, Salter begs Michael for 'something from deep inside your life', in an effort to effect a paternal bond; Michael describes not himself but his wife, whose 'disney elf' ears he loves.⁵⁶ The reference revisits Churchill's instructive focus on the citational nature of DNA. Our uniqueness inheres not in 'originality' – 'none of us' is the original, as the doctors have told Bernard 2⁵⁷ – but in the infinite variety of ways that we cite, combine and interpret pre-existing codes. No language is private. We become ourselves minute by minute through the actions we perform and the words we say, just, indeed, as Daniel Craig can become Bernard, Bernard and Michael Black before our eyes at the Royal Court. The actor stood to each of them as each of them stands to the others: a genetically identical person with a nonetheless unique way of being.

Thus *A Number* ends by quelling the angst that shadowed the Bernards. Their clone Michael instructs:

We've got ninety-nine per cent the same genes as any other person. We've got ninety per cent the same as a chimpanzee. We've got thirty per cent the same as a lettuce. Does that cheer you up at all? I love about the lettuce. It makes me feel I belong.⁵⁸

'[Y]ou like your life?' asks Salter, whose bewilderment betrays the patriarchal logic to which he clings. Michael replies, 'I do yes, sorry.'⁵⁹ Setting Michael

against Salter – strangers, and yet son and father – *A Number* highlights the performative nature of identity even as it limns the longing for essences. This longing persists, pervading the play and coursing under the skin of Churchill's entire corpus, suppurating onto her stages. It ties together Lance's quest with Teddy's plight, Derek's psychological need with Bernard's existential anxiety; it haunts Albert's schizophrenia in *Traps*. Filial longing may also stand behind our own fetish for origins, which we betray in our theatre histories and the printed artefacts of plays. (The text of *A Number* is no exception, announcing it 'was first performed at the Royal Court Theatre Downstairs, London, on 23 September 2002, with ... Daniel Craig [and] Michael Gambon').⁶⁰ But this longing betrays the distinctive nature of performance.

One stress remains to be laid. Churchill once said that her radio plays, such as *Identical Twins*, sought to smash the bourgeois family structure that constricted Hedda Gabler, one reason for the playwright's iconic status in feminist theatre.⁶¹ It is unsurprising that the sardonic Vera, like Syl and Enid, is without parents. Churchill's later plays, too, jam patrilineal lines – a potential effect of the incest fleetingly invoked in *Traps*, *Icecream* and even *Blue Heart*. (After all, the 'correct' plot of 'Heart's Desire' cannot get past its last hiccup, Brian's uncomfortably intimate declaration to Susy that 'You are my heart's desire.'⁶² Moreover, Susy and her brother Lewis – 'Where's my big sister? I want to give her a kiss ... Dad knows where she is, don't you Dad? Daddy always knows where Susy is'⁶³ – will reappear as a couple, Enid and Derek, in 'Blue Kettle', thanks to the semiotics of doubling.) That all of the characters searching for genealogical relief in these plays are male is equally unsurprising. Their search for originality follows their search for origins, on a path suggested by these words' shared etymology. The Latin root stresses ancestry.

But it also stresses 'coming into being'. So does theatre, which wields an inherently anti-essentialist power. Unlike her collaborative plays, *Identical Twins*, *Traps*, *Icecream*, *Blue Heart* and *A Number* are all solely authored creations; and the playwright's identity is imprinted on their copyright pages: 'Caryl Churchill has asserted her right to be identified as the author of these works.'⁶⁴ The etymology of *author* stresses origination, too, and as a category it is unsurprisingly gendered; indeed, the so-called 'right of paternity' binds the legal relationship of author to text.⁶⁵ However, unlike the father – Salter, omnipresent in *A Number* – Churchill is absent from the stage. The infinite acts of performance she engenders are all her progeny, but as a theatre artist she cannot invest in the patriarchal notion that positions 'author' as the unitary source of meaning. This fact may best explain why Bernard, Lance, Derek and others look only in vain for their patrilineal origins. At least one critic has bemoaned the complete absence, in *A Number*, of the clones'

mother, who is invoked only through her death before Bernard 2's birth – 'so she was already always', as he cryptically puts it.⁶⁶ It is Churchill's most fruitful provocation. The backward search for self may always turn up dead, but like the mother the performed self reveals itself, already always, only as it disappears in performance.

NOTES

1. Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 233.
2. Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), pp. 217–52.
3. Caryl Churchill, *A Number* in *Plays: Four* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2008), p. 166.
4. Churchill, 'Incompatible Flavours', interview with Kevin Jackson, *Independent* (12 April 1989), p. 15.
5. For example, Emile Benveniste demonstrated that speech requires a perspective – a subject position – from which 'I' can be uttered, and each subject position and therefore 'I' is different from all others. As he puts it:

Each *I* has its own reference and corresponds each time to a unique being who is set up as such... The definition can now be stated precisely as: *I* is 'the individual who utters the present instance of discourse containing the linguistic instance *I*'. Consequently, by introducing the situation of 'address', we obtain a symmetrical definition for *you* as the 'individual spoken to in the present instance of discourse containing the linguistic instance *you*'.

(Emile Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics*, trans. Mary Elizabeth Meek (Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami Press, 1971), p. 218)

Jacques Lacan theorized that a child finds the possibility of a unified, coherent being by identifying itself, in a mirror, as separate from the rest of the world and especially its mother. However, this illusion of an autonomous identity is rent, first because the identification is a mis-identification (the child sees a reflection) and second by the discovery of other bodies – a discovery which makes possible language acquisition and especially the subject-position declared as 'I'. In Lacan's terms,

We have only to understand the mirror stage as an *identification*, in the full sense that analysis gives to the term: namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image ... This jubilant assumption of his spectacular image by the child at the *infans* stage ... would seem to exhibit in an exemplary situation the symbolic matrix in which the *I* is precipitated in a primordial form, before it is objectified in the dialectic of identification with the other, and before language restores to it, in the universal, its function as subject.

(Jacques Lacan, 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I', *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Tavistock Publications, 1977), pp. 1–7, p. 2)

6. Churchill, *Identical Twins*, unpublished typescript, p. 25.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 1, 18.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 24.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 12, 14.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 26.
12. Churchill, *A Number*, in *Plays: Four*, p. 170.
13. Churchill, *Identical Twins*, p. 27.
14. Churchill, *Icecream*, in *Plays: Three* (London: Nick Hern Books, 1998), p. 59.
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.*, p. 62. The incest discussion appears in Act I, Scene 6, 'The Kiss', pp. 67–9.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 60.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 61.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 63.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 75.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 80.
22. *Ibid.*, pp. 80–1.
23. Una Chaudhuri, *Staging Place: The Geography of Modern Drama* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), p. 131.
24. Aristotle, *On Poetry and Style*, trans. G. M. A. Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989), p. 7: 'Hence they enjoy the sight of images because they learn as they look.'
25. Churchill, *Icecream*, in *Plays: Three*, p. 96.
26. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1957), p. xvi.
27. Chaudhuri, *Staging*, p. 135 and Churchill, *Icecream*, in *Plays: Three*, p. 102.
28. Churchill, *Traps*, in *Plays: One* (London: Methuen, 1985), p. 77.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 71.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 106.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 87.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 103.
33. Elin Diamond, '(In)Visible Bodies in Churchill's Theatre', *Theatre Journal*, 40.2 (May 1988), 188–204, p. 192.
34. Churchill, *Traps*, in *Plays: One*, p. 90.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 94.
36. *Ibid.*, pp. 86, 100.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 125.
38. Churchill, *Blue Heart*, in *Plays: Four* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2008), p. 65.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 86.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 120.
41. *Ibid.*, p. 103.
42. *Ibid.*, p. 126.
43. *Ibid.*
44. *Ibid.*
45. *Ibid.*, p. 128.
46. *Ibid.*
47. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (London: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), §67 (pp. 27–28c).
48. Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction', p. 223.

49. Churchill, *A Number*, in *Plays: Four*, p. 171.
50. *Ibid.*, p. 169.
51. See, for example, Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993), especially pp. 146–66.
52. Churchill, *Blue Heart*, in *Plays: Four*, p. 115.
53. As is *American Theatre's* convention, their tally excludes Shakespeare and adaptations of Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. See Eve Zappulla, '2005–06 Season Preview: A Comprehensive Listing of Productions, Dates, and Directors at TCG Theatres Nationwide', *American Theatre*, 22.8 (October 2005), 43–50, p. 43.
54. Churchill, *A Number*, in *Plays: Four*, p. 164.
55. *Ibid.*, pp. 180, 169.
56. *Ibid.*, p. 202.
57. *Ibid.*, p. 171.
58. *Ibid.*, p. 205.
59. *Ibid.*, p. 206.
60. *Ibid.*, p. 163.
61. They are 'about a bourgeois middle-class life and the destruction of it', Churchill quoted in Catherine Itzin, *Stages in the Revolution: Political Theatre in Britain since 1968* (London: Methuen, 1980), p. 281.
62. Churchill, *Blue Heart*, in *Plays: Four*, p. 92, see also p. 95.
63. *Ibid.*, p. 71.
64. Churchill, *Plays: Four*, p. iv.
65. A superb treatment of this relationship appears in Mark Rose, 'Mothers and Authors: *Johnson v. Calvert* and the New Children of Our Imaginations', in Paula A. Treichler, Lisa Cartwright and Constance Penney (eds.), *The Visible Woman: Imaging Technologies, Gender, and Science* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), pp. 217–39, especially pp. 223–6.
66. Churchill, *A Number*, in *Plays: Four*, p. 190.