

Engaging and Evading the Bard:
Shakespeare, Nationalism, and British Theatrical Modernism,
1900-1964

by

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in the Department of English
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

Engaging and Evading the Bard is about British theatrical modernism and its ambivalent relationship to Shakespeare. The conventional narrative of early twentieth-century British theater and drama situates their rise within the broad European context of Continental artistic developments, such as the rise of Henrik Ibsen. Examining the work of George Bernard Shaw, T. S. Eliot, W. H. Auden, and Peter Brook, this dissertation argues that the inauguration of a specifically British theater, theatricality, and dramatic movement in the modernist period is absolutely contingent on a turn to Shakespeare, the icon *par excellence* of British drama, British culture, British identity, British history, and British power. The turn to Shakespeare enables the emergence of a British tradition formally and politically distinct from its Continental counterparts.

This dissertation argues, however, that a modernist logic of paradox, contradiction, and irony governs the dynamics of British theatrical modernism's turn to Shakespeare: the engagement with Shakespeare is always co-extensive with the evasion of Shakespeare. *Engaging and Evading the Bard* explores the modernist irony towards Shakespeare. For Shaw, a Fabian-inspired anti-idealist political aesthetic (set forth in *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*) motivates his condemnation of "Bardolatry" throughout his career, most notably in *Caesar and Cleopatra*. In stark contrast to Shakespeare, a high-church, conservative Christian religiosity and ideological investment in medieval modernism lie at the heart of Eliot's 1935 verse drama *Murder in the Cathedral*. The interpenetration of media (print and performance) and genre (poetry, criticism, and drama) in *The Sea and the Mirror: A Commentary on The Tempest* allegorizes Auden's new-found liminal identity in the 1940s as both a British and American poetic and

political subject. Post-war, post-imperial, Cold War geopolitical realities and existential anxieties, especially concerning the Bomb and the threat of nuclear annihilation, lead Brook to adopt the late modernist theatricality of Samuel Beckett in his 1962 Royal Shakespeare Company production of *King Lear*, a production that succeeds in staging Shakespeare's play as the metatragedy (that is, a tragedy about the failure of tragedy) that it really is.

Ultimately, this dissertation problematizes nationalism as an animating force for British theatrical modernism by positioning nationalism in the modernist period in relation to its ethical and political universalist antinomies: socialist internationalism, transatlantic transnationalism, and an emergent utopian postmodernist postnationalism.

For Teresa

Contents

Abstract	iv
Acknowledgements	ix
1. Introduction: Shakespeare and Irony	1
2. Chapter One: George Bernard Shaw: Beyond Shakes versus Shav	25
2.1 The Ironic Bridge to the Future	26
2.2 Against Ireland	40
2.3 The Challenge of Dramaturgy and National-Canon Formation	44
2.4 Idealism Modernism Manifesto: <i>The Quintessence of Ibsenism</i> and the Avant-Garde	48
2.5 Without History: Romance and Violence in <i>Caesar and Cleopatra</i>	64
2.6 To Restore the Art of Playing to Its Former Use and Dignity: Shaw’s Medievalism and the Great War	81
2.7 Out, out, brief candle!: One Last Fight	92
3. Chapter Two: T. S. Eliot: The High Modernist as Early Modernist and Medieval Modernist.....	95
3.1 On the Poet-Critic.....	106
3.2 Marlowe, Rostand, and Rhetoric.....	110
3.3 Transitional Playwrights: Period and Subjectivity in “Philip Massinger” and “Thomas Middleton”	117
3.4 The Irony of Order: The High Modernist as Medieval Modernist.....	123
3.5 From Ritual to Religion and Theater	138
3.6 From High-Church Nonconsequentialism to High Modernist Anagogical History: Interrogating Ends and Means, Transcending Endings and Beginnings in <i>Murder in the Cathedral</i>	146

4. Chapter Three: W. H. Auden and Peter Brook: Trans- and Postnational Commentaries on Shakespeare	163
4.1 W. H. Auden, Transnationalism, and the Interpenetration of Form in <i>The Sea and the Mirror: A Commentary on Shakespeare's The Tempest</i>	164
4.2 Peter Brook's <i>King Lear</i> , the Cuban Missile Crisis, and Postnationalist Theatricality.....	181
Works Cited	209
Biography	226

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Lastly, my dedicatee. Without whom there is nothing. Without whom I am nothing. My final word is for her.

*This is the beginning of what I have called the modern,
characterizing it as a moment in which
history and conventions can no longer be taken for granted;
the time in which music and painting and poetry
(like nations) have to define themselves
against their pasts;
the beginning of the moment in which
each of the arts becomes its own subject,
as if its immediate artistic task
is to establish its own existence.*

—Stanley Cavell,
Must We Mean What We Say?

1. Introduction: Shakespeare and Irony

That breakthrough into the godless present moment was, of course, less a discovery than homage to the touchstone of all writerly merit: Shakespeare, who defied the popes, bishops, and deconstructionists by unflinchingly holding the mirror up to nature.¹

George Bernard Shaw thought comedy could be a philosophy; recall the full title of his 1903 play, *Man and Superman: A Comedy and a Philosophy*.² Philosopher Ted Cohen writes that laughter in the face of the absurd reveals our humanity.³ I begin this dissertation with a discussion of an academic parody, from Frederick Crews's *Postmodern Pooh*.

At the December 2000 meeting of the Modern Language Association in Washington, DC, a group of the most highly esteemed literary critics in the field (who do not exist) organized by N. Mack Hobbs, a distinguished English professor at Princeton,

¹ Frederick Crews, *Postmodern Pooh*. New York: North Point, 2001. p. 70. Hereafter cited parenthetically. *Postmodern Pooh* is the sequel to Crews's 1963 book *The Pooh Perplex*.

² *Man and Superman: A Comedy and a Philosophy*

³ "Many successful jokes incorporate an absurdity, and therein lies the lesson that a human response to absurdity is laughter. It is not just jokes, but indeed it is also the world itself and its various inhabitants that are sometimes absurd to human contemplation. When we laugh at a true absurdity, we simultaneously confess that we cannot make sense of it and that we accept it. Thus this laughter is an expression of our humanity, our finite capacity, our ability to live with what we cannot understand or subdue." *Jokes: Philosophical Thoughts on Joking Matters*. Chicago: Chicago UP, 1999. pp. 40-41.

(who also does not exist) convened a panel (which, too, did not exist) on Winnie-the-Pooh (who does exist but only as a fiction). Each presenter delivered a paper on the work of A. A. Milne from the perspective of one specific critical hermeneutic, highlighting the strength of that hermeneutic as an appropriate and necessary form of engagement with Pooh. An elder statesman of the literary humanities, the distinguished Romanticist-cum-Shakespearean Orpheus Bruno (who, like Hobbs, does not exist) read a paper, entitled “The Importance of Being Portly,” in which he denounces the various hermeneutic and critical methodologies that have emerged in the Academy in the wake of the rise of “theory”—the various articulations of French poststructuralism and their subsequent transmogrifications within the matrices of American identity politics—and in which he argues for the centrality of Pooh to the Western Canon. He does so by equating Pooh with Shakespeare.

The different theory-driven readings of Pooh delivered by his colleagues on the panel fail, to Bruno’s mind, to engage with the “heraldic image of an amply proportioned Winnie-the-Pooh tiptoeing on a chair to reach a honey pot in his larder.” They read the image allegorically. Addressing his fellow panelists, Bruno claims,

If you were an earnest high school senior in AP English, you might translate this image into a kitschy allegory; it’s a figure, say, of Aspiration. Being modish academics, though, you doubtless prefer an allegory drawn from your own sewing circles: the picture really bespeaks Commodity Fetishism, or Depletion of Natural Resources, or the Recycling of Social Energy, or, best of all, Male Rapacity. (69)

Bruno rejects the rendering of image into language-game, which he sees as a flight from immanence into interpretation (and interpretation he finds banal): “Translation itself—the escape from literary presence to packaged significance—is precisely the error here. What you ought to be registering is a teddy bear stretching for a honey pot.” He holds up the example of modernist lyric and its “daring literalism” as the lens through which to see and read the image, citing the exemplarity of William Carlos Williams and his poem “This is Just to Say”: “I have eaten / the plums / that were in / the icebox” (69).⁴

To reject the literalism of Williams’ lyric in the pursuit of further “significance” is folly and reactionary (Bruno, then, as the true radical, saving Literary Studies from itself). Bruno writes, “To insist on further portent is to take a step backward in sophistication. It aligns soi-disant postmodernists with the invisible universe of Cotton

⁴ The entirety of Williams’s “This Is Just to Say”:

I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the icebox

and which
you were probably
saving
for breakfast

Forgive me
they were delicious
so sweet
and so cold

The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams, Volume I: 1909-1939. Eds. A. Walton Litz and Christopher J. MacGowan. New York: New Directions, 1986. p. 372.

Mather and the medieval fathers of the church” (69). In a cheeky dig, Bruno asserts that the superstitious, diabolical cosmology of medieval ecclesiastical authority finds its contemporary analogue in the hermeneutics of suspicion of the contemporary theorist. It is against both that modernism enters into existence, not as an original cultural movement or phenomenon but rather as a rearticulation of the supremacy of the Greatest Writer Ever, the one against all others are measured, Shakespeare. We return to my opening epigraph: “That breakthrough into the godless present moment was, of course, less a discovery than homage to the touchstone of all writerly merit: Shakespeare, who defied popes, bishops, and deconstructionists by unflinchingly holding the mirror up to nature.”

Pooh, Bruno tells us, breathes the same rarefied air as Shakespeare. Shakespeare and Pooh are sublime subjects of aesthetic creation, not just incorrupt and pure but themselves incorruptible, themselves purifying. We stand in their company—they do not deign to stand in ours. As Shakespeare defied (and continues to defy) those who would subjugate him to their explanations of the universe,

As does *Pooh*, which is to literature for the young what Shakespeare is to literature altogether. We do not explain *Pooh*; it explains us, through the sheer fullness of its represented life. It possesses no portable meaning that we can corrupt to our tawdry didactic ends; nor does it allow us to forget that artistic facts are always *willed*. “In poetry,” Pooh tells Piglet, “—well, you *did* it, because the poetry says you did. And that’s how people know.” *There’s* a wisdom far more radical than that of the neophyte Nietzscheans and Rolex revolutionaries who have seized control of the academy. (70)

J. L. Austin writes that poetic language, like theatrical language, is the antithesis of a performative utterance, for it is a speech act which is “in a *peculiar way* hollow or void if said by an actor on stage, or if introduced in a poem.”⁵ Pooh’s explanation of poetry to Piglet contravenes Austin’s. Poetry, like all art, *is* performative. Saying poetry is doing poetry. The poem itself is what confirms the felicity of the uptake of the utterance to the poet and to the world (“And that’s how people know”).

For Bruno, the purpose of the “strong author” is not the financial reward emblemized by the Rolex on the wrist of the would-be “revolutionaries” whom he castigates. Nor is it didactic. His intent is not to communicate, to convey some “portable meaning,” or to teach. Rather, it is achieving immortality, “ensuring that we’ll never be able to dispense with his brainchild” (70), that most extraordinary performance utterance that has a life all its own. The best writers know it when they have done it, and they “can’t resist rubbing their immortality in our faces.” Bruno tells his fellow panelists,

Shakespeare flaunt the fact that Prospero’s cloud-capp’d towers, though made of the sheerest cardboard, will out-last every castle in England. So, too, there’s no exaggeration in the final, startlingly boastful clause of *The House at Pooh Corner*: “a little boy and his Bear will always be playing.” It’s nothing but the truth—and centuries after your clamorous “isms” have faded into silence, the boy and the Bear will be playing yet. (70)

⁵ J. L. Austin. *How To Do Things With Words*. 2nd ed. Eds. J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1975. p. 22. The rest of the paragraph and beginning of the next take freely from Austin.

It is not merely the greatness of *Pooh* that warrants its comparison to Shakespeare. There is something of Shakespeare's annihilating and categorically destructive negative energy in *Pooh* "adding nihilistic starch to the limp sentimentalities of the romper room" (70). In Milne's character Eeyore, Bruno sees as "an unmistakable surrogate for Hamlet":

Like the dyspeptic prince, this character doesn't "seem to have felt how for a long time." Not technically a canine but distinctly hangdog in demeanor, he might almost be called a melancholy Great Dane. And just as his literary ancestor does, he manifests a depressive inability to take arms against a sea of troubles—into which he literally tumbles in one episode of unmitigated terror: "There was a loud splash, and Eeyore disappeared." That the "sea" in this instance is a sylvan stream only goes to show that Milne's imagination was caught up not only in Hamlet's plight but in the doomed Ophelia's as well. (70-71)

There is another Shakespearean valence of tragedy in *Pooh*, one that recalls *King Lear* and its "sabotage" of the audience's expectations of a fortunate resolution, "a happy ending" (71).⁶ Without comfort, justice, or redemption, both stories end offering nothing but a vision of total desolation:

No more in *The House at Poof Corner* than in *King Lear* do we find the hero repaid with good fortune for his admirable traits and for the many indignities he has been made to suffer. Lear dies, heartbroken, over the corpse of Cordelia. Pooh will be unceremoniously tossed into an attic by some domestic factotum as Christopher Robin put[s] away childish things[.]

⁶ For a reading of *Lear* as a tragedy that refuses any humanistic affirmation of essential (and essentializing) value and that "sabotages" the possibility of closure, cf. Jonathan Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and His Contemporaries*. 3rd ed. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2004. pp. 189-203.

(71)

This sense of injustice and irresolution, this denial of the “sense of an ending”⁷ we feel at the prospect of Pooh’s spending the rest of time alone and disposed of in an attic is compounded by the fact that Milne’s tragic hero, for Bruno, is a version of Shakespeare’s greatest, most vital achievement, one that exerts a powerful influence on *Pooh*. Of Pooh’s child companion, Christopher Robin, Bruno writes,

Everybody loathes a goody-goody mama’s boy, as I learned the hard way at Music and Art. [...] It is Pooh, not the privileged, self-advancing, all too socializable Christopher, who has earned out lifelong affection. And yet we perceive with stark clarity that Christopher, not Pooh, will be the survivor here. It doesn’t seem fair to a Friendly Bear—does it, now, my dears?—to throw him away like a broken chair. (71)

Christopher will grow up and get on in the world, while Pooh, his erstwhile friend, is forgotten, disowned. Bruno asks, “For those of you who have actually taken the trouble to read some Shakespeare, doesn’t this rough treatment ring another bell—specifically, from *2 Henry IV*?” Based on this reading of the narrative parallels between Shakespeare and Milne, Bruno maps the story of Prince Hal and Falstaff onto that of Christopher Robin and Pooh, casting the bear in the role of Sir John, “twin to that very

⁷ “In *King Lear* everything tends toward a conclusion that does not occur; even personal death, for Lear, is terribly delayed. Beyond the apparent worst there is worse suffering, and when the end comes it is not only more appalling than anyone expected, but a mere image of that horror, not the thing itself. The end is now a matter of immanence; tragedy assumes the figurations of apocalypse, of death and judgment, heaven and hell; but the world goes forward in the hands of exhausted survivors. Edgar haplessly assumes the dignity; only the king’s natural body is at rest. This is the tragedy of sempiternity; apocalypse is translated out of time into the *aevum*.” Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000. p. 82.

friend—a character meant to embody the fun-loving plentitude that will be shamefully sacrificed to his ex-companion’s worldly ambition. He’s a reincarnation, in fur and stuffing, of the most profoundly human and sympathetic personage ever drawn by Shakespeare, or by anyone else, John Falstaff” (71-72). Christopher’s story will continue as Prince Hal’s does, gloriously, in *Henry V*; Pooh’s will not. Dismissed, the latter will vanish from the former’s life and be no more, just as Falstaff—nothing more than an off-stage character about whose death we hear only through the second-hand reportage of those on the peripheries of the narrative at which Hal, now King Henry, is the heroic center⁸—is present to us only insofar as he is an absence we barely register.

Bruno continues in this vein, expounding the influence that Shakespeare and his “most profoundly human” character had on *Pooh*. He then proceeds masterfully to uncover Henry James’s and William Wordsworth’s roles as two further influences on *Pooh*. “So much, then, for the major influences and Milne’s cunning means of containing them” (75).⁹

⁸ Hostess: Nay, sure, he’s not in hell. He’s in Arthur’s bosom, if ever man went to Arthur’s bosom. A made a finer end, and went away as it had been any christom child. *Henry V*, 2.3.9-11. All citations to Shakespeare are to *The Norton Shakespeare*. 2nd ed. Gen. Ed. Stephen Greenblatt. New York: W. W. Norton, 2008.

⁹ The rest of Bruno’s paper takes up again the theme of Pooh as an antiauthoritarian, anticlerical “blasphemer,” aligned with great heretics such as “the Gnostic Valentinus, the Kabbalist Moses Cordovero, the Sufi Ibn al-‘Arabi, the Shi’ite al-Hallaj,” and Bruno himself (75-76). As such, Bruno argues, Milne cannot possibly be the author. After the thought-experiment of imagining Kafka as the real author of *Pooh*, Bruno settles on Virginia Woolf (76-78) and makes his closing peroration against his theory-driven colleagues on the panel: “If you could grasp the import of the following exchange—*really* grasp it, as countless ordinary readers have done with my encouragement—you might be able to leave your fashionable shibboleths behind: ‘Oh Bear!’ said Christopher Robin. ‘How do I love you!’ ‘So do I,’ said Pooh.” I recount all this because Virginia Woolf could easily have been an object of study in this

* * *

If I may take a step back from what I have written thus far, I hope it is obvious that the “text” (note the scare-quotes) under discussion is Frederick Crews’s parody of Harold Bloom on Shakespeare, and I have begun my dissertation with this parody because it raises several themes, problems, questions, and opportunities. From the outset, I want to make perfectly clear what this dissertation is and what it is *not*. This is a dissertation about British modernism, nationalism, theatricality (in print and in performance), and the relationship between this constellation of terms and Shakespeare. Whereas Shakespeare is the central trope of this project, this dissertation concerns itself first and foremost with those other terms. This is not a dissertation on Shakespeare and his relationship to them. The difference is not simply one of priority; it is one of directionality. It is my task in this project to examine the heterogeneous ways by which the four figures on whom I focus in this project—George Bernard Shaw, T. S. Eliot, W. H. Auden, and Peter Brook—approach the challenge of Shakespeare, *not* the ways in

dissertation—less because she is, “uniquely in English literature, the only author [to have] produced a book-length biography of a cocker spaniel,” *Flush*, as Bruno writes (77), than because: 1) she wrote extensively on Shakespeare and other authors of the English Renaissance; 2) she made her own foray into dramatic writing with the comedy *Freshwater* (written 1923, given private performance in Vanessa Bell’s studio 1935); and 3) the event at the center of her last novel, *Between the Acts*, is the performance of something akin to a medieval pageant play, written novelistically as a quasi-closet drama. On Woolf, Shakespeare, and the Renaissance, cf. Cary DiPietro, *Shakespeare and Modernism*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2006. pp. 168-199; and Sharon Stockton, “Virginia Woolf and the Renaissance: The Promise of Capital and the Violence of Materialism.” *CLIO: A Journal of Literature, History, and the Philosophy of History* 24:3 (Spring 1995): 231-250. On Woolf and modernist performance in *Freshwater* and *Between the Acts*, cf. Penny Farfan, *Modernism, Women, and Performance*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2004. pp. 49-64 and 89-101.

which Shakespeare approaches them. Implicit in such this latter line of argument, I believe, would be the belief that Shakespeare acts on Shaw, Eliot, Auden, and Brook, that his agency is more important than theirs, that he influences and controls them rather than that they negotiate the pressures his work puts on theirs. This takes me, I fear, too close to pursuing a study in the theory of the “anxiety of influence,” the work that Bloom has made into his own cottage industry, especially as centered on Shakespeare as the center of the Western Canon.¹⁰ That is not to say that the relationships between the artists I consider and Shakespeare do not matter. They do, but 1) only insofar as I am interested in the “cunning means” by which Shaw, Eliot, Auden, and Brook contain Shakespeare, not in the “major influence” he has over them; and 2) only in relation to their social and historical contexts. This dissertation traces the formal development of British theatrical modernism, not because I want to perpetuate a cult of poetic personality, but rather because intertextuality is more important to me than influence. That is, a meditation on the “relationship among texts,” as Pierre Bourdieu defines intertextuality (and for the sake of argument, a given theatrical production is a text), is more useful than a meditation

¹⁰ For Bloom’s first major statement on, the “anxiety of influence,” cf. *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997. His works, from which I am trying to distance myself, are far too numerous, and repetitive, to cite in full. Nevertheless, Crews’s parody targets *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages*. New York: Riverhead, 1994; and *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*. New York: Riverhead, 1998. For a lively set of responses to Bloom’s *Shakespeare*, cf. Christy Desmet and Robert Sawyer, Eds. *Harold Bloom’s Shakespeare*. New York: Palgrave, 2002. In the “biographical headnote” to Bruno’s piece, Bruno’s books include *The Breaking of the Wind*, *The Savage Sublime: One-Upmanship at the Muses’ Gate*, *My Vico*, *My Shakespeare*, *My God!*, *What You Don’t Know Hurts Me*, *Just Read These Books*, and *As I Said Before*. *Postmodern Pooh*, pp. 65-66.

on individuals.¹¹ What I want is to situate the formal development of British theatrical modernism within the “space of possibles” in which it occurred—that is, within a sociology of cultural production.¹²

I also begin this dissertation with a turn to Crews’s parody because the defining characteristic of parody, irony, is also the defining characteristic of British theatrical modernism’s relationship to Shakespeare. Irony, paradox, ambivalence, and contradiction—these terms are at the heart of how Shaw, Eliot, Auden, and Brook approach Shakespeare.¹³ In their work, they go to Shakespeare throughout their careers to the extent that it is not much of an exaggeration to claim that the development of British theatrical modernism is impossible without Shakespeare. The logic governing their repeated returns to Shakespeare, however, is not one of pure, unalloyed adulation. It is more critical and complex than that—it is a dynamic of simultaneous *engagement* and *evasion*. The works of Eliot, Shaw, Auden, and Brook are constantly embracing Shakespeare yet at the same time keeping him at arm’s length. They read, appropriate, laud, and perform Shakespeare in their own ways, but there is always the spirit of refusal

¹¹ *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*. Trans. Randal Johnson. New York: Columbia UP, 1993. p. 179. I find it telling that theater, and not just dramatic literature but the system of actual theatrical production and consumption, from the ticket-paying audience to the director, plays such an important role in Bourdieu’s conceptualization of sociology of cultural production. Given how intrinsically collaborative and communal staging and watching a play, respectively, are, theater lends itself extremely well to Bourdieu.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 176.

¹³ Bloom’s theory of influence is essentially a psychoanalytic one of Oedipal conflict. Given the centrality of ambivalence in Freud’s psychoanalytic genealogy of civilization and culture, I use the term guardedly. Cf. “Taboo and Emotional Ambivalence.” *Totem and Taboo*. Trans. and Ed. James Strachey. New York: W. W. Norton, 1950. pp. 24-93.

hovering at hand, a need to avert their attention from him to something else. Oftentimes that something else is the Elizabethan and Jacobean drama of Shakespeare's contemporaries or the lyric and epic poetry of his successors, e.g., Donne, Herbert, Milton and Dryden. More often than not, though, it is a turn to the drama and culture of his medieval predecessors; hence, medievalism in the modernist period is a major theme in my work. The evasions of Shakespeare that Shaw, Eliot, Auden and Brook make and the forms that those evasions take are of paramount importance to me because they testify to the power of irony as the modernist trope supreme.¹⁴

Modernism is one of the central terms of this dissertation because it is an important dimension of the sociology of cultural production in which Shaw, Eliot, Auden, and Brook worked. For Crews's Bruno, modernism is mimesis, and its exemplar is Shakespeare, "holding the mirror up to nature." Shakespearean representation and the modernism of Williams' "This Is Just to Say" are alike in that they are both expressions of realism, a kind of literalism that constitutes a denial of a metaphysics, either religious or theoretical, that distances us from reality.¹⁵ Just as with the image of Pooh reaching for the honey pot and the words of Williams' poem, all we have to do is read whatever is

¹⁴ The modernists themselves certainly understood the centrality of irony to their project. Recall the valorization of irony by the New Critics in their reevaluation of poetry; for example, cf. Cleanth Brooks, "Irony as a Principle of Structure." *Literary Opinion in America*. Rev. ed. Ed. Morton Dauwen Zabel. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1951. pp. 729-741.

¹⁵ Recall Stanley Cavell's warning: "Philosophy must be useful or it is harmful." *Must We Mean What We Say?* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1976. p. xlii.

in front of us in order to see a real and present world.¹⁶ Realism, then, is a poetics of everyday life that extends into practice, into how we *live* everyday life.¹⁷ It is an affirmative engagement with the experience of being in the world, living among other things, other people, and their ways of being in the world (what Wittgenstein called “forms of life”),¹⁸ an engagement that acknowledges danger and loss, in addition to pleasure and consolation. Marshall Berman’s sense of “modernity” and what it means to be “modern” coincides with Bruno’s “modernism.” Berman writes,

There is a mode of vital experience—experience of space and time, of the self and others, of life’s possibilities and perils—that is shared by men and women all over the world today. I will call this body of experience “modernity.” To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world—and, at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are. Modern environments and experiences cut across all boundaries of geography and ethnicity, of class and nationality, of religion and ideology: in this sense, modernity can be said to unite all mankind. But it is a paradoxical unity, a unity of disunity: it pours us all into a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle

¹⁶ It is not clear to me that there is not a contradiction, though. Bruno’s reading of Williams’s “literalism” suggests, to me, at least, the possibility that his realism is no different from a formalism, that the immanence of the poem is inextricably bound up with the form of the poem. Does this not put us right back on the slippery slope of deconstruction, from which Bruno thought Williams’s literalism had broken through? If it does, then the “soi-disant postmodernists” are right, for deconstruction is the theoretical paradigm of postmodernism, albeit a paradigm in which the “supreme theoretical concept and value of traditional modernism and the very locus of the notion of self-consciousness and the reflexive,” irony, survives. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1991. pp. 258-259.

¹⁷ My use of the expression “poetics of everyday life” is a deliberate nod to the work of Michel de Certeau: cf. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Trans. Steven Rendall. Berkeley and Los Angeles: California UP, 1984.

¹⁸ In German, *Lebensformen*. Cf. *The Philosophical Investigations*. 3rd ed. Trans. G. E. M. Anscombe. Oxford: Blackwell, 2001. § 19.

and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish. To be modern is to be part of a universe in which, as Marx said, “all that is solid melts into air.”¹⁹

As ought to be the case with a philosophical definition of modernism that aligns the term with Marx, there is something profoundly utopian here that makes it very appealing. Yet, there is a problem in accepting this line of thought: modernism, at least as constellated within the academic field of Modernist Studies, is virtually never understood to be realism—realism is almost always figured as modernism’s Other.²⁰ This has led to the near-omission of drama from histories of modernism, as drama, since the rise of Ibsen, has only ever been considered in its relation to realism, either as allied with it or as a reaction against it, e.g., expressionism.²¹ Hence, there are classic studies of *modern drama* but not *modernist drama*.²²

Albeit ever so modestly, this dissertation understands itself as a contribution towards a new literary and dramatic history, one which acknowledges the extraordinary theatricality of Ibsen and his successors, a theatricality that flies in the face of a simplistic

¹⁹ *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity*. New York: Penguin Books USA, 1988. p. 15. The line from Marx is from the *Communist Manifesto*: “All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life and his relations with his kind.” *The Portable Karl Marx*. Ed. Eugene Kamenka. New York: Viking, 1983. p. 207.

²⁰ Georg Lukács is the most forceful exception, advocating a politically-committed (read: socialist) realism. Cf. *Realism in Our Time: Literature and the Class Struggle*. Trans. John and Necke Mander. New York: Harper and Row, 1964; and *Studies in European Realism*. Trans. Edith Bone. New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1964.

²¹ I invoke expressionism in order to recall the so-called Brecht-Lukács debate. Cf. Adorno, Benjamin, et al. *Aesthetics and Politics*. London: Verso. 1980.

²² Three that leap to mind: Robert Brustein, *The Theatre of Revolt: An Approach to the Modern Drama*. Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1964; Raymond Williams, *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1968; and Richard Gilman, *The Making of Modern Drama: A Study of Büchner, Ibsen, Strindberg, Chekhov, Pirandello, Brecht, Beckett, Handke*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1974.

dismissal of “modern drama” as merely realist or anti-realist and announces theater as theater, as a self-conscious, reflexive form no different from the modernist lyric or the modernist novel. *Engaging and Evading the Bard* aligns itself with Toril Moi’s 2006 book *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism: Art, Theater, Philosophy* as a literary and dramatic history that realizes modernism not as anti-realist but rather as anti-idealist and opposed, as well, to the other modes and genres aligned vis à vis gender with the nineteenth century tradition of aesthetic idealism: romance, melodrama, and (if Eric Bentley is right that the desire for melodrama is also the desire for drama) theater itself.²³ This dissertation, then, also aligns itself with recent work on modernist antitheatricity, but it does so by taking British theatrical modernism’s engagement with and evasion of Shakespeare as its starting point.²⁴

In doing so, in treating the four figures at the center of this study, a variety of ancillary topoi manifest themselves in discussion. For example, it is telling that Bruno

²³ “The dramatic sense is the melodramatic sense, as one can see from the play-acting of a child. Melodrama is not a special and marginal kind of drama, let alone an eccentric or decadent one; it is drama in its elemental form; it is the quintessence of drama. [...] [T]he young person who does not wish to write melodrama, does not write drama at all, but attempts a nondramatic genre, lyric, epic, or what not.” *The Life of the Drama*. New York: Applause Theatre Book, 1964. p. 216.

²⁴ Martin Puchner’s inspired work is extremely important to me both here and throughout. Cf. *Stage Fright: Modernism, Anti-Theatricality, and Drama*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2002; and (with Alan Ackerman) Introduction. *Against Theatre: Creative Destructions on the Modernist Stage*. Eds. Alan Ackerman and Martin Puchner. New York: Palgrave, 2006. pp. 1-17. In relation to that other classic work on antitheatricity, Jonas Barish” *The Antitheatrical Prejudice*, Ackerman and Puchner discuss their project in terms of “a number of revisions” (2). Barish’s treatment of modernist antitheatricity at the end of his magisterial study, from Nietzsche to the Holocaust, treats antitheatricity as a manifestation of fascism and anti-Semitism—in other words, as a wholly destructive force; for Ackerman and Puchner, modernist antitheatricity borrowing the phrase from economist Joseph Schumpeter, is a concerned with “creative destruction,” a negative force which is actually generative (“creative destruction” as a dialectic) and which produces the innovations we know as modernist theatricality. Cf. Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: California UP, 1981. pp. 400-417, 450-477.

characterizes the modernity and modernism into which realism breaks through as “godless.” Religion, then, is a major theme in this dissertation. Questions concerning religion were extremely important to Shaw, Eliot, Auden, and Brook, questions such as, What is God’s place in the world? in history? This includes problems pertaining to periodization, especially with respect to the Renaissance, the Middle Ages, and the recurrence of medieval modernism. The question of God and history also pertains with respect to modernity’s apocalypticism, one which Bruno identifies with his “spiritually yearning and eternally restless” vision of America, where “the quintessential Americans aren’t Franklin, Edison, and Ford [...] but Joseph Smith, Elizabeth Clare Prophet, and David Koresh” (67)—a vision frightening enough to make me fall to my knees indeed. Fredric Jameson, in his reading of the four levels of allegory, defines the fourth level, the anagogical, the one concerned with eschatology, as political, the level of allegory in which we find “the collective ‘meaning’ of history.”²⁵ The anagogical plays an important role in my reading of T. S. Eliot and *Murder in the Cathedral*. Related to the question of history, other questions concerning religion that this dissertation will address include: What is our relationship to God? How is that relationship organized, mediated? through Church? through the Saints? What is the relationship between politics and theology? Is modernist political theology culturally coherent? Shaw was an avowed socialist his entire life. What does the example of Christ have to offer him, ethically? politically? Is the

²⁵ *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1981. pp. 30-31.

Christian logic of sacrifice one that transcends or perpetuates violence and atrocity? Auden rediscovered the Anglicanism of his childhood upon emigrating to America. What is the relationship between new nation and religion, identity through belonging and conversion? Brook directs a play that, more any other by Shakespeare, is rife with the typology of apocalypse. How does his directorial concept speak to an existential situation in which, for the first time in the history of humanity, the means to literally end the history of humanity exist?

Related to the question of religion is nationalism, which, like modernism and related to modernism, is also one of the central terms of this dissertation because it, too, is an important dimension of the sociology of cultural production in which Shaw, Eliot, Auden, and Brook worked. “Pooh will be unceremoniously tossed into an attic by some domestic factotum as Christopher Robin put[s] away childish things, “ Orpheus Bruno writes, comparing Pooh’s fate with Falstaff’s. This will be done as Christopher “looks ahead to the well-known stages of English character-building: schoolwork, spanking, sodomy, self-abuse, and eventual espousal to a bucktoothed stick” (71). The theme of “English character-building” is one bound up with the rise emergence of British nationalism.²⁶ Benedict Anderson defines nationalism as “an imagined political

²⁶ For me, the terms *British* and *English* are interchangeable. This is not mere intellectual laziness on my part. Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Britain recognized the increasing porousness of these terms in response to Irish agitation, the growth of the Empire, and, in consequence thereof, a nascent national self-doubt. “The Unionist idea of the national character was necessarily coloured by the effects of the Home Rule crisis and of rampant imperialism, by the greater emphasis laid upon the state and the binding institutions of the nation, and by the new understanding of the artificiality of nations.” Peter

community” in which, by virtue of the size of any given nation, howbeit ever so small, the individuals who live in it are strangers to one another, will never know more than a miniscule number of their fellows citizens, “yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.”²⁷ What is communion if not a sacramental bond? Anderson maintains that nationalism emerges as a post-Enlightenment response to the decline in religion, the desacralization of monarchy, and a transformation of temporal subjectivity, a shift from what Walter Benjamin terms “Messianic time,” a medieval conception of simultaneity, to “homogenous, empty time,” the temporality at work in a novel or a newspaper; nationalism, then, steps in where religion leaves off.²⁸ Understanding the relationship between religion and nationalism allows us to skirt the trap of conceptualizing nationalism purely “as *an* ideology”; Anderson suggests that we treat nationalism “as if it belonged with ‘kinship’ and ‘religion’, rather than with ‘liberalism or ‘fascism.’”²⁹ The conceptualization of nationalism as the sense of kinship or belonging I find useful. This dissertation does not concern itself with trying to analyze and identify specifically British characteristics in a structuralist synchrony in either the works it examines or the four

Mandler, *The English National Character: The History of an Idea from Edmund Burke to Tony Blair*. New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2006. pp. 133.

²⁷ *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Rev. ed. London: Verso, 2006. p. 6.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 12-36. On “Messianic time” and “homogenous, empty time,” cf. Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History.” *Illuminations*. Ed. Hannah Arendt. Trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken, 1968. pp. 253-264.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

artists discussed. I do not essentialize Britishness with respect to the theatricality of this period or with respect to Shaw, Eliot, Auden, and Brook themselves. They negotiate the question of Britishness and nationalism for themselves through their engagements with and evasions of Shakespeare—and other ways, as well. Anderson writes, “Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined.”³⁰ The value of using Shakespeare as a trope in this project, then, lies in Shakespeare’s status as the embodiment of British drama, British culture, British history, British power, and British identity *par excellence*: the style with which Shaw, Eliot, Auden, and Brook engage and evade Shakespeare is the style with which they articulate their desire for a sense of belonging to a community called Great Britain—or not. Anderson tells us that nationalism is a cultural artifact of a particular kind.³¹ I try to recover the sense of it. This is no easy task, given that Shaw emigrated to Britain from Ireland, Eliot from America, Auden to America, and Brook to the Continent.

Parallel to politics, ethics a major theme in this dissertation. It is the question of the Other. The Williams’ poem that Bruno quotes in relation to Shakespeare, “This Is Just to Say,” is a poem that seeks forgiveness for a wrong done to the Other, eating the Other’s plums. The challenges posed by forgiveness, keeping promises, living in a world defined by the presence of others are often bound up with religion and questions of redemption and salvation (Christ). It is fortuitous, then, that Bruno frames the work of

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

“English character-building” in such ironic terms (“schoolwork, spanking, sodomy,” etc.). To consider Shakespeare with respect to Shaw, Eliot, Auden, and Brook is to consider nationalism with respect to its ethical and political universalist antinomies: internationalist socialism, transnationalism, and postnationalism.

That is, the teleology of nationalism in this narrative is one of potential utopian irony. While internationalist socialism, transnationalism, and postnationalism all dialectically produce their reactionary antitheses (e.g., xenophobia, fascism, war) the audacious hope exists, in tandem with the ever-increasing escalation of the global and technological scale of war carried out in the name of the nation, that the dialectic of nationalism culminates with a total reevaluation of human belonging predicated on a desire for community that transcends the nation-state altogether, the yearning for peace over patriotism, for cooperation over sacrifice, for an infinite horizon of global citizenship.³² The hydrogen bomb and the threat of nuclear omnicide that loom in the historicist imaginary of Peter Brook’s 1962 RSC production of *King Lear* are only the *reductio ad absurdum* of the nationalism emblemized by the sword of Caesar in Shaw’s *Caesar and Cleopatra* at the commencement of the twentieth century. It is my hope that the ways in which the relationships among the categories moral value, theater, and

³² Anderson writes that the nation “is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings.” *Ibid.*, p. 7. For a passionate advocacy of a cosmopolitan universalism against patriotism and the nation-state, as well as a variety of critiques in response to that position, cf. Martha Nussbaum et al., *For Love of Country: Debating the Limits of Patriotism*. Ed. Joshua Cohen. Boston: Beacon, 1996.

nationalism develop over time in the modernist period constitute a through-line in this project. For Shaw, the British imperialist nationalism embodied by Shakespeare is an obstacle to a universalist ethics predicated on a Marxist conception of social justice, and the medieval models a didacticism important for bringing change. For Eliot the reactionary, theater offers a form of nationalist self-fashioning bound up with religious and political medievalism, a form of conservatism to which Shakespeare ironically poses a threat. For Auden, the interpenetration of theater, criticism, and poetry in his engagement with Shakespeare transfigures Eliot's conservatism into a liberal, transnational subjectivity, one as keenly aware of mortality and death as Eliot's and Shaw's. For Brook, even transnationalism, finally, is found to be inadequate in the face of the Bomb and a qualitatively new global scale of war that can potentially cause the death of nations and nationalism altogether—postnationalism and a postnational theatricality must transcend (trans)nationalism and its cultural articulations (institutional and canonic) in theater. The dramaturgical shift from *King Lear* during the Cuban Missile Crisis to *The Mahabharata* in the 1980s and his later work parallels the shift from a conservative late modernism to a more utopian postmodernism.

While there is a bias towards a Marxist critical hermeneutic on my part, I, too, wish to resist the restraining dogmatism of dialectical metaphysics. A desire to inhabit and empathize with the imaginative space of Auden, Shaw, Eliot and Brook within a historically specific sociology of cultural production as each engages and evades Shakespeare is my primary commitment. As might be clear by now, the counter-

metaphysics of ordinary language philosophy animates me more than anything else. Perhaps this is a way of saying that mine is actually a post-Marxist perspective. Taking Anderson's admonition against conflating nationalism and ideology seriously, I nonetheless hold that nationalism, the communal desire for kinship and belonging, is often animated by ideology and certainly has real-world political ramifications, such as war. The critical tools that Marx bequeathed to us—including the rhetorics of production, consumption, class, and ideology—are more useful to me than his philosophy of history in addressing the dynamics of power at play in everyday life and ordinary language, language that includes the literary and theatrical language of modernism. No single theoretical orientation determines the course of this project. This dissertation reserves the right to appropriate responsibly from whatever critical or theoretical matrices necessary in it to pursue its goal, an understanding of the ironic development of modernist theatricality in relation to Shakespeare as trope of British nationalism.

Chapter One, "George Bernard Shaw: Beyond Shakes versus Shav," argues that an ironic, dialectical engagement and evasion of Shakespeare is necessary for Shaw to inaugurate a new British society and a New Drama. The short story "The Future of Theater" is an allegory of Shaw's process of revising Shakespeare. A Fabian, anti-idealist aesthetic, announced in his manifesto *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*, governs his work, both formally and ideologically. Realism, as a mode of authentic engagement with the modernity of everyday life, is his guiding principle; for example, Shaw drains the romance out of *Antony and Cleopatra* in his "prequel," *Caesar and Cleopatra*. Yet, in

his later works, an increasingly tendency towards medievalism occurs, such as in *The Dark Lady of the Sonnets*. This is especially the case in response to the Great War, Shakespeare now being tainted by the British nationalism that had, at least in part, caused World War I. Ironically, in his evasion of Shakespeare through a turn to the medieval in *Saint Joan*, Shaw reinscribes one aspect of the ideological underpinning that had led to World War I.

In Chapter Two, “T. S. Eliot: The High Modernist as Early Modernist and Medieval Modernist,” I argue that the constant critical and poetic attention Eliot pays to Shakespeare’s contemporaries—the Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists and the seventeenth-century poets—and to Shakespeare’s predecessors—the drama of the medieval ages and primitive ritual—are symptomatic of an evasiveness towards Shakespeare himself. For Eliot, Shakespeare’s Renaissance offers a view of chaos and disorder comparable to that of his modernity. A medieval modernist, Eliot’s conception of the Middle Ages, albeit ever so inauthentic and ideologically driven by his Christian conservatism, provides a template, both formally and theologically, for his own first full-length play, *Murder in the Cathedral*. The play’s investment in questions of ends and means, on the one hand, and endings and beginnings, on the other, is one to which Shakespeare cannot speak.

Chapter Three, “W. H. Auden and Peter Brook: Trans- and Postnational Commentaries on Shakespeare,” proceeds by a different route. Whereas the chapters on Shaw and Eliot are more expansively synoptic in assessing those two modernists’

engagement and evasion of Shakespeare, this shorter chapter focuses on two artists' specific engagements with Shakespeare as interpretive performances, one in the form of a book of poetry, the other a staging of a play: W. H. Auden's *The Sea and the Mirror: A Commentary on Shakespeare's The Tempest*, and Peter Brook's 1962 Royal Shakespeare Company production of *King Lear*. One of the first texts Auden composes after emigrating to the United States from Great Britain, the interpenetration of genre (lyric, prose, drama, criticism) in *The Sea and the Mirror* is homologous with a new sense of poetry as constituting a transnational canon. Brook's *Lear*, I argue, historicizes the political and existential reality of the Bomb, the Cuban Missile Crisis having ended only two weeks before the production's premiere. In doing so, it explodes tragedy and genre altogether and lays the groundwork for a more utopian postnational performative postmodern.

It is hoped, then, that this dissertation, in its investigation of nationalism, British theatrical modernism, and the myriad ways it engages and evades Shakespeare, lays a groundwork for a future history of universalism and theater, especially tragedy.

2. Chapter One: George Bernard Shaw: Beyond Shakes versus Shav

George Bernard Shaw begins his career as a would-be novelist and short fiction writer in the 1880s.¹ In the short fiction, we see the germinal seeds of future plays; for example, *Man and Superman* (prem. 1905) can trace its origins at least as far back as the 1887 short “Don Giovanni Explains.” By the turn of the twentieth century, he was established as the leading playwright in Britain, and, as Michael J. Holland writes, “Shaw would return to short fiction only to present subject matter not conducive to dramatic presentation.”² The 1905 short story, “The Theatre of the Future,” is such a story, and I wish to begin this discussion of Shaw by turning to this story precisely because doing so is instructive: cast in the form of a lengthy propagandist diatribe against the London theater scene of his day, its subject matter is “dramatic presentation” itself. Shaw’s theatrical modernism is animated by an anti-idealist ethical and political aesthetic that seeks to overturn the structures of nineteenth-century British theater and society. For Shaw, creating an avant-garde theater of the future is contingent on an ironic, dialectical engagement with the theater of the past, as exemplified by Shakespeare. Ultimately, the telos of Shaw’s engagement with Shakespeare is, ironically, a medievalism, ideologically borne out of the catastrophe of the World War I. “The Theatre of the Future” lays the

¹ The definitive study of Shaw’s early novels is Richard F. Dietrich’s *Bernard Shaw’s Novels: Potraits of the Artist as Man and Superman*. Gainesville, FL: Florida UP, 1996.

² “Shaw’s Short Fiction: A Path to Drama.” *SHAW: The Annual of Bernard Shaw Studies* 9 (1989): 122.

groundwork for understanding Shaw's achievements, with regards to both Shakespeare and British theatrical modernism.

2.1 The Ironic Bridge to the Future

In "The Theatre of the Future," Shaw narrates the life of one Gerald Bridges. "Bridges was a millionaire," Shaw writes.³ He returns from Buenos Aires having made a fortune as a wholesaler of "picrate of selenium" (121). He stumbles into the trade and stumbles out of it by chance "when his business suddenly vanished like a railway wreath of summer steam" (123) due to a new industrial innovation that rendered his picrate obsolete. Yet, he maintains an equanimity through it all grounded in his own innocence. It was "without emotion (for he was far too callow to grasp how near ruin he stood)" he discovered the means to become rich (122-123); he "saw his business go as he had seen it come, without emotion" (124): "Gerald was convinced that he had 'built up' his business by his own industry and astuteness, [but] he regarded its disappearance in quite a different way, as a natural catastrophe" (123). Bridges treats people with fairness and honesty. His supplier, "a person who reminded him of the pictures of Spanish farmers in the Doré Don Quixote" (122), shares in the wealth, for Bridges thinks the farmer "ought to have a fair profit" (123). The farmer is "delighted to have found an honest man." Uncorrupted by the capital he has acquired, he is an uncomplicated man who simply

³ George Bernard Shaw. "The Theatre of the Future." *The Black Girl in Search of God and Some Lesser Tales*. Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1946. p. 121. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

wants to lead a good life. For Bridges, wealth is no more than a means to an end, not an end in itself: “He did not care even for money any more than for any other necessary convenience of a comfortable life” (124).

What he cares about more than anything else is theater. An outsider who had spent so much time away from London, he had cultivated naïve fantasies about its theater scene based on the visits to the theater of his youth. “And in Buenos Ayres,” Shaw writes, he could “look forward to spending some of his millions in visiting them. He could go to the stalls instead of to the pit as he used to do when he was at the bank” (124-125).

Much has changed during his time abroad. Bridges makes a point of visiting the theaters of his youth, but to no avail: “Many of the old theatres were gone” (125); but several new ones have sprung up like rabbits: “for every old theatre he could remember, there were three new ones” (125). When he steps into one of the new theaters, he is privy to a conversation between a “deadhead,” a Society patron who is paid a small sum in exchange for his attendance at the theater, Mr Glossop, and the theater’s management. Glossop waxes nostalgic for earlier times: “I can remember the time when the stalls of the London theatres—the first rate west end houses, mind you—were often filled with people who got in simply by paying” (130). Ironically, when the audience had to pay to see a play, Glossop points out, it was cheaper: “When I went in those old days at my own expense, paying for my own traveling, and thanking the acting manager for my stalls as if he was doing me a favor, my theatergoing cost me LESS than it does now” (131). When the actor-manager of the theater, one Mozart Denbigh (a name that confirms the

management's desperate aspirations for class and social distinction), expresses incredulity, Glossop defends his assertion that the theater cost less, when he had to pay to get in, than it costs now, being free:

Oh yes it did: dont [sic]⁴ make any mistake about it. To begin With, theyd done away with fees at all the best houses: cloak room, programs and all. Here I'm blackmailed at every turn: a schilling for my hat, shilling for my coat, a schilling apiece for the two programs [...] Lucky if you get out of it all for half-a-sovereign! (131)

Later in his diatribe against the current state of London theater, Glossop says, "now it always means a supper, with wine and one thing and another, ending with an engagement for Brighton from Saturday to Monday that runs into a lot more" (132). If play-going is class punishment in the form of economic whipping, the fiduciary pain does not stop with the final curtain call. Glossop mocks Denbigh and his associates, claiming better knowledge of how the system works than they do:

You know jolly well that your theatres are only touting lobbies to your big hotels, and that every farthing you pretend to give me here comes back to you with a hundred per cent profit in your hotel. I know the game better than you do. It was flourishing in the east end long before it came to the west: fortunes were made in Hoxton out of owning one theatre and ten public houses—not counting bars before and behind the curtain—long before it was accidentally discovered at the west end that Savoy suppers paid better than Savoy opera. Nowadays the theatre is thrown in for nothing and a trifle over to people who can afford the suppers. (132)

⁴ Throughout, I preserve Shaw's non-italicization of titles and idiosyncratic use of punctuation, especially apostrophes, and spelling, including *Shakespear* for *Shakespeare*.

Clearly, Glossop is a Shavian proxy who gives vent to Shaw's indictment of the London theatrical establishment, which Shaw knew extremely well by 1905, having been a theater critic for several years during the 1890s, a job he called "the curse of Adam" in his preface to *Saint Joan*,⁵ and having become a successful playwright himself.

Bridges is shocked by the impoverishment of the London stage and the institutional-commercial bureaucracy that serves it, and that it, in turn, serves. The theatres are no different from the clubs, salons, and fashionable houses where the rich idlers who constitute Society go to be *seen* rather than to *see* well-performed, well-written plays.⁶ Consequently, theatre managers only have their eye to who their patrons are, who's on the free list and who's not, and the kickbacks get from the parasitic enterprises, especially the restaurants and hotels, that feed on the theatrical establishment rather than to the product they purportedly purvey.⁷ The quality and entertainment value of the plays actually mounted are an afterthought, "a nothing and a trifle."

⁵ George Bernard Shaw. *The Complete Prefaces, Volume 2: 1914-1929*. Eds. Dan H. Laurence and Daniel J. Leary. London: Allen Lane, 1995. p. 546. Hereafter, *The Complete Prefaces* are cited parenthetically, abbreviated *CP* with volume number and page, e.g., (*CP2*: 546).

⁶ Shaw continues in his preface to *Saint Joan*, "For in London the critics are reinforced by a considerable body of persons who go to the theatre as many others go to church, to display their best clothes and compare them with other people's; to be in the fashion, and have something to talk about at dinner parties; to adore a pet performer; to pass the evening anywhere rather than at home: in short, for any or every reason except interest in dramatic art as such" (*CP2*: 546).

⁷ I use the language of parasitism and feeding deliberately to play on Shaw's motif of the after-dinner supper. In addition to "The Theatre of the Future," 1905 was the year in which Shaw wrote *Major Barbara*, my favorite play by Shaw. Poverty, food, nourishment, and spiritual redemption thematize the dilemma that Barbara, the Salvation Army stalwart who loses her faith, faces in the play in important ways. Barbara visits Perivale St. Andrews, the utopian village built around the munitions factory owned by her father, Andrew Undershaft, the play's Mephistophelean antagonist. When Barbara asks her father to justify "this dreadful place, with its beautifully clean workshops, and respectable workmen, and model homes," Undershaft replies, "Cleanliness and respectability do not need justification, Barbara: they justify themselves. [...] In your Salvation shelter I saw poverty, misery, cold, and hunger. You gave them bread and treacle and dreams of heaven. I give from thirty schillings a week to twelve thousand a year. They find

One aspect of Shaw's critique here is that the costs associated with a night at the theater render the actual experience of it prohibitively expensive. The theater used to be a substantially more democratic institution. "Everybody could afford to go to the theatre then" (132), Glossop tells us. No longer. The subsidiary expenses associated with a night at the theater, such as the "Savoy suppers," have become a *de rigueur* part of London play-going, about which Glossop asks, "But how many people *can* afford them?" (132). Only the rich, for whom the actual play being performed, the event for which the entire endeavor of play-going exists, is irrelevant.

Another part of Shaw's critique of the London theatrical establishment is just this point: the plays being performed are terrible. Glossop contrasts the theater of his day with that of "away back in the nineteenth century" (which is to say, historically, not that long ago at all), and holds out the stars of the nineteenth century as exemplars for what acting should be (133). If theater at a historical remove is one exemplar, theater at geographical and class remove is another. Sarcastically, Glossop asks Denbigh,

You dont suppose I come here to enjoy plays, do you? Why, I can see any of your cast-off successes at a suburban theatre for a few schillings. Just turn in when the humor takes me, you know. No dress: no smart women to drag about. Nobody knows you and you know nobody: nothing to do but look at the play. (133)

their own dreams; but I look after the drainage." *The Bodley Head Bernard Shaw, Volume 3*. Ed. Dan H. Laurence. London: Max Reinhardt, 1971. p. 171. Hereafter quotations from Shaw's plays will be from the *Bodley Head Bernard Shaw* (abbreviated *BH*) and parenthetically cited with volume and page, e.g., (*BH3*: 171).

Shorn of its parasitical economic and societal dependents, the proper business of play-going can begin. Only in the “suburban theatre” can theater itself can finally happen. It is only there that the audience can happen, as well. Herbert Blau writes,

The audience [...] is not so much a mere congregation of people as a body of thought and desire. It does not exist before the play but is *initiated* or *precipitated* by it; it is not an entity to begin with but a consciousness constructed. The audience is what *happens* when performing the signs and passwords of a play, something postulates itself and unfolds in response.⁸

Undressed, unclassed, unsexed, unknown—ironically, only in the suburbs can one have a pure communal experience in the theater, Glossop suggests, initiated by nothing other than the immanence of the play itself, by simply looking at the play.⁹

Overcoming his shock at the conditions Shaw, through Glossop, describes, Bridges walks up to the box office nonetheless: “I want two stalls for tonight, please”; he is answered with the flabbergasted reply, “Wot?!!!!!!” (sic) (138). Denbigh refuses to

⁸ Herbert Blau, *The Audience*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1990. p. 24. Historicism is as much a part of this process as “thought and desire,” terms determined by history: “That is a matter of subjectivity but also of historical process, subjectivity underwritten or, in the Freudian sense, overdetermined. The history of the drama records but also prompts the double unfolding of this equivocal dialectic. If the drama was self-reflexive in other periods, the theater of modernism has impacted that mode of consciousness. In the space of introversion, the audience is more egregiously aware not only of its responsive but its potentially subversive presence in the event” (24-25). The sense of the audience as not only self-aware but aware of its own subversive potential in the theatrical event (and in consequence of it?) resonates powerfully with the dialectic central to Shaw’s Marxist politics and aesthetics, confirming my sense that Shaw’s theatricality is indeed a modernist theatricality, one less naturalist and realist than simply anti-idealist. More on this later.

⁹ Blau’s rhetoric of *initiation vis à vis* theater resonates strongly with Stanley Cavell’s rhetoric of initiation vis à vis language: “Instead, then, of saying either that we *tell* beginners what words mean, or that we *teach* them what objects are, I will say: We initiate them, into the relevant forms of life held in language and gathered around the objects and persons of the world.” I believe Shaw would respond well to Cavell and Ordinary Language Philosophy. Cavell’s communitarian ethos intersects with Shaw’s Fabianism: both share a strong ethical commitment with respect to language and action—they demand of us that we mean what we say and “make ourselves exemplary and take responsibility for that assumption of authority.” *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy*. New ed. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999. p. 178.

sell him the tickets: “‘Look here!’ he said: ‘do you supposed you can walk into a first rate west end London theatre without an introduction merely because you have two guineas in your pocket?’” (139). Bridges argues with him, but Denbigh, who feels insulted, as though Bridges expectation that he could gain entry into his theater by buying tickets from the box office were a personal affront, offers further resistance, culminating in a peroration he intends as a threat but which Bridges accepts as a challenge:

Youll get no tickets here; and I’ll see that you don’t get a stall in the west end of London until you apologize. Go and tell that to the Lord Chamberlain or to your Radical friends on the County Council. If you want a theatre to do as you like, you can build one for yourself. (140)

Shaw describes Bridges in terms consistent with his innocence, as “A dreamer, a born amateur,” and he tells us, “Therefore he had a hobby” (124). And what would that hobby be? “He collected Shakespeariana and read the Elizabethan dramatists in the spirit of Charles Lamb and Mr Swinburne” (124). As an Englishman in Buenos Aires dreamed of seeing the plays of Shakespeare and his contemporaries, he would ask himself, “Were there not Societies in London for the performance of the mighty works of Marlowe and Webster? Mermaid Societies, Elizabethan Stage Societies and what not?” (125). For Denbigh, the desire for Shakespeare is the desire for theater itself., and being told to go and build his own theater is not a dismissal. It is a challenge, a door opening onto an opportunity. He politely responds to Denbigh, “Thank you: I will,” before turning to walk away (140).

But in a remarkable twist, his explosion is only mock outrage, a performance for the sake of anybody who might be an unwanted spectator to the exchange. Denbigh runs

outside to stop Bridges and persuades him to come into his office for a cigar and a conversation. He reveals his true name to be Henry Wilkinson and tells Bridges his life story: “He was a thoroughbred Englishman, but was compelled by the financial and artistic prejudice against his countrymen to pretend to be a Jew” (140). He also talks about his family, also involved with the theater’s operations, and his love for his wife, Mrs Wilkinson. In the process, for Bridges, Denbigh reveals his true character as “a homely breadwinner of a Finchley villa, and the idolator of a little woman who managed to keep his humanity green through all his Mozartian and Mosaic metempsychoses” (141). Won over, Bridges convinces Denbigh (now Wilkinson) that he has “a hundred thousand pounds to spare to back his fancy,” to build his own theater (141). He shames Wilkinson into acknowledging the degrading nature of his work as an actor-manager in a theater that he knows to be an “imposture,” in which “the humbug of the box office and the comedy of the stage were not only housemates but children of one father, the Father of Lies” (142). Unconsciously, Wilkinson repudiates the false theater that had made him betray “That fancy for the theatre which had made him an acting manager instead of any other sort of functionary in the great west end fashion machine for squeezing money out of rich people,” a desire for authentic theatrical art that “must have sprung, after all, from some aborted miracle of genuine artistic passion which made him hanker after a real theatre, driven by the same passion in real actors, real authors, real audiences, instead of a simulacrum galvanized into a show of trickery” (142). Wilkinson agrees to go into partnership with Bridges in a new theatrical venture, a “Cash-for-Admission theatre” (141).

Thus ends part one of Shaw's story. The satirical case made, part two is much shorter, more impressionistic, narrated "in a few observations, and an extract or two from the theatrical advertisements of the time" (144). Part two answers the questions, Was the C.F.A. (Cash-for-Admission) Theatre successful? What kind of work did it produce? Did Bridges and Wilkinson's new theater stage any plays from the movement known as "the New Drama"?

The C.F.A. scandalizes the playwrights on the scene with the announcement:

The manager of the C.F.A. Theatre regrets to have to announce That his attempt to procure a new play introducing a married woman in love with her own husband, and without a past, has been wholly unsuccessful. An appeal to our leading dramatic authors to write such a play has elicited a unanimous refusal to compromise their professional reputation by dealing with an abnormal situation and catering for morbid tastes. The management has, therefore, determined to open the C.F.A. Theatre with a revival of the most successful play in English literature, the one which opened the theatre to Shakespear and inaugurated the Elizabethan stage (not Mr William Peel's but an earlier XVI-XVII Century enterprise known by the same name). (145)

Failing to find dramatists who will present a moral and realistic vision of domestic relations, Bridges turns to Shakespeare. Ironically, the Old Drama wins out over the New, the theatre of the future is really a "revival" of the theatre of the past, and Bridges, who had dreamed of "Mermaid Societies, Elizabethan Stage Societies and what not," is the backer of such a society himself. The plays of Shakespeare's first tetralogy, *Henry VI Parts I, II, and III* and *Richard III*, are the ones with which Bridges opens the C.F.A. While this announcement makes clear that the C.F.A. should not be mistaken for William Poel's Elizabethan Stage Society, they both share one thing in common: a desire

for presenting Shakespearean performances based on the actual unbowdlerized, uncut, and unrevised scripts by Shakespeare that have survived into modernity but which Victorian theater had all but abandoned in its transmogrification of Shakespeare into mindless spectacle: “These plays will not be altered or revised for representation in any way, as the C.F.A. Theatre has, unfortunately, not succeeded in obtaining the services of a stage manager whose judgment in these matters can be accepted as unquestionably superior to Shakespear’s” (145-146).¹⁰

Initially the theater, driven by its desire to at least intimate an authentic Shakespearean theatricality, is not a commercial success, but that changes quickly. One announcement from the C.F.A.:

TWENTY SEATS FOR A SCHILLING

In consequence of the derisive and almost unanimous condemnation of the C.F.A. Theatre by the London Press, it is now the cheapest and most comfortable house in London. Only one seat in every twenty is occupied; so that each member of the audience, in addition to his own fauteuil, has nineteen others on which to dispose his hat, overcoat, playbill, opera-glass, etc. etc. (146)

Only four days later:

The manager of the C.F.A. Theatre has to apologize to the public for the disappointment caused after his recent announcements by the crowded condition of the theatre. Only one seat can now be guaranteed to each person, and the ven-

¹⁰ Our best contemporary historians of Shakespeare in the Victorian period are Richard Foulkes and Richard W. Schoch. Cf. Foulkes’s *Shakespeare and the Victorian Stage*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1986; *Performing Shakespeare in the Age of Empire*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2002; and Schoch’s *Shakespeare’s Victorian Stage: Performing History in the Theatre of Charles Kean*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1998; and *Not Shakespeare: Bardolatry and Burlesque in the Nineteenth Century*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2002.

tilation of the house, though carefully attended to, is far from what the manager could desire. If the rush continues, he will be compelled to stem it by producing a fashionable comedy. (147)

There are other comical initial missteps:

The manager greatly regrets that the conclusion of the Second Part of King Henry VI was last night reduced to absurdity by the inartistic behaviour of the Lancastrian army, which in the excitement of the moment defeated the Yorkists instead of retreating in confusion. In future the numbers of the contending forces will be so apportioned as to make a recurrence of this regrettable incident impossible. (147)

The C.F.A. eventually becomes such a success that the entire institutional structure of the London theatre scene is reformed, along with its audiences. The short story closes with Bridges and his manager Wilkinson quietly observing a performance from the wings and commenting on the transformations in play-making and theatre-going they established. “Good old Shakespear! always touches the spot,” Wilkinson says (150).

While “The Theatre of the Future” is a satire, the autobiographical elements within it should not be overlooked. There are several parallels between Gerald Bridges and Shaw, enough to warrant the claim that “The Theatre of the Future” is an allegory of Shaw’s own experience assimilating to the scene of British theater and the British nation—and making them assimilate to him. Both Bridges and Shaw spent part of their youth working as clerks, Shaw for Uniacke Townshend and Co., Bridges in a bank. Poverty in youth had also been a pressing concern for both: Gerald loses all his money within three days of his arrival in Buenos Aires (121); the “ridiculous poverty” of Shaw’s

family as a child is a frequent motif in his autobiographical writings.¹¹ Both had unconventional uncles, from whom they later became estranged, who nonetheless inspired them to make something of themselves: A. M. Gibbs details how Shaw saw his maternal uncle, Walter John Gurly, as a father figure and describes the older relation as a Rabelaisian abettor;¹² it was Bridges' uncle who owns the cargo boat in which Bridges sails to South America, "giving him the perfunctory advice that he should 'take up an agency of some sort'" (121). Shaw and Bridges had problems with women: about Bridges, Shaw writes, "He had never cared enough for any woman to get married" (124); although Shaw had an enormous number of female friends, especially the leading actresses of his day (including Janet Achurch, Stella Campbell, Lillah McCarthy, Ellen Terry, and Sybil Thorndike), his relationship to his mother, Lucinda Elizabeth ("Bessie"), was always fraught,¹³ and it is telling that he did not marry Charlotte Payne-Townshend until he was 41. Both men were self-made men: Bridges invested in his agency and built it into a fabulously successful operation; for the autodidact Shaw, the Reading Room of the British Museum was his base, the place from whence his self-directed study of the literary classics, on the one hand, and the political philosophy of Marx, on the other, launched his intertwining careers as Fabian campaigner and man of letters.¹⁴

¹¹ A. M. Gibbs points out, however, that the young Shaw's family was actually much better off financially than he led on later in life. *Bernard Shaw: A Life*. Gainesville, FL: Florida UP, 2005. pp. 30-31.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 19; 43.

¹³ As with poverty, Gibbs tells us that Shaw exaggerated the extent she was a "cold and emotionally reserved woman [...] deficient in maternal feeling." *Ibid.*, pp. 26-27.

¹⁴ Shaw's most important statement on education is his preface to the play *Misalliance* (prem. 1910), entitled "Parents and Children."

Most importantly, both arrived in London after some two decades spent in cities that, in relation to the imperial center, can only be described as cultural backwaters: Bridges “returned from Buenos Ayres after twenty-two years’ absence” (121); Shaw arrived from Dublin and settled in with his mother in West Brompton in April 1876, some two months shy of his twentieth birthday. In other words, both Shaw and Bridges are outsiders to the nation whose culture they wished to reform and to which they desired to belong. Bridges has a difficult time of it trying to convince Wilkinson to give up “the game,” to abandon the degraded theatrical-institutional establishment in which he has worked. Wilkinson is stubborn, telling Bridges, “I’ve always played the game; and I always shall play the game” (141). Mere habit, though, is not the reason Wilkinson is so reluctant to abandon a theatre that had long ago sold its soul: “whilst frankly owning that he could not justify his feelings by argument, [he] pleaded that he should feel a cad and a juggling and a number of other indeterminate ignominious things if he did anything but what Dabernoon did, what Durberville did, what, in short, everybody did who was not that abject thing, an outsider” (142).¹⁵ Bridges and Shaw are both “that abject thing,” outsiders in the institutional and national communities to which they long to belong. Their status as outsiders, however, is precisely what enables them to accomplish the reformations of those communities, and they do it by deploying Shakespeare, the nexus at the intersection of the British theater and the British nation.

¹⁵ Dabernoon and Durberville are Denbigh’s backers.

They do so, however, by deploying Shakespeare ironically. Not only is Bridges' use of Shakespeare's original scripts a point of disjunct between Victorian theatricality and modernist theatricality, Bridges uses the scripts critically, willing to make dramaturgical interventions to rectify problems with Shakespeare's original texts. In the theatrical advertisement announcing the use of Shakespeare's scripts ("These plays will not be altered or revise for representation in any way"), there is also the following qualification: "Mr Algernon Swinburne, however, who all but idolatrous veneration for the Bard is well known, has undertaken to rewrite the Joan of Arc scenes from the point of view, not only of what Shakespear undoubtedly ought to have written, but of the *entente cordiale* between this country and France" (146).¹⁶ Simultaneous with Bridges' engagement with Shakespeare is an evasion of Shakespeare, a denial of those parts of Shakespeare's plays that he finds so offensive that he outsources their revision. Sonya Freeman Loftis writes that Shaw's "artistic conflicts with his dramatic predecessor draws attention to what is essentially a generational conflict: the old dramatist will smother the creativity of the new, the new dramatist will rewrite the canon of the old, or the two must join elements to create a new drama."¹⁷ This ironic dynamic of engagement and evasion is allegorically emblematic of a Shavian desire for the New Drama and Shaw's dialectical

¹⁶ Cf. A. C. Swinburne, *A Study of Shakespeare*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1880.

¹⁷ "Shakespeare, Shotover, Surrogation: 'Blaming the Bard' in *Heartbreak House*." *SHAW: The Annual of Bernard Shaw Studies* 29 (2009): 56. Loftis's piece appropriates Joseph Roach's "theory of surrogation" in making the argument that "*Heartbreak House* represents the climax in a lifetime spent speaking for the literary dead, a culmination in Shaw's ongoing attempts to present himself, both in his criticism and in his drama, as a cultural surrogate for Shakespeare" (50). On surrogation and the relationship between performance and cultural memory, cf. *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance*. New York: Columbia UP, 1996.

style with respect to Shakespeare and the British nation itself, a dialectic that seeks its utopian synthesis in the ascendance of a universalizing socialist order that Shaw's Fabian politics and Fabian dramaturgy have made possible.¹⁸

2.2 Against Ireland

Shaw, born and bred in Ireland, is always aware of his status as an outsider in Britain, yet he is always suspicious of what it means to "be Irish" in the modernist period, as well. He lived and worked in Britain, not Ireland, after all. In three of the last four meetings of the Modern Language Association of America, I have organized three special sessions on George Bernard Shaw.¹⁹ In the program for the annual convention, these sessions have not been listed under British literature but rather under Irish literature. This is problematic. While Shaw himself self-identified as Irish throughout his life, his work exists within a specifically British sociology of cultural production, one in which the "space of possibles," to use Bourdieu's language, is delineated by British, not Irish, parameters. The modernist period saw an extraordinary Irish cultural movement, the Celtic Revival, animated by Irish nationalism, and the theater, as institutionalized in the Irish National Theatre Society and the Abbey Theatre, played a substantial role, with W.

¹⁸ On Shaw's membership in the Fabian Society and its goals and tenets, cf. *Bernard Shaw: A Life*, pp. 107-111. The notion of a "Fabian dramaturgy" is not my own; I am indebted to an unpublished conference paper by J. Ellen Gainor, "Githa Sowerby's Fabian Dramaturgy." International Shaw Society. Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C. 16 October 2009. Shaw's Fabian essays and speeches are legion.

¹⁹ 2006, Philadelphia: *George Bernard Shaw at 150: Theater, Criticism, Contemporaneity*; 2007, Chicago: *George Bernard Shaw and History*; 2008, San Francisco: *Shaw and His Contemporaries*.

B. Yeats, Lady Gregory, J. M. Synge, and Sean O’Casey at the forefront of a new Irish nationalist dramatic canon. Shaw was not active in this scene. One play, *John Bull’s Other Island*, was written for the Abbey, but it is as much a satire on Ireland as a provincial, backwards, reactionary would-be state as it is on England as an ignorant, sentimental colonial power; consequently it did not have its premiere at the Abbey until 25 September 1916.²⁰ Gearóid O’Flaherty writes that “Shaw’s attitude towards Ireland and the ‘Irish Question’ vacillated at any given time between disenchanting exasperation and obdurate promotion. It was in essence a very particular Shavian dilemma.”²¹ Shaw himself was not only not a participant in the movement, he was also very skeptical of the Celtic Revival and the conservative politics that undergirded it. In “The Irish Literary Movement,” a 1910 address following a lecture by Yeats on contemporary Irish theater in London, Shaw says, “It is a very significant thing that Synge began his career by wandering all over the world, and I think it probable that he did not become acutely conscious of Ireland till he got out of Ireland.”²² Shaw’s point is more explicit in his answers to a 1946 questionnaire by James Whelan, “Shaw Speaks to His Native City.” Shaw is asked, “The revival of the Gaelic language in the schools and as the everyday language of the people has been pressed by both the Cosgrave and de Valera

²⁰ Robert Welch, *The Abbey Theatre, 1899-1999: Forms and Pressure*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999. pp. 33, 70-71. A Shavian theological critique disguised as an American Western, Shaw’s *The Shewing-Up of Blanco Posnet* premiered at the Abbey first, on 25 August 1909, having been banned by the Lord Chamberlain on the grounds of blasphemy (51).

²¹ Gearóid O’Flaherty, “George Bernard Shaw and Ireland.” *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Irish Drama*. Ed. Shaun Richards. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2004. p. 123.

²² *The Matter with Ireland*. 2nd ed. Eds. Dan H. Laurence and David H. Greene. Gainesville, FL: Florida UP, 2001. p. 66.

Governments since 1922. Hasn't Mr. de Valera, in achieving complete independence from Britain, been of the greatest benefit to future generations of the Irish race?" Shaw's reply is the emphatic, "Nonsense! How can we be completely independent of our next-door neighbor? Are we not Europeans and citizens of the world?"²³ Shaw was a great admirer of Yeats (although Nicholas Grene claims that Shaw's failure to "follow the curve of development of other late-Victorians-turned-modernists, his near contemporary Yeats being the most striking case," is reason enough to exclude Shaw from the canon of modernism).²⁴ In a questionnaire by Andrew E. Malone published in 1932 in the *Manchester Guardian*, Shaw is asked, "It is suggested that you are interested in the foundation of an Irish Academy and that you will be one of its members. Do you really believe in such things?" His response: "Man alive, it exists already, and I am a member. Mr Yeats and I elected one another. I see the Irish press is almost as far behind the times as the English."²⁵ Yet, Shaw distanced himself from Yeats's particular version of cultural nationalism, one that found its most extreme expression in the short eugenicist

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 335.

²⁴ "The Edwardian Shaw, or the Modernist That Never Was." *High and Low Moderns: Literature and Culture, 1889-1939*. Eds. Maria DiBattista and Lucy McDiarmid. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996. p. 136. Grene argues that "The matrix of looking forward faithfully to the future underpins Shaw's thinking and practice as writer and thinker, and made much of modernism necessarily unavailable to him" (146); but he foregrounds his argument by acknowledging the debt he owes to the three-volume biography of Shaw by Michael Holroyd and its psychologizing of Shaw within the context of a narrative of the "search for love," followed by "the pursuit of power," and, having failed in that pursuit, ending in the "lure of fantasy" that someday Shaw would someday be recognized as the great man, far ahead of his time, that he was (145). Holroyd's master-narrative has been roundly rejected by contemporary Shaw Studies. Shaw's most recent biographer, A. M. Gibbs, sums up the position: "Holroyd's account of Shaw seems to me in many ways reductive, trivializing, and condescending. It also repeatedly misrepresents and distorts primary biographical evidence in vitally significant areas of discussion. An approach to biography that allows the writer frequently to adopt a role akin to that of an omniscient narrator in a novel is not one that I endorse; it is the source of many problems in Holroyd's work." *Bernard Shaw: A Life*, p. 461.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 302.

play *Purgatory* (prem. 10 August 1938).²⁶ O’Flaherty writes, “Shaw was wary of the myopic, prejudiced, cultural nationalism establishing a firm foothold in Ireland, so he projected an internationalist or transnationalist vision of Ireland which was often interpreted as unpatriotic, but only because it was modern and certain elements of the Irish Literary Revival/Gaelic League were antagonistic to and found repugnant the notion of Ireland having any association with modernity.”²⁷ To lump Shaw in with the luminaries of Irish theatrical modernism rather than British theatrical modernism simply because he was born in Ireland is a mistake, and it that betrays how under-theorized the national identity of Shaw and his works have been. Biography is not an intellectual substitute for a sociology of cultural production.

Shaw makes a point of informing us that the unnamed theater which Bridges enters, only to discover the terrible conditions of London play-going and play-making from Denbigh and Glossop, is located “on the of site of St Martin’s Church” (125), which, in Shaw’s fiction, had been torn down. I believe that this St Martin’s Church is St. Martin-in-the-Fields, the famous eighteenth-century church in Trafalgar Square. Denbigh’s theater would be a very short stone’s throw from The National Gallery and a short walk down Whitehall to Westminster. In addition, given the history of Trafalgar Square itself, the location of Denbigh’s theater is symbolically fraught: it exists as the locus of the British public sphere, not the Irish public sphere.

²⁶ On *Purgatory* and its eugenicism, cf. Marjorie Howes, *Yeats’s Nations: Gender, Class, and Irishness*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1996. pp. 160-185. On Yeats’s cultural nationalism more generally, cf. Michael North, *The Political Aesthetic of Yeats, Eliot, and Pound*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1991. pp. 21-73.

²⁷ “George Bernard Shaw and Ireland,” p. 131.

2.3 The Challenge of Dramaturgy and National-Canon Formation

The alignment between theater and nation is important for Shaw and his contemporaries. The creation of a British national theater was a project that they worked on for many years. Shaw wrote “The Theatre of the Future” in 1905; only the year before, William Archer and Harley Granville Barker had written their “Blue Book,” the *Scheme and Estimates for a National Theatre*,²⁸ and Granville Barker, with manager John E. Vedrenne, took control of the Court Theatre in Sloane Square. From 1904-07 the Vedrenne-Barker seasons at the Court endeavored to put some of the institutional theory of the Blue Book into practice, with Shaw’s plays at the heart of the Court’s repertoire. The challenge of dramaturgy, specifically literary management, that Bridges had encountered in trying to find a “new play introducing a married woman in love with her own husband, and without a past” and in trusting Swinburne with the rewrites of the Joan of Arc scenes in *1 Henry VI* is a problem that Archer and Granville Barker must take up themselves. In her recounting of Gotthold Lessing’s tenure as the first official dramaturg at the National Theater in Hamburg, Germany, 1767-1769, Mary Luckhurst makes, for me, a very important point: “The political implications of Lessing’s experiment (both positive and negative) have resonated, and it is noteworthy that the first official appointments of dramaturges or literary managers in any country, East or West, have always come about in the context of a campaign for a national theatre or desire to identify

²⁸ Published as *A National Theatre, Scheme and Estimates*. London: Duckworth, 1907.

characteristics of a distinctively home-grown dramatic literature.”²⁹ The stakes of literary management are nothing less than the mission of the theatrical institution, and for a theatre which defines itself as the National Theatre, the stakes are nothing less than defining some sense of national identity.

In their plans for a national theatre, Archer and Granville Barker had also struggled with looking back to the Old Drama of the past or looking ahead to the New Drama of the future. According to Luckhurst, part of the failure of the Blue Book and the movement for a national theatre in Edwardian England more generally owes to Archer and Granville Barker’s own inability in *Scheme and Estimates* to strike the right balance between a theatre that would monumentalize Shakespeare and a specifically English repertoire grounded in Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, “an acceptably conservative national repertoire” and a theatre that would “promote an avant-garde theatre of social and aesthetic reform.”³⁰ The conflict between the theatrical imperatives for a national theatre that would monumentalize the great works of the national past, on the one hand, and disseminate an aesthetically forward-looking and socially progressive theatre concerned with its own political contemporaneity is, for Shaw, a conflict between Shakespeare and Ibsen.

Bridges returns to London on 15 April 1910. It is a date that has no special significance that I have been able to discover. However, that Bridges had been gone for twenty-two years is important. If he left in 1888, he would have missed the 7 June 1889

²⁹ *Dramaturgy: A Revolution in Theatre*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2006. p. 40.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

London premiere of Ibsen's *A Doll's House* at the Novelty Theatre, produced by Charles Charrington, his wife, Janet Achurch, starring as Nora.³¹ That premiere was a major cultural and social event, the catalyst for a decisive turn in the direction of British theater and drama and for the inauguration of a new kind of critique of late Victorian social mores regarding class, gender, marriage, domesticity, and power—the ideological commitments taken for granted by a late nineteenth-century London audience. The English premiere of Ibsen's play, rather than a play by Henry Arthur Jones, Arthur Wing Pinero, or even Oscar Wilde, marks the break between nineteenth-century British drama and an emergent theatrical modernism.³² In other words, Bridges would have missed the

³¹ Shaw wrote a review of the performance (*Manchester Guardian*, 8 June 1889). A Marxist critic who understood theater dialectically as an event that happens between actors and audience, he notes “the wonderful intelligence” of spectators in the gallery who “saw plainly that that Helmer not Krogstad [...] is the true ‘villain’ of the piece, and when the same discovery flashes on the wife in the last act they were in perfect sympathy with the situation and Miss Achurch.” Although Shaw continues, “it would be absurd of course to pretend that Nora’s assertion of her intention to leave her husband and home in obedience to an impulse of duty to herself before which all the institutions and prejudices of society must yield was felt to have the irresistible power of an awaking social force behind it,” he concludes his review calling the production “an unprecedented dramatic experiment.” In a piece entitled “Is Mr Buchanan a Critic with a Wooden Head?” published only a few days later (*Paul Mall Gazette*, 13 June 1889), Shaw attacks the critic Robert Buchanan and his letter to the editor, “Is Ibsen Zola with a Wooden Leg?” (*Pall Mall Gazette*, 11 June), Shaw uses a considerably stronger rhetoric in order to establish the London premiere of *A Doll's House* as a watershed after which everything—most importantly, theatrical taste—has forever changed: “There are many people who have never admitted any merit in Wagner’s music; but they cannot stand Donizetti’s operas after it. There are more people who laugh at Mr Whistler’s “impressions” and rage at M. Monet’s; but when they go back to their pet pictures the find, to their dismay, that there is not art in the landscapes and no light—except studio light—on the figures. The London playgoer has now seen a play of Ibsen’s acted. I do not claim that he likes it—perhaps he is only pretending—but let him just try a Buchanan play after it!” *The Drama Observed, Vol. I: 1880-1895*. Ed. Bernard F. Dukore. University Park, PA: Penn State UP, 1993. pp. 106-110. In the 1898 preface to his first volume of plays, *Plays Unpleasant*, entitled “Mainly about Myself,” Shaw writes, “Ibsen, then, was the hero of the new departure. It was in 1889 that the first really effective blow was struck by Charles Carrington and Janet Achurch.” *The Complete Prefaces, Volume I: 1889-1913*. Eds. Dan H. Laurence and Daniel J. Leary. London: Allen Lane, 1993. p. 28. Hereafter *Complete Prefaces* will be abbreviated *CP*, and all citations will be parenthetical and include volume and page (e.g., *CP* I:28).

³² In a letter to the editor of *The Dramatic Review* dated 27 June 1885 and signed pseudonymously as “George Bunnerd,” Shaw asks why *A Doll's House* has not yet been staged in England: “Because no manager would produce it until its intellectual seriousness was deliberately extirpated by British ‘adapters.’”

rise of Ibsenism and the “New Drama” which Shaw and his contemporaries from 1889 to 1910 (e.g., William Archer, J. T. Grein, John Vedrenne, Harley Granville Barker) promoted and produced.³³

While there were a number of important, aesthetically challenging new playwrights on the horizon at the turn of the last century (for Shaw, Strindberg is the “only genuinely Shakespearean modern dramatist,” *CP1*: 77), few were read as social reformers and political prophets as much as Ibsen. Indeed, in his magisterial history of twentieth-century British drama, Christopher Innes situates Ibsen, and particularly Shaw’s “reinterpretation of Ibsen,” at the origin of British theatrical modernism. For Innes, “the beginning of modern drama in England can be dated in 1890 when Bernard Shaw gave his lectures on ‘The Quintessence of Ibsenism,’ which marks a watershed between traditionalism and new politicized forms of drama.”³⁴ It is important, then, to examine Shaw’s *Quintessence of Ibsenism* in order to understand something of the nature

This is clearly a sarcastic allusion to *Breaking a Butterfly*, an 1884 adaption of *A Doll’s House* by Henry Arthur Jones and Henry Herman. *The Drama Observed*, Vol. I, p. 34.

³³ I do not include Shaw’s most important contemporary of the 1890s London theater world, Oscar Wilde. Wilde was by no means a dim-witted writer of “well-made plays” in the tradition of the French playwrights Victorien Sardou and Eugène Scribe. For me, however, Wilde’s plays represent the apotheosis of nineteenth-century British theatricality, not the birth of twentieth-century British theatrical modernism. Nonetheless, Wilde saw himself as more “an English Ibsen” than “an English Sardou”; for a sympathetic account of Wilde’s relationship to Ibsen, cf. Kerry Powell, *Oscar Wilde and the Theatre of the 1890s*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1990. pp. 73-88. For the importance of Archer, cf. Thomas Postlewait, *Prophet of the New Drama: William Archer and the Ibsen Campaign*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1986. Although his plays are still revived today semi-regularly in the theater capitals, London and New York, Granville Barker is tremendously under-worked. How fortunate that the only major recent study (i.e., from within the last thirty years) on him is so excellent, treating both his work as a theater practitioner (including his work directing Shakespeare) and his work as a playwright: Dennis Kennedy, *Granville Barker and the Dream of Theatre*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1985.

³⁴ *Modern British Drama: The Twentieth Century*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2002. p. 3.

of Shaw's "reinterpretation of Ibsen"—and its ramifications for Shakespeare. *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* is an anti-idealist manifesto that sets the agenda for Shavian drama as an avant-garde. Its strident anti-idealism is the basis for Shaw's stance against "Bardolatry."

2.4 Idealism Modernism Manifesto: The Quintessence of Ibsenism and the Avant-Garde

Along with William Archer, George Bernard Shaw is the central instigator of the "Ibsen Campaign," arguing for Ibsen's merits in the hostile world of late-Victorian England. His pamphlet *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*, first published in 1891 and extended and revised in 1913, paves the way for Ibsen's acceptance in London theater and London Society. It offers brilliant and insightful political and philosophical interpretations of Ibsen's plays from the 1866 closet drama *Brand* to "the last four plays"—*The Master Builder*, *Little Eyolf*, *John Gabriel Borkman*, and *When We Dead Awaken*. It is important to understand the political and philosophical terms that Shaw uses to achieve his stated "purpose" in the book, "to distil the quintessence of Ibsen's message to his age"; I turn towards the beginning of *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*.³⁵

Shaw ends the opening section of the book, "The Two Pioneers," with a sketch of social progress and human evolution that calls for "the evangelist" of the "evolution of

³⁵ *Shaw and Ibsen: Bernard Shaw's The Quintessence of Ibsenism and Related Writings*. Ed. J. L. Wisenthal. Toronto: Toronto UP, 1979. p. 132. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *SI*.

the concept of duty” to “preach the repudiation of duty” altogether if freedom and self-actualization are to be achieved (*SI* 116-117). Shelving the concept of “duty” for a moment, I want to examine Shaw’s idea of evolution. After concluding “The Two Pioneers,” Shaw begins the section “Ideals and Idealists” with a consideration of the evolution of courage. He writes, “We have seen that as Man grows through the ages, he finds himself bolder by the growth of his courage: that is, of his spirit (for so the common people name it), and dares more and more to love and trust instead of to fear and fight” (*SI* 118). The “growth” of courage and the human “spirit” Shaw speaks of has a profound moral and political entailment, as “love,” I think here understood in the broad context of human fellowship, and “trust” are, I hope it is fair to say, necessary preconditions for human community. There is an epistemological dimension to this “growth” as well:

But his courage has other effects: he also raises himself from mere consciousness to knowledge by daring more and more to face facts and tell himself the truth. For in his infancy of helplessness and terror he could not face the inexorable; and facts being of all things the most inexorable, masked all the threatening ones as fast as he discovered them; so that now, every mask requires a hero to tear it off. (*SI* 118)

The metaphor of the “mask” Shaw deploys and the observation that “now, every mask requires a hero to tear it off” recall the origins of Western theater, the masked theatricality of ancient Greek tragedy and its immortal heroes—Orestes, Prometheus, Oedipus. Unlike Sophocles and Aeschylus, however, Shaw is not a classical tragedian. A journalist, a socialist, a soapbox orator (recall that *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* began its life as a series of lectures for the Fabian Society)—in short, a political and cultural

critic profoundly concerned with social progress and human evolution, Shaw sees in these masks humanity's evasion of reality and everyday life, the inexorability of "facts."³⁶ "The masks," Shaw writes,

were his ideals, as he called them; and what, he would ask, would life be like without ideals? Thus he became an idealist, and remained so until he dared to begin pulling the masks off and looking the spectres in the face—dared, that is, to be more and more a realist. (*SI* 118)

In his 1890 "Fragments of a Fabian Lecture," Shaw states, "If a definition of idealism as a sense of obligation to conform to an abstract conception of absolute fitness of conduct is of any use to any member of the audience, he or she may quote it as the one given by myself" (*SI* 95). Idealism, in other words, is bound up with duty and moral conduct that, because abstract, removed from the realities of everyday life, yet totalizing and absolutizing, destroy the lives of men and, especially, women. Realism, then, is not simply a mode of representation. It is a mode of emancipatory ethical and political subjectivity.

In *The Quintessence*, Shaw writes, "In our novels and romances especially we see the most beautiful of all the masks: those devised to disguise the brutalities of the sexual instinct in the earlier stages of its development, and to soften the rigorous aspects of the

³⁶ Shaw emphasis on "facts" receives its grandest theatrical expression in Undershaft's exhortation to Barbara near the end of *Major Barbara*: "Come, com my daughter! dont make too much of your little teapot tragedy. What do we do here when we spend years of work and thought and thousands of pounds of solid cash on a new gun or an aerial battleship that turns out just a hairsbreadth wrong after all? Scrap it. Scrap it without wasting another hour or another pound on it. Well, you have made for yourself something that you call a morality or a religion or what not. It doesnt fit the facts. Well, scrap it and get one that does fit" (*BH3*: 170-171).

iron laws by which Society regulates its gratification” (SI 118).³⁷ The institutions of marriage and family become the examples by which he illustrates the opposition between idealism and realism:

The family as it really is a conventional arrangement, legally enforced, which the majority, because it happens suit them, think good enough for the minority, whom it happens not to suit at all. The family as a beautiful and holy natural institution is only a fancy picture of what every family would have to be if everybody was to be suited, invented by the minority as a mask for the reality, which in its nakedness is intolerable to them. (SI 119)

The realist not only acknowledges the reality that marriage and family are a convenient legal “arrangement” suited to many but not suited to all; the realist also acknowledges the power dynamic by which the majority impose marriage and family on the minority, which, in its turn, creates the “fancy picture” of a “beautiful and holy natural institution” to mask its own status as object of majority coercion. Elaborating the mask, Shaw writes,

We call this sort of fancy picture an Ideal; and the policy of forcing individuals to act on the assumption that all ideals are real, and to recognize and accept such action as standard moral conduct absolutely valid under all circumstances, contrary conduct or any advocacy of it being discountenanced and punished as immoral, may therefore be described as the policy of Idealism. (SI 119-120)

³⁷ To me, Shaw prefigures the critique of religion in Freud’s *The Future of an Illusion* and Freud’s assertions that “It seems rather every civilization must be built up on coercion and renunciation of instinct,” and this is accomplished via a civilization’s embrace of “ideals—its estimates of what achievements are the highest and the most to be striven after.” *The Future of an Illusion*. Trans. and Ed. James Strachey. New York: W. W. Norton, 1961. pp. 8, 16.

The definition of idealism as “a sense of obligation to conform to an abstract conception of absolute fitness of conduct” we find in the earlier fragment is essentially the same as the definition Shaw provides here in *The Quintessence*, with this one difference: by the time Shaw had published *The Quintessence*, his antipathy towards idealism’s coerciveness had grown. Towards the end of the section, Shaw writes,

The realist at last loses patience with ideals altogether, and sees in them only something to blind us, something to numb us, something to murder self in us, something whereby, instead of resisting death, we can disarm it by committing suicide. [Death being, in Shaw’s narrative of Man’s growth “through the ages,” the “king of terrors...the Arch-Inexorable” (*SI* 118).] The idealist, who has taken refuge with the ideals because he hates himself and is ashamed of himself, thinks that all this is so much the better. The realist, who has come to have a deep respect for himself and faith in the validity of his own will, thinks it so much the worse. To the one, human nature, naturally corrupt, is held back from ruinous excesses only by self-denying conformity to the ideals. To the other these ideals are only swaddling clothes which man has outgrown, and which insufferably impede his movements. No wonder the two cannot agree. The idealist says, ‘Realism means egotism; and egotism means depravity.’ The realist declares that when a man abnegates the will to live and be free in a world of the living and free, seeking only to conform to ideals for the sake of being, not himself, but ‘a good man,’ then he is morally dead and rotten. (*SI* 123)

Shaw’s rhetoric here, the language of moral death and putrefaction, makes clear two things: his sense that idealism as is not merely a flight from reality, but a flight from self; and his sense that realism, as idealism’s antinomy, is the will to spiritual life and freedom.

Charles A. Carpenter writes that the “basis for the structural organization” in Shaw’s early plays is “didactic rather than mimetic. In this respect, also, his dramaturgy

diverges sharply from canons of playmaking then standard, for Shaw was violating the long-ascendant ideal of drama as an ‘imitation of an action.’”³⁸ The tension between idealism and realism is not concerned presenting a mimetic mode of theatrical presentation per se; a realist theatricality is less important than an ethically and politically realist content of theatricality. The opposition between idealism and idealists, on the one hand, and realism and realists, on the other, is one we see played out in Shaw’s early plays, particularly the “Plays Unpleasant” *Widowers’ Houses* and *Mrs Warren’s Profession*, Shaw’s first major play. From the outset of the latter play, Vivie reveals herself to be a strong, clear-eyed, practical woman, one who rejects the beauty, romance, and culture members of her class, like Praed, and especially members of her sex are supposed to valorize and to which they are supposed to aspire. Praed tells her, “But you are so different from her [mother’s] ideal” and explains, “Well you must have observed, Miss Warren, that people who are dissatisfied with their own bringing up generally think that the world would be all right if everybody were to be brought up quite differently” (*BH1:279*). Praed’s remarks about Mrs Warren’s desire for her daughter’s upbringing to be different from her own demonstrate Shaw’s point that idealism is predicated on an abstraction of everyday life that is an evasion of reality: the logic underpinning the assertion, *Because my childhood and adolescence were so terrible, surely yours will be smooth and wonderful if only they’re different*, is the logic of fallacy. Indeed, if

³⁸ *Bernard Shaw and the Art of Destroying Ideals: The Early Plays*. Madison, WI: Wisconsin UP, 1969. pp. 16-17. Carpenter’s work, though strong on arguing for Shavian anti-idealism as profoundly ethical, is weak in its conceptualization of the specifically political, socially revolutionary dimensions of that anti-idealism and does not attempt to theorize Shaw’s anti-idealism in terms of modernism or the avant-garde.

knowledge and the engagement with the inexorability of the facts of everyday life constitute something of the realist spirit, the crisis in the play arrives not at Vivie's discovery of her mother's past as a prostitute in Act Two but rather at her epiphany in Act Three that she is, and has always been, complicit in her mother's past by having profited, and continuing to profit from, her mother's business; the key line in the scene is her line to Crofts, "[*Conscience-stricken*] You might go on to point out that I myself never asked where the money I spend came from. I believe I am just as bad as you" (BH1:331). Even Vivie's final condemnation of her mother at the end of the play is bound up with the problem of idealism for Shaw. Vivie tells Mrs Warren, "If I had been you, mother, I might have done as you did; but I should not have lived one life and believed in another. You are a conventional woman at heart. That is why I am bidding you good-bye now" (BH1:355). In *The Quintessence*, Shaw deems those people who conform to ideals "conventionalists," and writes, "If you ask why I have not allotted the terms the other way, and called Shelley and Ibsen idealists and the conventionalists realists, I reply that Ibsen himself, though he has not formally made the distinction, has so repeatedly harped on conventions and conventionalists as ideals and idealists that if I were now perversely to call them realities and realists, I should confuse readers of *The Wild Duck* and *Rosmersholm* more than I should help them" (SI 121-122). For Vivie to damn her mother as a "conventional woman" is to damn her as an idealist who herself has not made peace with her existence and the way she lives her everyday life. The implication, of course, is that Vivie, ever the practical realist, would have come to terms with her life as a prostitute and brothel keeper if "circumstances" had forced her to live

her mother's life of struggle and hardship rather than her own life of privilege and entitlement. It is important that the play ends with Vivie, having dismissed her mother, having dismissed Frank, her suitor and possible half-brother, and having left the pastoral world of Haslemere in Surrey where we find her happily ensconced at the beginning of the play for the chambers of her business partner Honoria Fraser in Chancery Lane, central London, alone with nothing but her work. In the *Quintessence*, Shaw performs a kind of hypothetical census of the nation:

For the sake of precision, let us imagine a community of a thousand persons, organized for the perpetuation of the species on the basis of the British family as we know it at present. Seven hundred of them, we will suppose, find the family arrangement quite good enough for them. Two hundred and ninety-nine find it a failure, but must put up with it since they are in a minority. The remaining person occupies a position to be explained presently. (*SI* 119)

The happy seven hundred are "Philistines," oblivious to any potential problem with the arrangement. The unhappy two hundred ninety-nine are "Idealists," people who recognize the moral and political horror of the situation but who "lack the courage to face the fact that they are irremediable failures, since they cannot prevent the 700 satisfied ones from coercing them into conformity with the marriage law" (*SI* 119). That one person in a thousand, neither happy nor unhappy with "the British family" (or any other ideal, for that matter) because he rejects the coercion of the ideal of the British family altogether, is a realist. To be a realist is to occupy a lonely place in society, and the tableau of Vivie alone at her desk with her calculations and her pen at the end of *Mrs Warren's Profession* drives that fact home.

Toril Moi, like Christopher Innes, positions Ibsen at the beginning of an emergent theatrical modernism. Drawing especially on Naomi Schor's *George Sand and Idealism*, Moi argues that Ibsen's place at the beginning of modernism has been so frequently marginalized in the historiography of modernism because of the extent to which modernism is so often seen as the antinomy of a dominant nineteenth-century tradition of realism. In reality, however, as Schor and Moi powerfully demonstrate, idealism reigned over realism in the nineteenth century, both in the novel and in other forms of artistic production. Moi writes,

In this book "idealism" is used as a synonym for "idealist aesthetics" or "aesthetic idealism," understood as the belief that the task of art (poetry, writing, literature, music) is to uplift us, to point the way to the Ideal. Idealists thought that beauty, truth, and goodness were *one*. [...] Idealism thus seamlessly merged aesthetics and ethics, and usually religion too, since most (but not all) idealists also believed that God was the highest incarnation of the trinity of beauty, goodness, and truth.³⁹

Borne out of the emancipatory German Romantic literary tradition of Hölderlin and Schiller,⁴⁰ this conceptualization of idealism is quite different from both the German Romantic philosophical tradition we associate with Hegel and his contemporaries Fichte and Schelling and the absolutizing, life-crushing, freedom-robbing code of conduct and moral duty Shaw rails against in *The Quintessence*. It is an aesthetic category that is almost wholly unfamiliar to us today:

³⁹ *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism: Art, Theater, Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006. p. 4.

⁴⁰ "We have seen that Hölderlin connects ideas (and ideals) to freedom. Freedom is the great theme of Friedrich Schiller's aesthetics, not least in his masterly little treatise *On Naive and Sentimental Poetry*[".]"
Ibid., p. 73.

As an *aesthetic* term, “idealism” appears to have disappeared. It is absent from major dictionaries of literary terms. I have never seen it discussed as a literary or aesthetic concept on a par with realism or modernism. We appear to have forgotten how important idealism was as a general way of understanding art and literature; how strong its hold on the hearts of nineteenth-century writers, artists, critics, and audiences was; and what a long, slow, piecemeal task it was for a whole generation—the first generation of modernists—to work itself free of that hold.⁴¹

Moi argues that the “ideology of modernism” played a decisive role in erasing the importance of idealism as the major nineteenth-century aesthetic category.⁴² She assimilates the work of Fredric Jameson on the “ideology of modernism” to define it as “a set of aesthetic norms that arose as a response to the artistic practices of the Cold War generation of artists and writers” that were projected back to earlier generations of modernists.⁴³ In other words, late modernists such as Beckett define modernism for everyone else.⁴⁴ The autonomy of the aesthetic, characterized by a strident formalism and a resistance to the claims of culture and political identity (sex, race, and class, for instance); depersonalization, often articulated as impersonality, objectivity, and the death of the author; and the autonomization of language underpinning “the taboo on representation, the hatred of realism, the preference for language preoccupied with the unsayable, the unrepresentable, the impossibility of meaning, absolute negativity and so on”—these components of the ideology of modernism posited realism as the antinomy of modernism, the aesthetic category which must be rejected, supplanted, evacuated, and

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

⁴² Cf. Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present*. London: Verso, 2002. pp. 141-210.

⁴³ *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism*, p. 19.

⁴⁴ *A Singular Modernity*, pp. 197-210.

superseded.⁴⁵ Schor writes that, “Whereas in twentieth-century critical theory idealism appears, if it appears at all, as a reaction to realism, in the nineteenth century the opposite was true. What secures the superiority of realism within the paradigm of representation is the alignment of its terms with the paradigm of gender.”⁴⁶ As an aesthetic category, idealism is the mode aligned with women, both female artists and female audiences. Yet, in the course of the writing of a phallogentric literary history, idealism is erased, locked away out of sight and out of mind like the mad woman in the attic.

For Moi, Shaw and the *Quintessence* are inadvertently complicit in the erasure of idealism. “Because Shaw defends Ibsen by turning idealism into the expression of a personally and politically thwarted psyche, *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* conveys no sense of the illustrious origins of idealist aesthetics, no sense that idealism once had genuine claims to be taken seriously,” Moi writes. She continues,

By reducing idealism to an effect of psychological repression, Shaw accelerated the process that would lead readers and critics of Ibsen to forget idealism entirely. But when we forget all about the idealist tradition in aesthetics, we are no longer able to see that *Ghosts* is not just about family sickness and family secrets, but about aesthetic norms. Paradoxically, then, the death of idealism that Ibsen helped to bring about makes it more, not less difficult to understand what Ibsen was doing in his modern plays.⁴⁷

Pace Moi, Shaw did not defend Ibsen “by turning idealism into the expression of a personally and politically thwarted psyche”—idealism had already become just that by the end of the nineteenth century. More importantly, Shaw and the *Quintessence* played

⁴⁵ *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism*, p. 20.

⁴⁶ *George Sand and Idealism*. New York: Columbia UP, 1996. p. 11.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 93-94.

a profoundly important role not in only demystifying Ibsen to the London stage and its audience but also in providing an aesthetic and political challenge directed towards the very possibility of a New Drama not imported from Norway but indigenous to Britain itself. Simon Shepherd and Tony Womack write,

Shaw's tract was the manifesto of a movement. Its immediate occasion was the foundation of the Independent Theatre, a small-scale non-profit-making company committed to new writing. Its opening production (in 1891) of *Ghosts*, and the famous torrent of shocked abuse it provoked from the London press partly accounts for Shaw's adversarial version of Ibsen himself [...] "Ibsenism" was a definite theatrical practice, playing semi-professional matinées and Sunday performances to artistically and politically progressive audiences, and trying by these means to open up a non-commercial space for new drama.⁴⁸

The *Quintessence* is more than a literary-political pamphlet. *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* must be understood within the context of the manifesto, the text *par excellence* of the avant-garde. The *Quintessence* exemplifies one of Moi's most important points: that there are a multiplicity of modernisms, that "modernism, like realism, is not one."⁴⁹ Along with the other feminine generic and modal forms of the nineteenth century, romance and melodrama, idealism, more than realism, is modernism's Other. The modernism of the *Quintessence* lies in its status as an anti-idealist manifesto.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ *English Drama: A Cultural History*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1996. p. 260.

⁴⁹ *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism*, p. 3.

⁵⁰ Indeed, Shaw characterizes Gerald Bridges as an idealist when he first returns to London in "The Future of Theatre." He writes that "in Buenos Ayres he could idealize the London theatres" (124-125). As Bridges discovers the truth of the commercial-institutional structure of London's theater scene but proceeds to radically transform it, we see that his trajectory through the short story is one from the idealism he had being thousands of miles distant from the reality he dreamed of to the realism necessary for the operation of a successful theater that manages to maintain its artistic credibility.

Peter Bürger characterizes the avant-garde as not merely a kind of articulation of modernism but rather as the cultural formation opposed to the art of the bourgeoisie. In bourgeois modernity, “the separation of art from the praxis of life becomes the decisive characteristic of the autonomy of bourgeois art” as the consequence of a historical shifts in the function, production, and reception of art going back to the sacral art of the Middle Ages.⁵¹ For Bürger, the autonomy of art, what for Jameson is an integral component to the “ideology of modernism,” is symptomatic of a bourgeois ontology that positions art outside the space of everyday life. The avant-garde seeks to redress this fragmentation of the subject with respect to art:

When the avant-gardistes demand that art become practical once again, they do not mean that the contents of works of art should be socially significant. The demand is not raised at the level of the contents of the individual works. Rather, it directs itself to the way art functions in society, a process that does as much to determine the effect that works have as does the particular content.⁵²

For the avant-garde, bourgeois art is an art of containment that “projects the image of a better order and to that extent protests against the bad order that prevails. But by realizing the image of a better order in fiction, which is semblance (*Schein*) only, it relieves the existing society of the pressure of those forces that make for change.”⁵³ This is nothing if not the idealism that Shaw opposes. The social energies for positive change

⁵¹ *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*. Trans. Michael Shaw. Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1984. p. 48-49.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 49.

⁵³ I use the term *containment* as a deliberate nod to Stephen Greenblatt, whose theory of subversion and containment in the essay “Invisible Bullets” is predicated on a theater that potentially operates in the same manner as what Bürger here describes. Cf. *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energies in Renaissance England*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: California UP, 1988. pp. 21-65.

“are assigned to confinement in an ideal sphere.”⁵⁴ What the avant-garde calls for, according to Bürger, is a radical transformation in the system of cultural production such that art and life are one: “When art and the praxis of life are one, when the praxis is aesthetic and art is practical, art’s purpose can no longer be discovered, because the existence of two distinct spheres (art and the praxis of life) that is constitutive of the concept of purpose or intended use has come to an end.”⁵⁵ The avant-garde must not be misunderstood as an articulation of Aestheticism. Shaw himself was strongly opposed to art for art’s sake. His ideal form of literature was utilitarian: journalism. In the preface to *The Sanity of Art*, Shaw writes that “journalism can claim to be the highest form of literature; for all the highest literature is journalism,” that is, specific and useful. “I also am a journalist, Shaw declares, “proud of it, deliberately cutting out of my works all that is not journalism, convinced that nothing that is not journalism will live long as literature, or be of any use whilst it does live” (CP1: 283). For Bürger, what distinguishes the avant-garde from Aestheticists is the avant-garde’s “attempt to organize a new life praxis from a basis in art”⁵⁶ (From here it is but a short step to Nietzsche, one of the most important stars in the constellation of Shaw’s intellectual formation. It is not Nietzsche’s aesthetic ideology per se—which, summed up in the line “for it is only as an aesthetic phenomenon that existence and the world are eternally *justified*,” is fundamentally

⁵⁴ *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, p. 50.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* 50 Bürger acknowledges a kind of irony in the avant-garde’s desire for the bifurcation between art and life to be dismantled: “For the (relative) freedom of art vis-à-vis the praxis of life is at the same time the condition that must be fulfilled if there is to be a critical cognition of reality. An art no longer distinct from the praxis of life but wholly absorbed in it will lose the capacity to criticize it, along with its distance” (50).

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

pessimistic (read: Schopenhauerean) and antitheatrical⁵⁷—that is important as much as it is his desire for the integration of art and being: “*One thing is needful.—To ‘give style’ to one’s character, a great and rare art!*”)⁵⁸

To that end, the avant-garde seeks to negate the categories of both individual reception and individual production. No wonder, then, that theater and theatricality are embraced by the avant-garde because the processes of putting on a play and sitting in an audience watching a play, of performance and spectatorship, are both inherently collaborative and sociological. The avant-garde’s desire for an integration of life praxis and art vis à vis a revolutionary overthrow of the bourgeoisie is homologous with the Fabian program of Shaw’s *Quintessence*, its call for a New Drama and a new British society.

For Martin Puchner, the avant-garde is inextricably linked with the genre of the manifesto. The genre of the manifesto for him is unique in its embodiment of both theatricality and performativity, terms that define the political and aesthetic mission of the manifesto. Turning to ordinary language philosophy and speech act theory, Puchner notes that “From the point of view of Austin, the manifesto would have to be described as a series of speech acts singularly invested, even overinvested, in the effects they produce in the real world, what Austin termed ‘perlocutionary effects’”.⁵⁹ In other words, manifestos *do* something. There is agency as a consequence of the manifesto, agency

⁵⁷ *The Birth of Tragedy and The Case of Wagner*. Trans. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Vintage, 1967. p. 52.

⁵⁸ *The Gay Science*. Trans. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Vintage, 1974. p. 232.

⁵⁹ *Poetry of the Revolution: Marx, Manifestos, and the Avant-Gardes*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2006. p. 23.

such as the revitalization of the London stage and emergence of a reform-minded, politically-concerned British theatrical modernism. The performativity of the manifesto is coextensive with its theatricality—ironic, as Puchner points out, given Austin’s own infamous denial of the efficacy of theatrical language. “Speech acts must battle and conquer the threat of theatricality in order to become speech acts. Such a battle between theatricality and performativity is nowhere as visible as in the manifesto,” he writes, “indeed, [the manifesto] tried to exorcise its own theatricality by borrowing from an authority it will have obtained in the future. All manifestos are intertwined with the theatrical, driven by it and troubled by it, and they all seek to turn the theater into a source of authority.”⁶⁰ The theatricality of Shaw’s *Quintessence*, however, is not limited to the need for self-authorization formally intrinsic to the genre of the manifesto or the style of language that grants that authority. Rather, the theatricality of Shaw’s *Quintessence* is central to its very content. It is a manifesto about theater itself, the need for a new kind of theater, an anti-idealist theater, an avant-garde theater that discards the remains of nineteenth-century idealism for the dual purpose of creating a new society and a “New Drama.”⁶¹ Indeed, it is a manifesto that launches just such a new theatrical tradition. The alignment between an anti-idealist theatricality and a Fabian-inspired

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁶¹ Within the fictional worlds Shaw creates, there exists one prominent manifesto, John Tanner’s, *The Revolutionist’s Handbook*, in *Man and Superman*. Looking back to the play’s premiere production at the Court Theatre, London, in 1905, we see that there is a long tradition of presenting Tanner as a stand-in for Shaw, with the actor who created the role, Harley Granville Barker, having been made up to look like Shaw, complete with beard. To say that *The Revolutionist’s Handbook* in *Man and Superman* is as much Shaw’s manifesto and it is Tanner’s is apropos—especially given that Shaw actually wrote a text with that name and appended it to published version of the play.

realist politics in the *Quintessence* figures Shaw's pamphlet as a revolutionary anti-idealist manifesto which, no less than any other manifesto, represents, to quote Puchner, "the very wish fulfillment of modernism" (7), modernism's wish to be a revolutionary play like one by Shaw.⁶²

2.5 Without History: Romance and Violence in Caesar and Cleopatra

Marx, who provides the philosophical basis for Shaw's Fabianism, writes in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* that the "social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot derive in poetry from the past, but only from the future."⁶³ If the case can be made that Fabianism represents a compromised version of authentic revolutionary Marxism, perhaps it can be made here. Shaw's short story allegorizes the necessity of creating the theater of the future dialectically by means of the theater of the past. The past cannot be altogether abandoned. Marx writes, "The revolution of the nineteenth century must let the dead bury the dead in order to arrive at its own content,"⁶⁴ but that is something that Shaw and his theater cannot do. If a new phase in British national history

⁶² Given Puchner's standing as one of the luminaries of the New Modernist Studies and contemporary Theater Studies, it is ironic that he fails to see the Fabian-inspired movement of the New Drama, with the *Quintessence* as its anti-idealist manifesto, as a home-grown, distinctly British avant-garde. In *Poetry of the Revolution*, he cites the Wyndham Lewis and the Vorticists as representing a "read guard" "marked by belatedness in relation to the Continental avant-gardes" (107). That said, the Futurists in Europe and the Vorticists in Britain admired Shaw and what his theater accomplished; cf. an unpublished conference paper by Lawrence Switzky, "The Nietzschean Motor-Car: Shaw among the Futurists and the Vorticists." Shaw and His Contemporaries. MLA Convention. San Francisco. 28 December 2008.

⁶³ Quoted in *Poetry of the Revolution*, p. 1.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

is to be inaugurated by and alongside theater, then the revolutionary impulse that Shaw and his contemporaries embodied must engage that history's greatest theatrical icon, Shakespeare, not so much to revive him as to revise him.⁶⁵

For Shaw, idealism characterizes nineteenth-century British theater's treatment of Shakespeare. In the section of the preface to *Three Plays for Puritans* (1901) with the provocative heading "BETTER THAN SHAKESPEAR?," Shaw dissects what Shakespeare had become, diagnosing it as "Bardolatry." In the nineteenth century Shakespeare becomes a figure so revered, placed on so high a pedestal of literary and national consciousness that any critical consideration of the performance of his plays in the theater and their content runs counter to the prevailing "Bardolatry." For Shaw, this was a matter of anachronism: Shakespeare is centuries ahead of his time, and the British people are only beginning to catch up:

As to our ordinary uncritical citizens, they have been slowly trudging forward these three centuries to the point which Shakespear reached at a bound in Elizabeth's time. Today most of them have arrived there or thereabouts, with the result that his plays are at last beginning to be performed as he wrote them; and the long-line of disgraceful farces, melodramas, and stage pageants which actor-managers, from Garrick and Cibber to our own contemporaries, have hacked out of his plays as peasants have hacked out of the Coliseum, are beginning to vanish from the stage. (CP1: 79)

⁶⁵ Martin Harries analyzes Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire* in relation to its allusions to Shakespeare, particularly *Hamlet*, literalizing the Foucaultian trope of archaeology by turning its attention to metaphors of digging and mining in its reading of Hamlet's exclamation to the ghost of his father, "Well said, old mole. Canst work i'th'earth so fast?" (I.5.164). Cf. *Scare Quotes from Shakespeare: Marx, Keynes, and the Language of Reenchantment*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2000. pp. 54-122.

Though Shaw presents himself as antagonistic with respect to the Bard and Bardolatry, the reality is not that Shaw has no reverence for Shakespeare but rather that he has more reverence for Shakespeare than anyone else, for he, too, like Shakespeare is a man ahead of his time. He writes, “I am far too good a Shakespearean ever to forgive Henry Irving for producing a version of King Lear so mutilated that the numerous critics who had never read the play could not follow the story of Gloster” (CP1: 79).⁶⁶ Shaw recognizes the irony of Victorian theater’s idealism of Shakespeare: “It is a significant fact that the mutilators of Shakespear, who never could be persuaded that Shakespear knew his business better than they, have ever been the most fanatical of his worshippers” (CP1: 79). That “most fanatical” worship of Shakespeare had become a form of idolatry, reverence for a false god. Shaw repeatedly casts himself as a true visionary in his writings, in doing so, he endows himself with the revelatory authority to denounce what Shakespeare had become and to write,

It was the age of gross ignorance of Shakespear and inca-

⁶⁶ Earlier in the preface, Shaw writes, “In 1896, when Sir Henry Irving was disabled by an accident at a moment when Miss Ellen Terry was too ill to appear, the theatre had to be closed after a brief attempt to rely on the attraction of a Shakespearean play performed by the stock company. This may have been Shakespear’s fault: indeed Sir Henry later on complained that he had lost a princely sum by Shakespear. But Shakespear’s reply to this, if were able to make it, would be that the princely sum was spent, not on his dramatic poetry, but on a gorgeous stage ritualism superimposed on reckless mutilations of his text, the whole being addressed to a public as to which nothing is certain except that its bias is towards reverence for Shakespear and dislike and distrust of ritualism” (CP1: 62). This is typical of Shaw’s attacks on Irving, which especially in his journalistic work as a theater critic, are too numerous to enumerate. Suffice it to say, Alan Hughes presents his case in support of Irving as a Shakespearean *eighty years later* by positioning his argument in opposition to Shaw, the preface to his book culminating: “Here, too, is a view of Irving that should be set over against that common and easy dismissal of his contribution to theatre which derives from hearsay, fashion, and the partisan comments of Bernard Shaw.” *Henry Irving, Shakespearean*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1981. p. xiii. For a more contemporary response to Shaw and Irving, cf. L. W. Connolly, “The Matter with Irving: Bernard Shaw and Irving Reconsidered.” *Henry Irving: A Re-Evaluation of the Pre-Eminent Victorian Actor-Manager*. Ed. Richard Foulkes. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008. pp. 185-193.

capacity for his works that produced the indiscriminate eulogies with which we are familiar. It was the revival of serious attention to those works that coincided with the movement for giving genuine instead of spurious and silly representations of his plays. So much for Bardolatry! (CP1: 80)⁶⁷

Despite its self-theatricalizing audacity, Shaw himself acknowledges that his particular renunciation of Bardolatry is not historically original. Of his rejection of Bardolatry, Shaw writes,

Such criticisms are no more new than the creed of my Diabolonian Puritan or my revival of the humors of Cool as a Cucumber.⁶⁸ Too much surprise at them betrays an acquaintance with Shakespear criticism so limited as not to include even the prefaces of Dr Johnson and the utterances of Napoleon.⁶⁹ I have merely repeated in the dialect and light of my own time and in the light of its philosophy what they had said in the dialect and light of theirs. (CP1: 78-79)

Repetition with a difference: the light and philosophy of the “Diabolonian Puritan” that Shaw details in the first part of the preface is a light and philosophy of anti-idealist antitheatricity, one that seeks to makeover the stage and the state. Reading

⁶⁷ The theatrical “movement” Shaw refers to here is best exemplified by William Poel and the Elizabethan Stage Society. Cf. Robert Speaight, *William Poel and the Elizabethan Revival*. London: Heinemann, 1954; and Marion O’Connor, *William Poel and the Elizabethan Stage Society*. Cambridge, UK: Chadwyck-Healey, 1987. This latter title, unfortunately, is extremely difficult to acquire.

⁶⁸ Shaw’s notion of the “Diabolonian Puritan” is detailed in the first two sections of the preface, “Why for Puritans?” and “On Diabolonian Ethics.” In short, Shaw holds up the Puritans as a model for a kind of modernist antitheatricity because he, like they, condemn a theater predicated on “a systematic idolatry of sensuousness” that “has crowned the idolatry of Art with the Deification of Love,” evacuating any capacity for critical (read: political) engagement with reality: “The pleasures of the senses I can sympathize with and share; but the substitution of sensuous ecstasy for intellectual activity and honesty is the very devil” (CP1: 70).

⁶⁹ Napoleon had based “the superiority of Corneille to Shakespear on the ground of Corneille’s power of grasping a political situation, and of seeing men in their relation to the State.” Letter, Shaw to Victor Tchertkoff, 2 August 1905. Quoted in CP1: 79.

Shakespeare without the impediment of an idealizing Bardolatry, Shaw confronts his plays for what they actually are. For Shaw, making an authentic engagement with Shakespeare's plays leads to the realization they are not necessarily worthy of the esteem in which they are held. Shaw is not above saying that he would be willing to discard forever "half a dozen of Shakespear's plays for one of the prefaces he ought to have written" (CP1: 72). Clear-eyed and unsentimental in his reading of Shakespeare, he is harshest on the play that embodies the idealist spirit most, *Antony and Cleopatra*.

Condemning Shakespeare's play, Shaw writes,

Shakespear's Antony and Cleopatra must needs be as intolerable to the true Puritan as it is vaguely distressing to the ordinary healthy citizen, because, after giving a faithful picture of the soldier broken down by debauchery, and the typical wanton in whose arms such men perish, Shakespear finally strains all his huge command of rhetoric and stage pathos to give a theatrical sublimity to the wretched end of the business, and to persuade foolish spectators that the world was well lost by the twain. Such falsehood is not to be borne except by the real Cleopatras and Antonys (they are to be found in every public house) who would no doubt be glad enough to be transfigured by some poet as immortal lovers. Woe to the poet who stoops to such folly! The lot of the man who sees life truly and thinks about it romantically is Despair. (CP1: 77)

Shakespeare's tragedy romanticizes political affairs of world-historical importance and trivializes them, subordinating them to the transfiguration of two individuals' love and emotional loss. In doing so, Shakespeare's play is no less corrupt and morally bankrupt than the nineteenth-century stage he rails against, and insofar as his poetic and theatrical power, his "huge command of rhetoric and stage pathos," are the means by which the

political is negated by the romantic, it is a power of darkness, of a bourgeois aestheticism of “Despair.”

Shaw’s own play, *Caesar and Cleopatra* (copyright perf. 1899; prem. 1901)⁷⁰ must be understood as a dialectical engagement with its Shakespearean predecessor, one that, ethically and politically, gets its themes right, and in so doing, exemplifies a theater and theatricality of the future, the British modernist stage. In the preface, Shaw writes, “Ten years of cheap reading have changed the English from the most stolid nation in Europe to the most theatrical and hysterical” (*CP1*: 70). The imagination of romance, substituting reading for reality, fantasy for lived experience in everyday life, is the primary object of Shaw’s anti-idealist critique. In act two of the play, Cleopatra’s brother, husband, and rival for the throne, Ptolemy, and his army capture the city of Alexandria, and the following exchange takes places:

THEODOTUS: The fire has spread from your ships. The first of the seven wonders of the world perishes. The library of Alexandria in flames.

RUFIO: Psha! [*Quite relieved, he goes up to the loggia and watches the preparations of the troops on the beach*].

CAESAR: Is that all?

THEODOTUS: [*unable to believe his senses*] All! Caesar: will you go down to posterity as a barbarous soldier too ignorant to know the value of books?

CAESAR: Theodotus: I am an author myself; and I tell you it is better that the Egyptians should live their lives than dream them away with the help of books.

THEODOTUS: [*kneeling, with genuine literary emotion: the passion of the pedant*] Caesar: once in ten generations of men, the world gains an immortal book.

⁷⁰ For information on the premiere and the literary sources of Shaw’s play, cf. Gordon W. Couchman, *This Our Caesar: A Study of Bernard Shaw’s Caesar and Cleopatra*. The Hague: Mouton, 1973.

CAESAR: [*inflexible*] If it did not flatter mankind, the common executioner would burn it.
THEODOTUS: Without history, death will lay you beside your meanest soldier.
CAESAR: Death will do that in any case. I ask no better grave.
THEODOTUS: What is burning there is the memory of mankind.
CAESAR: A shameful memory. Let it burn.
THEODOTUS: [*wildly*] Will you destroy the past?
CAESAR: Ay, and build the future with its ruins. (*BH2*: 218-219)

For the pedant Theodotus, tutor to the young would-be boy king Ptolemy, the burning of the library of Alexandria is a “Horror unspeakable,” an attack not merely on a book repository but on the “memory of mankind” itself, an assault so traumatic that words fail to describe it or express its magnitude.

The scene functions as an ironic allegory of writing and culture in Shaw’s *fin de siècle* England. Shaw was a playwright uniquely concerned in his day with the literary production of his plays and the establishment of a privileged category of dramatic literature through the publication of his plays as books, grouped under the titles *Plays: Pleasant and Unpleasant* (1898) and *Three Plays for Puritans* (1901) (into which latter category *Caesar and Cleopatra* falls). Shaw’s letters to his publisher Grant Richards give a clear sense of the precision Shaw wanted in the design of the books for publication, for example, fancifully calling for Richards to print the *Plays Unpleasant* “on light brown paper (Egyptian mummy paper) in an ugly style of printing and the pleasant ones on white paper (machine hand made) in the best Kelmscott style;” as W. B. Worthen writes, “For Shaw, the design of the book was not merely part of its packaging for the market: it was a means both to stage the value of modern drama as print literature, and a

means to represent the drama in the form of print.”⁷¹ For Shaw to render his Caesar, a fellow author himself, so cavalier about the burning of the library of Alexandria is ironic because there is the expectation that writers, who produce books, are people who care deeply about books, for reasons ranging from the pedantic humanism of Theodotus to the economic and political motivations of Shaw as he embraces the ideology of print for the dissemination of the New Drama. Yet, Caesar, like his brusque aide-de-camp Rufio, brushes off the conflagration, regarding it as no less a bonfire of the vanities than Savonarola. For Caesar, the “memory of mankind” scrolled, codexed, and booked in the library is a memory not worth keeping, a “shameful memory” grounded in violence, bloodshed, destruction, and war.

For Shaw, Shakespeare, that most revered of writers, is complicit in this “shameful memory.” *Antony and Cleopatra* represents exactly the sort of imaginative literature against which Caesar warns Theodotus, telling him, “I tell you it is better that the Egyptians should live their lives than dream them away with the help of books.”

Shaw critiques Shakespeare’s romanticization of imperial Roman history in *Antony and Cleopatra* and asserts his own latter-day “history,” as the play is subtitled, as a corrective, a revision, one which displaces the romantic pathos and sentimentality of Shakespeare’s tragedy with a hard-nosed ethical and political realism vested in the life-and-death stakes of the dynastic struggle between the young Cleopatra and her husband-

⁷¹ *Print and the Poetics of Modern Drama*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP: 2005. p. 45. Shaw’s letter to Grant Richards quoted in Worthen.

brother Ptolemy and his retinue, as well as the colonial enterprise of imperial Rome.⁷² *Antony and Cleopatra*, according to R. A. Foakes, is a play which grounds the representation of its two protagonists and the power they wield in terms of “glamour,” especially in its association with “gaudy, sensual pleasure.”⁷³ Implicit in Foakes’ discussion of glamour is romance, the genre, mode, or strategy which Barbara Fuchs calls a “concatenation of both narratological elements and literary topoi, including idealization.”⁷⁴ For Shaw, the formal (which is to say, ideological) contamination of Shakespeare’s high political drama by the idealizing glamour of romance is anathema. It is against this articulation of Shakespearean romance that Shaw, through Caesar, tells us that the “memory of mankind” is a “shameful memory” best disposed of, best burned. That romance is aligned with idealism entails, for Shaw, an ethical, political, and aesthetic demand that romance be rejected, and that realism and a careful examination of history be assumed in its place.

The problem, then becomes, the nature of history itself. The late Victorian and early modernist attitude towards history can be characterized as a positivist romance of “Progress.” In the “Notes: Apparent Anachronisms” appended to the play, Shaw writes,

The more ignorant men are, the more convinced are they that
their little parish and their little chapel is an apex to which

⁷² Ever an ardent believer in the journalistic topicality of literature, Shaw writes his play as an allegory of Britain’s colonial endeavors: “Conversely the debate on colonialism and carving up Africa, at its height when the play was written, is reflected in the imperialism of Classical Rome.” *Modern British Drama*, p. 24. Of course, Shakespeare’s play, too, participates in a cultural dialogue on empire in early modern England, although the discourse of *Antony and Cleopatra* is markedly different from that of New World colonialism; cf. Ania Loomba, “Shakespeare and Cultural Difference.” *Alternative Shakespeares 2*. London: Routledge. 1996. pp. 164-191.

⁷³ *Shakespeare and Violence*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2003. p. 172.

⁷⁴ *Romance*. London: Routledge, 2004. p. 9.

civilization and philosophy has painfully struggled up the pyramid of time from a desert of savagery. Savagery, they think, became barbarism; barbarism became ancient civilization; ancient civilization became Pauline Christianity [etc]; and the Dark Ages were finally enlightened by the Protestant instincts of the English race. The whole process is summed up as Progress with a capital P. And any elderly gentleman of Progressive temperament will testify that improvement since he was a boy is enormous. (*BH2*: 294-295)

Shaw rejects the romance of progress his contemporaries held dear, stating that “My reason then for ignoring the popular conception of Progress in Caesar and Cleopatra is that there is no reason to suppose that any Progress has taken place since their time” (*BH2*: 298). He takes a decidedly ahistoricist, approach to imperial Egypt and Rome, for example, creating characters who represent types found in modern British society: Cleopatra’s nurse, Ftatateeta, is analogous to the late Victorian dowager governess; Britannus, one of Caesar’s attendants, finds his counterpart in the uptight, efficiency-obsessed clerk of the City; Apollodorus, with his motto “Art for Art’s sake” (*BH2*: 226), is nothing if not a fin-de-siècle aesthete and dandy; Theodotus could just as easily be an Oxbridge don; etc. In the anti-idealist revision of Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra* into a “history” (as its subtitle announces it) that deliberately stages a non-mimetic, ahistorical, yet theatrically robust (imagine the scenography of the play in production) and rhetorically playful portrait of its titular characters and their world, Shaw, ironically, creates a play that presents to Britain an ethically and politically authentic portrait of itself, one that reveals British sentimentality, British irresponsibility, and British chauvinism as the faults that they are, and the narrative of Progress nothing more than a myth. According Otto Reinert “Shaw’s point is that where there has been no change

there can be no anachronism.”⁷⁵ If there is no history, there is no difference. What is left is a universalism of passive despair, an inversion of the universalism of the Fabian Marxism that Shaw promoted.

This point with respect to despair is underlined by the fact that, for Shaw, the only progress that has taken place has been in the sphere of technological development, and what has spurred it on, more than anything else, is war and the desire to create better, more destructive weaponry.⁷⁶

It might as well be assumed as indeed it generally is assumed by implication, that a murder committed with a poisoned arrow is different from a murder committed with a Mauser rifle. All such notions are illusions. Go back to the first syllable of recorded time, and there you will find your Christian and your Pagan, your yokel and your poet, helot and hero, Don Quixote and Sancho, Tamino and Papageno, Newton and the bushman unable to count to eleven, all alive and contemporaneous, and all convinced that they are the heirs of all the ages and the privileged recipients of THE truth (all others damnable heresies), just as you have them today, flourishing in countries each of which is the bravest and best that ever sprang at Heaven’s command from out the azure main. (*BH2*: 296-297)

Whether because there is a universal human essence or, more likely, because the material conditions that determine human subjectivity are, in some sense, always and forever the same—or both—Shaw asserts that progress is an “illusion,” an illusion made salient by the historical fact of murder and vengeance omnipresent across time. According to M. Sean Saunders, *Caesar and Cleopatra* “destabilizes rather than upholds his culture’s commonly held views concerning race, imperialism and colonialism, degeneration, and

⁷⁵ “Old History and New: Anachronism in *Caesar and Cleopatra*.” *Modern Drama* 3 (1960): 38.

⁷⁶ Recall the Devil in *Man and Superman*: “There is nothing in Man’s industrial machinery but greed and sloth: his heart is in his weapons” (*BH2*: 654).

sex and gender.”⁷⁷ In exploding the narrative of progress that defines history for modernist Britain, *Caesar and Cleopatra* tells us that the same people exist transhistorically. It conflates “Newton and the bushman” into a singularity of cultural narcissism and solipsism that negates the binary logic of “us-and-them,” the foundation of Britain’s idealizing sense of its own superiority, specifically, and the underpinning of bloodshed and war, more generally.

In act four, after Cleopatra’s ill-advised orders to have Pothinus assassinated have been carried out, a mob descends on her. Cleopatra and even Caesar’s men justify the killing of this dangerous rival as Caesar listens and observes the threat just outside:

Do you hear? These knockers at your gate are also believers in vengeance and stabbing. You have slain their leader: it is right that they shall slay you. And then in the name of that right [*he emphasizes the word with great scorn*] shall I not slay them for murdering their Queen, and be slain in my turn by their countrymen as the invader of their fatherland? Can Rome do less than slay these slayers, too, to shew the world how Rome avenges her sons and her honor. And so, to the end of history, murder shall breed murder, always in the name of right and honor and peace, until the gods are tired of blood and create a race that can understand. (*BH2: 277-278*)

History is an endless cycle of war, oppression, bloodshed, and murder—“always in the name of right and honor and peace,” Caesar seethes—that characterizes history for Shaw. It warrants Caesar’s claim that the “memory of mankind” is a “shameful memory,” a claim that lies at the heart of Shaw’s damning assessment of Shakespeare.

⁷⁷ “From Metropolis to ‘Impossible Edges’: Shaw’s Imperial Objects.” *SHAW: The Annual of Bernard Shaw Studies* 22 (2002): 102.

Hannah Arendt's work on violence, power, and government provides a lens through which to read *Caesar and Cleopatra*. For Arendt, power and violence are not synonymous terms, nor are they merely separate, discrete categories. Rather, they are thoroughly oppositional and mutually exclusive. For Arendt:

Power corresponds to the human ability not just to act, but to act in concert. Power is never the property of an individual; it belongs to a group and remains only so long as the group keeps together. When we say of somebody that he is 'in power' we actually refer to his being empowered by a certain number of people to act in their name. The moment the group, from which the power originated to begin with disappears, "his power" also vanishes.⁷⁸

Power is concerned with empowerment, the realization of human potential through collaboration, cooperation, through polity. It is not merely social; in the best sense, it is communitarian. Violence, then, is a function of the absence of power, the inability of people to work together. This is, of course, not to say that violence itself is inefficacious. However, violence is necessarily excluded from the utopian conception of polis, polity, and human intersubjectivity central to so much of Arendt's work. As she writes, "Violence can always destroy power; out of the barrel of a gun grows the most effective command, resulting in the most instant and perfect obedience. What can never grow out of it is power."⁷⁹ For human beings to live together and act in concert, Arendt writes, two things are necessary. Caesar alludes, albeit obliquely, to one of those things in when he tells us that the cycle of bloodshed will continue vertiginously "until the gods are tired of

⁷⁸ *On Violence*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1970. p. 44.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

blood and create a race that can understand.” The pulpit preacher of a doctrine of Creative Evolution,⁸⁰ Shaw is foreshadowing the coming day of the Superman, but I believe that there is a specific historical example of a man who had evolved into a Superman that Caesar is pointing to. The invocation of gods, the vision of a new dispensation, and the historical setting of the play mere decades before the birth and evangelism of Jesus Christ strongly suggest that Jesus is an exemplar of the “race that can understand.”⁸¹ The first thing necessary for society and power is forgiveness, as discovered by Jesus. Arendt writes, “The discoverer of the role of forgiveness in human affairs was Jesus of Nazareth. The fact that he made this discovery in a religious context and articulated it in religious language is no reason to take it any less seriously in a strictly secular sense.”⁸² As the Lamb of God, Christ is the ultimate scapegoat, the sacrificial victim whose death is supposed to atone for and end the cycle of revenge, sacrifice, and violence throughout history.⁸³ His death is supposed to be the ultimate pedagogical lesson in the value of forgiveness. This is not to say that the political theology of Shaw’s Fabianism is Christian; rather, the political economy of Christianity, according to Shaw, must be Fabian. Towards the end of the 1908 comedy *Getting*

⁸⁰ For Shaw’s most sustained discussions of Creative Evolution, cf. the prefaces to *Man and Superman* and *Back to Methuselah*; the latter frames Creative Evolution within a Lamarckian scientific discourse that contrasts with the biological and political discourses that emerged from the Darwinian theory of natural selection.

⁸¹ Shaw wrote and spoke extensively on religion: cf. *Shaw on Religion: Irreverent Observations by a Man of Great Faith*. Ed. Warren Sylvester Smith. New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1967. The 1912 piece “God Must Be Non-Sectarian and International” is especially useful in detailing Shaw’s universalism as inspired by his Fabian socialism.

⁸² *The Human Condition*. 2nd ed. Chicago: Chicago UP, 1998. p. 238.

⁸³ This line of argument is deeply indebted to René Girard; cf. *Violence and the Sacred*. Trans. Patrick Gregory. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1972.

Married, the character Hotchkiss asks the beadle Soames, “Soames: youre a communist, arnt you?” Soames reply: “I am a Christian. That obliges me to be a Communist” (*BH3*: 660). This is more than an ironic little joke at the end of one of Shaw’s talkiest plays. In the preface to his 1929 play *The Apple Cart*, Shaw dissects the problem of capitalism and Christian with respect to his charitable contributions:

[...] any spare money that the government leaves me is invested where I can get the highest interest and the best security, as there by I can make sure that it goes where it is most wanted and gives immediate employment. This is the best I can do without Government interference: indeed any other way of dealing with my spare money would be foolish and demoralizing; but the result is that I become richer and richer, and the poor become relatively poorer and poorer. So you see I cannot be a Christian except through Government action[.] (*CP3*: 53)

Again, at the risk of belaboring the point, Shaw’s avant-garde anti-idealism is not a political theology invested in the inauguration of a theocracy. The metaphysics of Christianity (the Trinity, the Resurrection, divine presence in the Eucharist, etc.) are of less import than the ethics of Christianity. In the preface to the 1933 play *On the Rocks*, In the form of a mini-closet drama, Shaw writes the dialogue he wishes had taken place between Christ and Pontius Pilate. Christ presents himself as a revolutionary intent on overthrowing the Roman moral and political order. Towards the end of their exchange:

PILATE: What do you mean by believing in you?
JESUS: Seeing the world as I do. What else could it mean?
PILATE: And you are the Christ, the Messiah, eh?
JESUS: Were I Satan, my argument would still hold true
(*CP3*: 210)

For Shaw, to “see the world” as Christ does is to engage with the reality of everyday life and live an ethics of forgiveness and charity. Jesus Christ sets an ethical and political

example to follow, one characterized by the recognition of the need for forgiveness and the organization of the nation's political economy according to a program of Fabian socialism.⁸⁴

For Arendt, the second thing necessary for people to live together and act in concert is making and keeping promises: “In contrast to forgiving, which—perhaps because of its religious context, perhaps because of the connection with love attending its discovery—has always been deemed unrealistic and inadmissible in the public realm, the power of stabilization inherent in the faculty of making promises has been known throughout our tradition.”⁸⁵ In a specifically political sphere, this amounts to respecting the social contract. This is where *Caesar and Cleopatra* becomes a play about Cleopatra's development, from the “*dreamless sleeper*” lying on a Sphinx (*BH2*: 181) we see at the beginning of act one to the worldly young woman who cries, despite herself, at the end of the play when, recognizing the enormous transformation he has wrought in her soul, Caesar takes his leave. *Caesar and Cleopatra* evidences the work of history, destroying the past (Shakespeare) to build the future with its ruins. The drama of Cleopatra's maturation from insolent willful child to responsible political leader is the microcosm of this historical process. In her first encounter with Caesar, Cleopatra describes to him her fantasies of violence and death: “When I am old enough. I shall do just what I like. I shall be able to poison the slaves and see them wriggle, and pretend to

⁸⁴ I realize that the category of ethics itself is under intense philosophical scrutiny from the left today, particularly from Alain Badiou. For his critique of Arendt and ethics, cf. *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*. Trans. Peter Hallward. London: Verso, 2002. pp. 115-116.

⁸⁵ *The Human Condition*, p. 243.

Ftataeteeta that she is going to be put into the fiery furnace” (*BH2*: 184). Over the course of acts two and three, however, as her position as queen is imperiled by Ptolomy and the retinue that controls him like a puppet on strings, she becomes increasingly aware of the precariousness of her power. In act three, she is smuggled out of her palace in a rolled-up carpet, and, at the end of the act, she is pitched into the sea, forced to swim for her life to the Roman fleet which alone can save her position as queen. The play is nothing if not a lesson in humility for Cleopatra. By act four, she develops beyond mere childish desire:

When I was foolish, I did what I liked, except when Ftataeteeta beat me; and even then I cheated her and did it by stealth. Now that Caesar has made me wise, it is no use liking or disliking: I do what must be done, and have no time to attend to myself. That is not happiness; but it is greatness. If Caesar were gone, I think I could govern the Egyptians; for what Caesar is to me, I am to the fools around me. (*BH2*: 256)

The maturation of the subject over time and the transcendence of self, the realization that political leadership and power are grounded in the truth articulated in the line “I do what must be done, and have no time to attend to myself,”⁸⁶ characterize history’s dialectical orientation towards futurity, political and ethical realism grounded in an anti-idealist aesthetic, and Caesar’s hopes for the “new race that can understand.” The acceptance of responsibility to others and the sacrifice of individual desire to a broader, more utopian view of power lie at the heart of Shaw’s conception of the art of government, the ability to create an order wherein violence does not and need not exist, an ethical and political

⁸⁶ Recall Undershaft and Cusins in *Major Barbara*, act three—CUSINS: I shall cannons to whom I please and refuse them to whom I please. So there! UNDERSHAFT: From the moment when you become Andrew Undershaft, you will never do as you please again. Dont come here lusting for power, young man. CUSINS: If power were my aim I should not come here for it. You have no power. UNDERSHAFT: None of my own, certainly. (*BH3*: 169)

order that operates “Without punishment. Without revenge. Without judgment”—as Cleopatra describes Caesar’s “way” (*BH2*: 289)—having evolved beyond the romantic bourgeois order in which these categories exist. For Shaw, *Caesar and Cleopatra* imagines a history of the future grounded in moral and political responsibility, a corrective to Shakespeare’s irresponsible romanticization of a violent history of the past.

2.6 To Restore the Art of Playing to Its Former Use and Dignity: Shaw’s Medievalism and the Great War

Shaw revised Shakespeare repeatedly after *Caesar and Cleopatra*. The plays themselves, like *Antony and Cleopatra*, however, were the only object of his critical-creative attention. The personage of William Shakespeare was as well. Throughout his career, Shaw identifies himself with Shakespeare, not merely in terms of the stature of his work compared with the Bard’s, but literally—casting himself in the role of the Bard himself. In the 1930 preface to the novel *Immaturity*, Shaw delights in being able to trace his genealogy back to *Macbeth*’s McDuff, “the third son of that immortalized yet unborn Thane of Fife, who, invulnerable to normally accouched swordsmen, laid on and slew Macbeth. It was as good as being descended from Shakespear, whom I had been unconsciously resolved to reincarnate from my cradle” (*CP3*: 7). The identification with Shakespeare does not preclude Shaw from taking license with the historical Shakespeare: it authorizes him to do just that.

One instance in which Shaw appropriates the biography of the historical Elizabethan Shakespeare is the 1910 play *The Dark Lady of the Sonnets*. Shaw writes his first play featuring Shakespeare as a dramatic character in order to raise funds for a “Shakespear Memorial Theatre” in Stratford-upon-Avon for the edification of the British people. Shaw presents us with a Shakespeare who is ridiculous and bathetic, especially in his dealings with women, much like Shaw himself was. In the play, Shakespeare woos a cloaked Elizabeth, believing her to be the Dark Lady, the female object of his desire. After offending his beloved, leaving the Dark Lady to run from the scene in broken-hearted humiliation, Shakespeare tries his hand at wooing Elizabeth in earnest. In a metatheatrical move, he breaks the diagetic fourth wall and begs her for a “boon of State,” money to endow a National Theatre, “for the better instruction and gracing of your majesty’s subjects” (*BH4:322*). At the end of the play here, in begging Elizabeth for the theater’s endowment, Shaw’s Shakespeare gives a short lesson in the history of English theater. Shaw’s Shakespeare cites not his own period’s theater but the theater of the period preceding his own, the didactic religious drama of the Middle Ages, as the one he would want this new national-theatrical institution to imitate in order “to restore the art of playing to its former use and dignity”—the theater of his own period, the Renaissance, representing, in relation to medieval drama, a fallen theater that “fell into the hands of poor players and greedy merchants that had their pockets to look to and not the greatness of this your kingdom,” he tells Elizabeth (*BH4:324*).

There is a something of a sly, self-deprecating humor in Shakespeare’s knocks against the theatrical establishment of his era, a theatrical establishment that is just as

easily Shaw's as well as Shakespeare's. While the critique here of late Victorian and Edwardian theater as intellectually vacuous and ethically (and spiritually) corrupt is far from being a new line of argument in Shaw, the valorization of the medieval, over a Shakespearean Renaissance Shaw saw as ironically aligned with his own modernity, is.

Shaw had previously voiced his admiration for the medieval and its later incarnations repeatedly. Foreshadowing his mature stance against idealizing romance, in the very early 1878 prose work for children *My Dear Dorothea*, Shaw advises his child reader that if she is "careful not to read 'good' books, you will spare yourself much discomfort, and keep yourself in good health." Shaw continues, "There is, however, one good book which you ought to read, because it is a very pleasant story: *Pilgrim's Progress*."⁸⁷ Shaw repeatedly held up Bunyan's 1678 book as one of the true classics of world literature. Given the status of *The Pilgrim's Progress* as the end point of the tradition of English allegory that had extended back historically at least as far as Langland's 1381 *Piers Plowman* (a fellow example of an English canon of literature of dissent), Shaw reveals himself to have a predisposition for the medieval. This is confirmed by another text from 1878, his very first attempt at playwriting, the aborted *Passion Play* (published 1971), a verse drama is in the mode of a medieval Biblical play (its provisional title was *The House of Joseph*).

Shaw held the art of the Pre-Raphaelites in particularly high esteem and praised it frequently; for example, in the preface to *Plays Unpleasant* (1898), Shaw writes,

⁸⁷ *My Dear Dorothea: A Practical System of Moral Education for Females Embodied in a Letter to a Young Person of That Sex*. New York: Vanguard, 1956. p. 22.

In the autumn of 1894, I spent a few weeks in Florence, where I occupied myself with the religious art of the Middle Ages and its destruction by the Renaissance. From a former visit to Italy on the same business I had hurried back to Birmingham to discharge my duties as musical critic at the Festival there. On that occasion a very remarkable collection of works by our British “pre-Raphaelite” painters was on view. I looked at these, and then went into the Birmingham churches to see the windows of William Morris and Burne-Jones. [...] When my subsequent visit to Italy found me practising the playwright’s craft, the time was ripe for a modern pre-Raphaelite play. (CP1: 41)

This “modern pre-Raphaelite play” is *Widowers’ Houses*. That the desire for a resuscitated, didactic, medieval British drama generates the first of the anti-idealist *Plays Unpleasant* is demonstrative of Shaw’s predisposition for medievalism within a modernist context.⁸⁸

Yet, Shaw’s attitude towards the medieval after World War I becomes qualitatively different from what it had ever been before. It becomes an extremely important means of evading Shakespeare. Shaw’s 1923 play *Saint Joan*, like *Caesar and Cleopatra* another putative “history,” must be understood within the context of a Shavian evasiveness to Shakespeare that was a consequence of the Great War. Shakespeare had come to signify everything wrong with the romance of British history, British identity, and British power. Gearóid O’Flaherty writes, “Shaw believed that Irish nationalism had to be ancillary to the more essential objectives of international socialism.”⁸⁹ The same

⁸⁸ For further discussion of Shaw and his relationship to the Pre-Raphaelites, cf. James D. Merritt, “Shaw and the Pre-Raphaelites.” *Shaw: Seven Critical Essays*. Ed. Norman Rosenblood. Toronto: Toronto UP, 1971. pp. 70-83. On the medievalism of the Pre-Raphaelites and the Victorians more generally, cf. Michael Alexander, *Medievalism: The Middle Age in Modern England*. New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2007. pp. 165-210.

⁸⁹ “George Bernard Shaw and Ireland,” p. 130.

held even more true with respect to British nationalism, indeed, with respect to nationalism altogether after World War I. Medievalism offers an alternative for a dialectical Shavian imagination that must rework the past and, now more urgently than ever, articulate a vision of an anti-nationalist Fabian universalism.

World War I is an event of such singular world-historical importance it becomes the means by which the modernists themselves periodize their era. In his 1920 book *The Acquisitive Society*, economist R. H. Tawney asserts the contradiction of capitalism for the bourgeoisie in the modernist period:

When they desire to place their economic life on a better foundation, they repeat, like parrots, the word “Productivity,” because that is the word that rises first in their minds; regardless of the fact that productivity is the one characteristic of the age before the war, as religion was of the Middle Ages or art of classical Athens, and that it is precisely in the century that has seen the greatest increase in productivity since the fall of the Roman Empire that economic discontent has been more acute.⁹⁰

As Martin Harries writes, “Tawney’s phrase, the ‘age before the war,’ reveals the extent to which he considers the time when he writes to be discontinuous with the time before August 1914.”⁹¹ For Tawney, World War I marked a singular point in the periodization of modernism: there is only *before the Great War* and *after*.

For Shaw, however, periodization is not so simple. Shaw realizes that with the fetishization of the singularity of a given historical event, there is the undesired consequence of becoming blind to the social energies and the slow, subterranean

⁹⁰ Quoted in *Scare-Quotes from Shakespeare*, pp. 126-127.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

mechanisms of process, development, and transformation that made the event possible in the first place and that may yet dictate the course of the future. Contexts must be maintained.⁹² Bourgeois capitalism and its co-optation of a virulent nationalism, Shaw argues, are the contexts that led inexorably to the Great War. Shaw's writings on the Great War are remarkable in their refusal to dehumanize Germany and in their lack of sympathy for Britain. What enables sympathy, on the one hand, and denies it, on the other, is Shaw's understanding of the Great War as a class war. In *Common Sense about the War* (1914), Shaw writes, "I do not see this war as one which has welded Governments and peoples into complete and sympathetic solidarity as against the common enemy. [...] I see both nations duped, but alas! not quite unwillingly duped, by their Junkers and Militarists into wreaking on one another the wrath they should have spent in destroying Junkerism and Militarism in their own country." Shaw gives the German translation for *Junker*: "young nobleman, younker, lording, country squire, country gentleman, squirearch." In reality, a *Junker* is a member of the landed gentry in particular, that is, part of the bourgeoisie. World War I took place because of the venality of the bourgeoisie in Britain and in Germany as an economic class and because of the stupidity of the bourgeoisie in Britain and in Germany as a political class incapable of effective government.⁹³ The war's casualties were the poor, "duped" into an insane conflict. For Shaw, World War I gives new urgency to the case that "there are only two

⁹² The dialogue between medievalists and early modernists in the humanities and the increasing tendency to situate the medieval and the Renaissance within a *long duree* (the works of James Simpson and Eamon Duffy leap to mind) have influenced my own thinking about how we "do" periodization.

⁹³ *What Shaw Really Wrote about the Great War*. Eds. J. L. Wisenthal and Daniel O'Leary. Gainesville, FL: Florida UP, 2006. pp. 17, 18.

real flags in the world henceforth: the red flag of Democratic Socialism and the black flag of Capitalism, the flag of God and the flag of Mammon.”⁹⁴

The desire for an anti-national socialist universalism animates Shaw’s engagements with and evasions of Shakespeare after World War I. Sonya Freeman Loftis reads Shaw’s first important theatrical response to the Great War, *Heartbreak House*, as a condemnation of romance similar to *Caesar and Cleopatra* and as a Shavian attempt to revise the bleak pessimism of *King Lear*, which Shaw’s play parallels and alludes to in a such a variety of ways that he himself refers to *Heartbreak House* as “my Lear” (*BH7*: 475).⁹⁵ I will not rehearse her arguments, but there is one point she makes that I want to highlight. Loftis writes that Shaw “frequently represents Shakespeare as a symbol of cultural stagnation, which Shaw suggests is the artistic and moral death of the human race.”⁹⁶ I would like to add that Shakespeare, especially, represents a *British* cultural stagnation, one that needs to be overcome through the creation of an anti-national Fabian socialist universalism and the evasion of Shakespeare.

Yet, with respect to the medievalism that is symptomatic of an evasiveness towards Shakespeare after World War I, there are ideological contradictions in Shaw’s

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

⁹⁵ Loftis’s work builds on and extends earlier work by Shaw scholars: Margery Morgan, *The Shavian Playground: An Exploration of the Art of George Bernard Shaw*. London: Methuen, 1972; Stanley Weintraub, *The Unexpected Shaw: Biographical Approaches to G.B.S. and His Work*. New York: Frederick Unger, 1982; and Martin Meisel, *Shaw and the Nineteenth-Century Theater*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1963. While holding Meisel’s work in the highest regard, I believe that it has had an unintentionally insidious effect on Shaw Studies, blinding Shavians to the modernity and modernism of his art. No one will argue with that fact that Shaw owes a profound debt to Victorian drama and theater, but I worry that it has been overstated. Nineteenth-century theater does not define Shaw, certainly no more than T. S. Eliot’s debts to Walt Whitman and Robert Browning define him.

⁹⁶ “Shakespeare, Shotover, Surrogation,” p. 54.

other great post-war play, *Saint Joan*. I will discuss the play briefly towards the end of my discussion of Shaw. More immediately, I want to make sense of those contradictions within medievalism as an ideology in play during modernism. Only then will *Saint Joan* come into focus.

For Shaw, the medieval is the nineteenth century. In “Preface on the Prospects of Christianity,” Shaw’s preface to *Androcles and the Lion*, Shaw writes, “We must therefore bear in mind that whereas, in the time of Jesus, and in the ages which grew darker and darker after his death until the darkness, after a brief false dawn in the Reformation and the Renaissance, culminated in the commercial night of the nineteenth century, it was believed that you could not make men good by Act of Parliament, we now know that you cannot make them good in any other way, and that a man who is better than his fellows is a nuisance” (*CP2*: 200-201). Shaw’s attitude towards the medieval is extraordinary similar to his attitude towards Shakespeare: he treats them both with profound ambivalence. The Dark Ages, for the author of *Androcles and the Lion*, are not to be found in the medieval period, whose art, culture, and intensity of moral and spiritual conviction Shaw celebrated repeatedly in his writing, but rather in the Dickensian hardship and capitalist exploitation of the “commercial night of the nineteenth century.” To paraphrase a point made by J. L. Wisenthal, the aesthetic and the moral superiority of the Middle Ages owes to the medieval world’s superiority as a society in Shaw’s eyes.⁹⁷

⁹⁷ Compare: “the aesthetic superiority of the Middle Ages is owing to the medieval world’s superiority as a society.” J. L. Wisenthal, *Shaw’s Sense of History*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1988. p. 79.

There is a certain irony in Shaw's casting of the nineteenth century as the Dark Ages. Indeed, the nineteenth century saw the rebirth of medievalism, and Shaw had the utmost admiration for such Victorian medievalists as William Morris, Thomas Carlyle, and John Ruskin. Michael Alexander tells us that the medievalism of the Arts and Crafts movement was a response to "the Industrial Revolution and its social consequences."⁹⁸ No doubt the functionalism of Ruskin, Morris, and the medieval modernists who were their successors would have appealed to Shaw, a playwright who rejected the formalist's cry "Art for art's sake!" and saw his own plays as no less didactic, which is to say, utilitarian, than the medieval drama that Shakespeare prefers to his own in *The Dark Lady of the Sonnets*.

Shaw frequently valorizes the medieval especially over his own modern contemporaneity. There is a dark side to the medieval as well, and Shaw acknowledges its horrors. Wisenthal discusses Shaw's abhorrence of the anti-Semitism, the Black Death, and the oppressive feudalism of the Middle Ages.⁹⁹ There is one more item to add to the list of medieval terrors. A. M. Gibbs, in his reading of Shaw and change, quotes Edmund Burke's famous line at the end of the eighteenth century, "the age of chivalry is gone."¹⁰⁰ Chivalry was rediscovered in the nineteenth century, and the historical and theological underpinnings of chivalry are important. Allen J. Frantzen argues that there is a logic of religious violence at the heart of medieval chivalry which rested on a profound misreading of Christ's Crucifixion. Building on the work of Rene Girard,

⁹⁸ *Medievalisms*, p. 180.

⁹⁹ Wisenthal, *Shaw's Sense of History* p. 83.

¹⁰⁰ "G.B.S. and 'the Law of Change.'" *SHAW: The Annual of Bernard Shaw Studies* 27 (2007): 33.

Frantzen tells us that Christ's martyrdom was intended to end history as a human narrative of vengeance and bloody retribution, a succession of violent act after violent act. "That, in Girard's view," Frantzen writes, "was the purpose of Christ's life and death: to bring the cycle of revenge to a halt."¹⁰¹ Yet, the example of Christ's death on the cross, an act Frantzen types as antisacrificial in its intention of halting the sacrificial logic of violence, was interpreted as an act of suffering and bloodshed that demanded more and more violence. Frantzen writes, "Authors of Passion narratives subscribed to a theory of 'quanto magis,' meaning 'how much the more.' According to this logic, if Christ suffered greatly, how much more greatly should Jews, heretics, criminals, and the outcast suffer."¹⁰² This articulation of the Other as scapegoat, in effect, crystallizes Girard, and what were the English in Joan's France if not an Other to be attacked and expelled? In medieval manuals of chivalry, according to Frantzen, the chivalric knight is justified in his violence because he himself may be a victim of violence and have to suffer and sacrifice his life as Christ Himself did.¹⁰³ Death at the hand of a non-Christian Other brings forgiveness and mercy from Christ—the fact that the Other who kills the knight might have been killed himself by the knight notwithstanding. This is chivalry as a divinely-inspired logic of sacrificial bloodshed. This is chivalry as an ideology of violence and war. It is no mere rhetorical flourish write that chivalry makes a comeback with a vengeance in the nineteenth century. As Frantzen demonstrates, the rhetoric and

¹⁰¹ Frantzen, Allen J. *Bloody Good: Chivalry, Sacrifice, and the Great War*. Chicago: Chicago UP, 2004. p. 44.

¹⁰² *Ibid.* p. 45.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 42 and 75-118.

iconography of chivalry are deployed *ad infinitum* in propaganda and visual culture both in Britain and throughout the Continent during World War I;¹⁰⁴ in Britain, Paul Fussell tells us, the soldiers in the trenches would have been avid readers of the tales of chivalry of nineteenth-century medieval romance.¹⁰⁵ Always present beneath the surface, chivalry's logic of sacrificial violence is central to the medievalism of the nineteenth century and therein Ruskin, Morris, Carlyle—the artists and intellectuals from whom Shaw inherited the medievalism that makes *Saint Joan* possible—are complicit in helping to create the ideological conditions which made the catastrophe of the Great War possible, and there is a cruel irony here: the war to end all wars is ideologically motivated by a fundamentally erroneous theological interpretation of Christ's Crucifixion, a sacrifice that was intended to end all sacrifice.

J. L. Wisenthal reads *Saint Joan* as a play about the bringing to a close the history that made Joan possible. Her radical individualism prefigures the Reformation and her divinely inspired desire to kick the English out of France is nothing if not an articulation of an early modern nationalism.¹⁰⁶ In other words, Joan is less an agent of the Middle Ages than the Renaissance that superseded the earlier period: in the play, “we see the clash between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, between the declining epoch and the rising one.”¹⁰⁷ Further, it is less Joan's embodiment of the early modern values of

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 149-194.

¹⁰⁵ *The Great War and Modern Memory*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000. p. 135.

¹⁰⁶ Benedict Anderson demonstrates that, by means of an emergent print-capitalism that made the dissemination of Reformation ideas possible, the Reformation played an important role in the rise of nationalism. Cf. *Imagined Communities*, pp. 39-45.

¹⁰⁷ Wisenthal, *Shaw's Sense of History* p. 84.

Reformation and Nationalism that bring the Middle Ages to a close than her embodiment of a thoroughly medieval ideology of divinely inspired violence, what Frantzen calls “Bloody Good,” that causes the period to implode. Wisenthal writes, “Joan represents the modern warfare that made the horrors of 1914-1918 possible” and he calls this a “post-medieval” development.¹⁰⁸ I suggest a qualification here to the periodicity of Joan’s deployment of violence, one which points to the irony of Shaw’s turn to the medieval as the means by which he seeks to evade Shakespeare and the nationalism he signified: the sophistication of her tactics might point ahead to the modernity of the Great War but the ideology of sacrifice that theologically sanctions it (as well as her own martyrdom), chivalry, is utterly medieval.

2.7 Out, out, brief candle!: One Last Fight

Behind the brash, insouciant, self-promoting persona of G.B.S. that took on the Bard, there is an irony present in Shaw’s dialectical appropriations and revisions of Shakespeare. In *Shakes versus Shav*, the play which Shaw intended as his “last play” (CP3: 532) and hence something of a self-conscious culmination of a lifetime spent as a man of the theater written in the face of an imminent death, Shaw gives the audience a theatrical vision of his relationship with Shakespeare as he sees it, figuring himself pugilistically as a combatant fighting a mock-heroic agon with Shakespeare, each one

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.* p. 88.

literally knocking down the other, declaring himself to have written the greater play: “Where is thy Hamlet? Couldst thou write King Lear?” Shakes demands. Shaw replies, “Aye, with daughters all complete. Could thou have written Heartbreak House? Behold my Lear” (*BH7*:475).¹⁰⁹ To a large extent, we have to characterize the spirit of agon in the play as broad comedy—after all, the two figures on stage aren’t actual human beings representing actual human beings (the two playwrights) performing before other actual human beings (the audience)—rather, they are puppets whose “unvarying intensity” (*CP3*: 532) and literally stiff, unchanging earnestness undermine and subvert any sense of danger and serious threat these two characters pose to one another. The bathos and comic irony of the play, however, do not carry the implication that nothing is at stake for Shaw in *Shakes versus Shaw*. Shaw might lampoon the Bard (and himself), but there is a profound appreciation and respect for the writer and the man, whom he declares in the preface to the play to have been “not an illiterate clown [who, by the way, by implication could not have written the plays] but a well-read grammar-schooled son in a family of good middle-class standing, cultured enough to be habitual playgoers and private entertainers of the players” (*CP3*: 533). He debunks the notion, still on occasion reiterated today, that Shakespeare was not Shakespeare and could not possibly have written *Hamlet* and *King Lear*.¹¹⁰ Shaw concludes his preface, “So much for Bacon-Shakespear and all the other fables founded on that entirely fictitious figure Shaxper or

¹⁰⁹ It is worth noting that Shaw had been an amateur boxer in his youth and was a fan of the sport his entire life. His fourth novel, *Cashel Byron’s Profession* (1882), features a boxer as its protagonist. It is also the only one of Shaw’s novels he adapted for the stage, *The Admirable Bashville* (1901), itself remarkable as the only play by Shaw written in verse—a verse intended to parody that of Shakespeare.

¹¹⁰ I myself have had this conversation with friends and acquaintances more often than I wish to recall.

Shasper the illiterate bumpkin. Enough too for my feeling that the real Shakespear might have been myself, and for the shallow mistaking of it for mere professional jealousy” (*CP3*: 533). This personal turn at the end does not so much mirrors desire for truce at the end of the play, plaintively expressed, “Peace, jealous Bard: We both are mortal. For a moment suffer my glimmering light to shine” as Shakes puffs out the candle illuminating them both: “Out, out, brief candle!” (*BHCP* 7:477).

Shaw spent his career creating a New Drama that move hand-in-hand into the future with a new society so that, ethically, politically, and spiritually, people might live a life more abundant,¹¹¹ and he did so through a dialectical engagement and evasion of Shakespeare. For a modernist so invested in the utopian possibilities of life, the ultimate irony is the dialectic’s arrival of synthesis in the universalism of death.

¹¹¹ “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10, NRSV). Shaw paraphrases this verse repeatedly in his prefaces, usually in the formulation above.

3. Chapter Two: T. S. Eliot: The High Modernist as Early Modernist and Medieval Modernist

In response to World War I, the 1920s was the decade that saw Shaw's anti-Bardolatry take a new form in a turn to the medieval in *Saint Joan*; it was also, perhaps not coincidentally, the decade in which he reached the apex of his dramatic career, both as an acclaimed literary celebrity and as a visionary artist. Two years after the premiere of *Saint Joan*, Shaw received the Nobel Prize "for his work which is marked by both idealism and humanity, its stimulating satire often being infused with a singular poetic beauty"¹—an ironic citation, given the anti-idealist aesthetics announced at the outset of his career in *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*.² As for the dramatic output following *Saint Joan*, revivals of the "Plays Political" (*The Apple Cart*, *On the Rocks*, and *Geneva*) and "Plays Extravagant" (*Too True to Be Good*, *The Simpleton of the Unexpected Isles*, and *The Millionairess*) are exceedingly rare, and not a single scholarly monograph has ever been written, to borrow a coinage from Adorno, on Shaw's "late style"³—an unfortunate fact as these plays, offering insight into Shaw's reactions to the geopolitical developments of the interwar years (e.g., the rise of Stalin's Soviet state, the increasing anxiety towards the fascist regimes in Italy, Germany, and Spain, and the growing

¹ http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1925/index.html

² Toril Moi discusses the idealist politics of the Nobel Prize; cf. *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism: Art, Theater, Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006. pp. 96-100.

³ On the idea of "late style," cf. Theodor W. Adorno, "Late Style in Beethoven." *Essays on Music*. Ed. Richard Leppert. Trans. Susan H. Gillespie. Berkeley: U of California P, 2002. pp. 564-568; and *Beethoven: The Philosophy of Music*. Ed. Rolf Tiedemann. Trans. Edmund Jephcott. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1998. pp. 123-161.

awareness of political contexts beyond those of Europe, particularly in the colonial territories of the British Empire), are absolutely fascinating and seem to me to be begging for serious critical attention. For Margery M. Morgan, the decline in Shaw's critical esteem in the late plays following *Saint Joan* and those plays' politics are co-extensive: "Shaw's later reputation has suffered, with that of numerous other artists of the day, on account of his willingness to concede virtues to fascism."⁴ More important than the politics of Shaw's late plays, however, is the shift in theatrical taste and the economy of cultural prestige in Britain during the 1920s, best signaled by the sudden rise to stardom of the young Noël Coward with the premiere 25 November 1924 of his domestic melodrama *The Vortex* at the Everyman Theatre, Hampstead, a play which Coward wrote, directed, and starred in as the drug-addicted socialite, Nicky Lancaster. Just as Shaw had come to define British theater to British culture at large for around thirty years, from the mid-1890s to the mid-1920s, Coward would define British theatrical taste for around thirty years, from the mid-1920s to the mid-1950s (with subsidiary figures such as Somerset Maugham, then Terence Rattigan achieving a subsidiary level of success, as well), before suddenly being displaced himself by another young man who would write and star in what was also essentially a domestic melodrama, John Osborne, whose *Look Back in Anger* immediately opened new possibilities for a "kitchen-sink realism" in postwar British drama upon its premiere 8 May 1956 at the Royal Court Theatre, Sloane Square—the very same theater in which Shaw's three great Edwardian masterpieces,

⁴ Margery M. Morgan. *The Shawian Playground: An Exploration of the Art of George Bernard Shaw*. London: Methuen, 1972. p. 273.

John Bull's Other Island (prem. 1904), *Major Barbara* (prem. 1905), and *Man and Superman* (prem. 1905), were first mounted five decades earlier— before it, too, is displaced, this time much more quickly, by the post-Beckettian comedy of Tom Stoppard, the post-Beckettian theater of menace of Harold Pinter, and the Second Wave of British political drama, notably Caryl Churchill and David Hare.⁵

It is, then, a historical irony that, in the decade in which Shaw saw his last great successes and the beginning of his artistic and critical decline, T. S. Eliot would see Shaw as the metric by which his own generation would be measured. In the autumn of 1921, Eliot writes, “Hardy is Victorian. Shaw is Edwardian. Shaw is therefore more interesting to us, for by reflecting on his mind, we may form some plausible conjecture about the mind of the next age—about what, in retrospect, the ‘present’ generation will be found to have been.”⁶ It is Eliot himself who we understand today to be the measure of British

⁵ The narrative I recount is very much the conventional narrative of modern British drama. For a rich, alternative account of mid-twentieth-century British drama and theater history, cf. Dan Reballato, *1956 and All That: The Making of Modern British Drama*. London: Routledge, 1999. In his history of postwar British drama, Michael Billington asserts “if any one event marked a genuine cultural turning point, it was not the first night of *Look Back in Anger* in May 1956: it was the first shambolic opening performance of a late-night revue at the Lyceum Theatre, Edinburgh on 22 August 1960. It was called, significantly, *Beyond the Fringe*.” *State of the Nation: British Theatre since 1945*. London: Faber and Faber, 2007. p. 127. For a dramatist and performer who enjoyed such a long and distinguished career, Noël Coward is remarkably absent from any narrative of British modernism I have encountered. Perhaps the word “invisible” is more apropos, as “queer modernism,” like theatrical modernism, only ever elicits the scantest of critical consideration within the field of Modernist Studies, receiving no entry in *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism* and only a nine-page entry in the more recent *A Companion to Modernist Literature and Culture*—and only then under the marginalizing heading “Other Modernisms.” Cf. Michael Levenson, Ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1999; and Laura Doan and Jane Garrity. “Modernism Queered.” *A Companion to Modernist Literature and Culture*. Eds. David Bradshaw and Kevin J. H. Dettmar. Oxford: Blackwell, 2006. pp. 542-550.

⁶ “London Letter.” *The Dial* 21.4 (October 1921): 453. Quoted in Maria DiBattista, “Introduction.” *High and Low Moderns: Literature and Culture, 1889-1939*. Eds. Maria DiBattista and Lucy McDiarmid. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996. p. 3.

modernism, to have “discovered” British modernism, as Louis Menand puts it.⁷ It is his 1922 classic, *The Waste Land*, published only a few months after Eliot wrote those words about Shaw, not *Saint Joan*, which stands as the great modernist monument of the British 1920s, if not of the entire “age.” That a poetic text stands as the central canonical text of British modernism rather than a drama is symptomatic of the conservative, masculinist, heteronormative cultural ideology at the heart of the high modernism Eliot came to embody, the sexual ideology that relegates feminine modes and forms—idealism, melodrama, romance, and theater—to the footnotes of literary and cultural history.⁸

Yet, a strong theatrical streak ran through Eliot’s personality. Peter Ackroyd writes, “it is possible that his detachment, of which so many contemporaries spoke, is simply the effect of Eliot looking at himself from the outside, arranging himself with his slow and infrequent gestures as an actor might.”⁹ Eliot gave the impression of being an actor throughout his life. As a student at Harvard, Conrad Aiken notes of the young Eliot that he had “a streak of buffoonery in his temperament, just as he sometimes displayed

⁷ Cf. Louis Menand, *Discovering Modernism: T. S. Eliot and His Context*. 2nd Ed. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007.

⁸ For the sake of argument, I am eliding the question of the novel and especially the extraordinary role of that other 1922 classic of the modernist canon, James Joyce’s *Ulysses*. My rationale is simple: no single novel by Conrad, Forster, Lawrence, Woolf, or anyone else in the British canon can lay claim to the same impact that *The Waste Land* had; and since I am dealing specifically with *British* modernism, the importance of *Ulysses*, an unequivocally *Irish* cultural production (albeit an Irish cultural production produced in exile (“*Trietse—Zürich—Paris*, 1914-1921,” as Joyce writes on the last page of the book), does not obtain here. James Joyce. *Ulysses*. 1922. New York: Modern Library, 1992. p. 783. This is not to say, however, that there is no relation between *Ulysses* and theatrical modernism. The “Circe” episode, in effect, is a modernist closet drama; cf. Martin Puchner, *Stage Fright: Modernism, Anti-Theatricality, and Drama*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2002. pp. 81-100. For an important work of scholarship that seeks to find the enormous range of literary and cultural sociologies into which both *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land* were, metaphorically, born, cf. Michael North, *Reading 1922: A Return to the Scene of the Modern*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999.

⁹ Peter Ackroyd. *T. S. Eliot: A Life*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984 p. 104.

the characteristics of both a clown and an actor.”¹⁰ As a young man in London in the early 1920s, Eliot had taken to wearing makeup on his face, “pale but distinctly green, the colour of lily-of-the-valley.”¹¹ Edmund Wilson heard Eliot well advanced into middle age give a reading in New York in 1933 and wrote of him to John Dos Passos that Eliot “is an actor and really put on a better show than Shaw. [...] He gives you the creeps a little at first because he is such a completely artificial, or, rather, self-invented character [...] but he has done such a perfect job with himself that you end up by admiring him.”¹²

When Wilson writes of Eliot that he is a “self-invented” man, the subtext is Eliot’s nationalist self-fashioning as a writer with a specifically *English* identity, not an American one, a self-fashioning that is as much a kind of performance as gender.¹³ The field of Postcolonial Studies recognizes this type of over-the-top nationalist self-fashioning as symptomatic of the “privileging norm” of imperial power. Eliot’s desire for Englishness is homologous with the normative ideological power of English imperialism and its attendant cultural articulations, i.e., the English canon, even English Literary Studies itself:

Literature was made as central to the cultural enterprise of Empire as the monarchy was to its political formation. So when elements of the periphery and margin threatened the exclusive claims of the centre they were rapidly incorporated. This was a process, in Edward Said’s terms, of conscious affiliation proceeding under the guise of filiation, that is, a mimicry of the centre proceeding from a desire not only to

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

¹¹ *Ibid.* p. 136.

¹² *Ibid.* p. 199.

¹³ Cf. Judith Butler. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. London: Routledge, 1990. Esp. pp. 1-46.

be accepted but to be adopted and absorbed. It caused those from the periphery to immerse themselves in the imported culture, denying their origins in an attempt to become “more English than the English.” We see examples of this in such writers as Henry James and T. S. Eliot.¹⁴

Contra Wilson, Eliot’s performance of English identity was not without fault, and he knew it, frequently signing letters with the Greek word *metoikos*, meaning “resident alien.”¹⁵

Nonetheless, Eliot constantly strove to realize himself culturally and politically as English, and his own self-theatricality was his favorite means. Eliot famously writes of himself in the preface to his 1929 essay collection *For Lancelot Andrewes* that his “general point of view may be described as classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and anglo-catholic in religion.”¹⁶ Although the decidedly conservative identity Eliot ascribes to himself is important, far less important than the content of this assertion is the form of this assertion, its self-conscious audaciousness. British national identity and the theatricalization of self went hand in hand with Eliot. In 1927, the year he took British citizenship and converted to the Church of England, Eliot’s “dress and demeanor were

¹⁴ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Postcolonial Literatures*. 2nd Ed. London: Routledge, 2002. pp. 3-4. On Said and filiation/affiliation, cf. *The World, the Critic, and the Text*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1983. esp. pp. 16-24 on Eliot, the turn from John Donne to Lancelot Andrewes, and humanistic education. For the classic statement on the concept of “mimicry,” cf. Homi K. Bhabha, “Of mimicry and man: The ambivalence of colonial discourse.” *The Location of Culture*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge, 2004. pp. 121-131. On Said and filiation/affiliation, cf. *The World, the Critic, and the Text*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1983. esp. pp. 16-24 on Eliot, the turn from John Donne to Lancelot Andrewes, and humanistic education. For the classic statement on the concept of “mimicry,” cf. Homi K. Bhabha, “Of mimicry and man: The ambivalence of colonial discourse.” *The Location of Culture*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge, 2004. pp. 121-131.

¹⁵ Ackroyd, p. 88.

¹⁶ T. S. Eliot. *For Lancelot Andrewes: Essays on Style and Order*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran, and Co. 1929. p. vii.

indeed now of the English type, and on occasions he went to theatrical lengths in order to proclaim himself one,” Ackroyd tells us, saluting sentries outside Marlborough House and wearing a white flower on the anniversary of the Battle of Bosworth in support of the Yorkist cause, Richard III being for Eliot the last true English king.¹⁷

“His interest in drama was not, at any rate, purely theoretical. He went to the theatre often and regularly,” Ackroyd writes.¹⁸ Little wonder, then, that Eliot himself would turn to playwriting in the decade following *The Waste Land* and Shaw’s *Saint Joan*, writing a hagiographical tragedy of his own, *Murder in the Cathedral*, that would stand as the defining achievement of modernist British verse drama.¹⁹ The 1933 Canterbury Festival featured a revival of Tennyson’s dismal Victorian verse drama *Becket*, a play which one eminent Tennysonian laments as a failure, a play into which “a great deal of industry, concern, and skill went [...] but to little avail.”²⁰ When offered the chance the following year to create his own theatrical version of the life and death of St. Thomas à Becket, there can be little wonder that Eliot seized the chance—it afforded him the opportunity to realize in the most communitarian medium possible his religious and nationalist convictions and his religious and nationalist sense of self. In a consideration of the various Tombs of the Unknown that were built in Britain and elsewhere following

¹⁷ Ackroyd, pp. 165-166.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* p. 105.

¹⁹ As one might suspect, there have been many critics who have written on *Saint Joan* and *Murder in the Cathedral* together (not to mention other martyr plays including Brecht’s *Saint Joan of the Stockyards*, Anouilh’s *L’Alouette*, and Bolt’s *A Man for All Seasons*). For the best, cf. Louis J. Martz, “The Saint as Tragic Hero: *Saint Joan* and *Murder in the Cathedral*. *Tragic Themes in Western Literature*. Ed. Cleanth Brooks. New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1955. pp. 150-178; and Charles A. Berst, “As Kingfishers Catch Fire: The Saints and Poetics of Shaw and T. S. Eliot.” *SHAW: The Annual of Bernard Shaw Studies*. 14 (1999): 105-125.

²⁰ Christopher Ricks. *Tennyson*. 2nd Ed. London: Macmillan, 1989. p. 276.

the Great War,²¹ Benedict Anderson writes that there is “a sense of the absurd” to the idea of a “Tomb for the Unknown Marxist, or a cenotaph for fallen Liberals”: “The reason is that neither Marxism nor Liberalism are much concerned with death and immortality. If the nationalist imagining is so concerned, this suggests a strong affinity with religious imaginings.”²² In *Murder in the Cathedral*, death and immortality are of the essence, and we see that, for Eliot, God, England, politics, and identity are all one.

Given the extent of Eliot’s writings on Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, it is ironic that, when he turned to writing his first major full-length play, Eliot did not look to his Renaissance predecessors for a model, certainly not turn to Shakespeare, icon of Englishness *par excellence*. Eliot peppered his poetry with allusions to Renaissance English drama, most famously *The Waste Land* with its “Notes” detailing the poem’s allusions to plays such as Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Coriolanus*, and *The Tempest*, Webster’s *The White Devil*, and Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy*. Yet, in Eliot’s own mind, there was a real distinction to be made between Shakespeare and his Elizabethan and Jacobean contemporaries. Looking back at his career late in his life in the 1961 essay “To Criticize the Critic,” Eliot writes,

At the period in which the stirrings of desire to write verse were becoming insistent, these were the men whom I took as my tutors. Just as the modern poet who influenced me was not Baudelaire but Jules Laforgue, so the dramatic poets were Marlowe and Webster and Tourneur and Middleton and Ford, not Shakespeare. A poet of the supreme greatness of Shakes-

²¹ Cf. Allen J. Frantzen, *Bloody Good: Chivalry, Sacrifice, and the Great War*. Chicago: Chicago UP, 2004. pp. 197-234.

²² *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Rev. ed. London: Verso, 2006. p. 10.

peare can hardly influence, he can only be imitated: and the difference between influence and imitation is that influence can fecundate, whereas imitation—especially unconscious imitation—can only sterilize.²³

Eliot understood Shakespeare to be a poetic threat. He was a political one, as well, an exemplar not only of English drama but of English identity in comparison to whom Eliot would always pale. There's a breathlessness to Eliot's enthusiastic citation of "Marlowe and Webster and Tourneur and Middleton and Ford," but he does not place them in the same pantheon with Shakespeare. They do not possess his "supreme greatness," Eliot tells us. Eliot's valorization of the Elizabethan and Jacobean playwrights, despite their lesser "greatness," is an evasion of Shakespeare. Eliot's repeated turns to Shakespeare's contemporaries are a means by which Eliot can distance himself from Shakespeare, for such a distancing allows Eliot to preserve not only a sense of his own poetic authority but also, just as important, his sense of national identity. After all, to be a bad English poet or playwright is to be a bad Englishman, one exposed to the world as only an "imitation" Englishman, not a real Englishman, an Englishman whose theatrical performance as "more English than the English" is lost on his desired audience, the English themselves.

That said, Eliot's essays on both Shakespeare and his Elizabethan and Jacobean contemporaries are extremely important for me in this chapter. In reading them, I discuss elements of Eliot's positions towards the rhetoric of poetry, temporality, history, and periodization, important categories that are foundational for my reading of *Murder in the Cathedral* at the end of the chapter. Ultimately, though, Eliot's writings on the Middle

²³ T. S. Eliot. *To Criticize the Critic and Other Writings*. 1965. Lincoln, NE: Nebraska UP, 1991. p. 18.

Ages and medieval drama in particular are of central importance to me. In contemporary academic parlance, we could say that Eliot's *Elizabethan Essays* established him as an "early modernist," a legitimate scholar of and specialist in early modern English literature and culture. However, Eliot's status as a "medieval modernist" is more important. Eliot is a high modernist far more intellectually, aesthetically, spiritually, and politically invested in his sense of the Middle Ages than in the Renaissance. In part, Eliot's discussion of medieval drama relates powerfully to his writings on verse drama and ritual itself, categories I discuss in this chapter since Eliot is a playwright for whom grounding the authenticity of religious drama in the liturgy itself is a prerequisite for theatrical success in *Murder*. More important, for Eliot, Shakespeare's Renaissance was a period of chaos and instability, a period analogous to Eliot's own modernity. It was a period that ended with a "dissociation of sensibility," a kind of fragmentation of the self, something that Eliot, as both Englishman and *metoikos*, would have known all too well. The medieval period, on the other hand, was a time of unity and order, a period in which all aspects of everyday life, both inner and outer worlds within the human subject, were in harmony. Very different from Shaw's own medievalism, Eliot's is a conservative Middle Ages, one that stands in stark contrast to the chaos of Shakespeare's Renaissance and the liberal modernity he denounced. Put differently, Shaw's Middle Ages are defined by the principles of Fabian political economy, Eliot's by conservative political theology. Eliot's conceptualizations of history, of course, are extremely problematic and shot through with contradictions, as I will demonstrate in this chapter, but they are at the heart of what he is doing in the *Elizabethan Essays*, in his writings on ritual and medieval

drama, and in *Murder in the Cathedral*. Ultimately, *Murder* is an allegory of the ideological conflict between Shakespeare's Renaissance and Eliot's own modernity on the one hand, and an idyllic Christian Middle Ages on the other, between chaos and order.

Put differently, Eliot's conceptualizations of period and periodization demonstrate a profound concern with the conflict between contingency and transcendence. *Murder* asks difficult questions concerning the relationship between ethics (right and wrong) and temporality (history and eternity). My reading of the play frames that relationship in terms of ends and means, on the one hand, and endings and beginnings, on the other. Allegorically, the medievalism of *Murder* articulates a desire for an anagogical nonconsequentialism—an order, granted to us by divine grace, that transcends the contingencies of both morality and time, an order that offers release from the existential challenge of uncertainty in the face of moral skepticism and death. In effect, my reading of the play serves as a gloss on the most famous rhyming couplet of the play: “The last temptation is the greatest treason: / To do the right thing for the wrong reason.” My central argument, then, is this: the constant attention to Shakespeare's Elizabethan and Jacobean contemporaries and, moreover, his medieval predecessors is symptomatic of Eliot's evasion of Shakespeare; and, within the tradition of British theatrical modernism in which Eliot played such a vital role, the ethical, theological, metaphysical and

ideological complexities of *Murder in the Cathedral* are animated by the medievalism that is symptomatic of that evasion and are that evasion's most enduring legacy.²⁴

3.1 On the Poet-Critic

In addition to his poetry, over the course of the fifteen years 1919-1934 T. S. Eliot wrote a substantial body of literary criticism that was to be influential for decades. Although later in life he felt "bewildered" by his status as "one of the ancestors of modern criticism," Eliot's major essays from this period are important for understanding the development of New Criticism and the concomitant academic institutionalization of

²⁴ I must note that I am omitting from consideration the early experiments in dramatic form: *Sweeney Agonistes*, *Coriolan*, and *The Rock*. The status of the first two attempts at a verse drama as fragments presents obstacles to consideration that define the principle of "diminishing returns." Consequently (and moreover) they have had such a limited life in the theater (especially *Coriolan*, about which I have read nothing concerning any sort of staged production) that they are disqualified from a consideration of Eliot's theatrical career. Some thoughtful discussions of *Sweeney Agonistes* can be found in: David E. Jones, *The Plays of T. S. Eliot*. Toronto: Toronto UP, 1960. pp. 24-38; Carol H. Smith, *T. S. Eliot's Dramatic Theory and Practice*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1963. pp. 32-75; Christopher Innes, *Modern British Drama: The Twentieth Century*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2002. pp. 461-477; and Michael Sidnell, *Dances of Death: The Group Theatre of London in the Thirties*. London: Faber and Faber, 1984. pp. 91-107. Both Innes and Sidnell discuss the Group Theatre's 1934 production of the fragment. Concerning *The Rock*, Eliot held an ambivalent position regarding his own contribution to the creation of that pageant. He writes in his preface to the 1934 published script of the play, "I cannot consider myself the author of the 'play,' but only of the words which are printed here." (This, by the way, points to the fact that, in all later collections of his poems and plays from 1935 on, Eliot only included "The Choruses" from *The Rock*, not the full extant script.) "Of only one scene am I literally the author: for this scene and of course for the sentiments expressed in the choruses I must assume the responsibility." He assigns authorial credit to his life-long director, E. Martin Browne, the Rev. R. Webb-Odell, the Rev. Vincent Howson, and Mr. F. V. Morely, writing of the latter "I am indebted for one speech for which technical knowledge of bricklaying was required." *The Rock*. London: Faber and Faber, 1934. p. 5. Clearly, *The Rock* was such an especially collaborative venture for Eliot that to conceptualize the play as *his* play, to situate it in terms of *his* critical and dramatic development points to the fallacy which assumes that plays are the products of a lone, individual authorial consciousness to an extent that cannot be ignored.

English literary studies.²⁵ It should be conceded that, so far as we know, it was never Eliot's intention to revolutionize criticism. Rather, Eliot's criticism, as he himself wrote repeatedly, must be understood in relation to his larger vocational calling as a poet and, later, as a verse dramatist. As he puts it in his 1961 essay "To Criticize the Critic," there are four kinds of critics: the "Professional Critic" of journalism, the "Critic with Gusto" embodying the spirit of enthusiasm and advocacy, the "Academic"/"Theoretical," and, lastly, "the critic whose criticism may be said to be a by-product of his creative activity. Particularly, the critic who is also a poet."²⁶ It is into this last group that Eliot places himself. What is significant about this last category is not that "his criticism should be distinguished for its own sake, and not merely for any light it may throw upon its author's verse";²⁷ rather, it is that both criticism and poetic production are products of a specific, singular "creative activity," even if one is necessarily a "by product" of the other. One of Eliot's far more politically-minded contemporaries puts it thus: "The reason why the comments of great artists on their own works and the works of others are so instructive is precisely because such comments are always based on the inevitable and productive single-mindedness. But we can really benefit by such criticisms only if we do not regard them as abstract canons but uncover the specific point of view from which they spring."²⁸ Eliot attaches special importance to the writings of the poet-critic. His writings on early

²⁵ "The Frontiers of Criticism." 1956. *On Poetry and Poets*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Cudahy, 1957. p. 117. *On Poetry and Poets* hereafter is abbreviated as *PP* and page numbers are parenthetically cited.

²⁶ *To Criticize the Critic*, pp. 11-13.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

²⁸ Georg Lukács. "Balzac and Stendhal." *Studies in European Realism*. Trans. Edith Bone. New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1964. p. 65.

English drama and the relationship between verse on the page and verse on the stage lay the groundwork for an understanding of his trajectory from poet to playwright. Further, his poetry and criticism together provide insight into his moral-spiritual imaginative project, one invested in the conflict between contingency and transcendence.

As early as his 1920 essay “The Perfect Critic,” Eliot, focusing on Coleridge and Matthew Arnold, discusses the relationship between one’s practicing of poetry and one’s criticism of poetry, asserting that “it is to be expected that the critic and the creative artist should frequently be the same person.”²⁹ In his 1923 essay “The Function of Criticism,” Eliot explores the relationship between artistic creation and critical labor, writing, “Probably, indeed, the larger part of the labour of an author in composing his work is critical labour; the labour of sifting, combining, constructing, expunging, correcting, testing: this frightful toil is as much critical and creative.”³⁰ Eliot is quick to dispel the possibility that the critic’s work is as creative as the poet’s;³¹ he also mitigates his earlier valorization of the poet-critic in “The Perfect Critic” (one is tempted to write *as* “The Perfect Critic”), stepping off his soap-box to take a more modest position:

But no writer is completely self-sufficient, and many creative writers have a critical activity which is not all discharged into their work. Some seem to require to keep exercising them miscellaneously; others, on com-

²⁹ *The Sacred Wood and Major Early Essays*. Mineola, NY: Dover, 1998. p. 9.

³⁰ *Selected Essays*. 3rd Ed. London: Faber and Faber, 1951. p. 30. Hereafter *Selected Essays* is abbreviated *SE*, and page numbers are parenthetically cited.

³¹ “If so large a part of creation is really criticism, is not a large part of what is called ‘critical writing’ really creative? If so, is there not creative criticism in the ordinary sense? The answer seems to be, that there is no equation. I have assumed as axiomatic that a creation, a work of art, is autotelic; and that criticism, by definition, is *about* something other than itself. Hence you cannot fuse creation with criticism as you can fuse criticism with creation. The critical activity finds its highest, its true fulfilment in a kind of union with creation in the labour of the artist” (*SE*, pp. 30-31).

pleting a work, need to continue the critical activity by commenting on it. There is no general rule. And as men can learn from each other, so some of these treatises have been useful to other writers. And some of them have been useful to those who were not writers. (*SE*, 31)

For Eliot, although one activity takes valuative priority over the other, the most important criticism is like his own: the work of a poetic practitioner. For Eliot, the practitioner's criticism is not important because of its potential "technical" import pertaining to the work of other practitioners.³² Rather, the importance of the practitioner's criticism, Eliot states in his 1942 lecture "The Music of Poetry," lies in its valuative status as either apologia or manifesto: "But I believe that the critical writings of poets, of which in the past there have been some very distinguished examples, owe a great deal of their interest to the fact that the poet, at the back of his mind, if not as his ostensible purpose, is always trying to defend the kind of poetry he is writing, or to formulate the kind that he wants to write" (*PP* 17). A bidirectional temporal logic with respect to the past and the future characterizes the present relation of poetry and criticism. One reads (note tense) the criticism as either 1) a defense of the poetry already written, as apologia, or 2) as an expression of aesthetic desire for a poetry yet to be achieved, as manifesto. In either case, the criticism says something germane to the poet's creative project. Indeed, the practitioner's criticism requires the contextualization of the practitioner's actual poetic work. As Eliot puts it, "What he writes about poetry, in short,

³² "And again, the purely "technical" critic—the critic, that is, who writes to expound some novelty or impart some lesson to practitioners of an art—can be called a critic only in a narrow sense. He may be analyzing perceptions and the means for arousing perceptions, but his aim is limited and is not the disinterested exercise of intelligence." "The Perfect Critic," p. 7.

must be assessed in relation to the poetry he writes” (PP 18). Eliot himself acknowledges that his own criticism obtains under this rule:

It is a by-product of my private poetry-workshop; or a prolongation of the thinking that went into the formation of my own verse. In retrospect I see that I wrote best about poets whose work had influenced my own, and with whose poetry I had become thoroughly familiar, long before I desired to write about them, or had found the occasion to do so. My criticism has this in common with that of Ezra Pound, that its merits and its limitations can be fully appreciated only when it is considered in relation to the poetry I have written myself. (PP 117)

Eliot’s valorization of the practitioner’s criticism entails the stated conviction that the criticism must be understood in terms of the poetry.

3.2 Marlowe, Rostand, and Rhetoric

Eliot would concentrate almost exclusively on the work of dramatic poetry from 1935 to the end of his creative life. Little wonder, then, that he would have served his intellectual apprenticeship as playwright by writing the dozen essays that comprise his *Elizabethan Essays* (1934).³³ By putting theory into practice, the essays on Renaissance playwrights constitute an extension of his critical-theoretical work—four of them (essays

³³ The 1934 volume differs from its later incarnations *Essays on Elizabethan Drama* (Harcourt Brace, 1956) and *Elizabethan Dramatists* (Faber and Faber, 1963) in that Eliot omitted his two Shakespeare essays, “Hamlet and His Problems” (1919) and “Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca” (1927), as well as the essay “Four Elizabethan Dramatists” (1924), opting instead to include “Seneca in Elizabethan Translation,” written as the introduction to the collection *Seneca His Tenne Tragedies*, a two-volume collection of the sixteenth-century translations of Thomas Newton, Jasper Heywood, John Studley, and Alexander Neville. Except as noted, all citations to Eliot’s essays on English Renaissance drama, then, are from his *Selected Essays*, 3rd Ed. (Faber and Faber, 1951), which includes all twelve essays.

on Hamlet, Marlowe, Jonson, and Massinger) were published alongside “The Perfect Critic” and “Tradition and the Individual Talent” in *The Sacred Wood* (1919).³⁴ They also provide a sense of Eliot’s understanding of the English Renaissance, the age of Shakespeare, and the historical conditions in existence at the time of English-language poetic drama’s last great flourishing.

The essays all share an investment in the poetic quality of each of the individual playwrights, what Eliot calls “personality.” That his essay on Marlowe, published in *Selected Essays* (1932, first edition) and *Elizabethan Essays* with the title “Christopher Marlowe,” first appeared as “Some Notes on the Blank Verse of Christopher Marlowe” says much about Eliot’s interest in versification, both its quality as it pertains to the personality and enduring achievement of each individual playwright and its development throughout the period.³⁵ Eliot’s piece on Marlowe is explicit with regards to its interest in both. Examining speeches from *Tamburlaine*, *The Jew of Malta*, and *Dido, Queen of Carthage*, much of the piece is a reading of Marlowe’s verse style, his “rhetoric.” In a short piece contemporaneous with his essay on Marlowe, “‘Rhetoric’ and Poetic Drama,” Eliot constructs a defense of the term “rhetoric,” a word similar to “melodrama,” Peter

³⁴ Writing of the “supremely self-confident voice” of Eliot in *The Sacred Wood*, Frank Lentricchia quips, “Here is the man, the voice implies, who knows literary history since Homer with the detail and ease of an elder statesman of letters (in fact, the essays of *The Sacred Wood* were written by a young man between his twenty-eighth and thirty-second years, not that well schooled in literary history, who had worked up his knowledge for the occasion). And the composure never cracks.” For Eliot, the practice of criticism is also a self-theatrical act. *Modernist Quartet*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1994. pp. 253-254.

³⁵ *Arts & Letters* 2.4 (Autumn 1919) 194-199. When the piece appeared in *The Sacred Wood*, Eliot shortened its name to “Notes on the Blank Verse of Christopher Marlowe.”

Brooks might remind us, in its pejorative force or connotation.³⁶ “‘Rhetoric’ and Poetic Drama” serves as a generative intellectual foil for a discussion of the Marlowe essay. To understand what Eliot means by “rhetoric” is to understand what he means by “personality”—insofar as both are concerned with feeling and vitality, they are equivalent terms.

Discussing Rostand’s verse romance of a play *Cyrano de Bergerac*, Eliot defends the late nineteenth-century masterpiece against the charge of being rhetorical, contrasting Rostand’s rhetoric with Baudelaire’s, making the assessment that Rostand’s rhetoric was “so much better” than Baudelaire’s, even though Baudelaire was the superior poet. For Eliot, the term “rhetoric” loses its pejorative thrust: “the word is merely a vague term of abuse for any style that is bad, that is so evidently bad or second rate that we do not recognize the necessity for greater precision in the phrases we apply to it” (*SE* 37). He declares, “The word simply cannot be used as synonymous with bad writing,” recognizing the potentiality “rhetoric” has to “represent a virtue” (*SE* 38). Rostand’s *Cyrano*, like Marlowe’s major characters, possesses a vitality, a “gusto,” a self-theatricalizing “dramatic sense” that Eliot found desirable. Rhetoric, in its best, most positive sense, is the product of a character’s self-consciousness taking a specifically theatrical form. “The really fine rhetoric of Shakespeare occurs in situations where a

³⁶ Brooks catalogues the many “connotations of the word” that “melodrama” carries: “indulgence of strong emotionalism; moral polarization and schematization; extreme states of being, situations, actions; overt villainy, persecution of the good, and final reward of virtue; inflated and extravagant expression; dark plottings, suspense, breathtaking peripety.” Just as Brooks’ book is interested (and succeeds) in rehabilitating its eponymous dramatic-literary category, so does Eliot’s essay with regards to the category of rhetoric. *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess*. 1976. New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1995. pp. 11-12.

character in the play *sees himself* in a dramatic light,” according to Eliot (*SE* 39). Cyrano is the self-theatricalizing romantic consciousness *par excellence*. His speeches, his insults, his arias in praise of his own nose, his very being is a performance, whether he exists to us conceptually only as a character within a fiction or, within the fiction in which he resides, as a real flesh-and-blood subjectivity. Eliot writes,

A very small part of acting is that which takes place on the stage! Rostand had—whether he had anything else or not—this dramatic sense, and it is what gives life to Cyrano. It is a sense which is almost a sense of humour (for when anyone is conscious of himself as acting, something like a sense of humour is present.). It gives Rostand’s characters—Cyrano at least—a gusto which is uncommon on the modern stage. (*SE* 41)

It is his penchant for role-playing, for becoming his own playwright, scripting the words he and others speak, that allow the play in which he (and not just the actor playing him) stars to satisfy “the requirements of poetic drama” (*SE* 41). Though Eliot was very much a reactionary against Romanticism, he at least recognizes that there is a legitimacy to the feeling and emotion from which Cyrano emerges: the criteria for legitimacy are satisfied by the very existence of Cyrano, as a successful artistic creation, himself.

Feeling and emotion are omnipresent in Eliot’s critical writing. The “materials” of poetry, Eliot tells us in a passage from “Tradition and the Individual Talent” famous for its alchemical conceit, are “emotions and feelings” which react to the “catalyst” of the poet’s mind, figured as a “shred of platinum” (*SE* 18). In “‘Rhetoric’ and Poetic Drama,” Eliot raises the question of “the ‘conversational’ in poetry—the style of ‘direct speech’, opposed to the ‘oratorical’ and the ‘rhetorical’” (*SE* 38). The idea of a conversational

poetic idiom is something that Eliot would take up again and again, especially in his dramatic criticism. The immediate point is that, as an antithesis to rhetoric, the conversational style is, also, not unproblematic: “if rhetoric is any convention of writing inappropriately applied, this conversational style can and does become a rhetoric—or what is supposed to be a conversational style, for it is often as remote from polite discourse as well could be. Much of the second and third rate in American *vers libre* is of this sort; and much of the second and third rate in English Wordsworthianism” (*SE* 38). The problem of being “inappropriately applied” speaks to one of Eliot’s major critical tenets: in every moment poetry (style, technique, form) is contingent on the feelings, thoughts, and emotions that are the reason for the poetic impulse in the first place. No single kind of poetry is adequate to the task of expressing the full range of human subjective experience; the specific poetic style or form must grow organically out of the materials which shall form the meaningful substance of the individual poem rather than be unilaterally coerced into being by means of a style or form that does not correlate to the specific materials of the poem, that, in other words, does not apply: “There is in fact no conversational or other form which can be applied indiscriminately[.] [...] [I]f we are to express ourselves, our variety of thoughts and feelings, on a variety of subjects with inevitable rightness, we must adapt our manner to the moment with infinite variations” (*SE* 38).

Marlowe and his successors in the Renaissance, including Shakespeare, are important to Eliot because one can locate the points of origin in the period for the development of poetic sensibility and style, categories that are always inextricably bound

for Eliot,³⁷ in English poetry: “Examination of the development of Elizabethan drama shows this progress in adaptation, a development from monotony to variety, a progressive refinement in the perception of the variations of feeling and progressive elaboration of the means of expressing these variations” (*SE* 38). The emphasis on “progress” and the “progressive” here is also important. Eliot’s progressivism with regards to Elizabethan dramatic verse towards Shakespeare is only a microcosmic glimpse of a macroscopic attitude towards history and human development. In his introduction to S. L. Bethell’s *Shakespeare and the Popular Dramatic Tradition* (1944), Eliot writes, “But on the whole, we must assume (as posterity will assume after us) that we are in a better position to understand Shakespeare than any of our predecessors. This is not merely an assumption of the Shakespeare critic, or of the literary critic in general, but the assumption implicit in all historical study: that we understand the past better than the previous generation did, simply because there is more of it. We assume, and must assume, a progressive development of consciousness.”³⁸ The “progressive development of conscious” is not limited to historical epistemology—it is, for Eliot, the defining characteristic of the development of poetry and human subjectivity over time.

The rhetorical style of Marlowe (and Kyd) represents a starting point in a line of poetic development that reaches its terminus in Shakespeare and Webster: “This drama is admitted to have grown away from the rhetorical expression, the bombast speeches, of

³⁷ In his essay on Massinger, Eliot states, “every vital development in language is a development of feeling as well” (*SE* 210). This is a position thoroughly consistent throughout Eliot’s critical career.

³⁸ S. L. Bethell. *Shakespeare and the Popular Dramatic Tradition*. London: P. S. King and Staples, 1944. pp. 7-8.

Kyd and Marlowe to the subtle and dispersed utterance of Shakespeare and Webster” (*SE* 38-39). Eliot sees two interrelated reasons for the “abandonment or outgrowth” of Marlovian rhetoric, both having to do with a kind of progress: “it is partly an improvement in language and it is partly progressive variation in feeling” (*SE* 39). In the Marlowe essay, Eliot discusses individual poetic personality in terms of “particular tones.” Any poet worth preservation “has produced particular tones which his verse and no other’s is capable of rendering” (*SE* 119). Marlowe’s musicality is “cruder” (*SE* 118) than that of his successors Webster and especially Shakespeare. “Shakespeare,” Eliot asserts, “is universal because he has more of these tones than anyone else” (*SE* 119). Nonetheless, Eliot, in another alchemical metaphor, justifies Marlowe’s importance: “The development of blank verse may be likened to the analysis of that astonishing industrial product coal-tar. Marlowe’s verse is one of the earlier derivatives, but it possesses properties which are not repeated in any of the analytic or synthetic blank verses discovered somewhat later” (*SE* 119).

Eliot’s essays on English Renaissance drama can very much be understood as appreciations of the individual playwrights he treats. In that context, his valorization of Marlowe as a starting point on the way up to Shakespeare may seem rather back-handed. Indeed, elsewhere, in the 1927 piece “Seneca in Elizabethan Translation,” Eliot assigns priority of position as starting point to Surrey and Sackville and Norton (and, from a purely historiographical perspective, rightfully so): “In 1557 came the publication of Surrey’s translation of Book II of the *Aeneid*, in the new ‘blank verse’, the instrument without which the Elizabethan drama would have been impossible. The first-fruits,

Gorboduc, are inconsiderable; but this play marks a new epoch; there is no clearer division in the whole of English literature” (SE 99). Marlowe is not even *the* starting point in the progressivist trajectory of blank verse towards Shakespeare that Eliot is concerned with in his discussion of Surrey and *Gorboduc*. Insofar as his is the first not “inconsiderable” blank verse specifically intended for the stage, however, Marlowe’s poetic drama is “indubitably great poetry,” Eliot concludes “Christopher Marlowe” (SE 125); about how many other poets would Eliot write those words?

3.3 Transitional Playwrights: Period and Subjectivity in “Philip Massinger” and “Thomas Middleton”

Towards the beginning of the Marlowe essay, Eliot lays out for us the critical presupposition for this trajectory in the development of sensibility and versification, stating that “blank verse within Shakespeare’s lifetime was more highly developed, that it became the vehicle of more varied and more intense feeling than it has ever since “ (SE 118). As I have said, Marlowe represents a very important point of commencement, one specific to dramatic verse, in the trajectory that was to reach culmination in Shakespeare. This flourishing hits a wall at the end of the seventeenth century and comes to a dead stop, “suffering not only arrest but retrogression”: as Eliot puts it, “the Chinese Wall of Milton” (SE 118). Eliot’s 1921 essay on seventeenth-century English poetry, “The

Metaphysical Poets,”³⁹ offers a suggestive foil for the essays on Renaissance drama I discuss, “Philip Massinger” (1920) and “Thomas Middleton” (1927).

English poetic verse reached an apogee in Shakespeare, and his superiority to every one of his contemporaries (even Webster) was to install him as “a Shakespearian standard,” Eliot tells us in his essay “John Marston,” the last of the essays on Renaissance drama (1934): “whatever is of the same kind of drama as Shakespeare’s, whatever may be measured by Shakespeare, however inferior to Shakespeare’s it may be, is assumed to be better than whatever is of a different kind” (*SE* 233).⁴⁰ For Eliot, Philip Massinger and Thomas Middleton are transitional playwrights. In the literary history he is writing, Massinger and Middleton mark a departure from a line of poetic-dramatic development in the Renaissance that had culminated in Shakespeare and the “Shakespearian standard.” They are signposts on the road to a post-Elizabethan, Restoration poetics and sensibility

³⁹ “The Metaphysical Poets,” along with the 1921 essays “Andrew Marvell” and “John Dryden,” was later collected and published by Leonard and Virginia Woolf’s Hogarth Press in London in 1926 under the title *Homage to John Dryden*. Eliot expresses in his preface the wish that these essays would have been part of a longer project “on the poetry of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: beginning with Chapman and Donne, and ending with Johnson.” Eliot’s anti-romanticism informs his interest in seventeenth-century poetry: “I have long felt that the poetry of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, even much of that of inferior inspiration, possesses an elegance and a dignity absent from their successors” (9). Eliot execrates English language poetry after Milton; it says much about his anti-romanticism, then, that he would find the poetry of the eighteenth century so much better than that of the nineteenth century.

⁴⁰ It is for this reason and, it seems, this reason alone that Eliot can pay compliment to Marston—not that Marston, in his best play, *Sophonisba*, as Eliot would have it, is following Shakespeare and ought to be “measured” by Shakespeare, but rather because *Sophonisba* shares the sensibility of the French neo-classicists, Corneille and Racine, the playwrights who, in the shadow of Molière, revolutionized French theater in the second half of the seventeenth century just as (whether Eliot discerns it or not) Marston, in the shadow of Shakespeare, helped to revolutionize English theater in the first half of the seventeenth century: “The minor poet who hitches his skiff astern of the great galleon has a better chance of survival than the minor poet who chooses to paddle by himself. Marston, in the one play on which he appears to have prided himself, is Senecal rather than Shakespearian. [...] He would no doubt have shocked the French dramatists by his improprieties, and the English classicists [“Greville and Daniel”] as well: nevertheless, he should be with them, rather than with the Shakespearians” (233).

embodied, for better or for worse, in Milton. As such, they raise important questions about Eliot's practice of periodization, both in terms of his fetishization of the Elizabethan Renaissance and in terms of his observations concerning that period's decline, a decline from Shakespeare.

Eliot on Massinger:

Massinger was, in fact, as a comic writer, fortunate in the moment at which he wrote. His comedy is transitional; but it happens to be one of those transitions which contain some merit not anticipated by predecessors or refined upon by later writers. The comedy of Jonson is nearer to caricature; that of Middleton a more photographic delineation of low life. Massinger is nearer to Restoration comedy, and more like his contemporary Shirley, in assuming a certain social level, certain distinctions of class, as a postulate of his comedy. (*SE* 216)

Seven years later, Eliot's position on Middleton's periodicity develops in relation to his reading *The Social Mode of Restoration Comedy* by Kathleen Lynch,⁴¹ a book which, Eliot writes, "calls attention to the gradual transition from Elizabethan-Jacobean comedy to Restoration comedy" (*SE* 167). While Eliot's perspective on Middleton's comedic dramaturgy as mere "photographic" realism, problematic as it is,⁴² remains unchanged ("She observes, what is certainly true, that Middleton is the greatest 'realist' in Jacobean comedy"[*SE* 167]), it at least has a more concrete and material ideational basis, one

⁴¹ Kathleen Lynch. *The Social Mode of Restoration Comedy*. New York: Macmillan, 1926.

⁴² Michael Taylor, in his run-through of the Middleton bibliography, tells us that Anthony Covatta's 1973 Bucknell University Press monograph *Thomas Middleton's City Comedies* is important in upsetting a critical convention with regards to Middleton that Eliot himself appears to have perpetuated. Covatta's book "attacked the common misconception of Middleton as essentially a realistic writer, made interesting connections between the city comedies and Middleton's later comedies, and forcefully argued for Middleton as an ironist rather than a satirist." Thomas Middleton. *A Mad World, My Masters and Other Plays*. Ed. Michael Taylor. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995, p. xxi.

homologous with what Eliot understood to be the basis for Massinger's resemblance to Shirley and Restoration comedy, the interrelation of economic stratification and social power—that is, the values and ideologies of “class”: “Miss Lynch's extremely suggestive thesis is that the transition from Elizabethan-Jacobean to later Caroline comedy is primarily economic: that the interest changes from the citizen aping gentry to the citizen become gentry and accepting that code of manners” (*SE* 167-168).⁴³

Supporting Lynch's arguments, Eliot asserts Middleton's transitional status:

She calls attention to this aspect of Middleton's comedy, that it marks, better than the romantic comedy of Shakespeare, or the comedy of Jonson, occupied with what Jonson thought to be permanent and not transient aspects of human nature, the transition between the aristocratic world which preceded the Tudors and the plutocratic modern world which the Tudors initiated and encouraged. (*SE* 168)

Massinger and Middleton, however, are not transitional playwrights marking the period transformation from the Elizabethan Renaissance to the Restoration and eighteenth century merely because their comedies, consciously or subconsciously, depict ideological shifts and transformations in inter-class relations. There is a larger point: there is a different relation between the subject and its own human experience, and it is evidenced in these playwrights' dramatic verse. Eliot writes,

⁴³ This proto-Marxist mode of periodization which Eliot appropriates differs sharply from that in his essay “John Bramhall,” an essay more remarkable for Eliot's polemic against Thomas Hobbes than for its commemoration of the eponymous Caroline bishop: “When I say the Renaissance I mean for this purpose the period between the decay of scholastic philosophy and the rise of modern science” (*SE* 355). Both the piece on Bramhall and the piece on Middleton were written in 1927, the former appearing in print in the 1928 collection *For Lancelot Andrewes*, the latter in *Times Literary Supplement*, June 1927. Gallup does not provide a specific date for the composition of the Bramhall piece. Given the development from a lazy mode of periodization based on an arbitrary and abstract intellectual history to one grounded more firmly in economic development and class transformation, I cannot help but to think that the Bramhall piece must have preceded the Middleton piece, with Eliot reading Lynch's book somewhere in the interim.

And, indeed, with the end of Chapman, Middleton, Webster, Tourneur, Donne, we end a period when the intellect was immediately at the tips of the senses. Sensation became word and word was sensation. The next period is the period of Milton (though still with a Marvell in it); and this period is initiated by Massinger.⁴⁴ (*SE* 209-210)

Massinger's is an anagogical periodicity: he represents both a beginning and an ending.

"We mean that Massinger must be placed as much at the beginning of one period as at the end of another," Eliot, with a tone of bitter-sweet resignation and regret, tells us (*SE* 210). Massinger's verse is "a different verse from that of his predecessors" (*SE* 210), most importantly Shakespeare, and it cannot be assessed and evaluated according to a "Shakespearian standard." It represents a decline in sensibility, in a subject's capacity to engage with its own thoughts and feelings, experience both interior and exterior: "it is not a development based on, or resulting from, a new way of feeling. On the contrary, it seems to lead us away from feeling altogether" (*SE* 210).

Here, we must turn to "The Metaphysical Poets" and one of Eliot's most famous critical passages. Discussing the difference in English poetry between the first half of the seventeenth century, on the one hand, and the Restoration and eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, on the other, Eliot attributes the difference to "something which had happened

⁴⁴ A point of clarification: Eliot includes Middleton in this inventory, but not Middleton the Comedian but rather Middleton the Tragedian. Before this passage, he cites two passages from Middleton and Tourneur which evidence "a very high development of the senses, a development of the English language which we have perhaps never equaled" (209). Tourneur's passage is from *The Revenger's Tragedy*, a play Eliot celebrates in his essay "Cyril Tourneur" for its "unique style in blank verse" and, moreover, "intense and unique and horrible vision of life" (191, 189). Middleton's passage comes out of his great collaboration with William Rowley, *The Changeling*. While Eliot lauds the playwright who could pen a comedy (also in collaboration, a fact to which Eliot rather easily lets himself pay no mind) as brilliant as *The Roaring Girl*, one has the sense in reading the Middleton essay that it is for the great tragedy rather than the great comedy that Eliot bothers to write on Middleton at all.

to the mind of England between the time of Donne or Lord Herbert of Cherbury and the time of Tennyson and Browning” (*SE* 287). Poets lost the ability to integrate the whole of their experience with a progressive linguistic development. “But while the language became more refined, the feeling became more crude,” Eliot laments (*SE* 288). A fragmentation of the subject occurred, and Dryden and especially Milton⁴⁵ exacerbated the problem: “In the seventeenth century a dissociation of sensibility set in, from which we have never recovered; and this dissociation, as is natural, was aggravated by the influence of the two most powerful poets of the century, Milton and Dryden” (*SE* 288). Eliot paints a broad portrait of poetic subjectivity before the dissociation and contrasts it with the subjectivity of a non-poet:

A thought to Donne was an experience; it modified his sensibility. When a poet’s mind is perfectly equipped for its work, it is constantly amalgamating disparate experience; the ordinary man’s experience is chaotic irregular, fragmentary. The latter falls in love, or reads

⁴⁵ Eliot is less harsh towards Dryden. In “John Dryden,” Eliot holds Dryden to be “one of the tests of a catholic appreciation of poetry” (305), prognosticates that “In the next revolution, of taste it is possible that poets may turn to the study of Dryden,” for “he remains one of those who have set standards for English verse which it is desperate to ignore” (316), and, most importantly, finds his style “in a high degree natural” in contrast to that of “Milton, our greatest master of the *artificial* style” (310). In his 1936 essay on Milton, Eliot declares Milton, though “a great artist,” to have been “a bad influence” on the development of English poetry. (*PP* 156). Milton would have to wait eleven years before Eliot could back-pedal in a second essay on Milton, recant the harshness of his judgment on Milton as a bad influence and even declare him “a great poet and one whom poets to-day might study with profit” (*PP* 169). Incidentally, Mark Van Doren, whose *John Dryden: A Study of His Poetry* effected Eliot’s writing “John Dryden” as a review in *Times Literary Supplement* (9 June 1921) and received a very favorable note from Eliot—“an admirable book [...] which every practitioner of English verse should study” (*SE* 306-307)—notes in the preface to the 1946 third edition of his book that poets of his time have not turned to the study of Dryden: “From the way Dryden wrote there is always something to be learned, and in fact it has been said of this essay, by T. S. Eliot and others, that it shows how the learning may be done. But in twenty-five years [since the first edition of the book] I have not seen it done. I am not saying that it should be done, or that I have succeeded in showing how it could be. I merely observe that contemporary poetry—and criticism—give no evidence of having benefited by the study of Dryden’s art.” Mark Van Doren. *John Dryden: A Study of His Poetry*. 3rd Ed. New York: Henry Holt, 1946. p. viii.

Spinoza, and these two experiences have nothing to do with each other, or with the noise of the typewriter or the smell of cooking; in the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new wholes. (SE 287)

In Eliot's literary historiography, Milton is a terminus, the end of a line of development essentially begun by the Elizabethan playwrights. With Milton and Dryden, poets are no longer capable of "amalgamating disparate experience." Their attunement to their own emotional, intellectual, and material selves is diminished. Poets become "reflective" rather than "intellectual" (SE 287). No longer "equipped" like Shakespeare and his contemporaries to exist in the full presence of the complete experiential range of their existence, poets retreat into the past, looking back nostalgically (which is to say, through the prism of absence and loss) on memories of experience—memories that are but imitations, representations, or simulacra present in existence only insofar as the confines of the world are drawn at the dark interior limits of the mind. Feelings, thoughts, emotions—for the "reflective" poet of the "dissociation of sensibility," experience's fragmented shadows displace its integral light.

3.4 The Irony of Order: The High Modernist as Medieval Modernist

T. S. Eliot's writings on early modern poetry and drama had a profound influence on early modern studies, an influence not lost on contemporary early modernists

interested in the genealogy of the field's current situation.⁴⁶ Indeed, as a poet-critic, Eliot hoped that the study and critical reception of early modern verse drama would shape the production of modernist verse drama. In the essay "Four Elizabethan Dramatists," Eliot calls for the study of Elizabethan drama to have a "revolutionary influence on the future of drama" (*SE* 109). Yet, in his later writings as a verse dramatist, Eliot always keeps an arm's length between himself and the early modern dramatic poets, especially Shakespeare, whom he saw as his strongest precursors in the development of a modernist English verse drama. In the essay "Poetry and Drama," on the matter of verse style in his own first major poetic drama, *Murder in the Cathedral*, Eliot writes, "As for the versification, I was only aware at this stage that the essential was to avoid any echo of Shakespeare. [...] Therefore what I kept in mind was the versification of *Everyman*" (*PP* 85). Elsewhere, he is keenly aware of the challenges of writing verse drama for a modernist theatre: "The difficulty of the author is also the difficulty of the audience. Both have to be trained; both need to be conscious of many things which neither an Elizabethan dramatist, nor an Elizabethan audience, had any need to know."⁴⁷ Ironically, Eliot finds his whip for training his audience and himself, as dramatist, less in the

⁴⁶ Richard Halpern, for example, begins his study of Shakespeare and modernism by rehearsing the conventional narrative of Eliot's influence, and its decline, as fable: "Once upon a time, modernists roamed the earth. They were large, lumbering creatures compared with the smaller, quicker species that dominate today. The fiercest and most awesome of the modernists, T. S. Eliot, exerted a far-reaching influence on the whole field of literary studies, and not least on the field of Renaissance criticism." *Shakespeare Among the Moderns*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1997. p. 1.

⁴⁷ Introduction, *Shakespeare and the Popular Dramatic Tradition*, by S. L. Bethell. London: P. S. King and Staples, 1944. p. 9. As excellent as his piece on Eliot's construction of his poetic audience is, one wishes Leonard Diepeveen had broached the subject of Eliot's construction of his later theatrical audience and the matter of what is at stake in the ways in which an audience itself is conceptualized. See his "I Can Have More Than Enough Power to Satisfy Me": T. S. Eliot's Construction of His Audience." *Marketing Modernisms: Self-Promotion, Canonization, Rereading*. Ann Arbor: Michigan UP, 1996. pp. 37-60.

examples Shakespeare and his contemporaries provide than in the works their medieval predecessors left behind. Eliot is a medieval modernist. The periodicity of Eliot's Middle Ages, problematic as it is, represents the convergence of his animus against modernity and liberalism with his desire for a religiosity that is not marginal, fragmented, and "compartmentalized" but rather central to the activity of everyday life in a culture and society best characterized by the words *unity*, *integration*, and *order*—the ideological language of conservatism.

In part, the concept of Eliot as "medieval modernist" is indebted to Michael T. Saler's work on visual modernism, the English avant-garde, and the London Underground transport system. What Saler describes in terms of medieval modernism is very much a stance or attitude towards the relationship between aesthetic production (imagination) and the utility of consumption (reception) grounded in a social functionalism thought to have its origins in the medieval. I should be quick to point out that Saler is rather ambivalent on the point with regards to Eliot himself: "While T. S. Eliot might be called a medieval modernist because of his admiration for the organic and spiritual community of the Middle Ages together with his "impersonal" conception of art, his elitist and formalist views isolate him from several of the central terms of the tradition as I have defined it."⁴⁸ Much of Eliot's early, pre-1927 (which is to say, pre-conversion) poetry and literary criticism leans in the direction of a formalism that stands opposed to the social functionalism of Saler's medieval modernism, a functionalism concerned with

⁴⁸ Michael T. Saler. *The Avant-Garde in Interwar England: Medieval Modernism and the London Underground*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999. p. 17.

the moral, spiritual, and commercial economies of the land. Yet, the “elitist and formalist views” for which Saler disqualifies Eliot as a medieval modernist shift after his conversion. Utility becomes an animating value for Eliot’s artistic practice. In his 1932-33 Charles Eliot Norton Lectures at Harvard University, published as *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, Eliot considers the importance of reception, writing, “I believe that the poet naturally prefers to write for as large and miscellaneous an audience as possible[.] [...] The most useful poetry, socially, would be one which cut across all the stratifications of public taste[.]” For Eliot, this is theater: “The ideal medium for poetry, to my mind, and the most direct means of social ‘usefulness’ for poetry, is the theatre.”⁴⁹ Eliot’s theatrical work—work that is *a priori* social, public, and above all collaborative and communitarian⁵⁰—and the literary-critical work that emerges out of Eliot’s experience as a man of the theatre necessarily point to a modernist deeply concerned with the social, cultural, and spiritual utility of his imaginative production—in other words, a medieval modernist, by Saler’s own criteria.

Medieval modernism is the most important articulation of Shakespearean evasion in Eliot’s poetic-theatrical project following his conversion in 1927. “Among the most striking of T. S. Eliot’s self-contradictions,” Sharon Stockton writes, “is his disagreement with himself over the poetic status of Shakespeare. [...] This ambivalence applies to

⁴⁹ *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1933. p. 146.

⁵⁰ Randy Malamud reads Eliot’s drama in terms of “a community of drama”: “This is a community that is defined through drama; the dramaturgy itself is the first sign of community and is at the same time an analogical model for an extradramatic fulfillment of community (for which the drama at hand offers incentive, inspiration, and guidance).” *Where the Words Are Valid: T. S. Eliot’s Communities of Drama*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994. p. 58.

Eliot's representations of the English Renaissance generally."⁵¹ Eliot's ambivalence towards the early modern evidences an ironic contradiction between Eliot's life-long desire for a clearly articulated unity, integration, and order in all aspects of everyday life, including writing and religion, and his fetishization of an early modern period he imagines in terms of anarchy, disorder, and decay; his repeated turns to the medieval are symptomatic of this. Eliot repeatedly mystifies the early modern period. In his introduction to G. Wilson Knight's *The Wheel of Fire*, Eliot gives voice to a vision of the early modern past as a period of phantasmagoric peril, uncertainty, even unknowability: "But with Shakespeare, we seem to be moving in an air of Cimmerian darkness. The conditions of his life, the conditions under which dramatic art was then possible, seem even more remote from us than those of Dante."⁵² The most egregious case of Eliot's early modern mystification pertains to the ever-troublesome category of subjectivity itself. In his essay "Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca," Eliot, though not without a hint of ambivalence, practically gives birth to the Burckhardtian narrative of the early modern period as inaugural of modern subjectivity (hence, the designation "early modern"), a commonplace so taken for granted by many literary critics and theorists that academics, especially medievalists,⁵³ are still correcting the ideational and factual assumptions that predicate this problematic narrative:

⁵¹ Sharon Stockton. "T. S. Eliot's Renaissance and the Meaning of Surrender." *Yeats-Eliot Review* 15:3 (Summer 1998): 8.

⁵² Introduction, *The Wheel of Fire: Interpretations of Shakespearian Tragedy*, by G. Wilson Knight. London: Routledge, 2001. p. xvi.

⁵³ As an example of the sort of corrective medievalists have to write in order to rein in the narrative of modern subjectivity Eliot propounds, see David Aers, "A Whisper in the Ear of Early Modernists; or,

What influence the work of Seneca and Machiavelli and Montaigne seems to me to exert in common on that time, and most conspicuously through Shakespeare, is an influence toward a kind of self-consciousness that is new; the self-consciousness and self-dramatization of the Shakespearian hero, of whom Hamlet is only one. It seems to mark a stage, even if not a very agreeable one, in human history, or progress, or deterioration, or change. (*SE* 139-140)

The archaeological and archival work performed by historians, critics, and theorists of the Renaissance stage sheds a very different light on the period and its drama from the “Cimmerian darkness” Eliot’s imagination excavates.

In the essay “The Metaphysical Poets,” Eliot discusses the line of English poetry that ran from Donne, Herbert, and Marvell to Milton and Dryden which, for Eliot, was the great English literary achievement succeeding from the playwrights of Shakespeare’s time: “The poets of the seventeenth century” were, for Eliot, very much “the successors of the dramatists of the sixteenth” and both alike “possessed a mechanism of sensibility which could devour any kind of experience” (*SE* 287). In “Four Elizabethan Dramatists,” Eliot argues there is a “philosophical basis” for this devouring insatiability: “Even the philosophical basis, the general attitude towards life of the Elizabethans, is one of anarchism, of dissolution, of decay. It is in fact exactly parallel and indeed one and the same thing with their artistic greediness, their desire for every sort of effect together, their

Reflections on Literary Critics Writing the ‘History of the Subject,’” *Culture and History, 1350-1600: Essays on English Communities, Identities and Writing*, Ed. David Aers. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1992. pp. 177-202. The growing trend on the part of medievalists to identity their period as the “premodern” fascinates me. It remains to be examined.

unwillingness to accept any limitation and abide by it" (*SE* 116).⁵⁴ It is an interesting irony that, according to Eliot, in the England of the Elizabethans and the first half of the seventeenth century, in a period "of anarchism, of dissolution, of decay," there could be this "mechanism of sensibility," whereas, in England during the latter half of the seventeenth century (the moment of Milton and Dryden) and the eighteenth century, in a period of restoration, of consolidation of (especially parliamentary, which is to say, democratic) power, of economic and mercantile development, of the emergence of a modern nation-state, and, most importantly, of returned domestic peace and order after the years of revolution and internal strife, that there would be the "dissociation of sensibility" afflicting the "mind of England" corrupting the poetic soul of the nation.

Order, for Eliot, is the point of intersection between art and life; it is the ideal towards which they strive. "It is a function of all art to give us some perception of an order in life, by imposing an order upon it," Eliot tells us in "Poetry and Drama"; order characterizes Eliot's vision of the perfect poetic drama: "I have before my eyes a kind of mirage of the perfection of verse drama, which would be a design of human action and of words, such as to present at once the two aspects of dramatic and musical order" (*PP* 93).⁵⁵ Yet, Eliot's idealization of order fails to stand in harmonious order with (or to be

⁵⁴ In "A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry" of 1928, Eliot makes a statement very similar to that in "Four Elizabethan Dramatists": "So far as I can isolate Shakespeare, I prefer him to all other dramatists of every time. But I can not do that altogether; and I find the age of Shakespeare moved in a steady current, with back-eddies certainly, towards anarchy and chaos" (*SE* 54).

⁵⁵ Eliot's use of the word "mirage" echoes a passage from the 1920 essay "The Possibility of Poetic Drama": "These poets [nineteenth century poets such as Wordsworth, Keats, Shelley, Tennyson, Browning] were certainly obliged to consume vast energy in their pursuit of form, which could never lead to a wholly satisfying result. There has only been one Dante; and, after all, Dante had the benefit of years

ordered by) the heterogeneous, disordered, cacophonous reality of history. Eliot's tone with regards to art, drama, and order may nod towards a reluctant acknowledgement of the reality of disorder that characterizes, and has always characterized, history; however, such a nod paradoxically reinscribes the mystification of a past that, as the last two or three generations of historians and literary historicists have demonstrated, was profoundly structured and regulated, sometimes, in part, through the intervention of the stage itself. History is simultaneously replete with order and disorder. The responsible historian recognizes this fact. What history is not, and this is a major problem in Eliot's conceptualization of early modernity, is a "Cimmerian darkness."

With regards to order and ideology, Eliot's periodization of the medieval, like his periodization of the early modern, is built on contradiction. Eliot's fetishization of the early modern belies a desire for the period as a historical moment of creative subversive

of practice in forms employed and altered by numbers of contemporaries and predecessors; he did not waste the years of youth in metric invention; and when he came to the *Commedia* he knew how to pillage right and left. To have, given into one's hands, a crude form, capable of indefinite refinement, and to be the person to see the possibilities—Shakespeare was very fortunate. And it is perhaps the craving for some such *donnée* which draws us on toward the present mirage of poetic drama." *The Sacred Wood and Major Early Essays*. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1998. p. 35. Eliot's use of the trope of mirage in relation to verse drama of a Christian nature is appropriate, for the very possibility of theater is predicated on the material deployment in space and time of illusion for the construction of an alternative of/to reality. With Thomas' line "Humanity cannot bear very much reality" as the epigraph to his discussion of Eliot, Anthony S. Abbott considers Eliot's dramatic career in relation to the illusion-reality dialectic: "In a study of reality and illusion in modern drama, the place of T. S. Eliot is both central and unique, central because reality and illusion are major concerns of his plays and unique because he is the only major modern dramatist to treat the theme from a Christian perspective." For Abbot, "Eliot's plays from *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935) to *The Elder Statesman* (1958) form both a unity and a continuum. All five plays deal with the difference between the saint and the common man and the degree to which each is able to confront reality as Eliot perceives it. All five plays contrast reality as normally understood by human beings with reality as understood by the Christian." *The Vital Lie: Reality and Illusion in Modern Drama*. Tuscaloosa: Alabama UP, 1989. p. 100.

potential, a desire that flies in the face of his otherwise-rigid conservatism. His subversive desire for the early modern stands counterpoised against a nostalgia, grounded in the works of Victorian medievalists such as John Ruskin and William Morris, for a medieval period that Eliot imagines in terms antinomically opposed to those by which he understands the early modern, the same terms that underwrite his conservatism: unity, integration, and order. As with his “early modernism,” the contradiction in Eliot’s medievalism lies in the fact that such a nostalgia is shot through with the ideology of romanticism, a historical development rooted in revolution, individualism, anticlericalism, and antiauthoritarianism, political categories against which Eliot consistently fought throughout his life. As Louis Menand remarks, “Eliot identified the main stream of modern culture as romanticism, and he regarded romanticism as the secret friend and abettor of all the tendencies of modern life he most deplored: liberalism, secularism, *laissez-faire*.”⁵⁶ In his most telling critical engagement with the medieval, the 1937 essay “Religious Drama: Mediæval and Modern,” Eliot takes up the problem of writing verse drama that is Christian in substance and modern in form. Inasmuch as it is valuable for better understanding Eliot’s dramaturgy, especially regarding *Murder in the Cathedral*, it is much more important for its highlighting the difficult and problematic relationship amongst the categories of religion, ideology, and history with regards to Eliot’s medievalism.

⁵⁶ Louis Menand. “T. S. Eliot.” *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism, Volume 7: Modernism and the New Criticism*. Eds. A. Walton Litz, Louis Menand, and Lawrence Rainey. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2000. p. 17.

He commences his essay, “When we speak of ‘religious plays,’ we inevitably have in mind *Everyman*, and the various cycles of plays, such as those of York, Beverley, Wakefield, Coventry and Chester, which flourished in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and lingered on through the time of the Tudors. These plays give us a kind of standard by which we measure anything that we write and produce now—however far we depart from the aims and methods of the older drama.”⁵⁷ Medieval drama stands as a very different kind of standard from the “Shakespearean standard” Eliot had announced only three years earlier in the “John Marston” essay. Eliot is quick to point out yet qualify the extent to which late medieval English drama can function as a “standard” for new religious drama. He recognizes the legitimacy, even the necessity of secular drama, from the popular performance traditions of Marie Lloyd,⁵⁸ the music hall, and Shaftesbury Avenue, on one end of the spectrum, to the high modernist dramatic art of Cocteau, Hofmannsthal, and Yeats,⁵⁹ for example, on the other.⁶⁰ However, secular drama needs to be integrated with religious drama to the extent that they are both ordered

⁵⁷ “Religious Drama: Mediæval and Modern,” *University of Edinburgh Journal* 9.1 (Autumn 1937) 8. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

⁵⁸ See T. S. Eliot, “Marie Lloyd,” first published as “London Letter,” *Dial* 6 (December 1922) 659-663.

⁵⁹ Cocteau’s *La Machine Infernale* had its premiere in 1934, the year before *Murder in the Cathedral*. Eliot thought highly enough of Hugo von Hofmannsthal to write a “Preface” in his *Poems and Verse Plays*. Ed. Michael Hamburger. New York: Pantheon, 1961. pp. xi-xii; and “A Note on ‘The Tower’” in his *Selected Plays and Libretti*. Ed. Michael Hamburger. New York: Pantheon, 1963. pp. lxxiii-lxxiv. Michael North understands Yeats’ cultural nationalism and Eliot’s conservatism as homologous in their ideological and poetic intimations of fascism. See his *The Political Aesthetic of Yeats, Eliot, and Pound*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1991.

⁶⁰ An increasing amount of scholarship in Eliot Studies in recent years takes up the problem of “high” versus “low” culture, as exemplified here in Eliot’s complicated attitude towards secular drama and performance. For important accounts of Eliot and mass culture, see David Chinitz, “T. S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide,” *PMLA* 110:2 (March 1995): 236-247; and Barry J. Faulk, “Modernism and the Popular: Eliot’s Music Halls,” *Modernism/Modernity* 8:4 (November 2001): 603-621. Chinitz has expanded his argument into a full-length study, *T. S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide*. Chicago: Chicago UP, 2003.

by a common attitude towards Christian principles and morality: “I do mean that we want, and must have, more than we seemed to want when we first started out to examine the future of specifically religious drama: we want the whole of serious drama to have a religious background and to be informed with religious principles” (11).

Eliot’s idealization of order is concomitant with a philosophy of action and belief which holds those two categories as not merely parallel in the practice of everyday life but as integrated in a unified ontology. It is this impulse towards integration in our being with respect to our thoughts and deeds, our conviction and agency, which animates Eliot’s literary criticism, social criticism, and dramaturgy. Theologically, it animates “Religious Drama,” as well. There is a polemical thrust to the piece. Eliot stands firm against any structure, whether political, ideological, cultural, or dramatic, that would force or coerce human beings into becoming divided selves that have compartmentalized their deepest religious beliefs and their everyday lives: “What I am opposing is not merely a division of religious and secular drama into watertight compartments; what I am proposing is not merely that we need to go to a religious play or to a secular play in much the same spirit. It is an opposition to the compartmentalisation of life in general, to the sharp division between our religious and ordinary life.” Eliot remarks that “in the world in which we live this compartmentalisation is constantly being forced upon us.” It represents a threat not merely to some abstract and vaguely-defined dignity of the individual soul; its danger is tangible and imminent: “The terminus of such a doctrine is of course to put an end to man’s private life altogether, for the division cannot be

maintained” (13). For Eliot the compartmentalization that would divide the subject would eventually effect the death of the subject.⁶¹

Though Eliot’s insistence of unity between inner religious being and outer social being is, according to Rowan Williams, in line with a tradition of high-church Anglican thought on the relationship between religious experience and everyday life,⁶² Eliot’s paranoia (evident in his apocalyptic fear of “an end to man’s private life altogether”) and animus against modernity, liberalism, and their entailments of pluralism and toleration for the non-Christian Other are peculiarly his own. Liberalism is the ideology that poses the greatest single challenge to the devout modern believer, Eliot would have it. “I am thinking also of the ways in which we have to adapt ourselves, every day, to the compromise of liberalism: to live among, and to maintaining common sympathy and common action (as indeed is duty as well as necessity) with, people who deny or ignore the fundamentals of Christianity. On the one hand we accept, and on the other we must never accept as a finality, this state of affairs” (13). There is a proto-fascist virulence to Eliot’s casting of the non-Christian Other that is undoubtedly related to his insidious anti-Semitism (an anti-Semitism that, in its modern incarnation, also has its historical roots in

⁶¹ Eliot had broached “compartmentalisation” two years earlier in the essay “Religion and Literature”: “And if we, as readers, keep our religious and moral convictions in one compartment, and take our reading merely for entertainment, or on a higher plane, for aesthetic pleasure, I would point out that the author, whatever his conscious intentions in writing, in practice recognizes no such distinctions. The author of a work of imagination is trying to affect us wholly, as human beings, whether he knows it or not; and we are affected by it, as human beings, whether we intend to be or not” (*SE* 394).

⁶² Rowan Williams. *Christian Imagination in Poetry and Polity: Some Anglican Voices from Temple to Herbert*. Oxford: SLG Press, 2004. Many thanks to Dr. Jeffrey McCurry for the reference.

the medieval);⁶³ it is not too far a leap from these sentences to the following now-infamous one from his 1933 Page-Barbour Lectures at the University of Virginia, *After Strange Gods*: “What is still more important [than cultural homogeneity] is unity of religious background; and reasons of race and religion combine to make any large number of free-thinking Jews undesirable.”⁶⁴ Eliot Studies has been concerned with this nasty strain of Eliot’s thought for some time now; it is not my intention to rehearse old arguments on the matter.⁶⁵ The important point is that Eliot’s desire for order and integration of inner and outer life over and above a compartmentalization of action and belief, in short, his conservatism takes the form of a medievalism that offers an insular alternative, in Eliot’s devotional imagination, to pluralism, liberalism and, by extension, a modernity Eliot had, elsewhere, repudiated.⁶⁶

⁶³ On Eliot and fascism, see Paul Morrison, *The Poetics of Fascism: Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, Paul de Man*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996. pp. 60-108.

⁶⁴ *After Strange Gods: A Primer of Modern Heresy*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1934. p. 20.

⁶⁵ For the most important readings of Eliot’s anti-Semitism, see Christopher Ricks, *T. S. Eliot and Prejudice*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: California UP, 1988. pp. 25-76; and Anthony Julius, *T. S. Eliot, Anti-Semitism, and Literary Form*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1995. The second edition of Julius’ book (London: Thames and Hudson, 2003) includes an interesting summary of and point-by-point “response to” his critics. Even more recently, two special issues (September 2003 [10:3] and September 2004 [11:3]) of the journal *Modernism/Modernity* continue the debate.

⁶⁶ In the 1928 essay “The Humanism of Irving Babbitt,” Eliot critiques his former teacher’s analysis of modernity and his objection that the “moderns [...] have not been sufficiently modern,” writing, “Those of us who lay no claim to being modern may not be involved in the objection, but, as bystanders, we may be allowed to inquire whither all this modernity and experimenting is going to lead” (SE 478). The tone is not one of bemusement as much as it is one of dread, and one can hear a quietly menacing apocalyptic undercurrent in the stream of Eliot’s words. While Eliot’s conservatism is frequently characterized (by myself, among others) in terms of fascism, he himself characterized liberalism as a potential precondition of fascism. In his reading of the temporality of liberalism in chapter one of Eliot’s *The Idea of a Christian Society* (a book which was written only two years after “Religious Drama”) Kenneth Asher argues, “Perceptively (and Eliot is often a telling critic of the liberal cause) he attacks liberalism for its lack of a telos. Because liberalism is a freedom *from* and not a freedom *for*, it is in grave danger of leading the democratic mass toward ‘that which is its own negation: the artificial, mechanised, or brutalised control which is a desperate remedy for its chaos.’ Thus, fascism and communism appear to Eliot as merely the logical extension of a rudderless, democratic materialism. It is with this in mind that he presents the reader

Eliot's "Religious Drama" is burdened with a romantic nostalgia for a Middle Ages that, in contrast to the anarchism, dissolution, and decay of the Elizabethan period, was "simple" in its social, cultural, and ecclesiastical structures. Against liberalism, the compartmentalization of action and belief, and the binary of religious and secular drama, all of which he finds untenable, Eliot seeks "reintegration": "We need to strive towards a kind of *reintegration* of both kinds of drama, just as we need to strive towards a reintegration of life" (13). For Eliot, the work of reintegrating seemingly disparate aspects of drama and of the self does not take the form of a leveling, erasure, or "simplification" of difference: "When I say 'reintegration' I do not want to be taken to mean 'simplification.' We do not want to get back to the state of mind of the village or cathedral-town audience of the later Middle Ages, for whom the religious play provided everything simply because it was the only kind of play they had" (13-14). Yet, we must be wary of Eliot's disqualification of "simplification," for it is disingenuous. Underwriting Eliot's characterization of the work the medieval drama accomplishes vis à vis the adverb "simply" is the assumption that the drama works "simply" because the people and the period were simple—which is deeply problematic. Eliot might tell us that theirs is a "state of mind," a simple "state of mind," to which we do not wish to return, but does he believe it? As already discussed, he qualifies his statement that medieval drama is a "standard" according to which we must judge new theatrical work by asserting

with his concluding either/or: 'If you will not have God (and He is a jealous God) you should pay your respects to Hitler or Stalin.'" *T. S. Eliot and Ideology*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1995. p. 88.

that, even where “their aims and methods” differ from medieval drama, both religious and secular modern drama should share an investment in Christian values and belief.

Eliot also qualifies, with respect to this “standard,” the extent to which the medieval and the simplicity of the people and the period might be problematic to modern audiences of religious drama. He writes,

The qualification is important. For this standard of the mediaeval plays may be applied in an undesirable way. We are apt to think of the Middle Ages as having been somehow specially favoured in the way of their mode of life, their religious stability, and their atmosphere of faith and devotion; and we start with a feeling of discouragement and timidity that is fatal to the production of anything new. I suspect that, for the most part, people still tend to regard the performance of a religious play as something to be attended, like a bazaar or a jumble sale, from a sense of duty rather than for the purpose of enjoyment. (8)

Eliot asserts the status of the medieval as “specially favoured”—divinely blessed and anointed, we hear in a tone that suggests a sharp, condemning contrast between the religious and social idyll of the Middle Ages and the fallen spiritual wasteland of liberal modernity wherein the attendance of a religious play is done more out of onerous “duty” than out of the soul’s longing for a specific (and exalted) pleasure and “enjoyment.”

While Eliot may be disturbed by our modern potential towards a fatalistic spiritual “discouragement and timidity,” we should be disturbed by Eliot’s utter disregard for historical fact. Apparently, Eliot’s Middle Ages are a fantasyland devoid of grueling hardship and excruciating pain. Not everyone had to live in the mud, by the plow, killed by sword or plague; but many people did; many people were. The morality and the

spirituality that remain oblivious to this pain, that do not acknowledge it, are suspect; as Stanley Cavell tells us, “A ‘failure to acknowledge’ is the presence of something, a confusion, an indifference, a callousness, an exhaustion, a coldness. Spiritual emptiness is not a blank.”⁶⁷ Likewise in Eliot’s Middle Ages there are not to be found heresy, heterodoxy, and religious and ecclesiastical instability—let alone individual doubt and crisis of faith. When reading Eliot and considering the ironic periodicity of his Middle Ages, we must be careful not to allow Eliot’s projection of an idyllic utopian Christian society and subjectivity onto the medieval to substitute for the historical reality as it was. The portrait of the Middle Ages we glimpse from Eliot’s discussion of religious drama would be foreign not only to the historians and historicists who have painted, at the least, a much more complicated picture than Eliot’s “specially favoured” idealization—it would be foreign to the people of the Middle Ages themselves.

3.5 From Ritual to Religion and Theater⁶⁸

Eliot conflates the historical realities of the Middle Ages and the Elizabethan early modern periods with the thoroughly mystified historical landscapes of order and

⁶⁷ Stanley Cavell. *Must We Mean What We Say?* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1976. p. 264.

⁶⁸ In addition to being a nod to Jessie L. Weston’s *From Ritual to Romance*, which Eliot prominently cites in his “Notes” to *The Waste Land*, the title of this part of the chapter is an homage to anthropologist and performance theorist Victor Turner, author of *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York, PAJ Publications, 1982); see his “social drama” approach to the actual incident between Becket and Henry II, “Religious Paradigms and Political Action: Thomas Beckett at the Council of Northampton,” in *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1974. pp. 60-97.

anarchy in his conservative political and devotional imagination. Eliot, however, makes no such mistake with regards to the difference between religious drama and actual religious observation. Eliot tells us we must be careful not to allow a modern tendency to substitute religious drama with religious observance. While there is something of the dramatic in the liturgy and there is (or ought to be, Eliot would argue) something of the liturgical in the drama, they are not categories that can be conflated or substituted one for the other without diminishing the full utility of each category. However, Eliot's valorization of late medieval English drama stems, in part, from the fact that it is a form of drama that, historically, emerged directly out of liturgy, the Mass. It is sacramental drama. A play such as *Everyman*, which, Eliot claims, served as the model for his versification in *Murder in the Cathedral* (PP 85), is an achievement because "in *Everyman* the religious and the dramatic are not merely combined, but wholly fused. *Everyman* is on the one hand the human soul in extremity, and on the other any man in any dangerous position from which we wonder how he is going to escape—with as keen interest as that with which we wait for the escape of the film hero, bound and helpless in a hut to which his enemies are about to set fire" ("Religious Drama" 7). Eliot is concerned with pleasure and entertainment in drama. Part of his task, as he sees it in "Religious Drama," is the reorientation of a modern audience's attitude towards religious drama from resigned dutifulness to full appreciation and enjoyment on every level. Engagement of the audience is key, and Eliot, in a short piece entitled "Five Points on Dramatic Writing" published in 1938 after the success of *Murder in the Cathedral* but before the disappointment of *The Family Reunion*, has at least learned this much: "But if

you can keep the bloody audience's attention engaged, then you can perform any monkey tricks you like when they ain't looking, and it's what you do behind the audience's back so to speak that makes your play IMMORTAL for a while."⁶⁹

Pleasure and amusement, however, are not enough. Eliot contrasts deep spiritual ennui with "mere amusement": "There is a very profound kind of boredom which is an essential moment in the religious life, the boredom with all living in so far as it has no religious meaning. The capacity for this boredom is latent in everyone, and it can never really be appeased by mere amusement" ("Religious Drama" 12). Eliot seeks a new poetic religious theater that, rather than merely amuse as Shakespeare's theater would, satisfies the human desires for both aesthetic, specifically dramatic, pleasure and spiritual, specifically religious, fulfillment. Understanding his turn to the origins of theater in ritual in his pursuit of a suitable theatrical and poetic form helps to contextualize what Eliot accomplished in *Murder in the Cathedral*.

In an earlier, uncollected piece, "The Beating of a Drum" (1923), Eliot begins to work through the relationship between drama and poetry, on the one hand, and religion and spirituality, on the other, by means of the category of ritual. Eliot laments the lack of "rhythm" (remember that the order which characterizes Eliot's mirage-vision of the perfect poetic drama is one of "dramatic and *musical* order" [italics mine]) in the drama of his time: "It is the rhythm, so utterly absent from modern drama, either verse or prose, and which interpreters of Shakespeare do their best to suppress, which makes Massine

⁶⁹ "Five Points on Dramatic Writing." *Townsmen* 1.3 (July 1938) 10.

and Charlie Chaplin the great actors that they are, and which makes the juggling of Rastelli more cathartic than a performance of ‘A Doll’s House.’” So pervasive and insidious has Ibsen’s influence on theatrical modernism been that the musicality of Shakespeare, in modern performance, is lost and one has to turn to other forms of performance to find something that approximates it.⁷⁰ Rhythm and musicality are present in Massine, Chaplin, and Rastelli by virtue of the exquisite choreography necessary for them to carry off their acts. Eliot recognizes this connection to dance: “The drama was originally ritual; and ritual, consisting of a set of repeated movements, is essentially a dance.” The problem with respect to the “drought” of rhythm in modernist drama is a teleology of reason which dictates that human beings act in some such way, e.g., dance, poetry, and drama, because they have reasons for acting:

“We suggest, then, that the origins of the sacred dance was the desire of early man to imitate what he conceived to be the characteristics of supernatural power,” he says. It is equally possible to assert that primitive man acted in a certain way and then found a reason for it. An unoccupied person, finding a drum, may be seized with a desire to beat it; but unless he is an imbecile he will be unable to continue beating it, and thereby satisfying a need (rather than a “de-

⁷⁰ Interestingly, Eliot is very harsh to Ibsen (and, by extension, to Shaw) in “Religious Drama.” In tracing the decline of Greek tragedy from Aeschylus and Sophocles to Euripides, he writes, “For the conditions and requirements of his time, Euripides is as adroit as anybody. If his plays are not as good as those of his two predecessors, it is because of a less profound grasp of religious and moral problems; because of a preoccupation with serious, but more superficial issues: and this has made him more congenial to a great part of the later nineteenth century, to the world to which Ibsen and Shaw belong. (Tchechov seems to me a more serious dramatist than Ibsen, in that he at least presents profounder problems, though he may not attempt to solve them.)” “Religious Drama: Mediæval and Modern,” p. 11. In a 1954 book edition of the essay printed for charity, Eliot repudiates his dismissive condemnation of Ibsen, writing in the preface of the piece that “It is also obvious that it was written before I had re-read Ibsen’s plays. As a result of studying Ibsen’s plays, and criticizing my own plays of contemporary life, I have a very much higher opinion of Ibsen than I appear to have held in 1937. In fact, I repudiate what I have here said about Ibsen.” *Religious Drama: Mediaeval and Modern*. New York: House of Books, 1954. n. pag.

sire), without finding a reason for doing so. The reason may be the long continued drought.⁷¹

Eliot finds in his primitive man, as he finds in his medieval peasant, a simple creature, prerational, precultural, still capable of attending to his needs without having to justify doing so according to logic, “without finding a reason for doing so.”

Eliot universalizes humans as having needs for poetry, drama, and religion. In his 1928 essay “A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry,” his homage to Dryden’s *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy* (1667), Eliot declares that “there is no ‘relation’ between poetry and drama. All poetry tends towards drama, and all drama towards poetry”; along the same lines, he states, “The human soul, in intense emotion, strives to express itself in verse. [...] The tendency, at any rate, of prose drama is to emphasize the ephemeral and superficial; if we want to get at the permanent and universal, we tend to express ourselves in verse” (*SE* 52, 46). This is not only a universalizing assertion concerning desire and “the permanent and universal” in verse and expression—it is a universalizing assertion concerning human nature and its prerational, latent primitive needs.

Eliot begins with anthropology but, by way of the Church, ends with theater. From ritual it is but a short step to liturgy and, from liturgy, to the Mass. Dance and the Mass, for Eliot, share a common formalism that he found instructive in the creation of his first successful verse play, *Murder in the Cathedral*. Apropos Serge Diaghilev’s *Ballets Russes*, the character *E* in “A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry” says,

A few years ago, I—and you *B* and you *C* and you *A*—was

⁷¹ “The Beating of a Drum.” *The Nation & the Athenæum*. 6 October 1923: 12.

delighted by the Russian ballet. Here seemed to be everything we wanted in drama, except the poetry. It did not teach any 'lesson', but it had form. It seemed to revive the more formal element in drama for which we craved. [...] If there is a future for drama, and particularly for poetic drama, will it not be in the direction indicated by the ballet? (*SE* 46)

Dance is the essence of ritual; as, in historical terms, English drama emerges out of the liturgical ritual of the Mass, the ballet, the most mature, expressive, and refined form dance can take, functions as a model for Eliot of what, formally, modern English verse drama should resemble if it desires adherence to its essential foundation in ritual and liturgy. Eliot acknowledges problems with ballet as formal exemplar: "The ballet is valuable because it has, unconsciously, concerned itself with a permanent form; it is futile because it has concerned itself with the ephemeral in content" (*SE* 47). There is a disjunct between the temporal orientations of form (futuraity—"permanent") and content (suddenness—"ephemeral"): they are not ordered in an integral unity.⁷² The valorization of form over content that characterizes *E*'s idealization of ballet and dance is symptomatic of the divided self and the compartmentalization of action and belief that Eliot reacts to strongly against. The mentality of form-over-content permits *E* to hold up the Mass, genealogically related to ballet, as the telos of drama:

⁷² My own experience of seeing a performance of *The Firebird*, one of the first major successes of Diaghilev's company, at the New York City Ballet during the junior year of my undergraduate career bears out the truth of Eliot's remark here. The exquisiteness of the dancing and choreography, the sumptuousness of the costume and stage design, and the liveness of Stravinsky's well-known score constitute the memories I take away from the performance. If I want to remember the names of the *characters* of the ballet's story or the details of the story's *plot*, however, I inevitably have to consult a CD recording of Stravinsky's music. My hunch is that this lacuna of memory is not so atypical and that it says more about ballet than it does about me.

I say that the consummation of the drama, the perfect and ideal drama, is to be found in the ceremony of the Mass. I say, with the support of the scholars whom *B* mentions (and others), that drama springs from religious liturgy, and that it cannot afford to depart far from religious liturgy. [...] But when drama has ranged as far as it has in our own day, is not the only solution to return to religious drama? And the only dramatic satisfaction that I find now is in a High Mass well performed. (*SE* 47)

The liturgical embodiment of ritual in the Mass may be generative as a model for what can be accomplished in drama—witness *Murder*—but its value, as ritual, as liturgy, is not necessarily related to its formal construction, to how “well performed” the Mass may be. This is not to say that the formal performance of liturgy is irrelevant. Eliot concedes that if the Mass “is badly done and interferes with our devotion consequently,” we will be taken out of our experience of the Mass as believers paying devotional and religious observance and “we shall only be aware of the Mass as art” (*SE* 48). The important point for Eliot is that *E*’s statement “And the only dramatic satisfaction that I find now is in a High Mass well performed” belies a fundamental failure of spiritual and religious belief. *B* tells an anecdote about an acquaintance who, like *E*, only took aesthetic pleasure from the Mass and comes to the realization that the pleasure and satisfaction his acquaintance took from the Mass is predicated on the fact that “he was not a believer”:

But when I came to consider his conduct, I realized that he was guilty of a *confusion des genres*. His attention was not on the meaning of the Mass, for he was not a believer but a Bergsonian;⁷³ it was on the Art of the Mass.

⁷³ Eliot himself studied under Bergson in Paris (1911) and went through a Bergsonian phase. Eliot always retains something of Bergson in his conceptualizations of time and history: “The notion of ‘ideal duration’,

His dramatic desires were satisfied by the Mass, precisely because he was not interested in the Mass, but in the drama of it. (SE 48)

Where there is a fundamental lack of religious belief within the subject, there will be people for whom religion and drama are interchangeable. Yet, Eliot holds the universalizing conviction that all people do not merely desire but, indeed, “need” religious belief just as his “primitive man”—which is to say, all of us, as well—needs rhythm:

We need (as I believe, but you need not believe this for the purpose of my argument) religious faith. And we also need amusement (the quality of the amusement will, of course, not be unrelated to the quality of our religious belief). [...] And religion is no more a substitute for drama than drama is a substitute for religion. If we can do without religion, then let us have the theatre without pretending that it *is* religion; and if we can do without drama, then let us not pretend that religion is drama. (SE 48)

Drama and religion are different categories that pertain to different needs for which the prerational human spirit in all of us, Eliot would have it, demands satisfaction.⁷⁴

Substituting one for the other is not merely an act of compartmentalization, it is an act of self-division that replicates the mechanisms of an ontological irony for which the only

of immersion in time, of the flow of consciousness, is clearly an analogy for Eliot’s own sense of experience and its claims.” Ackroyd, p. 41.

⁷⁴ In “Religion and Literature,” Eliot makes an analogous point concerning the non-substitutability of literature and life: “It is simply not true that works of fiction, prose or verse, that is to say works depicting the actions, thoughts and words and passions of imaginary human beings, *directly* extend our knowledge of life. Direct knowledge of life is knowledge directly in relation to ourselves [...] Knowledge of life obtained through fiction is only possible by another stage of self-consciousness. That is to say, it can only be a knowledge of other people’s knowledge of life, not of life itself” (SE 395).

remedy is a whole-scale shift of subjectivity from the superficiality of empty rhetoric to deep-rooted conviction that manifests itself in everyday life; in other words, as Schlegel tells us, “a leap out of language into faith.”⁷⁵

3.6 From High-Church Nonconsequentialism to High Modernist Anagogical History: Interrogating Ends and Means, Transcending Endings and Beginnings in Murder in the Cathedral

Eliot’s rejoinder against substituting religion and drama for one another is predicated on the conviction that, as in *Everyman*, the substance of both religious belief and dramatic performance can exist in an integral order, “not merely combined, but wholly fused,” and that this order, in opposition to the threat to subjectivity itself that the compartmentalization of action and belief poses, can and ought to be a model for our own performance of life itself (“We need to strive towards a kind of *reintegration* of [...] drama, just as we need to strive towards a reintegration of life”). It also indicates something about the extent to which Eliot is concerned with ends and means. “Religion, as a means, cannot be used for the end of satisfying the universal human need for drama (and vice versa),” Eliot could have written. Throughout Eliot’s literary and social

⁷⁵ Paul de Man. “The Rhetoric of Temporality.” *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*. 2nd Ed. Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1983. pp. 222-223. A vertiginous, repetitive recursivity of self-consciousness best characterizes what I mean when I speak of the mechanisms of ontological irony. As de Man puts it, “In temporal terms [...] irony engenders a temporal sequence of acts of consciousness which is endless[;] [...] irony is not temporary but repetitive, the recurrence of a self-escalating act of consciousness” (220); “Irony divides the flow of temporal experience into a past that is pure mystification and a future that remains harassed forever by a relapse within the inauthentic. It can know this inauthenticity but can never overcome it” (222).

criticism there is an abiding concern with the issue of ends and means. In terms of systematic ethics, Eliot is a nonconsequentialist. Nonconsequentialism is an ethics that denies the consequences of human agency the privilege of according moral legitimacy to an act or behavior. One cannot posit that the ends justify the means, where the means taken to effect whatever ends are achieved are wrong, according to nonconsequentialism. If an act is wrong, it is inherently wrong, and no consequence of that act, howsoever good it may be, can justify the act. Utilitarianism—the mentality of the-greatest-good-for-the-greatest-number—is the consequentialist ethic *par excellence*. In terms of sacrifice and martyrdom, it is the ethical justification for Christ’s crucifixion.⁷⁶ It is an ethics to which Eliot was profoundly opposed.⁷⁷

Nonconsequentialism is at the heart of *Murder in the Cathedral*. There is a definite relation between nonconsequentialism and deontology, the moral philosophy of

⁷⁶ Consider this aside in one account of the Passion of Christ: “Caiaphas was the one who had advised the Jews that it was better to have one person die for the people” (John 18:14, NRSV). Christ’s martyrdom is the greatest theological fulfillment of the consequentialist ethical imperative, a fulfillment which brings a historical logic of talion, retributive violence (“eye for eye, tooth for tooth” [Exodus 21:24, NRSV]) to a close (apotheosis as negation) and ushers in a new nonconsequentialist dispensation marked by an immanence which holds all human life as unequivocally sacred and displaces the older ethical order that permits the sacrifice of even one human being for the safety or well-being of a “people.”

⁷⁷ In university courses on systematic or applied ethics, there are a number of scenarios that instructors deploy in order to say something about the difficulties in consistently adhering to either consequentialism or nonconsequentialism. Perhaps the most famous one is the following: You are a visitor in a foreign land ruled by a bloody, oppressive despot. On the day of your visit, ten innocent people are to be executed as political prisoners. As his honored guest, the despot tells you 1) that if you choose one prisoner to be executed, he will free the other nine; and 2) that if you do not choose one to be killed, he will execute all ten as he had planned. Do you choose to implicate yourself in the execution of one innocent person in order to save nine, or do you refuse culpability in the wrongful death of even one person, even if to save nine others, and watch all ten die? Is there a right or wrong answer? (David Edgar, in a blood-curdling *coup de theatre*, theatricalizes a variation on this scenario in a fictionalized version of the mid-1990s Balkans in his play *The Prisoner’s Dilemma* (2001). In the scene’s endgame, a paramilitary commander kills two men when the humanitarian aid worker to whom he has presented the option of killing one man or the other refuses to engage with the demand on her conscience that he makes and refuses to answer.) Scenarios like this one are exercises that are meant to clarify and sharpen our own moral and ethical positions to and for ourselves.

duty or obligation. Like the polemical medievalism of “Religious Drama,” Eliot’s nonconsequentialism is very much an entailment of his own conservative religiosity (consequentialism, then, figures as a kind of equivocation or casuistry), which works in terms of a communitarian system of obligations and responsibilities to ourselves, our fellow human beings, and to God.⁷⁸ Eliot tells us, “I wanted to concentrate on death and martyrdom” in writing *Murder* (PP 86). Martyrdom is predicated on the belief that one’s faith obligates one to bear witness (according to the *OED*, the etymology of the word *martyr* is *μάρτυς*—*witness*) even unto death. Martyrdom, in theological ethics, is a problem that can be expressed in the plain language of ends and means: Is the conscious choice of death a legitimate means for the end of preserving one’s own religious convictions and beliefs? Does deliberate self-sacrifice, in the name of religious faith, form a theologically coherent moral position? If so, what are martyrdom’s acceptable parameters? These are questions *Murder* addresses.

The spirit of self-sacrifice is fundamental to Eliot’s early critical writing. In “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” Eliot describes the “process of depersonalization” an artist must undergo if s/he is to achieve anything of true (for Eliot, universal) significance: “What happens is a continual surrender of himself as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable. The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality” (SE 17). In “The Function of Criticism,” Eliot claims that it is only in relation to the ““organic wholes”” that constitute the tradition of

⁷⁸ My sense of communitarianism owes much to Mary Ann Glendon’s wonderfully polemical study on the banalization of discourse on “rights” and the absence of a coextensive discourse on responsibilities. See her *Rights Talk: The Impoverishment of Political Discourse*. New York: Free Press, 1991.

European literature that “individual works of literary art, and the works of individual artists, have their significance”; the implication, then, is that “There is accordingly something outside of the artist to which he owes allegiance, a devotion to which he must surrender and sacrifice himself in order to earn and to obtain his unique position” (*SE* 24). There is a strong religious undercurrent to the self-sacrifice Eliot calls for in these two passages (especially in the tone of the latter, which uses the language of “surrender” to “something” that seems to suggest a supernatural being to whom “devotion” is owed), and it is bound up with martyrdom. Eliot argues, in effect, that great artists must martyr themselves for their art.⁷⁹

The Cocktail Party (1949), the most successful of the contemporary verse dramas Eliot takes to writing after the “dead end” (*PP* 84) of explicitly religious historical drama that is *Murder in the Cathedral*, provides an interesting dramatic foil to Eliot’s martyrology as embodied in *Murder*. Reilly (whose name, appropriately, is a pun on “wry” and “wily”), the mysterious guest/spiritual counselor of the play, helps a young woman, Celia, see beyond her “despair” and “hopelessness” towards life. He describes two ways of life, the first a happy bourgeois domestic life, declaring “It is a good life” (*CPP* 417).⁸⁰ About the second he is much more cryptic:

There *is* another way, if you have the courage.
The first I could describe in familiar terms

⁷⁹ For Randy Malamud, the parallels between religious martyrdom and artistic martyrdom beg the question: to what extent did Thomas Stearns Eliot make an identification with his twelfth-century namesake, Thomas à Becket? See his note on how Eliot’s major biographers draw the connection, *Where the Words Are Valid*, pp. 192-193.

⁸⁰ All quotations from Eliot’s drama and poetry are from *The Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot*. (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), abbreviated in parenthetical citation as *CPP*.

Because you have seen it, as we all have seen it,
Illustrated, more or less, in the lives of those about us.
The second is unknown, and so requires faith—
The kind of faith that issues from despair;
You will know very little until you get there;
You will journey blind. But the way leads towards possession
Of what you have sought for in the wrong place. (*CPP* 418)

Reilly sends Celia off to become a nun and a martyr. In the cocktail party of the last act (which completes a symmetry with the one of the first act), the characters of the play learn that Celia “had joined an order. A very austere one” (*CPP* 433). She had gone to Kinkanja to work as a nurse, and when conflict broke out between the group of converts whom she tended and the indigenous “heathen,”⁸¹ Celia was killed: “But from what we know of local practices / It would seem that she must have been crucified / Very near an ant-hill” (434).

According to David E. Jones, “true martyrdom requires the fulfillment of two halves of a pattern. The first half must be fulfilled by the martyr himself; he must learn to accept his martyrdom in the right spirit” (62). Theologically, the legitimacy of martyrdom is contingent on the spirit with which one accepts martyrdom. Its parameters relate to the extent to which the martyr surrenders up his/her will to God. As Christ surrenders Himself totally to God, so must those who follow in His footsteps, dying in witness to revealed truth. There must be a purity of will. Martyrdom cannot be entered into haphazardly: its power depends on the martyr’s choosing to accept his/her destiny as

⁸¹ The relation between conversion and the non-Christian colonial Other in Eliot, both here and in *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*, is absolutely fascinating...and problematic. Cf. *Notes in Christianity and Culture*, pp. 99ff., 127ff., 137ff., and 165ff. Gauri Viswanathan’s work on conversion and colonialism sheds light on the matter; cf. *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity, and Belief*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1998.

only God can direct it. Reilly's attitude towards Celia's death is one of "satisfaction" (CPP 436). He explains.

So it was obvious
That here was a woman under sentence of death.
That was her destiny. The only question
Then was, what sort of death? *I* could not know;
Because it was for her to choose the way of life
To lead to death, and, without knowing the end
Yet choose the form of death. We know the death she chose.
I did not know she would die in this way;
She did not know. So all that I could do
Was to direct her in the way of preparation.
That way, which she accepted, led to this death.
And if that is not a happy death, what death is happy? (CPP 437)

You cannot will your own death. You cannot seek martyrdom. You can choose a "way" that may perhaps lead to death and martyrdom, but the end of martyrdom does not justify the means of choosing a "way" that can only lead to death. If martyrdom is your "destiny," the only choices you can make with respect to that destiny are to surrender your will to God's and to allow martyrdom to find you; you yourself may not seek it. —This is the moral and theological statement Eliot makes to us here.

Turning to the earlier play, will, choice, and spirit are of the utmost importance to the protagonist of *Murder in the Cathedral* as they dictate the legitimacy of his martyrdom. From the outset of the play, the women of the Chorus and Thomas share the premonition of catastrophe. Deferral and expectation characterize the temporal logic of the play:

Some malady is coming upon us. We wait, we wait,
And the saints and the martyrs wait, for those who shall be martyrs and
Saints.
Destiny waits in the hand of God, shaping the still unshapen:

I have seen these things in a shaft of sunlight. [...]
For us, the poor, there is no action,
But only to wait and to witness. (CPP 240)

We the audience wait as well, and the wait leads to weight, psychic and theatrical pressure in need of action for release. The release the play finally provides us from the pressure of waiting and deferral—Thomas’ correction of spirit and surrendering up of will—is internal rather than external action. Raymond Williams remarks that Eliot’s general project is one of “trying to imagine a drama in which, essentially, states of consciousness would be an action.”⁸² More so than in the later contemporary verse plays, the dramaturgy of *Murder* is one of “states of consciousness,” of interiority. The essential action of the play has been performed by the end of the first act. Francis Fergusson writes, “the theological scene is presented as the sole reality; and in the realistic horrors of Part II everything moves by its machinery,” machinery the installation of which is the *raison d’etre* for the play.⁸³ The knights who murder Thomas in the Second Act merely fulfill the proper willing of destiny which itself constitutes the governing action of the entire play; put another way, they merely achieve the theatrical teleology of the play’s internal action.

More so than in the later contemporary verse plays, the dramaturgy of *Murder* is one of “states of consciousness,” of interiority, and this interiority relates to the play’s liturgical form. Christopher Innes writes, “The performance, incorporating prayers, the introits, a sermon and the offering of body and blood in martyrdom, is metaphorically a

⁸² *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1968. p. 175.

⁸³ *The Idea of a Theater*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1949. p. 216.

Mass (the church service celebrating Christ's sacrifice)."⁸⁴ In the twelfth-century medieval world during which this play is set, which is to say, in pre-Reformation England, the sacramentality of the Eucharist, temporally, was defined by presence, by the actual transformation (transubstantiation) of the host and wine into the corporeal body and blood of Christ (whereas, in the case of post-Reformation consubstantiation, the temporal definition of the Eucharist lies in its orientation towards the past, with the wine and host functioning as a symbolic reminder of the Christological event two thousand years ago). In scholastic theology, the consecrated bread and wine maintain the accidents of their anterior material forms but are in fact Christ's body and blood. That the two very different materialities can adhere together is a mystery, and the dramaturgy of *Murder* is one of mystery as well. The audience cannot peer into the depths of Becket's soul. We cannot witness the pride in his heart that would taint his will and negate his martyrdom (though not his death). We cannot see his will triumph over his pride, submitting itself wholly to God. These things, like the divine agency that transforms ordinary bread and wine into Christ's body and blood, are hidden, undisclosed to reason and the senses. In this sense, *Murder* is a modern example of the sacramental drama of the middle ages.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Christopher Innes. "T. S. Eliot (1888-1965): the drama of conversion." *Modern British Drama: The Twentieth Century*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2002. p. 468.

⁸⁵ For a fascinating overview of the controversial significance (and signification) of the Eucharist in the late Middle Ages, cf. David Aers, "The Sacrament of the Altar in the Making of Orthodox Christianity or 'Traditional Religion.'" *Sanctifying Signs: Making Christian Tradition in Late Medieval England*. Notre Dame: Notre Dame UP, 2004. pp. 1-28. For a brilliant meditation on absence, presence, medieval drama, and Eucharistic sacramentality, cf. Sarah Beckwith, *Signifying God: Social Relation and Symbolic Act in the York Corpus Christi Plays*. Chicago: Chicago UP, 2001.

However, we are given glimpses, like the Chorus' "shaft of sunlight," into the interiority of his being by the limited means of language.⁸⁶ We hear Thomas' cry of self-realization, "Is there no way, in my soul's sickness / Does not lead to damnation in pride?" (*CPP* 255), when the Fourth Tempter, after his dismissal of the first three, offers Thomas exactly that which he has been pursuing, the glory of sainthood and martyrdom: "King is forgotten, when another shall come: / Saint and Martyr rule from the tomb" (*CPP* 254). The limits of language we the audience confront do not absolve us of responsibility to "wait" and "witness" as the Chorus does. There is a spiritual trajectory which we, like the Chorus, are subject to, "from passivity to involvement to participation" (Williams 180). David E. Jones writes, "But as martyrdom requires the right attitude to God on the part of the martyr, so also it requires the right attitude on the part of the great mass of men" (67). The value of martyrdom is contingent on the spirit with which the martyr accepted his destiny. Yes, Thomas overcomes himself, and a nonconsequentialist order, essential for martyrdom to be accepted "in the right spirit," has been restored:

Now is my way clear, now is the meaning plain:
Temptation shall not come in this kind again.
The last temptation is the greatest treason:
To do the right thing for the wrong reason. (*CPP* 258)

⁸⁶ The intersection of *language* and *limit* recalls in *Sweeney Agonistes* the eponymous character's frustration with language: "But I've gotta use words when I talk to you" (*CPP* 125). Randy Malamud sets forth an interesting communitarian reading of Eliot's plays, from *Sweeney Agonistes* to *The Elder Statesman*, which understands the trajectory of Eliot's playwriting in terms of a dramaturgy of community made possible by language, however limited. Cf. *Where the Words Are Valid: T. S. Eliot's Communities of Drama*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994.

The value of Thomas' martyrdom is contingent as well on its efficacy in the social order. We have a responsibility to his martyrdom because we are responsible for it. Thomas has an interesting speech before end of the first act:

I know that history at all times draws
The strangest consequence from remotest cause.
But for every evil, every sacrilege,
Crime, wrong, oppression and the axe's edge,
Indifference, exploitation, you, and you,
And you, must all be punished. So must you. (*CPP* 258-259).

The last "So must you" is ambiguous and richly suggestive. It is the fourth "you" and could be addressed to the Fourth Tempter. At the same time, its being grammatically removed from the rest of the long sentence which precedes it might also suggest a qualitatively different kind of stage direction. Perhaps Thomas directs that last "So must you" to the audience, to us.

Dramaturgically, then, we do not need the Knights' speeches to implicate us in Thomas' murder. Eliot writes, "in the speeches of the knights, who are quite aware that they are addressing an audience of people living eight hundred years after they themselves are dead, the platform prose is intended of course to have a special effect: to shock the audience out of their complacency" (*PP* 86).⁸⁷ The suddenness of the transition from verse to prose removes us from the liturgical world of the play, and that "shock" value is important. In breaking the fourth wall, the knights' prose rhetoric collapses the difference between the temporal order of the stage and the temporal order of

⁸⁷ In a begrudging admission of Shaw's having potentially been a model for the Knights's speeches to the audience, Eliot continues, "But this is a kind of trick: that is, a device tolerable only in one play and of no use for any other. I may, for aught I know, have been slightly under the influence of *St. Joan*" (*PP* 86-87).

the audience: the historical distance between the medieval knight and modern viewer is bridged. We share a presence, and therein we share guilt and culpability: “We have served your interests; we merit your applause; and if there is any guilt whatever in this matter, you must share it with us” (*CPP* 279). More than shock and implication of guilt with the knights, the knights’ defense of their actions aligns us with Thomas: “it is, in effect, the temptation of the audience, corresponding to the temptation of Thomas in Part I, as is subtly indicated by the doubling of the Tempters and the Knights” (Jones 61-62). Like Thomas, we must not be deluded by a consequentialist equivocation that does not call out wrong as wrong. W. B. Worthen makes an excellent point about the relationship between the audience and the play it witnesses and, ultimately, participates in: “For *Murder in the Cathedral* is a play *about* its audience, who, like the play’s protagonist and like the choral audience onstage, come to know that ‘action is suffering / And suffering action.’”⁸⁸

Our “participation,” like that of the Chorus, takes the form of acknowledgement, the recognition that Thomas has died for us and that his death makes a demand on us to live morally better.⁸⁹ Theologically, martyrdom is a figural repetition of the

⁸⁸ W. B. Worthen. *Modern Drama and the Rhetoric of Theater*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: California UP, 1992. p. 123. Christopher Innes explicates the relationship between action and suffering: “Indeed, the whole play is based on the paradox that ‘action is suffering / And suffering is action’, derived from the Latin root of patience/passivity in the verb *patio*: to suffer. So the protagonist’s usual dramatic function is reversed, his objective being to avoid willed activity—to such an extent indeed that the original actor of the role ‘asked ... how the positive character of Becket could be reconciled with so passive a protagonist?’” (Innes 468).

⁸⁹ Stanley Cavell’s meditation on skepticism and the distinction between knowledge and acknowledgement grounds my own deployment of the latter term, with its moral and ethical implications; see his “Knowing and Acknowledging.” *Must We Mean What We Say?* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1976. pp. 238-266.

Christological event of crucifixion.⁹⁰ In *The Cocktail Party*, Celia's own crucifixion carries the same analogical force as Christ's: it is the negation of death as an ending and the transformation of death into a beginning. One character, Peter, mourns Celia's death:

And, of course, I wanted to do something for Celia—
But what mattered was, that Celia was alive.
And now it's all worthless. Celia's not alive.

Another, Lavinia, consoles him:

No, it's not all worthless, Peter. You've only just begun.
I mean, this only brings you to the point
At which you *must* begin. (*CPP* 435)

⁹⁰ My conceptualization of the crucifixion in terms of Christological *event* is influenced by Alain Badiou's consideration of New Testament Pauline scripture, the foundational texts, according to Badiou, in the long history of Western universalist thought in which Eliot features as the greatest modernist exemplar: "But in spite of everything, when one reads Paul, one is stupefied by the paucity of traces left in his prose by the era, genres, and circumstances. There is in this prose, under the imperative of the event, something solid and timeless, something that, precisely because it is a question of orienting a thought toward the universal *in its suddenly emerging singularity*, but independently of all anecdote, is intelligible to us without having to resort to cumbersome historical mediations (which is far from being the case for many passages in the Gospels, let alone for the opaque Apocalypse)" (36). The key difference here between Eliot and (Badiou's) Paul lies in the fact that, for Eliot, the Christological event *par excellence* is the *Crucifixion*, the death of Christ; whereas for Paul (according to Badiou) it is, more magnanimously, the *Resurrection*: "the Resurrection [...] is not, in Paul's own eyes, of the order of fact, falsifiable or demonstrable. It is pure event, opening of an epoch, transformation of the relations between the possible and the impossible. For the interest of Christ's resurrection does not lie in itself, as it would in the case of the particular, or miraculous, fact. Its genuine meaning is that it testifies to the possible victory over death, a death that Paul envisages [...] not in terms of facticity, but in terms of subjective disposition. Whence the necessity of constantly linking resurrection to *our* resurrection, or proceeding from singularity to universality and vice versa: "If the dead do not resurrect, Christ is not resurrected either. And if Christ is not resurrected, your faith is in vain" (Cor. I.15.16). In contrast to the fact, the event is measurable only in accordance with the universal multiplicity whose possibility it prescribes. It is in this sense that it is grace, and not history" (45). For Eliot, martyrdom is and is of necessity a profoundly communitarian event; yet, its communitarian reach is of a second-order quality, for only the exceptional man, like Thomas, can spiritually transact with Christ as a martyr vis à vis the crucifixion. For Badiou, the communitarianism of the resurrection, however, is of a first-order quality in which all can participate in Christ equally—which is to say, democratically. *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*. Trans. Ray Brassier. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2003.

As Christ's death, in Christian doctrine, marks a new beginning, a new point of commencement for human history in its making available to us the possibility of redemption and spiritual renewal,⁹¹ so Celia's death offers a new beginning for Peter.

In *Murder in the Cathedral*, Eliot concentrates on martyrdom, treating it in terms of ends and means; he concentrates on death, as well, treating it in terms of endings and beginnings. The "Interlude" between the two parts of the play, like the knights' speeches, is another departure from verse into prose. The occasion is Christmas Day, 1170, and Thomas is giving his Christmas sermon.⁹² This Interlude, to an extent, stands as *Murder's* self-exegesis. Thomas shifts from the question of Christ's Peace to the Disciples to whom he left it, men who died as martyrs preaching the Gospel. Thomas elucidates the purposefulness of martyrdom:

A Christian martyr is never an accident, for Saints are not made by accident. Still less is a Christian martyrdom the effect of a man's will to become a Saint, as a man by willing and contriving may become a ruler of men. A martyrdom is always the design of God, for His love of men, to warn them and to lead them, to bring them back to his ways. It is never the design of man; for the true martyr is he who has become the instrument of God, who has lost his will in the will of God, and who no longer desires anything for himself, not even the glory of being a martyr. (*CPP* 261)

⁹¹ It was orthodox doctrine that, before Christ's resurrection and triumph over death, the souls of the dead were denied presence with God in Heaven. Hence, the mythology of the Harrowing of Hell and the mythology of Canto IV of Dante's *Inferno*.

⁹² In his essay "Lancelot Andrewes" (1926), Eliot advises readers interested in appreciating Andrewes' prose and devotion but too apprehensive towards the five-volumes devoted to Andrewes in *The Library of Anglo-Catholic Theology* to get their hands on a copy of *Seventeen Sermons on the Nativity*. Eliot writes, "It is an additional advantage that these sermons are all on the same subject, the Incarnation; they are the Christmas Day sermons preached before King James between 1605 and 1624" (*SE* 346-347). Eliot acknowledges the influence Andrewes' Christmas sermons must have had on Becket's Christmas Day sermon in *Murder*. Cf. *To Criticize the Critic*, p. 20.

Just as Thomas is speaking to his audience about himself, so is the play speaking to its audience about itself. Strictly from this latter metatheatrical perspective, however, the Interlude is extraneous.

The Interlude is not without worth or function, however; its decisive contribution to the intellectual, moral, and religious integration of the play is its treatment of beginnings and endings. Thomas tells us that the Mass performed on the day of Christ's birth, in its Liturgy of the Sacrament, the Eucharist, is a performance of Christ's death: "For whenever Mass is said, we re-enact the Passion and Death of Our Lord; and on this Christmas Day we do this in celebration of His Birth. So that at the same moment we rejoice in His Coming for the salvation of men, and offer again to God His Body and Blood in sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world" (*CPP* 260). The simultaneity of Christ's birth and death in the liturgy is a fundamental paradox, and Thomas acknowledges it: "Beloved, as the World sees, this is to behave in a strange fashion. For who in the World will both mourn and rejoice at once and for the same reason? For either joy will be overborne by mourning, or mourning will be cast out by joy; so it is only in these our Christian mysteries that we can rejoice and mourn at once for the same reason." The liturgy allows us to transcend the paradox of simultaneous birth and death, beginning and ending. Ultimately, Thomas intimates an alternative temporal and historical metaphysics—eternity. Just as Thomas' (and Eliot's) nonconsequentialism is a moral philosophy that organizes the problem of ends and means according to an absolute religious truth, Thomas' idealization of sacramental time is a

philosophy of history and temporality that transcends the problem of endings and beginnings according to an indefinite divine eternity.⁹³

“Religious Drama” is animated by polemic against Liberalism and Modernity; *Murder* also carries a polemical force. Carol H. Smith writes, “Eliot saw in the events leading to the martyrdom of Thomas Becket a situation involving the conflict between the church and world analogous to the modern struggle of the church against its enemies.”⁹⁴ For Eliot, “world” is synonymous with modernity, both ours and the “Cimmerian darkness” of Shakespeare’s early modernity, “more remote to us” than the medieval period itself, with which “church” is synonymous, both church and medievalism representing a historical-imaginative bulwark against the violence and disorder of a modernity in which we are complicit and indicted. The church and the Middle Ages offer two things for Eliot worth defending: 1) a nonconsequentialist systematic ethics that orders the all-too-frequently difficult problem of ends and means, right and wrong; and 2) a dispensation of grace that permits an analogical transcendence of history and time that, in its gift of eternity, integrates beginnings and endings, past and future, life and death. *Murder* allegorizes the conflict between competing conceptualizations of historical realities, the one belonging to Shakespeare, the one

⁹³ The fact of “sacramental time” allows William V. Spanos to give a specifically figural reading of *Murder* that easily ranks as the most sophisticated piece on Eliot’s play I have read. See his “*Murder in the Cathedral: The Figura as Mimetic Principle.*” *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Murder in the Cathedral: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. David R. Clark. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1971. pp. 54-72; and *The Christian Tradition in Modern British Verse Drama: The Poetics of Sacramental Time*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1967.

⁹⁴ Carol H. Smith. *T. S. Eliot’s Dramatic Theory and Practice: From Sweeney Agonistes to The Elder Statesman*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1963. p. 92.

belonging to Eliot and his audience, the one belonging to God. It is clear which one Eliot thinks should win, for a return to a medieval sense of spiritual order would bring healing to a world in need of redemption.

Much like Eliot's engagement with and evasion of Shakespeare, the anagogical impulse is omnipresent in Eliot's critical and imaginative writing. His writings on the poet-critic; his historical progressivism, which is to say, his philosophy of history; his early modernism with respect to Shakespeare, the Elizabethan dramatists, and the metaphysical poets; his medievalism with respect to religious drama; his primitivism with respect to dance, liturgy, and the origins of theater; his own practice as a verse dramatist—they are all touched by the anagogical, an attention to past and future, to endings and beginnings, and a desire to transcend the different limits set by endings and beginnings. While Eliot's concern with the poetry and drama not only contemporary with (the Elizabethan dramatists) but anterior (medieval drama) and posterior (Milton and the seventeenth-century poets) to Shakespeare is frequently problematic with respect to its treatment of actual historical reality and its conservative ideological animus against a modernity embodied most ominously in Eliot's imagination as the non-Christian Other, Eliot's preoccupation with the poetry and drama that existed as the past, present, and future in relation to Shakespeare is at least theatrically generative, producing a verse drama unparalleled in twentieth-century British drama in its power of spiritual concentration, formal construction, and ethical interrogation. In terms of Eliot's position with respect to his own twentieth-century contemporaneity—that is, Eliot's periodicity—his anagogical investment qualifies him, by his own standards, as not just an early

modernist or a medieval modernist but as a high modernist. In “The Metaphysical Poets,” Eliot famously writes, “It is not a permanent necessity that poets should be interested in philosophy, or in any other subject. We can only say that it appears likely that poets in our civilization, as it exists at present”—at the height of the high modernist moment—“must be *difficult*” (*SE* 289). Eliot is constantly working to assimilate and integrate endings and beginnings, the past and the future, life, death, and, in his cosmos, the life to come—and this *is* difficult, as difficult as the scientific paradigm shifts that occurred in his lifetime and that themselves inform his poetics⁹⁵—as difficult as articulating a physics of faith, a calculus of the Christological, a spiritual trigonometry that seeks to triangulate time—a poem that succeeds in doing so:

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps in time future
And time future contained in time past. (*CPP* 171)⁹⁶

⁹⁵ Daniel Albright. *Quantum Poetics: Yeats, Pound, Eliot, and the Science of Modernism*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1997. pp. 218-287.

⁹⁶ It is worth remembering that these, the opening lines of “Burnt Norton,” the first of the *Four Quartets*, were excised by Eliot at the suggestion of his director, E. Martin Browne, from *Murder in the Cathedral*. For Browne’s first-hand account of his work with Eliot on *Murder*, see his *The Making of T. S. Eliot’s Plays*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1969. pp. 34-89; also, for a discussion of the Eliot-Browne collaboration, see Richard Badenhansen, *T. S. Eliot and the Art of Collaboration*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2004. pp. 149-160.

4. Chapter Three: W. H. Auden and Peter Brook: Trans- and Postnational Commentaries on Shakespeare

This chapter takes a different approach to the modernist dynamics of engaging and evading Shakespeare from what the one I have taken thus far. Whereas the discussions of Shaw and Eliot were synoptic, addressing much of each writer's career, this discussion will be more targeted, focused on single engagements with Shakespeare, poetic and theatrical performances that, implicitly or explicitly, announce themselves as commentaries on specific Shakespearean dramas. This chapter discusses W. H. Auden's poetic tract *The Sea and the Mirror: A Commentary on Shakespeare's The Tempest* and Peter Brook's ground-breaking 1962 Royal Shakespeare Company production of *King Lear*.

With respect to Auden, one reason for the change in approach has to do with a desire to think beyond the canons of dramatic literature themselves, at least insofar as they have been traditionally constituted as the published writings of playwrights. With respect to Brook, though his *Lear* has received its fair share of commentators, I myself would like to engage with Shakespearean Performance Studies and do theater history, insofar as the ephemerality of theater ever allows one to do so.

What my readings of these two cultural productions share in common is a positioning of British theatrical nationalism further and further at the edge of what it means to be British—and at the edge of whether or not it means anything at all. Nationalism and the nation itself are the objects of inquiry here, and I hope I demonstrate

the ways in which Auden's *The Sea and the Mirror* and Brook's *King Lear* challenge and even deconstruct those terms—the one by exemplifying a transnational poetics predicated on hybridity, the interpenetration of form; the other by instantiating the creation of a postnational theatricality in response to geopolitical and existential dilemma, the fact of the Bomb. So much of the best scholarship at the intersection of Theater Studies and Modernist Studies is work that takes a broad view with respect to how theater and theatricality are “done.” In thinking through how Auden's text performs a kind of theater and in demonstrating how Brook's production explodes theatrical genre altogether, I hope that to be operating at that intersection as well.

4.1 W. H. Auden, Transnationalism, and the Interpenetration of Form in The Sea and the Mirror: A Commentary on Shakespeare's The Tempest

In his 1953 address, “American Literature and the American Language,” T. S. Eliot reflects on the matters of his own national identity and asserts its inverse relationship to W. H. Auden's: “whichever Auden is, I suppose I must be the other.”¹ There is little wonder that Eliot would figure his identity in terms of Auden's. Eliot had played an important role in launching Auden's career. Having just left Oxford, Auden submitted his first stab at dramatic writing, the short modern revenge tragedy *Paid on Both Sides: A Charade*, to Eliot for publication in *The Criterion* on the last day of the year, 1928; Eliot published it in 1930. Eliot gets a second edition of Auden's *Poems*

¹ *To Criticize the Critic and Other Essays*. 1965. Lincoln, NE: Nebraska UP, 1991.

(first edition private printing by Stephen Spender) in print in 1930, as well. “This fellow is about the best poet that I have discovered in several years,” Eliot said of his young would-be protégé.²

The modernist verse dramatists associated with Eliot as his contemporaries in the 1930s and after are often the poets of the Mercury Theatre (having been revived after World War II by Eliot’s theatrical collaborator E. Martin Browne): Anne Ridler, Norman Nicholson, Ronald Duncan, and, most of all, Christopher Fry. Plays such as Fry’s *The Lady’s Not for Burning* (1948) and Eliot’s *The Cocktail Party* (1949) actually enjoyed transatlantic commercial success in the mainstream theater.³ Theirs does not constitute a transnational theater, however; the travel of those plays across the Atlantic is the mobility of a commodity from an exporter to an importer: the nation and nationalism are not at stake in their content or form.

This is different with Auden, the exemplar of a radical interwar theatrical avant-garde. It is an unfortunate fact of theater history that, though well remembered as Britain’s foremost poet of the 1930s, he is rarely remembered as one of the most important British playwrights of the 1930s, as well. Yet drama, performance, theater and theatricality, like history, politics, ethics, and the practice of everyday life, were of central concern to Auden throughout his career. Christopher Innes writes,

Auden focused consistently on opportunities for wider discourse and immediate emotional impact offered by various

² Quoted in Humphrey Carpenter, *W. H. Auden: A Bibliography*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981. p. 95.

³ Cf. William V. Spanos, *The Christian Tradition in Modern British Verse Drama: The Poetics of Sacramental Time*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1967. pp. 252-324; and Christopher Innes, *Modern British Drama: The Twentieth Century*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2001. pp. 477-482.

kinds of performance. He started writing his first dramatic script on leaving Oxford at the age of twenty-one, and was collaborating on an operatic libretto in 1973, the year of his death. There was hardly a year when Auden was not working on some kind of performance text.⁴

With respect to Auden's commitment to drama and theater, it is telling, I think, that the very first item in the standard edition of Auden's *Collected Poems* is *Paid on Both Sides*.⁵

Throughout the late 1930s, Auden grows increasingly politically disaffected with his native Britain; along with Isherwood, he emigrates to the United States in January 1939. Leaving the Group Theatre and the emergent modernist verse drama scene in Britain behind him, Auden is rarely at a loss for opportunities for theatrical expression. Shortly after arriving in America, Auden writes a libretto for an opera on the life of one of the giants of American folklore, *Paul Bunyan*, for his friend, the composer Benjamin Britten, which receives its premiere in 1941.⁶ He also collaborates with Bertolt Brecht in the U.S. on a production of John Webster *The Duchess of Malfi* for Broadway (prem. October 1946), a collaboration which Humphrey Carpenter characterizes as "quite fruitless."⁷ More importantly, with Chester Kallman, who would remain Auden's partner for much of the rest of his life, Auden wrote several libretti for major operas by the

⁴ Christopher Innes, "Auden's plays and dramatic writings: theatre, film and opera." *The Cambridge Companion to W. H. Auden*. Ed. Stan Smith. Cambridge, UK: 2004. p. 82.

⁵ Auden, W. H. *Collected Poems: The Centennial Edition*. Ed. Edward Mendelson. New York: Modern Library, 2007.

⁶ For a fictional account of the two men late in life, cf. Alan Bennett's most recent play, *The Habit of Art* (prem. November 2009).

⁷ *W. H. Auden: A Biography*, p. 338. For a fuller discussion of Auden's contentious relationship to Brecht, cf. John Willett, "Auden and Brecht." *Transformations in Modern European Drama*. Ed. Ian Donaldson. Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1983. pp. 162-176.

composers Hans Werner Henze and Igor Stravinsky, most notably the libretto for the latter's *The Rake's Progress* (prem. 1951).

However, while still in Britain, Auden is as much a presence in some of the same theatrical circles in the 1930s as Eliot is. When choreographer Rupert Doone's Group Theatre mounts a production of Eliot's fragment play *Sweeney Agonistes* in 1934, it is staged in a double bill with Auden's *The Dance of Death*. No less aesthetically daring than the Eliot fragment, *The Dance of Death*, a scathing satire of bourgeois Britain in the interwar years, demonstrates the strong influence of the German expressionists, with whose work he had become acquainted during his year abroad in Berlin from 1928 to 1929; it might well be able to lay claim to being British theatrical expressionism's greatest legacy. Eliot himself "imitated and parodied" *The Dance of Death* in his 1934 church pageant, *The Rock*, finding his younger contemporary's example inappropriate for the ritual solemnity towards which his theatricality was shifting (before turning direction again, towards modernity itself).⁸ In collaboration with friend and sometime lover, the novelist Christopher Isherwood, Auden wrote three additional plays for the Group Theatre—*The Dog Beneath the Skin* (prem. 1935), *The Ascent of F6* (prem. 1936), and *On the Frontier* (prem. 1938).⁹ Commenting on this body of work and Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*, Mick Wallis writes, "If Auden and Isherwood's practice of the poetic

⁸ Michael Sidnell, *Dances of Death: The Group Theatre of London in the Thirties*. London: Faber and Faber, 1984. p. 95.

⁹ As of 2010, no scholarly monograph on Auden's (and Isherwood's) drama has been published. One can only hope that changes sometime in the near future. In the meanwhile, the best place to look for history and analysis remains Sidnell's *Dances of Death*; also, cf. Glenda Leeming, *Poetic Drama*. New York: St. Martin's, 1989. pp. 138-151.

stage is centrifugal, deconstructive, Eliot's practice here is centripetal, totalising."¹⁰ Auden's revolutionary politics of the 1930s dovetail nicely with a fascination with and commitment to drama. To put it differently, the performativity, the impulse towards constructive action, at the heart of Auden's Marxism lent itself naturally to an avant-garde aesthetics of performance and theatricality.¹¹ Auden writes in a May 1934 unsigned review of Priscilla Thoulless's *Modern Poetic Drama*, a collection of verse plays by Yeats and the Georgian poets,

[M]odern English poetic drama has been of three kinds: the romantic sham-Tudor which has occasionally succeeded for a short time on the strength of the spectacle; the cosmic-philosophical which theatrically has always been a complete flop; and the high-brow chamber-music drama, artistically much the best, but a somewhat etiolated blossom. And it is difficult to believe that the poets are really satisfied with the solution.¹²

It is against these three paradigms for poetic drama that Auden's theatricality asserts itself. The drama of T. S. Eliot constitutes a nationalist project for Eliot that seeks to reconstitute the spiritual identity of the nation in conservative (sometimes, verging towards fascist) Christian terms. For Tom, the American poet from St. Louis, standing at the vanguard of a medieval modernist English verse drama that stood in opposition to the ideological horrors of liberal modernity is as much a self-theatricalizing stance to take as

¹⁰ "Social Commitment and Aesthetic Experiment." *The Cambridge History of British Theatre, Vol. 3: Since 1895*. Ed. Baz Kershaw. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2004. p. 185.

¹¹ According to Justin Replogle, Marx offers Auden "a theory of human nature" that not only complements (and at times even displaces) his investment in psychoanalysis but also "laid the foundation for a conception of human existence that, incorporated into and transformed by Christian theology, became the central theme of his later poetry." "Auden's Marxism." *PMLA* 80:5 (December 1965): 595.

¹² Quoted in Christopher Innes, "Auden's plays and dramatic writings: theatre, film and opera." *The Cambridge Companion to W. H. Auden*. Ed. Stan Smith. Cambridge, UK: 2004. p. 83.

a literary-theatrical one. From such a position, his own recently-acquired English national identity is assured.

If Eliot's theater represents a anti-modernist nationalism, then Auden's theater represents a counter- (though not anti-)nationalist modernism. Though Eliot and Auden both ground their drama in ritual, music, and dance, Eliot's theatricality looks to the medieval and classical past in *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935) and *The Family Reunion* (1939); Auden's theatricality vests itself in a forward-looking utopianism in order to better engage the political realities of modernity by satirizing moral callousness, dehumanization, class exploitation, and bourgeois materialism and to attack the provincial "Little Englandism" nationalism upon which, in political-institutional terms, they are predicated: "In the case of Auden [...] Englishness finally stands for the cloying and claustrophobic legacy to be left behind on the way to lyric cosmopolitanism.¹³ Jed Esty reads the antagonism between Auden's poetics and Eliot's in terms of generational conflict with respect to the meaning of Englishness in what is becoming a post-imperial nation, a conflict that literary historians have not accurately assessed. For Auden and his generation, "the end of British hegemony was a *fait accompli* [...] and therefore not the occasion for searching for attempts to manage the transition between imperial universalism and national particularism. [...] The difference between in historical perspective between the modernist [i.e., Eliot] and Auden generations helps account for

¹³ Jed Esty, *A Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Culture in England*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2004. p. 216.

the former's interest in reviving English culture and the latter's interest in eulogizing it."¹⁴ With respect to the binary of inversion between Auden and Eliot, Esty writes,

Auden's career offers what is perhaps the clearest instance of the problem of national culture for English writers after modernism [as exemplified by Eliot and his generation]. Partly because of the famous symmetry between Auden's removal to America and Eliot's self-styled repatriation to England, Auden seems to epitomize the internationalist tide pulling against [...] Anglocentrism[.] Auden leaves an early career rooted in national tradition to become a roving poet-without-borders, while Eliot leaves the cosmopolitan and cross-cultural orientation of his early career in order to root himself in a national tradition.¹⁵

Although Auden's career suggest a poetic and theatrical subjectivity that seeks to transcend nationalism, that is too easy a summation of his trajectory. For Auden as for Eliot, national affiliation has its implications in literary form, the "relation to its audience" mediating between them. Hence, the theatrical form of Auden's work for the Group Theatre, though satirizing the British bourgeoisie, what Britain at the end of its imperial power had become, represents a genuinely nationalist form, in the sense that what is at stake is the nation as an imagined community to which one belongs. Though counter-nationalist, it is not anti-nationalist: "Auden's political engagement in the thirties is inseparable from a thematic interest in the condition of England and from an aesthetic stake in the social, collaborative elements of drama."¹⁶

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 216.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 217.

According to Nicholas Jenkins, the poetry that Auden writes in 1939 after emigrating to the U.S. represents a “post-national” poetry, one that finds, in the figure of the recently-deceased Jewish psychoanalyst in the elegy “In Memory of Sigmund Freud,” a signifier for the “condition of exile, uprootedness and mobility (poetic and otherwise)” that is homologous with Auden’s own.¹⁷ Against this assessment of Auden’s as a post-nationalist poetry, I want to argue that Auden’s investment in the nation-state never disappears. Rather, Auden’s poetics transmutes from a nationalist poetics and theatricality in the 1930s to a transnational poetics and theatricality in the 1940s in which, frequently, theatricality and poetics interpenetrate to create hybrid formal constructions. Auden’s British theatrical modernism becomes a transnational dramaturgical modernism.

What interests me here, then, with respect to Auden’s career as dramatist after his relocation from Britain to America, is less his work as a writer of opera libretti than his work as a poet who produced some of the most impressive long poems (a term used loosely here) of the mid-century, poetry that followed his 1940 spiritual crisis and conversion to Episcopalianism and reflected his new-found Christian faith, poetry such as *For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio* (written 1941-42), *The Age of Anxiety: A Baroque Eclogue* (written 1944-46), and, most important to me here, *The Sea and the Mirror: A Commentary on Shakespeare’s The Tempest* (written 1942-44). Following Esty, what interests me are questions of form. Auden’s *The Sea and the Mirror* performs

¹⁷ “Writing ‘Without Roots’: Auden, Eliot, and Post-national Poetry.” *Something We Have That They Don’t: British and American Poetic Relations since 1925*. Eds. Steve Clark and Mark Ford. Iowa City: Iowa UP, 2004. pp. 75-76.

a commentary on *The Tempest* as modernist Shakespearean closet drama. It participates in what Martin Puchner has called modernism's "Stage Fright," the creative antitheatricality essential to the innovation of theatrical modernism.¹⁸ To put it differently, incorporating a variety of lyric forms, prose, criticism, and drama, forms associated with print culture rather than performance, the interpenetration of form in *The Sea and the Mirror* creates a hybrid text that allegorizes a transnational universalism.¹⁹ In so doing, *The Sea and the Mirror* represents both an engagement with and evasion of Shakespeare, because to problematize the nation and nationalism, as a transnational universalism does, is to destabilize the relationship between Shakespeare and a proprietary British cultural identity and ideology: it is to make Shakespeare both British and American.

Written in three parts with a preface, "The Stage Manager to the Critics" and postscript, "Ariel to Caliban. Echo by the Prompter," *The Sea and the Mirror* is comprised of a series of theatrical monologues as the dramatic personae of Shakespeare's play reveal their themselves, sometimes in passages addressed to one another, as with Part I, "Prospero to Ariel," sometimes in dramatic monologues addressed directly to the text's audience, such as the long prose monologue of Part III, "Caliban to the Audience." Auden could have written the piece as an actual dramatic script for theatrical

¹⁸ Cf. *Stage Fright: Modernism, Anti-Theatricality, and Drama*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2002.

¹⁹ Auden wrote formal Shakespearean criticism as Professor of Poetry at Oxford, 1956-1961; those lectures are published under the heading "The Shakespearian City" in *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays*. New York: Random House, 1962. His lectures on Shakespeare while teaching at The New School in New York from 1946 to 1947 have been published as *Lectures on Shakespeare*. Ed. Arthur Kirsch. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2000.

performance (Caliban's monologue would be a bravura piece for *any* actor, much like Molly Bloom's monologue at the end of Joyce's *Ulysses*), yet he situates his dramatic text squarely within the bibliographic confines of a book.

The uneasy relationship between, on the one hand, text, print, and the audience-as-reader and, on the other, theater, performance, and the audience-as-spectator has received much critical treatment in recent years. Julie Stone Peters, Martin Puchner, Alan Ackerman, and W. B. Worthen have reshaped the discourse around the so-called "stage-page" divide, in effect, deconstructing the binary altogether to point to the inextricability, even the interpenetration of genre and media, of text and performance.²⁰ Worthen's work on poetry, performance, and drama provides the theoretical means by which to read *The Sea and the Mirror's* political form. Much modern poetry exhibits "stage fright": it resists performance. It is at its furthest remove from authenticity at the moment of performance, the poetry reading.²¹ Yet, when a performance is translated into print by means of the publication of its script as a book, it tends to look like poetry. Worthen writes, "Performance writing sometimes dramatizes a startling use of print: it seems to resist the conventional forms of printed (and stage) drama by adopting the

²⁰ Cf. Julie Stone Peters, *The Theatre of the Book, 1480-1880: Print, Text, and Performance in Europe*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000; Puchner, *Stage Fright*; Alan Ackerman and Martin Puchner, Eds., *Against Theatre: Creative Destructions on the Modernist Stage*. New York: Palgrave, 2006; W. B. Worthen, *Print and the Poetics of Modern Drama*. Cambridge UK: Cambridge UP, 2005. I see Worthen's book as an extension of his 1997 *Shakespeare and the Authority of Performance*; whereas the latter book tests the limits of situating theatrical authority in Shakespeare with the figures of the director, the actor, and the performance-oriented Shakespeare critic, the former tests authority as a construct of the page—which is to say, a value that privileges the author, as mediated by the practices and practitioners that assemble books as materials objects whose conventions determine meaning. I regret that I did not have time to read his just-published *Drama: Between Poetry and Performance*.

²¹ *The Print and Poetics of Modern Drama*, pp. 131ff.

familiar strategies of printed poetry.”²² I want to suggest that what performance does on the page is it colonizes the page. The colonialist is a useful metaphor for how *The Sea and the Mirror* as closet drama, as printed performance operates. According to Terence Hawkes, the colonialist and the dramatist are homologous with one another. “A colonialist,” he writes

acts essentially as a dramatist. He imposes the “shape” of his own culture, *embodied in his speech*, on the new world, and makes that world recognizable, habitable, “natural,” able to speak his language;

simultaneously,

the dramatist is metaphorically a colonialist. His art penetrates new areas of experience, his language expands the boundaries of our culture, and makes the new territory over in its own image. His “raids on the inarticulate” open up new worlds for the imagination.²³

Auden and *The Sea and the Mirror* ironize the triumphalism of the directional trajectory of colonial power, and in so doing, problematize identity. Certainly, there is a critical narrative to be written that figures Auden as a colonialist—who, like a dramatist, comes to a foreign land, “a new world,” America, that he will reshape through language. Yet, Auden does not reshape American poetry in the (always utopian) image of “his own culture” because he disavows that culture; nonetheless, is it possible to say that the poetry he writes after 1939 is absolutely American, pure, uncontaminated by his filiative British culture, the Caliban to his Prospero, “This thing of darkness I / Acknowledge mine”

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 101. Worthen’s key example is the published books of the one-woman shows of Anna Deavere Smith.

²³ Quoted in Stephen Greenblatt, “Learning to Curse: Aspects of Linguistic Colonialism in the Sixteenth Century.” *Learning to Curse: Essays in Early Modern Culture*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge, 2007. p. 33.

(5.1.578-579)? His writing is neither American nor British but both, transnational. The hybridity of *The Sea and the Mirror* as a modernist Shakespearean closet drama, a printed poetic performance, allegorizes its transnationalism,

In a different but related register, Mary Luckhurst participates in this discourse on the relationship between print and performance. She explicates a key term for understanding the stage-page divide, one of the most difficult terms to define in theater practice, the term *dramaturgy*. Luckhurst clarifies the term, along with its attendants *dramaturgy*, *literary manager*, and *literary management*, terms which, in practice, mean many different things to many different people but which generally correspond to a range of specific material practices that have developed since the Enlightenment into official artistic and bureaucratic positions regarded—especially in the last ten-to-fifteen years—as necessary institutional presences in different theater cultures throughout Europe and, increasingly, the United States as well. I would like to appropriate the term from this discourse pertaining to theatrical practice. Luckhurst traces the etymological career of *dramaturgy*, stressing its historical tension between theory (dramatic literature and textuality) and practice (theatrical production and performance), as well as its emphasis on process. To resituate *dramaturgy* from a term that describes a kind of practice to one that describes a kind of theoretical category, I would like to instantiate *dramaturgy* as the name for a formal category, one that represents the point of intersection between text and performance. If Peters, Puchner, Ackerman, and Worthen have, in effect, deconstructed the “stage-page” binary, *dramaturgy* is the supplement which points to the

interpenetration, even inextricability, of genre and media, of text and performance.

Dramaturgy is theatrical poetics.²⁴

There is an ironic homology to be drawn between the dramaturgical status of *The Sea and the Mirror* and Auden's transnational identity. In the introduction to her book, Luckhurst asserts that the work of dramaturgs has been "under-appreciated" and "overlooked"; the study of dramaturgy, then, "reveals secret histories and seeks to make visible what has been rendered invisible."²⁵ Her methodology is the creation of a new theater history that understands the dramaturg, the agent of literary management who adapts, translates, and selects the plays for institutional production, as essential in the development of modern dramatic literatures and theatrical institutions, artistic traditions whose development historically has been coextensive with broader nationalist political development.²⁶ Dramaturgy, as a practical category, then, is ideologically aligned with nationalism. Yet, as a formal category of theatrical poetics, one that is a hybrid that performs drama as print culture, dramaturgy allegorizes transnationalism. Given the counter-nationalist poetics of Auden's work as a playwright, Auden's modernist engagement with Shakespeare in *The Sea and the Mirror* is ironic. Dramaturgy as practice is ideologically nationalist; yet the formally dramaturgical structure of Auden's text negates nationalism. In so doing the formal dramaturgy of *The Sea and the Mirror* enacts a sweeping critique of Shakespeare and a Shakespearean text well-known as a play

²⁴ This paragraph and the next rework material from my review of Luckhurst's book, *Theatre Survey* 48.2 (November 2007): 386-388.

²⁵ *Dramaturgy: A Revolution in Theatre*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2006. p. 2.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 40-41.

borne out of imperial ambition, New World settlement, and the emergence modern capital, and the British colonial project.²⁷ Arthur Kirsch writes that the poem is fundamentally about the limits of theater and the limits of art for everyday life. *The Sea and the Mirror*, he writes, is a text characterized by its

deepest religious impulses as well as its deepest inspiration in Shakespeare, radiating both inward to the illusion it creates and outward to the illusion it imitates, a luminous counterpart of Shakespeare's grave and beautiful epilogue to *The Tempest*, a distillation of the reconciliation of charity and art that Auden sought in his poem and in his life.²⁸

With respect to the identity, both that of the poet and that of the poem, *The Sea and the Mirror* demonstrates in dramaturgical terms the limits of Shakespeare as icon *par excellence* of British theater, British culture, British history, and a proprietary British national identity that insists on an exclusive claim to its native sons, Shakespeare and Auden. Dramaturgically, *The Sea and the Mirror* performs an ironic negation of British nationalism. A hybrid form at the intersection of print and performance, *The Sea and the Mirror*, like its author, is a poetic subject that knows itself to be a modernist transnationalist.

My figuring Caliban as the Britain that Auden's Prospero wants to deny but cannot, above, is ironic in relation to *The Sea and the Mirror* itself. Caliban is no mere

²⁷ The amount of scholarship on *The Tempest* and New World colonialism is enormous. Particularly useful are: Jeffrey Knapp, *An Empire Nowhere: England, America, and Literature from Utopia to The Tempest*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: California UP, 1992. pp. 220-242; and the various essays in Peter Hulme and William H. Sherman, Eds., "*The Tempest*" and *Its Travels*. Philadelphia: Pennsylvania UP, 2000. Aimé Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism* should be required reading alongside *A Tempest*.

²⁸ *The Sea and the Mirror: A Commentary on Shakespeare's The Tempest*. Ed. Arthur Kirsch. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2003. p. xxxix.

colonial abject in *The Sea and the Mirror*. Part III, “Caliban to the Audience,” is an homage to Henry James, another transnational writer like Auden, although, in his desire to erase his transnationalism by means of nationalism, in his self-entrenchment in British culture and literary tradition, a writer more like Eliot than Auden. In *The Tempest*, Prospero relates teaching Caliban how to talk, only for Caliban to repay him by attempting to rape Miranda, threatening the binary logic of racial identity in the relationship between Prospero and Miranda, on the one hand, and Caliban, on the other, with miscegenation. Accordingly disciplined, Caliban can only renounce his former attachment, one borne of shared language: “You taught me language, and my profit on’t / Is I know how to curse” (1.2.366-367). Auden’s Caliban contrasts powerfully with Shakespeare’s. The dense, rich Jamesian prose of Auden’s Caliban represents an embrace of language—which is to say, an embrace of community and social relations, the possibility of belonging. It reconciles Prospero to Shakespeare’s Caliban by suggesting the possibility of multiple simultaneous affiliations. It is the language that belongs equally to Britain and America in a transnational poetic canon, in which *The Sea and the Mirror* is a major text; and, in problematizing the Anglo-American binary, it offers a vision of the universal commonality those two nations and their citizens share.

Such a vision is a consolation in a world ever in need of it. In Shakespeare’s play, Prospero speaks words of comfort to Ferdinand when the masque he presents to Miranda and his would-be son-in-law is interrupted, words that erase the distinction between the phenomenology of theater and the phenomenology of human life:

Be cheerful, sir,

Our revels are now ended. These our actors,
As I foretold you, were all spirits and
Are melted into air, into thin air;
And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,
The cloud-capped towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep. (4.1.147-158)

The limit of theater and the limit of life is death. The topos of death haunts *The Sea and the Mirror*. It does so, however, in a politically and existentially positive form, for death is aligned with a transnational universalism that stands in contrast to the fascist nationalism at the heart of the global conflict taking place at the time of the text's writing, World War II. A Christian poem, *The Sea and the Mirror* ends with an intimation of immortality, a vision of redemption and mercy which stand on the other side of an all-universalizing death:

Yet, at this very moment when we do at last see ourselves as we are, neither cosy nor playful, but swaying out on the ultimate wind-whipped cornice that overhangs the unabiding void—we have never stood anywhere else,—when our reasons are silenced by the heavy huge derision, —There is nothing to say. There never has been, —and our wills chuck in their hands —There is no way out. There never was, —it is at this moment that for the first time in our lives we hear, not the sounds which, as born actors, we have hitherto condescended to use as an excellent vehicle for displaying our personalities and looks, but the real Word which is our only *raison d'etre*. Not that we have improved; everything, the massacres, the whippings, the lies, the twaddle, and all their carbon copies are still present, more obviously than ever; nothing has been reconstructed; our shame, our fear, our incorrigible staginess, all wish and no resolve, are still, and more intensely than ever, all we have: only now it is not in spite of them but with them that we are

blessed by that Wholly Other Life from which we are separated by an essential emphatic gulf of which our contrived fissures of mirror and proscenium arch—we understand them at last—are feebly figurative signs, so that all meanings are reversed and it is precisely in its negative image of Judgement that we can positively envisage Mercy; it is just here, among the ruins and the bones, that we may rejoice in the perfected Work which is not ours. Its great coherences stand out through our secular blur in all their overwhelmingly righteous obligations; its voice speaks through our muffling banks of artificial flowers and unflinchingly delivers its authentic molar pardon; its spaces greet us with all their grand old prospect of wonder and width; the working charm is the full bloom of the unbothered state; the sounded note is the restored relation.²⁹

To demonstrate the limits of theater and art is not to reject theater and art outright—after all, if the proscenium arch is only a “feebly figurative sign” of a world beyond this one, a “Wholly Other Life,” then a poor vision remains better than no vision at all. Better to envisage Mercy than not—an ethical and political point that *The Tempest*, a play deeply bound up with the difficulty of forgiveness, makes. That is the commentary that Auden’s *The Sea and the Mirror* performs on Shakespeare. Lyric, prose, drama, criticism—the interpenetration of form central to Auden’s *The Sea and the Mirror* as a hybrid text points towards a vision of a transnationalist self and political universalism, “the restored relation” where Shakespeare, Prospero, Caliban and Ariel are redeemed.

²⁹ *The Sea and the Mirror*, pp. 52-53.

4.2 Peter Brook's King Lear, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and Postnationalist Theatricality

In 1962, the director Peter Brook performs a commentary of Shakespeare in his production of *King Lear* at the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, starring Paul Scofield in the title role, Diana Rigg as Cordelia, Irene Worth as Goneril, and Alec McCowen as the Fool. In the Beckettian desolation and violence of his production, one that historicizes the Bomb, Brook lays the foundation for a postnationalist theatricality: Auden's transnationalism is inadequate to the global-historical situation of the Cold War. Brook's *Lear* exemplifies the need for a world in which new forms of belonging exceed the space of possibles defined by the parameters of the nation-state. In doing so, his *Lear* creates the ideological conditions for a politically-engaged performative postmodernism.

By 1962, Peter Brook had already by this point in his career made a name for himself in Britain as a director of Shakespeare's plays, one whose aesthetics were rooted in modernist spectacle and an embrace of the experience of everyday life in modernity. Dennis Kennedy writes that "Peter Brook has made it his life-long business to apply innovative and avant-garde methods to the mainstream theatres, asking his audiences to rethink classic plays in terms of contemporary life and transcendent images."³⁰ Cinema,

³⁰ *Looking at Shakespeare: A Visual History of Twentieth-Century Performance*. 2nd ed. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2001. p. 164.

modernism's most representative art, was Brook's first love.³¹ In his memoir, Brook writes that, after his five terms at Oxford studying languages and philology, "there was no doubt in my mind that all I wanted to do was direct films," and that he "spent every spare moment writing scripts—none of them was ever completed—and discussing wildly ambitious movie projects with shady men in Soho pubs."³² His desire to make cinema, though frustrated,³³ found consolation in the stage and its scenographic possibilities.

According to Jan Kott,

Mr. Brook introduces film conventions into theatre. Intervals of time are marked by black-outs. Scenes fade, one into the other, as in film. The audience do not seem to notice the convention; they accept it. It is then that Shakespeare is taken in literally. The King really sets out for a hunt; Tamora and Aaron really meet in a forest; Lavinia is really raped.³⁴

While other theater artists, particularly in America, were importing cinematic devices both in writing and production, Brook is different.³⁵ The terms with which Kott describes Brook's directorial practice are the terms of montage, which, Michael Wood reminds us,

³¹ I call cinema modernism's most representative art because cinematic form, more than any other artistic form, is predicated on irony: stillness yet motion (24 frames per second), performance without presence. For postmodernity, this latter binary is especially important. So much of what we think of as postmodern performance blurs the line between theater and cinema, what Philip Auslander calls "liveness" and "mediatized performance" to the extent that the instability between them is a defining characteristic. Cf. *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge, 2008. As for the modernists themselves, from H.D. to Virginia Woolf, they were fascinated with cinema; cf. Laura Marcus, *The Tenth Muse: Writing about Cinema in the Modernist Period*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007.

³² *Threads of Time: Recollections*. Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 1998. p. 26.

³³ Frustrated but not totally frustrated. Brook has directed several feature-length films, including adaptations of *The Lord of the Flies* (1963), *Marat/Sade* (1967), and *King Lear* (1971).

³⁴ *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*. Trans. Boleslaw Taborski. New York: W. W. Norton, 1974. pp. 351-352.

³⁵ Cf. Zander Brietzke, *American Drama in the Age of Film*. Tuscaloosa, AL: Alabama UP, 2008.

is “one of the fundamentals of film theory.”³⁶ To think theater in terms of montage is to theorize it, to fragment it, to place it in an opposition to itself by which it *knows* itself as theater. Wood writes,

Because films rely so much on our seeing things, on our watching a world, on the illusion of our being there, their richest effect is not like that of the great realist novels or plays, where our absence is what allows us to accept and rebuild and inhabit the offered worlds. In modernist cinema, or in any cinema that remembers its modernist possibilities, our absence, however, much we are prepared for it, is a shock. How could a world so real get on without us?³⁷

Brook’s cinematic aesthetics of montage in his theatrical work, rather than situating us within the world of his productions where neither our presence nor absence matter, implicates us, makes us complicit, promises that our presence as audience is important. “Montage, then, is not only the organization of cinematic material, it is the implication of meaning—of a meaning that can only be implied, since films, like dreams, have a syntax which functions chiefly by association and accumulation.”³⁸ Brook’s use of montage devices guarantees that our presence is meaningful, that, without us there to watch, the theatrical worlds he creates are meaningless. The irony, of course, is that the formal theatrical mechanism of montage before us as an audience in Brook’s work is invisible to us: “The audience do not seem to notice the convention; they accept it. It is then that Shakespeare is taken in literally.” Marrying a wildly visual, cinematic imagination with a

³⁶ “Modernism and film.” *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*. Ed. Michael Levenson. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1999. p. 220.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 231. Here especially Wood demonstrates the extent to which his conceptualization of cinematic modernism owes a debt to Stanley Cavell. Cf. *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*. 2nd ed. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1979.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 223.

grave concern for “scripts,” for authentic engagement with a dramatic text, Brook’s theatricality represents a modernist coupling of word and image.

By 1962, Peter Brook has already made a name for himself in Britain as a director of Shakespeare’s plays. In April 1946, one of his earliest productions, *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, opens at the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre in a production featuring a young, little-known Paul Scofield, who would go on to play Lear in Brook’s production. Brook’s conceptualization of scenic design in this early production typifies his later directorial practice. William Speaight relates that, in Paris, Brook had attended a performance of the play “in a translation where echoes of Marivaux and Musset, and even an epigram from Voltaire on the lips of Moth, seemed in no way out of place.”³⁹ Seeking to translate an eighteenth-century French aesthetic into concrete visual imagery for the stage, Brook used the paintings of the rococo artist Antoine Watteau as the basis for his production’s design. In the *mise-en-scene* of this production, Kennedy writes, Brook “offered a prototype of what would become his general method: since the Euphuistic foundation of the play has little or no meaning for a modern audience, the director searched for a scenographic equivalent, a ‘visual correlative,’ that would cut across the centuries.”⁴⁰

The concern with a theatricality that speaks to the experience of everyday life in modernity for his audience animates his directorial praxis. A tradition-bound theater that cannot adapt itself to its audience is, as Brook writes in *The Empty Space*, a “Deadly

³⁹ Quoted in *Looking at Shakespeare*, pp. 165-166.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 166.

Theatre,” a theater that “not only fails to elevate or instruct, it hardly even entertains.”⁴¹

Shakespeare, for Brook, is particularly susceptible to becoming the on-stage corpse of a

Deadly Theatre:

Of course nowhere does the Deadly Theatre install itself so securely, so comfortably and so slyly as in the works of William Shakespeare. The Deadly Theatre takes easily to Shakespeare. We see his plays done by good actors in what seems like the proper way—they look lively and colourful, there is music and everyone is all dressed up, just as they are supposed to be in the best of classical theatres. Yet secretly we find it excruciatingly boring—and in our hearts we either blame Shakespeare, or theatre as such, or even ourselves.⁴²

For Brook, Shakespearean performance lends itself to a static, normative theater,

moribund and dull. Against Deadly Theatre Brook holds out the possibility of

“Immediate Theatre,” theater that is utterly collaborative, not just in performance where the structure of relationality exists as “actor/subject/audience,” but in rehearsal, where it is “actor/subject/director,” and even in the very first stages of production,

“director/subject/designer.”⁴³ Against the stasis of Deadly Theatre, Immediate Theatre

recognizes that “Truth in the theatre is always on the move”—and runs after it.⁴⁴ With

respect to Shakespeare, Brook’s maxim “It is only when we forget Shakespeare that we

can begin to find him” sums up the attitude nicely.⁴⁵

⁴¹ *The Empty Space*. New York: Touchstone, 1968. p. 10.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 100-101.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

⁴⁵ *Evoking (and Forgetting!) Shakespeare*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2003. p. 47.

After productions of *Romeo and Juliet* (1947), *Measure for Measure* (1950), and *The Winter's Tale* (1951), Brook directs a production of *Titus Andronicus*, starring Laurence Olivier, at the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre, the first successful twentieth-century British production of the play. Again, its scenic design plays a key role in the production's success. Brook "designed a structure of plain wood panels mounted in monumental fashion, its square pillars capable of different positions for new scenes"; within the geometric angularity of the set, Brook realizes an abstract, stylized visual language to convey the horrendous brutality and violence of *Titus*. Realizing that mimetic realism would not work for a modern audience, Brook's *Titus* "conveyed the physical horrors by elegant and even beautiful estrangements," such as near-monochrome costumes that shifted throughout the play towards the rust red of dry blood; and the use of scarlet and white streamers flowing from Lavinia's mouth and wrists after her rape and mutilation.⁴⁶ As Dennis Kennedy writes, "Brook's almost Asian symbolism welcomed the audience into its unfamiliar spirit, transforming it into a piece of visual and performative virtuosity."⁴⁷

When Brook's production of *Titus Andronicus* toured Europe in 1957, the Polish literary scholar Jan Kott saw it in Warsaw. Brook's *Titus* opened a door to a whole new world of possibilities with respect to Shakespearean performance and modernity. Kott writes, "*Titus Andronicus* has revealed to me a Shakespeare I dreamed of but have never seen on the stage. I count this performance among [the] five greatest theatrical

⁴⁶ *Looking at Shakespeare*, pp. 168-170.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 170.

experiences of my life.”⁴⁸ It leads Kott to write a piece reading *King Lear* in terms of the drama of Samuel Beckett, “*King Lear* or *Endgame*,” profoundly effecting Brook’s conception for his 1962 *Lear*.

According to Brook, “The key problem, one that I have been pondering upon for the year I’ve been preparing this production, is whether to fix the production specifically in a certain place at a certain time.” One alternative that had been tried recently was staging the play as though it took place outside of time altogether. This does not work. For the play to be effective it must be specific:

You can’t say that *Lear* is timeless, which is what the interesting but unfortunate Noguichi experiment at the Palace in 1955 proved. In his program note to that production, George Devine wrote, “We’re trying to show with timeless costumes and timeless sets the timelessness of the play”—an apology which didn’t actually touch the core of the problem. Although in a sense it is timeless (that’s a sort of critic’s comment), in actual fact it is taking place in big, violent and therefore very realistic circumstances, with flesh and blood actors in very harsh, cruel and realistic situations.⁴⁹

In using Beckett’s theatrical modernism as the basis for the design and concept of the play (the two being so inextricably bound up with one another for Brook that he designs sets and costumes himself), Brook directs *King Lear* as a play that stages the “very harsh, cruel and realistic situations” of postwar late modernity. For Brook, late modernity is a period in history that existentially strips humanity to its barest essence—and keeps

⁴⁸ *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, p. 353.

⁴⁹ *The Shifting Point: Theatre, Film, Opera, 1946-1987*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1987. p. 88.

stripping, leaving nothing but a “poor, bare forked animal” (Folio 3.4.96-97).⁵⁰ During rehearsal, Brook tells Scofield his interpretation of the play vis à vis Lear himself:

One morning I came to Paul with what seemed to me an illuminating discovery. “Lear is someone who wants to let go. But whatever he sacrifices, there is always something left to which he is attached. He gives up his kingdom, but still his authority remains. He must yield his authority, but there is still his trust in his daughters. This too must go, as must the protection of a roof over his head, but this is still not enough, as he has preserved his sanity. When his reason is sacrificed, there is still his profound attachment to his beloved Cordelia. And in the pitiless process of stripping away, inevitably she too must be lost. This is the pattern and the tragic action of the play.”⁵¹

As Beckett’s theatricality is one of near-infinite loss, so is the theatricality of Brook’s *Lear*—plain, unsentimental, austere, “pitiless,” for that is the modern existential historical reality for Brook’s audience.

Brook’s design and directorial choices highlight the late modern existential bareness of the world of *King Lear*, including the King himself, as acted by Paul Scofield. On the premiere 6 November 1962, Edmund Gardner writes,

Peter Brook has mounted a production bald of clutter—dropped on to a stage draped in off-white and ornamented only with utilitarian furniture. His only extravagance is a set of portable

⁵⁰ Brook uses George Ian Duthie and John Dover’s Wilson’s 1960 Cambridge New Shakespeare edition of the play, itself based on the 1623 folio text. Dennis Kennedy writes, “His cuts are well known and much discussed. The Gentleman’s report on Cordelia’s sorrow (4.3), Lear’s passionate happiness in ‘He that parts us shall bring a brand from heaven / And fire us hence like foxes’ (5.3), Edmund’s repenting his order for the execution of the King and his daughter (‘some good I mean to do, / Despite of mine own nature’)—all had to go.” *Looking at Shakespeare*, p. 172.

⁵¹ *Threads of Time*, p. 31. Brook uses the word “seemed” because, while this interpretation was useful to him, it was not useful to Scofield: “Paul did not react with enthusiasm. ‘Mmm...’ Then he said thoughtfully, ‘That may be true. But I mustn’t think of it, as it can’t help me as an actor. I can’t play negative actions. I can’t show *not* having. I have to find a different way to mobilize my energies, so as to fully active, moment to moment, even in loss, even in defeat.’” p. 31

thunder-sheets which descend from the flied to rumble while Lear commands the winds to blow and crack their cheeks. Throughout one is conscious of a clear intelligence shaping Every move. The final result is somewhere near to a full impact of the play's thesis—that life is merciless; virtue and vice, wisdom and folly, youth and age, all have a common destiny.⁵²

Felix Barker writes, “No music. No textual tricks. Austere abstract settings. Leather costumes. A general feeling of primitive bareness. Paul Scofield was perfect for such a text book intellectual interpretation. This actor never tears a passion to tatters.”⁵³ J. C.

Trewin captures something of the sense of the modernity of the concept:

It is not, let me say at once, a production for advocates of traditional Shakespeare. It is of its own day as assuredly as Irving's Lyceum revival belonged to another period. In classical production we cannot set back the clock. The Stratford stage is surrounded by tall, coarse-textured off-white screens. Against these are variously-disposed shapes of metal that look as if they have been raised, in their rust, from the sea depths. In this setting the tragedy [...] grows in a world of terrible menace, a world where the first thunder peal at “I shall do such things—what they are, yet I know not, but they shall be the terrors of the earth” sounds to us like the first prelude of a fearful doomsday.⁵⁴

With the production's premiere, journalistic critical opinion is overwhelmingly positive. Although many critics see the play as a production that Brook conceptualizes in terms of post-World War II modernity, very few see the influence of Beckett. Among the few who do is Roger Gellert, who writes,

Shakespeare has corralled his poor forked animals in a maze

⁵² “Paul Scofield Is a Towering Lear.” *Stage and Television Today*. London. 8 November 1962.

⁵³ “A Straightforward Text Book Lear.” *Evening News and Star*. London. 7 November 1962.

⁵⁴ “King Lear at Stratford: Combined Power of Brook and Scofield.” *Birmingham Post*. Birmingham, UK. 7 November 1962.

of pessimism, mischance, treachery, and freezing cold: *Endgame* is no bleaker. But *Lear* is the great play of the two because it shows hell on earth, in active relation to wrath and goodness. Brook has approached it humanly and anti-heroically, guiding Scofield into the performance of his career: King Lear without the wuthering and whiskers, with a sharp tongue and brain even in madness, and best of all in his penultimate lucidity, which hurts like the emergence from a chrysalis. The celebrated notion of Lear as “unactable” suggests precisely the terms of elemental grandeur which Brook and Scofield have turned their backs on. These two, with a consistently good supporting cast to second them—Alec McCowen’s deeply committed Fool outstanding—have demonstrated shatteringly how it can be acted for our generation.⁵⁵

The only other journalistic critic I read who demonstrates an understanding Brook’s deployment of Beckettian theatricality (vis à vis Kott), fascinatingly, in a review entitled “Waiting for Scofield” is a young Tom Stoppard. On the end of the first part of the production just before the interval, the blinding of Gloucester, Stoppard expresses deep appreciation for what Brook does with the scene:

The act ends with the blinding of Gloucester, which bridges the interval logically towards his blind progress at the beginning of Act IV. It also makes for the most brilliantly executed and moving curtain scene I can remember (not excluding Lear’s own death). The blinding itself is done with Cornwall’s spur. The line is there—*Upon these eyes of thine I’ll set my foot*. Gloucester is left alone with the servants. As they start to clear the furniture he is buffeted and jostled by them until he gropes his way upstage, with the house lights going on, a broken, figure long in view of a mesmerized audience sitting in full light.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ “Scofield’s Lear.” *New Statesman*. London. 16 November 1962.

⁵⁶ “Waiting for Scofield.” *Scene*. London. 15 November 1962. Can there be any doubt that Brook’s Beckettian *King Lear* sets the stage for Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, the play which, upon its 24 August 1966 premiere at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, launches his playwriting career?

Within the context of the long dramatic absence of Lear from the stage as Gloucester, then, and other characters hold our attention, Stoppard writes, the production, like Beckett's *Godot*, becomes a drama of anticipation, of waiting: "Lear does not appear again for six scenes, but the positioning of the break, justified by the grand and dominating curve which Mr. Scofield traces over what has gone before, makes Lear not missing but *awaited*. The actor capitalized on the deformity of structure, and this kind of sophistication is part and parcel of Mr. Scofield's performance which has a truly intellectual consistence." In addition to Scofield's performance, he gives special praise to Alec McCowen's: "The Fool of McCowen is certainly one of the evening's triumphs. McCowen is always touching, his guarded familiarity with Lear somehow working for the both of them."⁵⁷ Reading this description of McCowen's Fool, with its description of a character who clearly knows degradation and hurt and pain and yet desires connection, a character whose humanity Stoppard finds emotionally moving, I at least feel that Stoppard sees something of a kinship between McCowen's Fool and Beckett's Didi and Gogo.

Among the critic there are competing notions of the production's style. Several saw Brook's production as owing a debt to Brecht. Don Chapman, one of the few critics to give the play a negative review, writes, "But, alas, in this last production of the season, there are signs that the newly introduced Brechtian approach to presentation may be

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

carried a little too far.”⁵⁸ John Wardle notes, “Much of the acting, and particularly that of Mr. Scofield himself, able though it is, seems of the applied kind. Brecht’s “Mother Courage,” in which one is supposed to take a detached kind of interest, has moved me throughout its course, whereas this “King Lear” has only a few moments that moved me, and Alan Webb’s Gloucester is at the centre of these few, the Scofield Lear figuring in only one of them, the scene in which he at once taunts and attempts to console the blinded Gloucester.”⁵⁹ Bamber Gascoigne writes, “Even when settling into one’s seat, one has a foretaste of the chief quality of Peter Brook’s *King Lear*—a magnificent clarity. The set, designed by Brook himself, lies open. Two vast flats, the backcloth and the stage itself are all painted a subtle whitish grey, against which a table and a few utensils stand out as vividly and solidly as chunks of metal on a light silk. The effect so far is Brechtian, and it remains to in several scenes throughout the production.”⁶⁰ It is true that Brecht includes Shakespearean theater as “Epic Theater.”⁶¹ Yet, I have found no evidence that Brechtian theatricality serves as a model for Brook’s theatrical modernism in *King Lear*. Indeed, despite the 1956 residence of Brecht’s company, the Berliner Ensemble, in London, Janelle Reinelt maintains that Brecht’s influence on postwar British theatricality is more dramaturgical than anything else—that is, theoretical and

⁵⁸ “King Lear on the Heels of Brecht.” *Oxford Mail*. London. 7 November 1962.

⁵⁹ “Too Little Play on the Emotions in This Lear.” *Bolton Evening News*. Bolton, UK. 7 November 1962.

⁶⁰ “A Lear of the Head.” *The Spectator*. London. 16 November 1962.

⁶¹ For example: “An epic way of acting isn’t equally valid for every classical work. It seems to be the most easily applicable, i.e. to hold most promise of results, in works like Shakespeare’s and in the earliest works of our own classic writers (including *Faust*). It depends on their attitude to their social function: representation of reality with a view to influencing it.” Bertolt Brecht. *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*. Ed. and Trans. John Willett. New York: Hill and Wang, 1964. p. 225.

textual rather than directorial. The experience of reading John Willett's *Brecht on Theatre* (published 1964) is far more instructive for British playwrights than the production of his plays in Britain is for British directors.⁶² Ironically, Brook himself is ambivalent towards Brecht. In his "Manifesto for the Sixties," Brook writes of Brecht's troupe, "The Berliner Ensemble is the best company in the world."⁶³ Yet, while touring his 1951 production of *Measure for Measure* in Germany, Brook meets Brecht, and Brecht shares his dramatic theory with Brook: "Brecht described to me his theory of 'alienation.' He spoke of his ideal audience: two peasants, sitting side by side in the front row, discussing the action with irony, never caught up in the make-believe. He was articulate and entertaining, but I was unconvinced."⁶⁴ When Brook returns to Berlin with *King Lear* on its European tour in 1963, Brook attends a rehearsal of *Coriolanus* with the Berliner Ensemble, the late Brecht's widow, Helene Weigel, now artistic director of the company. Brook relates the experience:

As the main actor entered the stage, I recognized him as one of the European heavyweights, middle-aged, of peasant stock, shrewd and commanding, a type of actor for which England had few equivalents [...] so I was very intrigued to see how he worked. "No!" cried an overexcited dramaturg as the actor spoke the first line. "Say it like this!" and he proceeded to show how the words should be spoken, delivering them in a tense, high-pitched, singsong voice. [...] As he repeated the line exactly as he had been told, there came another cry, this time from one of the two directors, who instructed him to raise his arm and point his fingers in a certain way to match the rising inflection. Then Weigel drily intervened to launch

⁶² *After Brecht: British Epic Theater*. Ann Arbor: Michigan UP, 1994. pp. 7-8.

⁶³ *The Shifting Point*, p. 54.

⁶⁴ *Threads of Time*, p. 64.

a discussion on the meaning of the scene.

When the rehearsal, covering “less than half of a very short scene,” is over, Brook asks Weigel, “When you next come back to the scene, do you expect the actor to reproduce all that you’ve made him do today?” “Of course not,” she answers, “This is how we work in order to stimulate the actor. Now he must digest the rehearsal and come back with his own propositions.” Brook is nonplussed at her reply: “I was not convinced that this answer was completely genuine and left wondering how much freedom the actor was eventually allowed.”⁶⁵

Nonetheless, Brook’s ambivalence towards Brecht throws into relief his own politics. As a young man just out of Oxford, he writes, he had auditioned to join the company of “the one Communist theater of the time, called Unity.” He did not receive a callback. Brook writes, “I never heard from them, so I neither joined the Communist party nor ever again tried to act. Instead, a sense of the relativity of all positions prevented me from attaching myself to any political conviction. I simply observed events with journalistic interest and journalistic skepticism.”⁶⁶ The rejection of attachment is a refusal of belonging, the object of desire of nationalism as an imagined community. Though working within a symbolically fraught sociology of cultural production at the Royal Shakespeare Company, an institution in Britain’s cultural landscape that would seem to embody Britishness more than any other, Brook’s theatricality is one that entails a political objectivity with respect to the nation.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

Peter Brook is a postnationalist director. In its deployment of Beckettian theatricality, as exemplified in *Endgame*, Brook's 1962 *King Lear* objectively historicizes the geopolitical reality of the Bomb—the arms race and the threat of nuclear war. Insofar as Brook's *King Lear* exemplifies the sublime, it is only what Frances Ferguson calls “the nuclear sublime,” the logic of which is suicide.⁶⁷ The proliferation of nuclear weapons between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War is the basis for an existential crisis within the nationalist subconscious, a crisis that had nearly manifested itself in the form of *actual nuclear war* only two weeks before the play's premiere when the Cold War logic of “mutually assured destruction” crystallized itself during the Cuban Missile Crisis, 16-28 October 1962, ending not even two weeks before the premiere of Brook's production.⁶⁸

R. A. Foakes writes that there is a shift with respect to which play, *Hamlet* or *King Lear*, holds the position of ideological preeminence within the Shakespearean canon over the course of the modernist period. He begins his book *Hamlet versus Lear* with two lists, a list of critical evaluations of the greatness of *Hamlet* and *King Lear*, the other a chronology of important historical events during the period 1954-1965; for Foakes, that “is when the great shift in the status of *King Lear* took place.” He writes, “I do not claim

⁶⁷ “The Nuclear Sublime.” *Diacritics* 14:2 (Summer 1984): 4-10.

⁶⁸ Richard Rhodes's short discussion of the Cuban Missile Crisis highlights how obscenely close the world came to nuclear obliteration in October 1962; cf. *Dark Sun: The Making of the Hydrogen Bomb*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995. pp. 570-576. As John F. Kennedy's Secretary of Defense, Robert S. McNamara, barks in the Errol Morris documentary *The Fog of War*, “It was LUCK that prevented nuclear war.” The two political lessons he draws from the event are nothing if not sobering: 1) “Empathize with your enemy”; and 2) “Rationality will not save us.” Errol Morris, dir. *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara*. Sony Pictures Classics. 2003.

that there is a direct connection, or that what was happening politically in the world at that time explains the way Shakespeare's plays were assessed, but only that critics consciously or unconsciously reflect the mood of their time; and the mood of that period was dominated by the expansion of nuclear arsenals and the fear of a war that might destroy the world."⁶⁹ Brook's *Lear* confirms Foakes' (tentative) thesis: that *King Lear* is a play that better reflects the apocalyptic "mood" of the Cold War.

It does so, in part, because the text of *King Lear* is already rife with the rhetoric and imagery of apocalypse, the typology of the Revelation of St. John, as many critics have shown.⁷⁰ More than that, however, the Beckettian dramaturgy that Brook mobilizes in his *Lear* is one that itself historicizes the Bomb and its existential ramifications.

Charles A. Carpenter resists the temptation to reduce Beckett's *Endgame* to "a concrete nuclear-age melodrama."⁷¹ Nevertheless he reads the play within the context of several postwar plays in Britain and the United States dramatizing, literally or metaphorically, fallout shelters and the dilemma they pose—with only limited resources inside, who is given safety inside and who is forced to remain outside and die along with everything and

⁶⁹ *Hamlet versus Lear: Cultural Politics and Shakespeare's Art*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1993. p. 1.

⁷⁰ For example, cf. Joseph Wittreich, "Image of That Horror": *History Prophecy, and Apocalypse in King Lear*. San Marino, CA: Huntington Library, 1984.

⁷¹ Beckett himself was extremely critical of productions of *Endgame* that literalized it as such. Robert Brustein, then-director of the American Repertory Theatre, Cambridge, Massachusetts, writes, "My own company also got in hot water with Beckett when the director JoAnne Akalaitis, literalizing a postnuclear metaphor, set the ART production of *Endgame* in an abandoned subway station (a fallout shelter) and commissioned a brief overture for it from Philip Glass. Although he never saw the production, Beckett protested that his play had been 'musicalized,' objected to the casting of two black actors as Hamm and Nagg, and, citing his set descriptions, wrote a program note that said, 'Any production of *Endgame* which ignores my stage directions is completely unacceptable to me.'" "Samuel Beckett: Millennium Poet Laureate." *Chronicle of Higher Education*. 4 August 2006.

everyone else,⁷² a dilemma that evidences the scale of dread that the possibility of nuclear war creates: dread continues in the short-term and the long-term after the cataclysm. Carpenter writes that “within the ‘allusive fallout’ that the play generates through a myriad of suggestive devices is a perceptible metaphor of a family shelter after a nuclear holocaust, and an unobtrusive but distinct analogy to the dilemma that might have faced the person in charge.”⁷³

Ironically, even more than the Suez Crisis in 1956, the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 reveals the end of the British Empire. At the moment of truth when humanity was on the brink of nuclear omnicide, still “numbed” from the disaster at Port Said six years earlier as Jan Morris puts it,⁷⁴ Britain was a spectator, involved only insofar as it followed America’s military and diplomatic lead.⁷⁵ Testifying to Britain’s status as, in effect, a post-imperial nation, the Cuban Missile Crisis also exemplifies the idea that the political demand that the existential crisis the Bomb brings on the subconscious of late modernity is a postnational universalism, a new geopolitical order in which nations cannot wage an all-consuming nuclear war against each other because nations themselves

⁷² I write *everything* in addition to *everyone* in order to include not just the human world but the entire ecological world, on which humanity is dependent, as well. *Endgame*, no less than *Lear* as G. Wilson Knight argues, is an anti-pastoral. Cf. *The Wheel of Fire: Interpretations of Shakespearian Tragedy*. By G. Wilson Knight. 4th ed. London: Routledge, 2001. pp. 201-234. For a more contemporary take on *King Lear* that situates the political ecology of the play within the burgeoning discourse of Animal Studies, cf. Laurie Shannon, “Poor, Bare, Forked: Animal Sovereignty, Human Negative Exceptionalism, and the Natural History of *King Lear*.” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 60:2 (Summer 2009): 168-196.

⁷³ *Dramatists and the Bomb: American and British Playwrights Confront the Nuclear Age, 1945-1964*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1999. p. 137.

⁷⁴ *Farewell the Trumpets: An Imperial Retreat. Pax Britannica* Vol. III. New York: Harvest, 1978. p. 526.

⁷⁵ L. V. Scott writes, “the view that Britain’s role was nugatory clearly exercised officials and commentators.” The Conservative Prime Minister Harold Macmillan was forced to go on the defensive: “Labour made great play with Kennedy’s failure to consult the government.” *Macmillan, Kennedy and the Cuban Missile Crisis*. New York: St. Martin’s, 1999. p. 180.

are no longer a historical reality. This is not to say that in an ideal postnational geopolitical order the Bomb does not pose a threat. It does, as long as it exists as a fact, a material reality in our world. (Which is to say, as long as, politically, humanity continues to repress its knowledge of the fact that the Bomb exists, that it is real. Hence the continued need for documentary efforts to raise global public consciousness of the Bomb in order that serious efforts at nuclear arms reduction will take place between nations, with the goal, almost attained in 1986, of zero nuclear weapons.)⁷⁶ Non-state actors, such as terrorists and terrorist organizations (which, despite often being funded by a state, are at the same time separate entities distinct from it, working *in parallel* with a state to achieve common goals), become objects of fear and paranoia (all the more intensely because they are non-national, and, as such unnamable within the vocabulary of a conventional geopolitical syntax), but the scale of potential catastrophe is qualitatively different: though world history would be forever changed by an act of nuclear terrorism, at least history itself would continue. In no meaningful way would that be the case with respect to nuclear war.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Richard Rhodes chronicles how extraordinarily close Reagan and Gorbachev came to reaching just such an agreement at the Reykjavik summit of 1986. *Arsenals of Folly: The Making of the Nuclear Arms Race*. New York: Knopf, 2007. pp. 236-270. If, as McNamara tells us, humanity was lucky to have had Tommy Thompson in the room with Kennedy during the Cuban Missile Crisis, then how unlucky humanity was to have had Richard Armitage in the room with Reagan during the Reykjavik summit.

⁷⁷ The possibility of nuclear terrorism has existed in the imagination since at least as far back as the late modernity of the 1950s. Witness John Boulting's 1950 British melodrama *Seven Days to Noon*, in which a British scientist steals a small atomic bomb, threatening to detonate it in central London if the British government does not halt its weapons program. In the wake of September 11th, nuclear weapons designer Ted Taylor's comments have the sad ring of the uncanny to them. In 1973 he tells John McPhee while touring the recently-built World Trade Center that "There's no question at all that if someone were to place a half-kiloton bomb on the front steps where we came in, the building would fall into the river." John McPhee, *The Curve of Binding Energy*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1974. p. 226.

As a commentary on Shakespeare that situates his bleakest tragic vision in the historical imagination of late modernism and historicizes the existential crisis created by the Bomb, Brook's *Lear* accomplishes is something very profound with respect to genre. Ironically, Brook's engagement with Shakespeare tragedy dismantles Shakespearean tragedy. It explodes altogether, marking the death of tragedy.

Brook's *Lear* self-consciously presents itself as a commentary on the death of tragedy. Brook's *King Lear* spent the winter of 1962-1963 in London at the Aldwych Theatre (It then went on tour through Europe and the United States, 1963-1964. It was the theatrical production that opened Lincoln Center in New York, May 1964). When it transferred to the Aldwych from Stratford, the RSC put together a much more elaborate program than the plain cast list that had been the playbill for the play in Stratford. The Aldwych program includes texts that underscore the relationship between Brook's production and other literary texts concerned with apocalypse, such as W. B. Yeats's "Lapis Lazuli" and lines and an image from William Blake's "Proverbs of Hell" (from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*). Under the heading "Beckett and Shakespeare," the program makes explicit its appropriation of Beckettian theatricality, printing Lear's "Is man no more than this?" speech (3.4.96ff.) underneath what is supposed to be an apposite moment from *Endgame*:

HAMM: One day you'll be blind, like me. You'll be sitting there, a speck in the void, in the dark, for ever, like me. (Pause) [...] Yes, one day you'll know what it is, you'll be like me, except that you won't have anyone with you, because you won't have had pity on anyone and because there won't be

anyone left to have pity on. (Pause)
CLOV: It's not certain.⁷⁸

Most telling is a quotation from George Steiner:

Tragedies end badly. The tragic personage is broken by forces which can neither be fully understood nor overcome by rational prudence. Where the causes of disaster are temporal, where the conflict can be resolved through technical or social means, we may have a serious drama, but not tragedy. More pliant divorce laws could not alter the fate of Agamemnon; social psychiatry is no answer to Oedipus. The destiny of Lear cannot be resolved by the establishment of adequate homes for the aged. Tragedy is irreparable. There is no asking for rational explanation or mercy. Things are as they are, unrelenting and absurd. We are punished far in excess of our guilt. It is a terrible, stark insight into human life. Yet in the very excess of his suffering lies man's claim to dignity. Powerless and broken, a blind beggar hounded out of the city, he assumes a new dignity. Man is ennobled by the vengeful spite or injustice of the gods. It does not make him innocent, but it hallows him as if he had passed through flame.⁷⁹

Shakespeare's play, according to Steiner, may have once represented a coherent vision of tragedy in its originary moment, but the inclusion of this excerpt from *The Death of Tragedy* contrasts that historical era with that of postwar late modernity, one in which the Bomb and the end of history itself are an ever-present threat.⁸⁰

Brook's *Lear*, in self-consciously historicizing its moment, dramatizes what it means to live in a world in which tragedy is completely incommensurate with the world from which, as theatrical genre, it is created. Just as the implication of the Bomb for the

⁷⁸ Royal Shakespeare Company. Program, *King Lear*. Aldwych Theatre, London. n.d. Archives of the Royal Shakespeare Company. Shakespeare Center Library. Stratford-upon-Avon, UK.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ Cf. George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy*. New York: Knopf, 1961. Its most important response and rebuttal is Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1966.

nation and nationalism is, ironically, the death of nations and their inhabitants, the subjects in whom nationalism coheres as imagined community, the subjects who, in the name of nation and nationalism had created the Bomb; so the implication of Brook's *Lear* is, ironically, the death of Shakespearean tragedy and of genre altogether. Fredric Jameson writes that "Genres are essentially literary *institutions*, or social contracts between a writer and a specific public, whose function is to specify the proper use of a particular cultural artifact."⁸¹ Tragedy cannot speak to this world. Acknowledging the contingency of human relations and what it is to live in the world, Stanley Cavell writes, "We begin to feel, or ought to, terrified that maybe language (and understanding, and knowledge) rests upon very shaky foundations—a thin net over an abyss."⁸² Brook's *Lear* presents an iteration of tragedy that removes us from the everyday, a tragedy that can only address metaphysical realities. It has no effect except to tear the "thin net" that holds social being together and cast us into an existential "abyss" from which there is no coming back; therefore, it has no use. Without use, the value of tragedy and of genre as such does not obtain. Importantly, if we accept that the nation and nationalism are, like genre, "cultural artefacts of a particular kind," as Benedict Anderson writes, then Brook's *Lear*, as the destroyer of tragedy, is the destroyer of the nation and nationalism, as well.⁸³

To get a sense of this, tragedy's antinomy, comedy, provides a useful foil. In his history of comedy as genre, Erich Segal observes that "comedy always thrives upon

⁸¹ *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1981, p. 106.

⁸² *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy*. New ed. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999. p. 178.

⁸³ *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Rev. ed. London: Verso, 2006. p. 4.

outrage and flouting the establishment—or common sense—whether it be an Aristophanic hero dethroning Zeus and marrying his queen, or Jarry’s King Ubu defying all morality in pursuit of gratification.”⁸⁴ In the age that Brook’s *Lear* historicizes, outrage and defiance do not obtain because there is nothing left that cannot be ironized and made the object of comedy. Segal continues,

But after the savage atrocities of two World Wars, comic authors had to seek ever more radical subjects to evoke in the audience the illicit pleasures of “enjoying the outrage and being spared the consequences.” Even the Nazi concentration camps have been portrayed light-heartedly—first in Chaplin’s *Great Dictator* and then more recently in Roberto Bellini’s prize-winning *La vit’è bella*, which dealt—albeit at a remove of half a century—with the unspeakable mass slaughters of the Second World War. [...] It no longer seemed possible to find any more Freudian objects of wit—moral or religious precepts that command so much respect that they can only be approached in comedy, and even then in disguise. What was left that evoked awe, respect, and fear?

Only nuclear holocaust.⁸⁵

Dr. Strangelove, a 1964 film made in Britain at Shepperton Studios outside London, directed by an American expatriate, Stanley Kubrick, starring a British comedian, Peter Sellers, is not merely the film that explodes the conservative ideologies of postwar Hollywood cinema, as Peter Biskind writes.⁸⁶ For Segal, it marks the death of comedy. It “took the subject of comedy into *terra incognita*, by evoking laughter from the prospect of the destruction of the entire world.”⁸⁷ Many people categorize *Dr.*

⁸⁴ *The Death of Comedy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2001. p. 453.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 453-454.

⁸⁶ *Seeing Is Believing: How Hollywood Taught Us to Stop Worrying and Love the Fifties*. New York: Henry Holt, 1983. pp. 344-348.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 454.

Strangelove as a satire, but this is a mistake. “Satire,” according to M. H. Abrams, “can best be described as the literary art of diminishing or derogating a subject by making it ridiculous and evoking toward it attitudes of amusement, contempt, scorn, or indignation. It differs from the *comic* in that comedy evokes laughter as an end in itself.”⁸⁸ Classically, satire is performative—it seeks to have an effect on the world, specifically, to bring about change for the better. Its highest aspiration is not laughter, which is only a means to an end, but agency. Not so with *Dr. Strangelove*. It takes the absurdity of the world-historical, geopolitical situation that that Cuban Missile Crisis had exposed, sexualizes it, turns it into a dirty joke. The orgasm of laughter it evokes in its sexual image of a cowboy pilot riding a hydrogen bomb between his legs to global annihilation, whooping and hollering all the way down, is the laughter of nihilism. Fredric Jameson writes, “Comedy is social in its ultimate perspective.”⁸⁹ Yet, beyond nuclear war, there is nowhere else for comedy to go. In a world in which human beings have created the possibility of actual nuclear omnicide and that threat hangs politically and existentially in the air like a Damocles sword, comedy confronts its limit.

Brook’s *Lear* realizes the Shakespeare’s play as tragic failure. One anonymous reviewer of Brook’s *King Lear* notes, “Mr. Brook, the director and designer, was not also

⁸⁸ *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. 6th ed. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1993. p. 187.

⁸⁹ *The Political Unconscious*, p. 142.

the composer of the music, for this production had none other than the sounds that awakened Lear at the end of Act IV.”⁹⁰ G. Wilson Knight writes:

though *love and music—twin sisters of salvation*—temporarily may heal the racked consciousness of Lear, yet, so deeply planted in the facts of our life is this unknowing ridicule of destiny, that the uttermost tragedy of the incongruous ensues, and there is no hope save in the broken heart and limp body of death.⁹¹

In the reconciliation scene of Act Four, Scene Seven, Lear is brought in and music is played to soothe Lear in his convalescence. We know how this scene ends, and it is very touching; but when we see Lear again, as I have stated, he is not healed but just as mad as he was before, and his moment of death—self-deluded in a hideous, grotesque joy into believing that Cordelia still lives, Lear must be said to be his most deranged in the entire play. Those “twin sisters of salvation,” music and Cordelia's love, are not enough to bring Lear back from his madness and redeem his troubled soul.

The failure of music is one which needs serious treatment. Tragedy, according to Nietzsche, flourished in the Hellenic world until Euripides drained it of its moral value and Socrates, as Stanley Cavell writes, replaced tragedy with the “new epistemology”⁹² of rational, scientific inquiry in which knowledge of oneself (Remember Socrates' famous maxim, “Know thyself.”) would save us all.⁹³ Brook's *King Lear* shows us the impossibility of achieving redemptive self-revelation and the failure of this “new

⁹⁰ “A Polished Mirror for Humanity.” *The Times*. London. 7 November 1962. With byline “From Our Special Correspondent.”

⁹¹ *The Wheel of Fire*, p. 198. Italics mine.

⁹² *Must We Mean What We Say?* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1976. p. 323.

⁹³ *The Birth of Tragedy and The Case of Wagner*. Trans. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Vintage, 1967. pp. 78-86, 93-94.

epistemology," rational thought and inquiry. Tragedy, which arises out of the "spirit of music" according to Nietzsche, fails as well.⁹⁴ If the progenitor fails, and indeed, music does, then the issue, tragedy, must fail too. Lear's story is one of fatherhood failed and monarchy failed. Those things the father and the monarch engender, family and nation fail, as well.⁹⁵ By extension, so too must those things engendered and created by families and nations—tragedy, music, art, nature, language, subjectivity, futurity and humanity themselves.⁹⁶ In that Brook's *King Lear* represents the failure of representation, it is an allegory of the failure of allegory. His *Lear* historicizes, but it is a historicism without content: history has ground to a halt, the perfect negative example of Eliot's cherished eternity. Tragedy cannot bring us redemption any more than music can for Lear. That is what Brook's *King Lear* stages, and it is in this sense that his *King Lear* is a not merely a tragedy but also a metatragedy, an ironic allegory of its own tragic failure. To paraphrase Robert S. McNamara, tragedy will not save us.

To address the failure of that other "twin sister of salvation," love: one of the facets of Shakespearean tragedy which makes it so powerful, A. C. Bradley writes, is the sense of the "waste of good" that occurs in the deaths of the play's tragic heroes.⁹⁷ The

⁹⁴ Recall the original 1872 German title of Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy: Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik*.

⁹⁵ On the role of dynastic monarchy and its decline as a precondition of nationalism, cf. *Imagined Communities*, pp. 19-22.

⁹⁶ Tragic failure in Brook's *King Lear* can be seen allegorically in terms of the curse that God put on language in response to mankind's pride in building the tower of Babel (Gen 11:1-9, NRSV). Because the world of *King Lear* is a pre-Christian one, one unredeemed by Christ's death and resurrection, language itself in the world of the play is inefficacious, doomed, condemned. In Christianity, it is not until the Pentacost (Acts 2:1-5, NRSV), when the Holy Spirit comes down upon the twelve apostles in the form of tongues of fire to inspire and enable their evangelism, that language is redeemed.

⁹⁷ Bradley, A.C. *Shakespearean Tragedy*. Rev. ed. New York: Macmillan, 1952. p. 37.

extent to which Lear is such a tragic hero, one possessed of this “good” is debatable. Scofield plays Lear anti-heroically, yet one possessed of sinewy strength and power. By no means do I want to argue that Lear is such a figure, one in whom we find the “priceless good” about which Bradley writes, but I certainly would not argue that he is *not* such a hero.⁹⁸ It is unquestionably true, however, that Cordelia fits the mold of heroine as it is to be understood here. Like Edgar, she stays true to the goodness inherent in her heart even after she has been greatly wronged by him whom she has loved most. She does not abandon Lear, but rather, works and sacrifices to help him and comfort him in his time of greatest need. Cordelia pays the greatest sacrifice of all for Lear, her life. Her love, as demonstrated throughout the course of the play, is absolutely unconditional. It is in this that Cordelia, if she can be said to allegorize anything, allegorizes human love in all its beauty and hardship, for love is hard.⁹⁹ It is so much easier in everyday life to hate, to seek revenge or retribution and perpetuate an endless cycle of violence, or simply to be indifferent to suffering and pain; yet, Cordelia goes down the harder path of love, and we must love her and hate her for it. The miracle of *King Lear* lies in the fact that, in a world as barren, hopeless, and devoid of divine love as that of *King Lear*, love can exist at all between two human beings. The tragedy of *King Lear*, unique to all of Shakespeare, lies in the fact that such a beautiful, unconditional love—Cordelia's love for

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 38

⁹⁹ “A ‘failure to acknowledge’ is the presence of something, a confusion, an indifference, a callousness, an exhaustion, a coldness. Spiritual emptiness is not a blank.” *Must We Mean What We Say?*, p. 264.

Lear—fails and is such a waste. In the era of late modernity, it is her death, not Lear’s that prompts the line, “There is no God and we are his prophets.”¹⁰⁰

Jameson writes that the “association of Marxism and romance [...] does not discredit the former so much as it explains the persistence of the latter, which [Northrop] Frye takes to be the ultimate source of all story-telling.”¹⁰¹ (And so Shaw’s discrediting of romance in *Caesar and Cleopatra* is ironic—the story of Caesar and Cleopatra his play tells does not exist without it, and the problem becomes not romance as such but its moral content and social utility.) The rhetoric of redemption and salvation I use reveals my investments in a dialectical romance of progress. I make no apologies. Real progress must, I think, embrace the *belief* in progress—in other words, accept progress *as* romance.

It is within this tragic context that Peter Brook’s *King Lear* represents the apotheosis of British theatrical modernism. A play by that most British of authors, William Shakespeare, staged by that most British of theatrical institutions, the Royal Shakespeare Company; historicizing the global threat posed to late modernity by the Bomb by means of its appropriation of the theatricality of Samuel Beckett; allegorizing the death of tragedy, of genre, and of their political counterparts as cultural artifacts that bind people together, the nation and nationalism—Brook’s *King Lear* lays the

¹⁰⁰ Cormac McCarthy, *The Road*. New York: Knopf, 2006. p. 143. Although unlike theirs it ends with an uplift towards hope, there is no question in my mind that *The Road* belongs in the same company as Shakespeare’s and Beckett’s evocations of desolation and annihilation.

¹⁰¹ *The Political Unconscious*, p. 105. Much of Jameson’s piece “Magical Narratives: On the Dialectical Use of Genre Criticism” is a deconstruction of Frye’s “semantic” topography of romance, especially in relation to structuralist “syntactic” delineations. Cf. *The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1976.

groundwork for the increasing postnational performative postmodernism of Brook's later works: *Marat/Sade* and the Artaud-inspired "Theater of Cruelty" season (1964), *US* (1966), the white-box production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1970), and, upon leaving Britain for France, his work on the Continent, culminating in *The Mahabharata* (1985). Dramatizing the need for a postnational universalism as the road to peace, Brook's commentary on Shakespeare's *King Lear* as the death of tragedy, ironically, helps give life to the utopian performativity of a postmodern ethical and political order governed by new forms and structures of an all-inclusive belonging, acknowledgement of the humanity of all individuals in every community, of the dignity of everyday life in the here and now, of the need for connection and love.

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Biography

Charles Joseph Del Dotto was born 12 January 1977 at Fort Dix, New Jersey. He split his childhood between McGuire Air Force Base, New Jersey, and Summerfield, Illinois, and spent his adolescence in Round Rock, Texas. He did his undergraduate work at Princeton University (A.B. *cum laude*, English, 1999) and earned his A.M. (2002) and Ph.D. (2010) in English from Duke University, where he was a recipient of the Duke Endowment Fellowship, Presidential Endowment Fellowship, and, from the Department of English, the William Preston Few Fellowship, as well as four Conference Travel Fellowships. He received grants from the Folger Institute, International Shaw Society, and the Shaw Festival, Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario (The Ronald Bryden Scholarship). An excerpt from chapter two of his dissertation was published in *The Journal of Religion and Theatre*, 5.2 (Fall 2006): 104-114. He is married to Teresa Lioi Del Dotto, and they have two cats, Beatrice and Wasatch.