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Presentism, Walter Benjamin, and the Search for Meaning in *King Lear*

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The much-used phrase "the meaning of life" is symptomatic of a cultural crisis in which such meaning is not obvious. The modern institutions called "literature" and "culture" arose in part as attempted answers to this crisis, producing the mid-twentieth-century discourses of New Criticism and liberal humanism. In the reaction against these discourses over the last thirty years of English studies, issues of larger meanings in literary studies have tended to disappear in favour of strictly political issues. However, signs are emerging that the crisis of meaning is on the critical agenda again, and the Presentist critical movement is one important vehicle for this renewed interest. A precedent for this new interest can be found in critics who are important theoretical forebears of Presentism, the 1920s' "pre-Marxist", Hegelian critics Georg Lukács and Walter Benjamin, in whose writings the search for meaning was central. By applying Benjamin's idea that Shakespeare wrote, instead of tragedies, versions of modern "mourning plays" or *Trauerspiele*, predicated on a world devoid of meaning and employing objects allegorically to fill in the void, it is possible to read a Shakespearean tragedy like *King Lear* as a mourning play disclosing an empty world but, as Benjamin insisted, disclosing as well the possibility of a restoration of meaning through redemption.

Keywords: Allegory; Althusser; Benjamin; Cultural Materialism; Edgar (in *King Lear*); Greenblatt; humanism; Joughin; *King Lear*; Lukács; meaning of life; modernity; Mousley; New Historicism; Poststructuralism; Presentism; Shakespeare; *Trauerspiel*

I

The announced theme of this special issue, "Shakespeare and the Meaning of Life", is an almost proverbial example of the kind of impossibly large and impossibly unwieldy topics that generations of professors have warned generations of students to avoid. That several of us have decided, none the less, to answer the call and attempt essays on this issue is remarkable—and evidence for another much-cited cliché, Pope's dictum about fools and angels. Putting that fear aside, however, I reflected that the implied question behind the topic was, in fact, an eminently reasonable and timely one. In the wake of twenty to twenty-five years of the hegemony of historicizing methods in Shakespeare studies, a number of new critical trends have appeared, and two broad and competing alternative directions for Shakespeare studies are in evidence: one is a further intensification and extension of historicism, as has been advocated most prominently by David Kastan; the second is a set of proposed methods with an

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emphasis on the meaning of Shakespeare's texts in our present, rather than historicism's focus on past meanings, including the newer trends of Presentism, Ecocriticism, and the New Aestheticism. In this context, it seems to me, the phrase "the meaning of life" has an irreducible present-ness about it. We are intellectually curious about what life meant, say, to the first human hunter-gatherers, or to the ancient Chinese—and to Shakespeare's contemporaries. But we are passionately concerned about what it means for us now. To ask about Shakespeare's relation to the meaning of life is to pose a question about Shakespeare's possible meanings for us now—although of course in attempting to answer that question, we are curious as well about what the texts meant to his contemporaries, and we shall need to form what Walter Benjamin called a critical constellation[1] between our own age and his to conceptualize the complex act of the construction of meaning by readers in the present of texts from the past. In this present encounter emerges our (tentative) truth about Shakespeare's meaning, and in this present-based, imperfect encounter with the past depends the difference between the positive Presentism I and others have been advocating and the reductive, flattening Presentism that the word was originally coined to designate.[2]

The phrase the "meaning of life" itself, as far as I have been able to discover, is a relatively modern one, but a quick computer search shows that it had already been established as a cliché by the 1920s. There is, it seems to me, something Victorian about the phrase, a quality connected to the Victorian cultural and educational debate between proponents of mathematics, science and technology on the one hand and defenders of religion and of humanist learning on the other: "the meaning of life", I suspect, was the subject matter of the latter, completely ignored by the disciplines of the former, as the traditional debate went. But there is a more telling implication in the phrase. To pose the issue thus is to acknowledge that it is a problem: a discussion of the meaning of life can arise only when the consensus about what it is has broken down. In that sense, the phrase is a symptom of modernity, understood in this context to signal that quality of societies committed to technical and scientific reason whose power is based on its epochal "bracketing" of larger questions of the meaning of both nature and life. For the most part, use of the phrase signals puzzlement, questioning, doubt, searching—a *lack* of meaning experienced as a problem. And if we think about the issue this way, there is little question that the issue of the meaning of life as something in doubt was prominently alive in the imagination of the poet who could write (among many other possible examples):

> [MACBETH] Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
> That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
> And then is heard no more. It is a tale
> Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
> Signifying nothing.
> (Shakespeare, *Macbeth* 5.5.23–27)

In this famous speech and in many others, Shakespeare shows us, contrary to mid-century critics like E. M. W. Tillyard, that he had already become a full participant in intellectual modernity precisely because "meaning" was no longer directly available to him, but had become a problem, which it was perhaps the central task of his artworks to illuminate. And like his near-contemporary Michel de Montaigne, it is in the process of the attempt, rather than in the several (temporary, contingent)

terminal points of individual plays, that his greatest value for us today is to be found. Why we should be coming back to this issue *now*, near the end of the first decade of the new millennium, is of great interest. But if we are looking for critical precedents in the past for writings on this question, we have to look outside both the current and the earlier annals of American and British critical commentary on Shakespeare. It is true that for F. R. Leavis, a focus on "Life" and an implicit search for its meaning was a constantly reiterated refrain, but his refusal of aesthetic or philosophical language and his commitment to "the concrete" tend to turn his passionate commentaries conceptually into mere thematic summaries. In addition, the theories of French Poststructuralism—so useful for opening up the artwork's internal contradictions and its relation to power and discourse—will teach us little about Shakespeare and the meaning of life, except negatively.

II

This legacy of French Poststructuralist theory is, I think, the context for the recent work of Andy Mousley (editor of this special issue) in his 2007 *Re-Humanising Shakespeare: Literary Humanism, Wisdom and Modernity*. Mousley usefully revisits this territory and makes it clear that the context for his call for a new kind of "humanism" is the deficiencies of the "anti-humanist" discourse that first arose in the debates between Structuralists and Existentialists in France in the 1960s, and which migrated to English studies in the 1970s. This was the era when Anglophone academic literary critics first began to examine and assimilate the ideas of Lévi-Strauss, Barthes, Althusser, Lacan and Foucault for their possible usefulness in interpreting literary texts. In the works of Lévi-Strauss and Althusser particularly, Structuralism was seen as a kind of "science" allied to the natural and social sciences, a method that distanced itself from the work's power to induce readers into a willing suspension of disbelief, concentrating instead on the implied binary oppositions that built up the text's "map" of its fictional world. The influential practice of Pierre Macherey, a disciple of Althusser, wove together and instantiated materials from the various domains of literary forms, genres and conventions as well as materials from the world of social ideology in which the literary work subsisted. Criticism became a method of analysis, and Structuralist Marxism, largely ignoring a long tradition within Marxism that valued art as something more than an instance of ideology, put its emphasis on showing the work of literature as an over-determined, socially inscribed text, all the elements of which could, in principle, be explained through Structuralist analysis. Structuralism was in that sense, Lévi-Strauss once remarked, a development of the Marxist notion of ideology.

To be sure, early on the potentialities for Structuralism as a political tool were also recognized and developed; Leninist Marxism had led the way for "scientific" politics. And Roland Barthes in *Mythologies*, for example, showed how Structuralism harboured socially critical dimensions by turning his attention to the domain of the French popular culture of the 1950s and its organization of the perceptual world of mass culture as a strikingly banal array of structural oppositions. Louis Althusser, facing up to the danger of Structuralist Marxist literary analyses simply dissolving art into ideology *tout court*, developed his ingenious theory of the literary effect as that which "distantiates" readers from ideology, which allows readers to "'perceive' (but not know) in some sense *from the inside*, by an *internal distance*, the very

ideology in which we are held" (222–23, emphasis Althusser's). But Althusser held on to his basic, enabling binary opposition, science/ideology, even as he opened up space within it for the singular category "art", which was located outside of both science and ideology.

After the May–June 1968 events in France, however, Althusser's notion of a "science" that offered a refuge from an otherwise all-encompassing ideology (now defined by him in a much broader way than had previously been the case in the Marxist tradition) began to seem hollow. Since, for Althusser, the "science" that counted most was, specifically, Marxism-Leninism and because it was the "scientific" nature of its theory that justified the power of the vanguard Leninist party, many veterans of this missed revolution, who had become highly critical of the French Communist Party of which Althusser was a faithful, if somewhat "Maoist" member, began to see that this "science" acted exactly like "ideology"—it justified the power of the status quo rather than opening up critical perspectives for human emancipation. The science/ideology binary collapsed, and a new Poststructuralist/Postmodernist *mentalité*, in which there were no foundations on which to stand to distinguish absolutely truth from falsity, became established. The age of Poststructuralism had begun. Jacques Derrida's deconstruction meant that all knowledge, including all versions of science, were in effect ideology. Michel Foucault, breaking with the use of the concept "ideology" altogether, nevertheless created a cognate version of the notion with his analyses of "discourses". Discourses were, like ideology, sets of connected ideas that organized knowledge into various modes of power. They were in turn institutionalized in a disciplinary society whose aim was to subject the population to the control of power.

The result of this paradigm change was complex in terms of the Structuralism/humanism binary that had dominated much literary critical debate in the 1970s. Although many Poststructuralists continued to speak disparagingly of "liberal humanism", it was no longer from a stance of "scientific" methodology. Science disappeared, but *politics* remained. The critique of humanism subtly shifted, away from methodology and towards values. But this meant, in an irony that went largely unarticulated, that Poststructuralism had silently entered the domain of humanism by taking on a politically inflected moral stance—a stance of radical human equality and respect for human cultures of all kinds.[3] Weber had famously categorized scientific reason as based in value-free rationality, but now both sides in the reformulated debate between the successors of New Critics and Leavis-ites, on the one hand, and the successors of 1970s Structuralism, on the other, were arguing about values.

This was the intellectual context for the emergence in the UK and USA in the 1980s of powerful new critical ideas that built on the battle between Structuralists and humanists that had taken place in the 1970s, but rewrote them in the new Poststructuralist terms. Because the idea of science normally implied positive knowledge and because the new methods were based on anti-positivist premises, there could be no question of reproducing the older science/humanist dichotomy. But the concept of ideology or Foucaultian discourse suggested that much of the content of literary criticism was implicated in power and defence of the status quo. If criticism could not be scientific in the new intellectual environment, it could certainly be political. It could work to unearth the implicit political stances of an older "liberal humanist" criticism and to take an explicit stand on the side of the various oppressed subjects of the contemporary world. And this political turn, perhaps surprisingly in

the era of Thatcher in the UK and Ronald Reagan in the USA, found widespread support as the generation that had come of age during the Viet Nam War entered the professoriate. In the USA the New Historicism of Stephen Greenblatt, Louis Montrose and others became widely imitated, and the method dominated publications and presentations by early modern scholars for the next twenty years (and counting). In the UK a more diverse array of theorists—Alan Sinfield, Jonathan Dollimore, Catherine Belsey, Terence Hawkes and John Drakakis among others—offered versions of what came to be called "Cultural Materialism", but all practitioners shared an orientation to reading the meaning of the work of literature in the context of its moment of socio-cultural origin and/or in the moment of its reception in our present; and all were interested in the political uses of Shakespearean texts both in their original context and in their long reception history.

It is now clear that these two potentials of New Historicism and Cultural Materialism—their interest in the original socio-political context of older texts and their interest in the reception-history and cultural uses in our present of these texts—proved more difficult to keep in balance than had initially appeared. To come directly to the point I am interested in here, the two tendencies have now split into two somewhat opposed alternatives: "the New Materialism", committed to a minute reconstruction of the past for its own sake; and "Presentism", committed to highlighting the influence of the present on the way we read and interpret the past. As I have argued elsewhere, the danger of the "New Materialism" is that its agenda is harder and harder to distinguish from the positivist (or "old") historicism of the past, and presentist methods have arisen precisely to challenge the leaching out of present-oriented political interest from New Materialism (Grady, "Shakespeare Studies").

Thus, I agree up to a point with Andy Mousley's argument that there is a great danger to the potentially emancipatory power of literature and other art forms in the recent past of Shakespeare studies, but I would reconceptualize the issue somewhat differently. Mousley links this danger, among other things, to postmodernism's suspicion of universals:

> The waning of interest in Shakespeare's assumed universality means that existential questions (even though they might take the humble form of questions rather than assertions) are marginalized in favour of culturally specific issues and questions. "Meaning" is no longer about the meaning of life. "Meaning" is instead something that is produced by and within specific languages and cultures. (77)

Certainly, the domestication in recent years of "New Historicism" to (de-politicized) "historicism" and of "Cultural Materialism" to (de-politicized) "materialism" is linked to Mousley's diagnosis in the above quotation—except I think he has mislabelled the malaise. I think that in our multicultural present, the notion of "universality" is a lost cause—and one not to be nostalgic about, since the invocation of "universality" in criticism almost always turns out to be a strategy for elevating the values of one set of readers over those of another. Rather, the dissolving of values that Mousley rightly detects is a result of the slow draining out of what, at the beginnings of New Historicism and Cultural Materialism, was an explicit "Presentism" (in the positive sense of that word I discussed above). Instead of universality, when we read works from the past like Shakespeare's, we are involved in a complex and difficult-to-conceptualize encounter between a text generated in a past socio-historical context and a reader immersed in her own context, her

"present". "Meaning" is what happens as an outcome of this process, and if we can find in our encounters with some of these texts experiences that illuminate our sense of the meaning of life, clearly it is because we are experiencing life (in our present) and because we are in search of its meaning (also in our present). That experience, as Ewan Fernie has argued, is in fact one of the most important contributions of artworks to our lives, and art only exists, in a full sense of the word, for us now (182–84). To turn to a focus on Shakespeare as a source for contributing to our understanding of the "meaning of life", we need to turn to a notion of Shakespeare as art experienced in the present. We will not be the first generation to do so. I think we can find support in this effort, to take one notable example, from the beginnings of the "Modernist" moment of critical interpretation in some of the ideas from the 1920s by two Hegelians on the verge of becoming Marxists, the Hegel- and Nietzsche-influenced philosophical critics Georg Lukács and Walter Benjamin. For both of these critics, the possibility of meaning in the modern world and of the artwork's relation to the issue of meaning was *the* central critical issue.

III

The Hungarian critic-philosopher Georg Lukács (in his early "Hegelian" period at any rate) perhaps raised the issue more directly than any other literary critic in his attempt to define the relation between the ancient Greek epics and modern novels. The chief difference, he opines, is that the epic was the product of a society in which meaning was directly available in the forms of everyday life:

> Happy are those ages when the starry sky is the map of all possible paths—ages whose paths are illuminated by the light of the stars. Everything in such ages is new and yet familiar, full of adventure and yet their own. The world is wide and yet it is like a home, for the fire that burns in the soul is of the same essential nature as the stars; the world and the self, the light and the fire, are sharply distinct, yet they never become permanent strangers to one another, for fire is the soul of all light and all fire clothes itself in light. Thus each action of the soul becomes meaningful and rounded in this duality: complete in meaning—in sense—and complete for the senses; rounded because the soul rests within itself even while it acts; rounded because its action separates itself from it and, having become itself, finds a centre of its own and draws a closed circumference around itself. (Lukács 29)

For the Hegelian Lukács (who, however, seems to be following Friedrich Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* in this instance), this happy age was already in transition in the time of the composition of the Homeric poems and to have definitively ended with the rise of Attic tragedy, the non-tragic drama of Euripides, and finally Platonic philosophy (35–37). The Middle Ages revived a meaningful totality in a new, Christian guise, but Dante's great *Commedia* already showed the tensions underlying its epic unity by imposing a coercive, abstractly systematic form to try to contain its kinetic materials (37–39, 68–69). By the time of *Don Quixote* (and by extension, the time of Shakespeare), meaning was no longer immanent in the European world but had to be searched for by a "demonic hero" who finds that "a mere glimpse of meaning is the highest life has to offer, and that this glimpse is the only thing worth the commitment of an entire life, the only thing by which the struggle will have been justified" (80). In short, for Lukács, Western life since the Renaissance has become a

search for a no longer available sense of meaning and totality, for a lost sense of unity between the self and the world.

While Lukács thought that the spirit of the Greek tragedy had managed to survive this epochal transformation, one of his most acute readers and developers, Walter Benjamin, argued that a similar transition had occurred in the history of dramatic forms as well. The inner form of the ancient Attic tragedy, he wrote in his 1928 *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, differed fundamentally from both medieval and early modern non-comic drama. Using the seventeenth-century German term *Trauerspiel* to distinguish the modern dramas from the ancient—for which he reserved the cognate term *Tragödie*[4]—Benjamin argued that these early modern dramas were a European and not just a German phenomenon and that the greatest masters of the form were William Shakespeare and Pedro Calderón de la Barca, the great Spanish baroque dramatist (Benjamin, *Origins* 127).

Greek tragedy had disappeared from the world because the intellectual framework in which it originated and developed disappeared in favour of Christian monotheism—but a monotheism with a dualistic tendency to separate the empirical and material from the ideal and spiritual. Greek tragedy's promotion of its heroes to a status greater than the divine was no longer tenable in this new world,[5] and the idea of tragedy passed to the Middle Ages as an external form which was reconfigured as a submission to a higher will, a realization that the empirical world is worthless and empty—although it is open to the Messianic transformations of divine history (Benjamin, *Origins* 112). Medieval drama reflects this epistemic change in developing the new forms of the miracle and morality plays. They can be considered in some ways the first *Trauerspiele*, but the early modern forms differ from them in one crucial respect: the divine comedy of salvation history—always present, explicitly or implicitly in the medieval drama—drops out of the form of seventeenth-century baroque drama and its analogues in England and Spain. The most typical form of the *Trauerspiel* (that of modernity) is one based on a profane and empty world, and this in turn forms the basis for the most important aesthetic technique of the *Trauerspiel*, which Benjamin calls allegory, using the term in an expanded and unique sense.

Much more than the extended metaphor that it has traditionally been defined as, allegory in this work is for Benjamin a technique and a form whose properties are grounded in the seventeenth-century historico-philosophical moment—although as his later, more explicitly Marxist work will make clear, it extends forward at least into the early twentieth century. First, in a conception akin to Lukács's notion of a problematized world of modernity as expressed in the novel's inner form, the allegory assumes that the empirical world is devalued or empty (later Benjamin will assert that this is primarily a result of capitalist commodification[6]), so that its objects are free to be used as protean signifiers. The allegory thus constructs a form, Benjamin says, in which "anything can mean anything else" (Benjamin, *Origins* 175). This encompasses traditional extended metaphors but is a principle that takes several other forms as well. In addition, and importantly, while the precondition for the allegory of the *Trauerspiel* is a sense of a meaningless world, the artwork anchored in this world and reproducing its negative evaluations also and crucially produces a profligate, meaningful aesthetic space of multiple significations.

Second, this allegorical space is emphatically not one of Romantic organic unity. The allegorist fills up aesthetic space through a strategy of the accumulation or

agglomeration of a series of fragments: "For it is common practice in the literature of the baroque," Benjamin observes, "to pile up fragments ceaselessly, without any strict idea of a goal" (Benjamin, *Origins* 178). Furthermore, the inner logic of allegory resists any attempts at totalization: "In the field of allegorical intuition the image is a fragment, a rune .... The false appearance of totality is extinguished" (176).

In short, just as the coming of the novel had signalled the death of God for Lukács, so for Benjamin the advent of the *Trauerspiel* manifests God's desertion of the world, leaving it empty of meaning but open to the possibilities of allegorical representations in art which model the possibilities of a redemption of the devalued world.

In what follows, I want to argue that Lukács and Benjamin both got this large-scale narrative of the historical development of the inner forms of narrative and dramatic literature more or less right, speaking in broad terms; and that in doing so, they have defined a very helpful purchase point for a discussion of the elusive issue of Shakespeare's take on the meaning of life. Of course, in this discourse, the development of aesthetic forms is a collective rather than merely individual process, so that the form in question is one Shakespeare shares, *mutatis mutandis*, with a generation or more of his fellow artists. Equally, however, Shakespeare's examples have become by far the most significant for us in our twenty-first-century present.

For Benjamin, as for most German heirs of Romanticism, *Hamlet* was the Shakespearean work that counted most, and his book is peppered with allusions to that play as a consummate if atypical representative of the genre.[7] In order to extend the discussion beyond what Benjamin directly established, I want to use instead Shakespeare's *King Lear* as an example of a Shakespearean *Trauerspiel* in Benjamin's sense—without being able, in the space available, to pursue beyond a few quickly noted instances the play's chain of allegories, as I did for *Hamlet* in the article cited immediately above. But certainly *King Lear* explores the issues of life's meaning as much as or perhaps even more explicitly than does *Hamlet*.

IV

For Benjamin, the foundational condition of the *Trauerspiel* is its depiction of an empty world, and, although he never mentions *King Lear*, it should be immediately obvious to all familiar with this titanic Shakespearean masterpiece that it is a prime example of this quality of the *Trauerspiel*. In what follows, I will necessarily be describing qualities of *King Lear* that have been widely noted in the immense body of commentary on the play. What will be new here is my claim that certain of these widely shared interpretations match up strikingly well with Benjamin's generic theory and take us directly into the some of the central questions *King Lear* raises about the meaning of life.

The world of *King Lear* is emptied through a slow development in which Lear's unexamined world construction is systematically voided—at three inter-related levels—under the pressure of the new, power-obsessed regime of his modernizing successors. The fragmented allegories represented by the torn map of Britain, the severed crown, and then the images of the cosmos to be discussed below enact different versions of this theme. Lear's imperious division of the kingdom, and especially his retirement into a merely symbolic kingship in which the actual power devolves to his heirs, is one crucial move in this carefully charted process, which in

retrospect is clearly a transition into modernity, more or less as described by Lukács and Benjamin. We see this particularly in the long discussion in Act 1 Scene 2 of the meaning of "these late eclipses of the sun and moon" between the Earl of Gloucester and his bastard son Edmund. The old Earl sees these astronomical oddities as meaningful portents of real-world events:

> GLOUCESTER These late eclipses in the sun and moon portend no good to us. Though the wisdom of nature can reason it thus and thus, yet nature finds itself scourged by the sequent effects. Love cools, friendship falls off, brothers divide; in cities, mutinies; in countries, discord; in palaces, treason; and the bond cracked 'twixt son and father. This villain of mine comes under the prediction; there's son against father. The king falls from bias of nature; there's father against child. We have seen the best of our time. Machinations, hollowness, treachery, and all ruinous disorders, follow us disquietly to our graves. (*King Lear* [A Conflated Text] 1.2.96–106)

Gloucester is here expressing a point of view widely held within the early seventeenth-century intellectual class, and by many of the unlearned in very general terms as well. However, the ridicule of it by both the villainous Edmund (in lines to be discussed below) and by the virtuous Edgar in his reaction to Edmund's derisory mouthing of his father's views—Edgar asks, "How long have you been a sectary astronomical?" (1.2.137)—suggests that a sceptical, proto-scientific attitude towards these ideas has already asserted itself. The cosmos itself becomes an allegorical representation of this intellectual conflict.

As Lukács suggests in the quotation I reproduced at the beginning of this essay, for the ancients (and, in this context, for their medieval and early modern followers), "the starry sky is the map of all possible paths" of humanity. Observable celestial events were not the outcome of the interactions of matter and energy in the immense scales we have learned from modern astronomy; they are instead signs, ambiguous portents that signal changes in the affairs of humanity below. This pre-modern, pre-scientific worldview was founded on a doctrine of what Karl Jung called "simultaneity", the idea that all things that happen in a given moment are interconnected and manifest each other. And because in this system every level of creation mirrors every other level in following a strict principle of hierarchy, so that every element has a distinct rank—above one element but below another—heavenly events that seemed to show a celestial "disorder" were seen, as in the case of Gloucester's analysis of the meaning of the eclipses, as indicating, even in a sense causing, disorder below through the effects of simultaneity.

Comets were one example of "disorderly" celestial events, and they had widely been associated with various political or natural disasters throughout human history, including especially the Roman system of learning, so important throughout Renaissance Europe, with its intense preoccupation with signs and portents. The "wandering" of the seven planets as they moved through the background of the "fixed stars" of the Zodiac was also a constant if slowly unfolding and repetitive principle of disorder and the principal matter for the predictions of "sectaries astronomical" like the early modern physician Simon Forman, who began each one of his medical examinations by casting a horoscope of his patient, the better to diagnose whatever ailed him or her (Traister). And among the most spectacular events of these planetary wonderings (the sun and moon were considered planets or "wandering stars" as well as Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn) were "occultations," or eclipses, when one

of the planets blocked the view of another celestial body. When that body was the moon or especially the sun itself (an event causing first a dimming and then a night-like darkness), it constituted a major "disorder" of the heavens subversive of the normal hierarchy of things.

Edmund soon lets the audience know that these doctrines are to him of a piece with those of "the plague of custom" he denounces in his first soliloquy—merely widely believed illusions, contrary to the realities of the nature that he defines:

> EDMUND This is the excellent foppery of the world, that, when we are sick in fortune, often the surfeit of our own behavior, we make guilty of our disasters the sun, the moon, and stars; as if we were villains on necessity; fools by heavenly compulsion; knaves, thieves, and treachers, by spherical predominance; drunkards, liars, and adulterers, by an enforced obedience of planetary influence; and all that we are evil in, by a divine thrusting on. An admirable evasion of whore-master man, to lay his goatish disposition to the charge of a star! My father compounded with my mother under the dragon's tail, and my nativity was under Ursa Major, so that it follows, I am rough and lecherous. Fut! I should have been that I am, had the maidenliest star in the firmament twinkled on my bastardizing. (1.2.109–22)

Edmund's evacuation of the ancient symbolic system still upheld by this father—and in a confused way by Lear himself—is soon extended to the political realm as Cornwall, Albany, Regan and Goneril take up positions of power in the absence of the legitimating title and "additions" retained by King Lear as stipulated in his division of the kingdom. The result is a Machiavellian realm of individualistic power-striving, which soon embroils ancient Britain in civil war and external invasion, revealing politics to be as empty of inherent significance as the cosmos has become.[8] And this logic of amoral striving is soon extended to the level of the individual human figure in Lear's mad remarks on the figure of the nearly naked Tom o'Bedlam on the heath:

> [LEAR] Is man no more than this? Consider him well. Thou owest the worm no silk, the beast no hide, the sheep no wool, the cat no perfume. Ha! Here's three on's are sophisticated! Thou art the thing itself; unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art. (3.4.95–100)

As innumerable critics have noted, this allegorical vision of "unaccommodated man" haunts both Lear and the play as a whole: it focuses into one figure the outcome of the de-signifying worldview that seems to have taken over the world of the play. It is perhaps the most intense of many of the play's evocations of emptiness, nakedness and meaninglessness. It is one of the play's most potent posings of the question: what is the meaning of life?

These are familiar observations on the unfolding of these issues in *King Lear*; it is my view that they constitute some of the most inescapable qualities of the play as seen from our own era's chastened vantage point in history. Stephen Greenblatt asked at the end of a much-cited essay on the play's "negotiations" with one of its sources, Samuel Harsnett's Protestant indictment of Catholic exorcisms, "Why has our culture embraced *King Lear*'s massive display of mimed suffering and fraudulent exorcism?" (Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations* 128), and he answers with a series of claims very close to the ones that would fuel his much later *Hamlet and the Question of Purgatory*:

> Because we no longer believe in the magical ceremonies through which devils were once made to speak and were driven out of the bodies of the possessed. Because the play

> recuperates and intensifies our need for these ceremonies, even though we do not believe in them, and performs them, carefully marked out for us as frauds, for our continued consumption .... Hence, we embrace an alternative that seems to confirm the official line, and thereby to take its place in the central system of values, yet at the same time works to unsettle all official lines. (128)

Here, Greenblatt is recuperating an insight about our own consumer society as old as T. S. Eliot and W. B. Yeats, in a sense one that goes back to Coleridge, but still with an important application in the early twenty-first century. Post-Enlightenment rationality introduced the Latin term *mythos* into English, but in a fundamentally post-Enlightenment meaning that emphasized the non-historical, non-scientific nature of the stories that the Greeks and Romans had seen in a variety of ways, from naive acceptance to complex allegorical interpretation. Eliot, Yeats and a host of Modernists, following up on hints from the Romantics and Victorians, emphasized modernity's lack of myths in the positive sense of the term as that which provided cultures with a common sense of meaning. Rituals invoked myths, embodied them, commemorated them. Art would have to become the new, secular ritual of a disenchanted modernity that still needs meaning in the absence of truly shared mythology. *King Lear*, according to Greenblatt, like *Hamlet* in a different mode, provides such rituals, gives us such a myth. And in its complex contours, innumerable critics have attempted to tease out the heart of these two plays' "answers" to meaninglessness.

Indeed, all of Shakespeare's tragedies, and many of the histories and comedies, pose different versions of this fundamental question, and they give different "answers" as well. *Hamlet* left us in a pregnant silence. The late romances give us various allegories of possibility. *King Lear* seems to be somewhere between these two. And all the answers depend on that peculiarity of artworks which Theodor Adorno defined as their "enigmaticalness":

> Although no artwork can be reduced to rationalistic determinations ... each artwork through the neediness implicit in its enigmaticalness nevertheless turns toward interpretive reason. No message is to be squeezed out of *Hamlet*; this in no way impinges on its truth content. (128)

That is to say, the non-conceptual content of art is nevertheless part of rationality, an extension of rationality, not another realm of cognition entirely. Earlier Adorno had argued about art that

> its object is determined negatively, as indeterminable. It is for this reason that art requires philosophy, which interprets it in order to say what it is unable to say, whereas art is only able to say it by not saying it. (72)

At the same time as art for Adorno always escapes simple conceptualization, it is always an expression of its own historical moment, and especially at the level of form. What I want to argue is that several of the widely understood features of *King Lear*—its enunciation of the advent of modernity and the death of feudalism, its evocation of a starkly empty world, its ambiguous ending—should be understood as manifestations of the new genre of early modern drama that Benjamin argued informed many of the basic works of Shakespeare, the *Trauerspiel*. The play continues to speak to us in the early twenty-first century because we continue to live within the same crisis of meaning—now, of course, in much more concentrated and higher-stakes form—as is

revealed in this play. In fact, a glance at *King Lear's* critical history can show us that we who have lived under the shadows of nuclear weapons and who have witnessed the mega-atrocities of mid-twentieth-century history are much better positioned to appreciate this great play than were Shakespeare's contemporaries—who were very nearly silent in response to this announcement of deep crisis.[9] The first of two extant versions of the play to come down to us was published in a 1608 quarto, but we have no comments from readers or auditors that I have been able to discover, with the partial exception that in Ben Jonson's encomium to actor Richard Burbage, King Lear is mentioned as one of his great roles, along with Hieronimo in Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, Hamlet and Othello. Otherwise, there is silence.

When the play returned to the stage in the Restoration, it was, famously, in the altered adaptation of Nahum Tate, who focused in his changes on precisely those elements of the play that strike us as most stark and searing: the role of the Fool, the unjust deaths of Cordelia and Lear. Tate was following the strictures of neoclassicism in his changes, eliminating the Fool under neoclassical theory's disdain for mixed genres (the Fool being seen as an alien intrusion into tragedy of a comic device), changing the ending because of the doctrine of "poetic justice". However, the results were to strip the play of its revelation of the emptied world of modernity, to protest at the play's revelations of modernity's devastating reduction of the old pre-modern symbolics. Even today, when widespread recognition of the starkness of *King Lear*'s ending has contributed to its being seen as the very summit of Shakespeare's achievements, we find frequent attempts to find compensation in the devastation, sunshine in the rain. And of course, the play provides us with these moments as well, in the heartbreaking description of the death of Gloucester or Cordelia's fierce refusal of the world in her last speech.

Twentieth-century commentary on *King Lear* has struggled to find a way to understand these fine balances of the play, with critics up to about 1980 divided between "optimists", who tended towards Christian and humanist readings emphasizing some sense of affirmation amidst the stark events of the play's conclusion, and "pessimists", often Existentialist ones, who saw the play as a cheerless statement of an intractable human condition and/or meaninglessness. After the critical revolutions, which produced a new kind of Shakespeare studies from about 1980 on, fresh attempts to move past this debate began to appear, first in several deconstructive studies, then in New Historicist, Cultural Materialist, Feminist and Psychoanalytic essays.

However, as Kiernan Ryan points out in his useful survey of commentaries on *King Lear* in the period 1980–2000, the older debate often reappeared within this more political context (Ryan 5–9). Whether seeing the play as a struggle between feudal rulers and the commons, or as a reaffirmation or subtle critique of patriarchy, or as an ambiguous intervention into the topic of King James's proposed union between England and Scotland, critics were still forced to come to terms with the issues of the meaning of suffering, the meaning of human existence itself, insistently raised in the drama, and they tended to take sides on these issues along the same lines as the previous generation of critics.

The "containment and resistance" debate among New Historicists and Cultural Materialists in the 1980s and early 1990s to some extent reproduced the early opposition between pessimism and optimism: proponents of "containment" tended to a Nietzschean despair (but without Nietzsche's redeeming aestheticism), the proponents of "resistance" tending to ground meaning in the struggle for human liberation

affirmed in the celebration of "resistance". Thus, even taking into account the paradigm shift of the 1980s, the archive of writings on *King Lear* in the twentieth century was largely a debate between two interpretive positions, each of which is based on opposed themes in the play's conclusion, the moment John Joughin described in his 2002 essay on the play as encapsulating the play's irreducible meaning. The critical history of *King Lear* in the twentieth century was largely a debate about this moment of the play, between proponents of the view that the play underlines the inherent meaninglessness of the human condition and those who see some kind of positivity affirmed amidst the catastrophe of the closing.

To be sure, one would look in vain over the last several decades for much agreement with the specifics of the once dominant "optimistic" view of the play by A. C. Bradley, who construed the play in terms of a Manichaean struggle between good and evil and wrote:

> Thus the world in which evil appears seems to be at least unfriendly to it .... Good, in the widest sense, seems thus to be the principle of life and health in the world; evil, at least in these worst forms, to be a poison. The world reacts against it violently, and, in the struggle to expel it, is driven to devastate itself. (280)

We who have lived through, or inherit, a recent history of genocide and assured mutual destruction, tend to read it through those experiences, and for us, as I indicated above, earlier optimistic views of the play like Bradley's seem to have lost something crucial about Shakespeare's prescient vision as embodied in this play. The play as we have it (in both its closely linked versions), ends with the skies still empty, the catastrophe-plagued realm of Britain still void of intrinsic meaning.

This is not quite the same as saying, however—as any number of twentieth-century readers of the play did—that all hope of redemption vanishes with Cordelia's (and then Lear's) death. Joughin speaks eloquently on this point: "For my part though, the strain at the end of Lear also sustains a utopian impulse and in doing so is eventually probably more Adornian than Cavellian" (77). This allusion to Adorno references the latter's insistence on a messianic hope for redemption, even in the face of a reality that provides us no such guarantee. Joughin, rightly in my view, finds this viewpoint truer to the spirit of the play than that of the well-known essay on it by Stanley Cavell. And we can get at important aspects of that quality of the play through the theoretical insights of Adorno's great friend and intellectual partner, Walter Benjamin, and his theory of the *Trauerspiel*.

I turn, then, to those much discussed last portions of the play which all readers must inevitably attempt to come to terms with—beginning, however, with a brief look at a mirroring moment from the drama's second family romance, Edgar's narration of the death of his father, the blinded Earl of Gloucester.

Edgar himself has been a potent and perhaps under-appreciated allegorical figure over the course of this epic play. After being outmanoeuvred by his half-brother and declared an outlaw, he famously takes on the role of a madman, providing the occasion for Lear's famous diagnosis of him as "the thing itself", "unaccommodated man". In line with Greenblatt's insight into the crucial role that theatricality plays as a thematic motif in this drama, however, we need to note the complex effects that Edgar's disguise has on the diagnosis. If the "thing itself" is, far from being "itself", instead a meta-theatrical artifice that refuses to sit statically "underneath" Lear's signifier, he suggests as well a sense of resistance to the reduction of humanity to the stasis of a

one-dimensional emptiness, meaninglessness, or vacuity. In his resistance, then, we can begin to intuit an aura of the utopian, the sense that for all our animality, we are not just animals, the sense—amplified also in the figure of the side-changing Duke of Albany—that the version of human nature acted out in the power struggles of Goneril, Regan and Cornwall (and we should include in this list the Lear of the early portions of the play) is not the last word about "human nature". As early as this speech, then, a source of "resistance" to meaninglessness is subtly introduced into the play.

Edgar's sustained series of transformations—from earl-to-be, to outlaw, to madman, to serving man, and then to folk-tale knightly hero—enacts its own allegorical narrative about the potential positivity of human nature. In this play, such positivity resides above all in the humble, salt-of-the-earth figures of suffering and endurance whom Edgar disguises himself as. We see this theme also in the case of Cornwall's servant who stands up against his unjust master and in the anonymous servants who bind up the blinded Gloucester's bleeding eyes and offer what help they can.[10] The mad Lear on the heath had come to understand something of this in his "Poor naked wretches" speech. Naked bodies themselves emerge as one of the play's most powerful allegories. Edgar shares in this theme more directly by wearing the rags of Tom o'Bedlam, a role he enacts so intently that Shakespeare had to insert an aside for him in the heath scenes to indicate his "true" identity. But he is also notoriously slow to "own" that identity: it has been crushed along with the old lifeworld whose destruction has been enacted for us.

This reluctance may help explain one of the puzzles about the play which Bradley called attention to early in his discussion, namely the issue of why Edgar never identified himself to his father until just before his father's death. In recounting the story of that death, he himself referred to it as a "fault" as he narrates his several metamorphoses of disguise, from his early privileged position, then

> [EDGAR] Into a madman's rags; to assume a semblance
> That very dogs disdained; and in this habit
> Met I my father with his bleeding rings,
> Their precious stones new lost; became his guide,
> Led him, begged for him, saved him from despair;
> Never—O fault!—revealed myself unto him
> Until some half-hour past, when I was armed:
> Not sure, though hoping, of this good success,
> I asked his blessing, and from first to last
> Told him my pilgrimage. But his flawed heart—
> Alack, too weak the conflict to support!—
> 'Twixt two extremes of passion, joy and grief,
> Burst smilingly.
> (5.3.186–98)

Edgar's "fault" is understandable as an early warning that this play will deny us the expected "happy ending" and in so doing creates a moving moment of redemption just before death—an emotional complex of mixed joy and grief.

The ending of the play, from the reappearance of Cordelia until its catastrophic conclusion, is full of such complex, mixed moments. At the risk of inviting the scorn of all "tough-minded" readers of the ending, I would argue that this mixture of joy and

grief is also present, albeit in attenuated, distanced form, in Lear's last words. In the 1623 Folio text, in lines that have been adopted in all composite editions I know of, this positively ambiguous mixture is recapitulated and given even greater emphasis, when Lear passionately asserts the possibility of Cordelia's life in his very final words:

> [LEAR] Do you see this? Look on her, look, her lips,
> Look there, look there! *Dies.* (5.3.309–10)

These are, in fact, often the lines that are most pivotal in many interpretations of the text. "Optimistic" critics here see a final affirmation of (allegorical) redemption in the lines, an assertion of Cordelia's allegorical functions as an emblem of forgiveness, mercy, and redemption—even specifically, the assertion of Christian meaning and grace intruding into the space of this pagan world.[11] "Pessimists" read Lear's lines as the last foolish illusion of a foolish old man confronting the empty sky of an indifferent universe.[12]

Instead, I want to align my all-too-brief reading of this great play in the long line of critics in search of some way beyond this binary opposition, in this case by way of the *Trauerspiel* theory of Walter Benjamin. The ambiguity at the end of the play revealed in its critical history and argued for by numerous more recent commentators is precisely the kind that Benjamin thought was characteristic of the *Trauerspiel*'s allegory. This form, he wrote, encompasses extremes of ambiguity, and especially near the end of these plays, where the signifiers of the empty world often take on a utopian signification in a structure of ambiguity which leaves visible emptiness and despair as well as hope. Benjamin put it this way:

> For it is precisely visions of the frenzy of destruction, in which all earthly things collapse into a heap of ruins, which reveal the limit set upon allegorical contemplation, rather than its ideal quality. The bleak confusion of Golgotha, which can be recognized as the schema underlying the allegorical figure in hundreds of the engravings and descriptions of the period, is not just a symbol of the desolation of human existence. In it transitoriness is not signified or allegorically represented, so much as, in its own significance, displayed as allegory. As the allegory of resurrection. (Benjamin, *Origins* 232)

Benjamin's insight into the ambiguity of certain of the allegorical elements of the *Trauerspiel* is at once historicist and Presentist: historicist because his analysis of drama's form ties it to the historico-philosophical moment of its origin; Presentist because, both in the 1920s and in the beginning of the twenty-first century, we find ourselves situated before the same dilemma of meaning, confronting a world that God seems to have abandoned with the ambiguous resources of our humanity, including both the innate and the historically constituted. We find ourselves, like the dying Gloucester, posed between catastrophe and redemption, the meaning of life a puzzle, not a solution. We and Shakespeare share this moment and this predicament, but clearly it is not a universal human situation; rather, it is an outcome of that disenchantment of nature that we blandly call modernity—one barely underway in 1608 but one we have lived with without solving for a long time. Modernity's promises of human equality and emancipation and its threats of human self-destruction and annihilation are much clearer for us than they were for Shakespeare, even in this prescient and slow-to-be-appreciated masterpiece. Meaning remains an allegory for us—a signifier whose signified we have yet to define. But meaning is, precisely, for us to make, in both our present and in our future.

Notes

1. The "constellation" for Benjamin is a fragmentary grouping of facts and concepts that mutually illuminate each other, allowing us to make intellectual connections among ideas. He developed the notion in rejecting both empirical generalizations and the traditional Hegelian procedure of attempting to see the relation of all concepts to totality. See Benjamin (*Origins* 34–35).
2. See Grady and Hawkes for an overview and several distinct versions of contemporary critical Presentism.
3. See Mousley (11–13).
4. Because of that fundamental distinction, the choice of the term "tragic drama" to render *Trauerspiel* in the book's title in the New Left Books 1977 translation by Osbourne is a misleading one. In the translation's text, by way of contrast, the German term is retained exclusively. The German *Trauer* variously means mourning, grief, or sorrow, so that "mourning play" is a common translation for the German. "Plays of lamentation" is an alternative.
5. Benjamin took this conception of Greek tragedy from Rosenzweig (qtd. in Benjamin *Origins* n20, 243). For a very lucid discussion of what Benjamin took from Rosenzweig on tragedy, see Moses (228–46).
6. Benjamin wrote in 1938: "The allegorical mode of apprehension is always built on a devalued world of appearances. The specific devaluation of the world of things, as manifested in the commodity, is the foundation of Baudelaire's allegorical intention" (Benjami, "Study Begins" 95–98, 96). For a lucid discussion of the connection of the theory of allegory in the *Origin* to Benjamin's later Marxist work on Baudelaire, see Buck-Morss (177–85).
7. See Grady ("*Hamlet* as Mourning-Play") for an expansion of Benjamin's scattered remarks on the play as a *Trauerspiel.*
8. Here and elsewhere in this section on *King Lear*, I am drawing on an earlier and much longer discussion of these themes in the play (Grady, "What Comes of Nothing"). This chapter-essay, however, did not make use of Benjamin's theory of the *Trauerspiel*.
9. For an eloquent discussion of the need to situate this play in our post-Holocaust world, see Joughin.
10. Of the several essays between 1980 and 2000 which fasten on the subaltern characters of the play as a source of possible redemptory themes—including White, Heinemann, Strier, Grady ("What Comes of Nothing") and Patterson—Ryan in his previously cited survey mentions only Patterson, thus under-representing this strain within the debate about the play in the period 1980–2000.
11. These "optimistic" readings tended to occur earlier in the twentieth century, particularly before the revelations of the Nazi genocide. The best-known such reading is Chambers. L. C. Knights similarly argued that "at the centre of the action [of *King Lear*] is the complete endorsement of a particular quality of being": "love," defined, among several other things, as "that without which life is a meaningless chaos of competing egotisms" (117–19).
12. This is the view that predominates from the post-Second World War period to the present; it is well represented by Greenblatt's Introduction to the play in the *Norton Shakespeare*, 2nd edn. But the "pessimistic view" was defined as early as Swinburne (1880).

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