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Nuclear Shakespeare: Apocalypse and Annihilation in *King Lear* and *Hamlet*

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Abstract

Recent scholarship on Shakespeare's plays centres around the question of their relevance for the present day. Feminist, Marxist and post-colonial analyses speak to our globalised political context; post-structuralist methods explore the relationship between language and power; historicist methods look at the construction of modernity in Shakespeare's day; presentism considers the plays from a self-consciously present-focused perspective; and the recent eco-critical approach reads Shakespeare's plays in the light of the so-called "Anthropocene." In this thesis, I use an updated method of Derridean nuclear criticism, combined with materialist feminist critique, to examine the relevance of *King Lear* and *Hamlet* to today's heterogeneous threat of annihilation (including nuclear destruction, genocide, and ecological disaster through climate change), focusing on the implications of annihilation for artistic representation – literature, in particular. I also look at *King Lear* and *Hamlet* in their context of early modern Christian apocalypticism, taking apocalypticism as a possible precursor to today's discourses of annihilation.

I argue that the spectre of annihilation problematises traditional realist mimesis, revealing the complex and paradoxical relationship between truth, meaning, and representation. Early modern Scriptural exegetes and Reformation iconomachs were also deeply concerned with the problem of representation, one which apocalyptic ideology promises to resolve through an ultimate revelation of truth at the end of history. These concerns continue today in late modern critiques of representation as well as in millennialist secularisations of the apocalypse, which are ambivalent in their dual potential to lead to destruction and to provide a necessary hope for justice. *King Lear* and *Hamlet* both dramatise and subvert early modern apocalyptic views on eschatology and teleology, providence, revelation, mystery, prophecy, and messianic justice. Both plays reveal the contradictory nature of the Apocalypse described in the Book of Revelation, itself an "Apocalypse without apocalypse" which lacks ultimate revelation of truth and justice, presenting only annihilation of the enemies of God. However, the two plays also dramatise the paradoxical power of rhetoric, fiction, and literary and theatrical representation to both act as weapons of mass destruction and *defer* the ultimate end. The complexity of the apocalypse presented in *King Lear* and *Hamlet* thus allows the two plays to be appropriated in twentieth-century adaptations and intertextual uses to explore the relationship between representation and annihilation in the modern day and to consider the role of the artist in the nuclear age.

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Contents

Introduction

I came up with the idea for this thesis after the devastating nuclear accident at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant in Japan in 2011. Not long after, the government of my country, India, pressed ahead with the establishment of a nuclear power plant despite vehement opposition from the public. Although the Indian Supreme Court allowed the plant to become operational, one of the judges expressed grave reservations about the risk of a Fukushima-style catastrophe, writing in the verdict: "All efforts are to be made to avoid any man-made disaster. […] The life of some cannot be sacrificed for the purpose of the eventual larger good."[1]

The right-wing government of India recently won a second term in power after using jingoistic rhetoric and escalating tensions with Pakistan – both countries possessing nuclear weapons. For those of us living in nuclear-armed states, it is clear that the risk of nuclear warfare is still a pressing concern. But the danger of annihilation, in all its varied forms, is not limited to a few states; it is one that affects all of humanity. In January 2020, the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists moved the hand of the Doomsday Clock to one hundred seconds to midnight, identifying multiple threats which may lead to human extinction and warning that "the international security situation is now more dangerous than it has ever been, even at the height of the Cold War."[2]

I did not see literature as divorced from this context. In my view, literature does not exist in a separate sphere from "real life." On the contrary, the study of literature may shed a light on our predicament in the nuclear age. Every lover of books has noticed the great power of fiction to move, delight, and influence us in a myriad of ways. Some theorists of fiction see it as structuring the very way we experience reality, including the reality of living under the shadow of nuclear annihilation. I wanted to understand why the possibility of annihilation is often called "unthinkable" or "unspeakable" and how we can begin to think, speak, and write about it.

[1] N. D. Jayaprakash, "The Supreme Court of India's Judgement on the Kudankulam Nuclear Plant," *CounterPunch Magazine,* 05 Aug 2013 <https://www.counterpunch.org/2013/08/05/the-supreme-court-of-indias-judgment-on-thekudankulam-nuclear-plant> 18 Feb 2020

[2] John Mecklin, ed., "Closer than ever: It is 100 seconds to midnight. 2020 Doomsday Clock Statement," *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists,* 23 Jan 2020 <https://thebulletin.org/doomsday-clock/current-time> 18 Feb 2020

I had noticed, when I started my research, that there was a curious relationship between *King Lear* and nuclear annihilation: the nuclear threat is an implicit or explicit concern in four film adaptations of the play made in the 1970s and '80s. *Hamlet* has also been seen as highly relevant to the nuclear age: modern commentators stress the way its political climate seems to foresee the wars, massacres and totalitarian repression that characterised the twentieth century (and which are still with us in the twenty-first). More than four hundred years after they were written, *King Lear* and *Hamlet* seem to speak directly to our situation in the present day.

Still, William Shakespeare was not our contemporary, nor was he a prophet; he wrote his plays against the background of his own tumultuous political context, which was riven by political struggles and religious schisms. Shakespeare reflects us because he too lived in interesting times, seen by many even then as the *end* times. Could an *apocalyptic* consciousness of time in the Reformation period, then, be the reason that *King Lear* seems so relevant to our fear of annihilation today? Certainly, the word “apocalypse” has stayed with us, often being invoked to describe the threat of nuclear annihilation. Could the emerging ideology of modernity in Shakespeare's day explain why the politics of *Hamlet* seem so similar to ours? These are the questions I started out with. I imagined a large-scale study to examine Shakespeare's plays in their early modern context of apocalypticism and technological modernity in order to understand the connections made between his plays and the threat of nuclear annihilation today. But when I started researching these topics, I realised that such a study would require many years and far more resources than were available to one person doing graduate research.

Thus, I decided to focus on the theoretical issue of artistic representation – the strange power of fiction I mentioned above. This power comes from the paradoxical place of representation within the conceptual oppositions of presence and absence, letter and spirit, matter and idea, and more. These paradoxes of representation call into question the essence and purpose of art and literature, problematise the interpretation of the meanings of texts, and complicate the relationship between representation and reality, or truth. The relationship between representation, meaning and truth is also a concern shared by both early modern apocalyptic ideology and late modern discourses of annihilation.

Central Research Question

My central research question can be expressed as three linked questions:

1. How were Shakespeare's *King Lear* and *Hamlet* influenced by early modern apocalyptic concerns about representation, in particular, the connection between sacred representation, meaning and ultimate truth? What is the attitude shown in the two plays towards apocalyptic elements such as eschatology and teleology, revelation of mystery, and messianic justice? Can the two plays be called "apocalyptic," and why or why not?

2. Why did multiple late-twentieth-century artists choose to adapt, appropriate or otherwise refer to *King Lear* and *Hamlet* to respond to the threat of annihilation? In particular, how do they use the two plays to reflect on the way in which annihilation seems to problematise truth and meaning in artistic representation? What aspects of the two plays did they see as illuminating our present condition in the nuclear age?

3. What do the apocalypse and annihilation portrayed in *King Lear* and *Hamlet* and their modern-day versions reveal about the historical and theoretical relationship between apocalypticism and discourses of annihilation? Can early modern apocalypticism be considered a historical precedent for, or otherwise illuminate aspects of, late modern discourses of annihilation?

An Updated Method of Nuclear Criticism

I have taken methodological inspiration from Jacques Derrida's "nuclear criticism," proposed in his 1984 essay "No Apocalypse, Not Now," in which he emphasises the link between literature and nuclear annihilation.[3] Richard Klein's essays on temporal consciousness in the nuclear age and Peter Schwenger's 1992 book *Letter Bomb* on post-apocalyptic twentieth-century fiction are some of the significant works in the field.[4] Following Klein's identification of one of the aims of the method as "the interpretation of canonical texts through the perspective of nuclear criticism," Nicholas Royle applied the method to Shakespeare, arguing that *Hamlet* is a "nuclear text" in his 1990 essay

[3] Jacques Derrida, "No Apocalypse, Not Now: full speed ahead, seven missiles, seven missives," trans. Catherine Porter and Philip Lewis, *Diacritics* 14.2 (1984) 20-31, JSTOR <https://www.jstor.org/stable/464756> 10 Oct 2011

[4] The most recent essay by Klein on this topic is "Knowledge of the Future: Future Fables," *Diacritics* 38.1/2 (Spring-Summer 2008): 173-179, JSTOR <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20616524> 05 Dec 2019; Peter Schwenger, *Letter Bomb: Nuclear Holocaust and the Exploding Word* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992)

"Nuclear Piece: *Memoires* of *Hamlet* and the Time to Come."[5] However, there has never been a detailed attempt at reading any of Shakespeare's plays in the light of this method, something I hope to rectify in this thesis.

After an initial burst of popularity in the 1980s and early '90s, nuclear criticism lost much of its momentum due to a general attitude that discourse on the nuclear threat was outdated after the end of the bipolar world order. I have given my reasons for disagreeing with this assessment at the beginning of this introduction. However, it is true that the nuclear threat has mutated in the twenty-first century into a much more heterogeneous threat of annihilation, including the spectre of ecological disaster through climate change.[6] While earlier critics focused on the relationship between literature and projected *future* events of annihilation, I also believe that nuclear criticism can also consider the impact of *past* events such as war and genocide on artistic representation, building on the valuable work of scholars in genocide studies, particularly Holocaust studies, on the problem of representing events of annihilation.

In contrast to traditional realist readings which assert the apolitical universality of Shakespeare, recent and contemporary approaches in Shakespeare studies emphasise the political and historical aspects of Shakespeare's plays. Post-structuralist approaches, influenced by the literary and critical theory of Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and others, apply their theoretical insights about the relationship between language and power to Shakespeare's work.[7] Significant work has been done through Marxist, feminist, and post-colonial approaches, which explore the political context and import of Shakespeare's plays from different perspectives.[8] The New Historicist approach, which emerged from of the work of Stephen Greenblatt, analyses Shakespeare's plays within the socio-political context in which they were written and first performed. In contrast to the historicist

[5] Nicholas Royle, "Nuclear Piece: *Memoires* of *Hamlet* and the Time to Come," *Diacritics* 20.1 (1990): 33-57, JSTOR <http://www.jstor.org/stable/465227> 15 Aug 2014

[6] However, Richard Klein has argued that the scope of nuclear criticism should be expanded beyond the nuclear referent (including to consider the spectre of climate change) in the following essays: "The Future of Nuclear Criticism" *Yale French Studies* 97 (2000): 78-102, JSTOR <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2903216> 05 Dec 2019. ; and "Climate Change Through the Lens of Nuclear Criticism," *Diacritics* 1.3 (2013): 82-87, JSTOR <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43304244> 05 Dec 2019

[7] See Nicholas Royle, *Shakespeare and Derrida* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), Jonathan Gil Harris, *Shakespeare and Literary Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), and Jennifer Ann Bates and Richard Wilson, *Shakespeare and Continental Philosophy*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014)

[8] See Jean E. Howard and Scott Cutler Shershow, eds., *Marxist Shakespeares*, (London: Routledge, 2001); Dympna Callaghan, *Shakespeare Without Women: Representing Gender and Race on the Renaissance Stage* (London: Routledge, 2000); Ania Loomba and Martin Orkin, *Post-colonial Shakespeares*, (London: Routledge, 1998); and Craig Dionne and Parmita Kapadia, *Native Shakespeares: Indigenous Appropriations on a Global Stage* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008)

approach, Hugh Grady and Terence Hawkes have proposed a presentist approach, which aims to read Shakespeare's plays from the perspective of present-day concerns.[9] Recently, Randall Martin, Steve Mentz, Dan Brayton, and others have emphasised the importance of ecology and the natural environment in understanding Shakespeare's drama. The eco-critical approach is also often a presentist one, trying to read the relevance of Shakespeare's plays for the so-called "Anthropocene."[10]

The work of many of these scholars has laid the foundation for my own research. But rather than subscribing to any one approach, I believe that future methodological innovations can be found in the tension between different approaches. Thus, my work is inspired by, and critical of, all the approaches mentioned above. For example, I share the same concerns about climate change as the eco-critical approach. However, I am critical of concept of the "Anthropocene," a term which diffuses responsibility for the climate crisis to "humanity" more broadly rather than emphasising the importance of structural inequalities of power whereby different groups contribute disproportionately to the crisis (while other groups suffer disproportionate effects).[11] Therefore, I believe that an eco-critical approach must be combined with a political one that recognises the root causes of the climate crisis, as many scholars in the field also recognise. In this thesis, I will consider annihilation more broadly, the climate crisis being one among many threats that affect humanity – and the humanities – today.

Nuclear criticism is inspired by Derrida's deconstruction, so his writings on apocalypse, literature and rhetoric will be invaluable to my thesis. However, I will use Derrida's theory in a critical way, considering Marxist, feminist, and some realist critiques of deconstruction, as well as providing my own materialist feminist perspective as a counterpoint. My updated method of nuclear criticism aims to combine both presentism and historicism by trying to understand the links between early modern apocalypticism and late modern discourses of annihilation. My background and primary

[9] See Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt, *Practicing New Historicism* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2000); and Hugh Grady and Terence Hawkes, eds., *Presentist Shakespeares* (London: Routledge, 2007)

[10] See Randall Martin, *Shakespeare and Ecology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Steve Mentz, *At the Bottom of Shakespeare's Ocean* (London: Continuum, 2009); Dan Brayton and Lynne Bruckner, eds., *Ecocritical Shakespeare* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2011); Gabriel Egan, *Green Shakespeare: From Ecopolitics to Ecocriticism* (London: Routledge, 2006); and Simon C. Estok, *Ecocriticism and Shakespeare: Reading Ecophobia* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011)

[11] For a more detailed critique, see Andreas Malm and Alf Hornborg, 'The geology of mankind? A critique of the Anthropocene narrative ', *The Anthropocene Review* (07 Jan 2014), Sage Journals <https://doi.org/10.1177/2053019613516291> 12 Feb 2014

area of interest are in literature and literary theory, so I will rely heavily on the works of historians of theatre and apocalypticism for the important historical perspective. This thesis will be a work of literary theory and criticism; thus, theoretical and methodological questions will be woven into the very fabric of this work. I will consider both realist and anti-realist perspectives on representation of reality, or mimesis, to explore the relevant paradoxes of representation.

My method of analysis involves close reading of texts, together with a comparative perspective that emphasises intertextuality and textual multiplicity: seeing the text as not just an autonomous work of art, but as constituted by its relations to other texts, such as sources, variants, adaptations, appropriations, citations, and references in intertextual dialogue. To this end, I will read Shakespeare's plays along with references to them in texts like James Joyce's *Ulysses*, the ninth chapter of which is in constant dialogue with *Hamlet*; Derrida's *Specters of Marx*, which appropriates the ghost in *Hamlet* to rethink Marxism; and twentieth-century film adaptations of *King Lear* and *Hamlet*, to examine the ways in which literary and theatrical representation have been adapted or appropriated in the cinematic medium.

In this thesis, I hope to demonstrate the value of my updated and modified form of nuclear criticism to open up new insights and perspectives into Shakespeare's plays, as well as to reignite discussion on the multiple threats of annihilation we face today. My intent is to identify how we can begin to speak in a more productive way about these threats, and thus, respond to them effectively. I also hope to contribute to the discourse on the role of literature in a world rife with political violence, capitalist, sexist and neo-colonialist exploitation, ecological disaster, and other forms of annihilation.

Thesis Structure

The first three chapters of my thesis focus on theoretical questions about the connections between annihilation, apocalypse, and representation.

In **Chapter 1**, I contrast realist and anti-realist responses to the problem of representing events of annihilation. These include both past events like the nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and acts of genocide as well as projected future events of annihilation due to the nuclear threat or climate change. In particular, I examine the connection made by Derrida and others between

literature and annihilation, considering theoretical, methodological, and ethical questions about the role of literature and literary studies in an age of annihilation.

In **Chapter 2**, I consider apocalypticism as a possible historical precedent of today's discourse of annihilation. First, I look at the link between the apocalyptic consciousness of time and conflicts of interpretation of Scripture (particularly regarding the literal and spiritual dimensions of the Book of Revelation) in the medieval and early modern period made by several scholars. Then, I explore the transformation of these concerns in modern-day millennialist ideologies. My aim is to identify historical ruptures and continuities in the consciousness of time in the early modern period and to examine the way in which these shifts are connected to questions of representation and interpretation of texts.

In **Chapter 3**, I trace a history of philosophical debates about truth and meaning in representation from antiquity to the modern day. After examining the classical philosophers' attitudes towards rhetoric (and the way they influenced early modern writers), I read Derrida's critique of Platonic logocentrism and alternative theory of representation characterised by "différance." I also consider realist critiques of Derrida's theory and articulate my own perspective. Finally, I compare the attitude towards visual representation by iconomachs in the Reformation period with similar critiques of "spectacle" and "simulation" in the present day.

In the last four chapters, I read Shakespeare's two plays within the framework provided by the first three theoretical chapters. Chapters 4 and 5 are about *King Lear*; Chapters 6 and 7 about *Hamlet*. I focus primarily on the theme of *annihilation* in the two plays in Chapters 4 and 6 and their attitudes towards the *apocalypse* in Chapters 5 and 7.

In **Chapter 4**, I try to understand why several twentieth-century critics and adapters have made a strong connection between *King Lear* and nuclear annihilation. I first examine Jan Kott's reading of "the paradox of theatre" and the "grotesque apocalypse" in *King Lear*. I then consider critiques of Kott's method, as well as Edward Bond's Marxist rewriting of Shakespeare's play. Then, I compare the varying attitudes to eschatology and cinematic techniques used to present the theme of nuclear annihilation in the three film adaptations of *King Lear* directed by Peter Brook, Grigori Kozintsev, and Akira Kurosawa. Finally, I conduct a detailed examination of Jean-Luc Godard's metacinematic appropriation of *King Lear*, which I argue is a form of Derridean nuclear criticism: both a

commentary on Shakespeare's play as well as a reflection on literary and cinematic representation in the nuclear age.

In **Chapter 5**, I read the Quarto and Folio versions of *King Lear* alongside the Book of Revelation from the Geneva Bible, examining the way that *King Lear* highlights or subverts apocalyptic themes such as revelation of mystery and prophecy. I focus particularly on the "textuality" of Revelation and the "apocalyptic" use of written messages in *King Lear.* I also explore the concept of "nothing" and "sovereign" speech in *King Lear* with reference to Derrida's use of Georges Bataille's concepts of the restricted and general economy. My intent in this chapter is to understand the "broken apocalypse" many have identified in *King Lear*, hypothesising that Derrida's "apocalypse without apocalypse" (apocalypse without a revelation of truth, which describes the prospect of nuclear annihilation) can illuminate the paradoxical apocalypse of *King Lear*.

In **Chapter 6**, I examine the hypothesis that *Hamlet* is a "nuclear text" by identifying certain paradoxes of representation highlighted by Hamlet, as well as looking at his subsequent attempt to use rhetoric as a weapon to effect political change. I then consider the way that *Hamlet* is read as a "forecast" of modern-day forms of annihilation in James Joyce's *Ulysses*, comparing its protagonist Stephen Dedalus' attitude to the relationship between rhetoric and violence with Hamlet's. Then, with a materialist feminist critique, I assess the fear of the uncontrollable, generative power of female speech and the female body demonstrated by the male characters in *Hamlet*. Finally, I argue that Hamlet's transformation into a man of violence at the end of the play can be understood as a transformation from a restricted to a general economy.

In **Chapter 7**, I look at the apocalypse in *Hamlet*, focusing primarily on references to the Last Judgement in the play. I start with a reading of Stephen Dedalus' reflections on the ghost and apocalypse in his theory about *Hamlet* in *Ulysses*. After this, I explore Derrida's use of the ghost in *Hamlet* to deconstruct Marxism in *Specters of Marx,* together with the emphasis he places on disjointed time and his proposal of a "messianism without messianism" to enable what he calls justice-to-come. Finally, I examine the references to doomsday, purgatory, and providence, as well as the presentation of death and mourning, in *Hamlet* to understand the attitude towards apocalyptic justice presented in the play.

With this study, I aim to show the centrality of the paradoxes of representation to today's discourses of annihilation, as well as to illuminate those discourses by considering their relationship with early modern apocalypticism. By using nuclear criticism to analyse the way in which representation, annihilation, and apocalypse are combined in Shakespeare's *King Lear* and *Hamlet*, I hope to show the importance of literature and literary studies for understanding, speaking about and responding to the multiple threats of annihilation which we face today – including the nuclear threat and the climate crisis. Ultimately, we must find a way to take effective action against a threat which would destroy literature as well as humanity, which both depend on each other.

CHAPTER 1

Disaster Writing: Responses to the Difficulty of Representing Annihilation

In 1945, the US bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki instantly annihilated two cities full of human beings and brought the terrifying reality of the nuclear bomb to the attention of people all around the world. These events inaugurated a new age: the nuclear age. The collective fear of nuclear war then intensified during the Cold War, when the stockpiling of nuclear weapons by the US and the Soviet Union made it apparent that what was at stake was nothing less than the fate of the entire human species. In 1986, the accident at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant showed that it was not only nuclear weaponry, but nuclear technology itself which endangered the species: by splitting the atom, a force had been unleashed too powerful for its inventors to control.

The *absurdity* of humanity's self-destructive potential became the defining feature of the nuclear age. All historical processes, ideologies, institutions, economic systems, and forms of social organisation were implicated in the crisis; earlier ways of thinking seemed inadequate to respond to the real possibility of imminent disaster. Art and literature were not exempt from this questioning; on the contrary, they were central issues.

In the twenty-first century, however, talking about the nuclear threat is often dismissed as outdated: the dissolution of the Soviet Union brought an end to the bipolar world, and with it, the madness of the nuclear speed race. Much of the public discourse assumes that nuclear energy technology has been brought under control, but accidents continue to happen: in 2011, a tsunami caused a catastrophic failure at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant, resulting in an uncontrollable spread of radioactive material. The threat of nuclear war too has morphed into a new – still terrifying – shape, due to the addition of several more nuclear-armed states, my own country, India, and neighbour, Pakistan, among them. The far-right government in power in India has recently been stoking war fervour, scapegoating the Muslim population of India as agents of “the enemy,” and ramping up its repression in the disputed region of Kashmir. The Pakistani government too has

joined this game with limitless stakes, with its prime minister recently raising the spectre of nuclear war.[12]

Nuclear technology is not the only thing that threatens the human species at the present moment: global warming, or climate change, has now become a crisis – primarily caused by intensive fossil fuel use required for the growth of global capitalist economic systems. Natural disasters in the form of forest fires, intense storms, and floods, seem to increase in frequency and intensity every year, along with attendant human misery. Scientists warn that we have little time to drastically reduce or eliminate the emission of greenhouse gases or risk irreversible ecological catastrophe. Public discourse around this threat is heterogeneous, ranging from anti-scientific climate denial, enabled by obfuscation in the right-wing media funded by fossil fuel profiteers, to the opposite end of the spectrum: a panicked and despairing "climate doomism" which sees the end as inevitable.[13] Both these responses disable action instead of helping us face the danger, understand its real scope, and put solutions into effect which can prevent or mitigate rather than precipitate the crisis. In order to act, we must learn to think and speak productively about the threat of human extinction, annihilation, or the end of the world, a possibility often called "unthinkable" or "unspeakable."

The centrality of the question of speech or linguistic representation to this problem means that students of the humanities – of literature, cultural studies, art, and history – may be able to shed some light on the issue, addressing such questions as: What implications does annihilation have for language, literature, and artistic representation? Can annihilation be represented at all? What is the responsibility of literature in these circumstances? How can we overcome the difficulty of speaking, understand and assume our responsibility, and take the conversation further? These questions are philosophical and ethical, requiring a blend of theory and practice. They are also methodological questions to be addressed when reading, interpreting, evaluating, and criticising texts.

Many writers, artists, and philosophers have tackled these questions before me. In this chapter, I will look at some works in which these questions have been addressed to identify the important

[12] "Imran Khan warns US of potential nuclear war in Kashmir," *The Guardian*, 26 Sep 2019 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/sep/26/imran-khan-warns-un-of-potential-nuclear-war-in-kashmir> 01 Oct 2019

[13] "Doomsday scenarios are as harmful as climate change denial," *The Washington Post*, 12 July 2017 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/doomsday-scenarios-are-as-harmful-as-climate-changedenial/2017/07/12/880ed002-6714-11e7-a1d7-9a32c91c6f40_story.html> 01 Oct 2019

issues they raise and the answers they propose. The quotes I use should not be taken to be authoritative facts, but *questions* with provisional answers. The writers I refer to changed their opinions throughout their lives; it is important to understand the socio-historical context of their comments and to look at them with a critical eye. But their articulations of issues are well made, and, in my opinion, a good place to begin thinking about this issue.

First, I will examine how the difficult paradoxes of thinking the "unthinkable" prospect of nuclear annihilation were articulated by Jonathan Schell and Jacques Derrida. I focus primarily on the way in which Schell and Derrida highlight the importance of art and literature for thinking of annihilation, as well as on Derrida's proposal for a "nuclear criticism." Second, I will look at the ethical problem of representing annihilation implied in the term "unspeakable." Borrowing parts of Michael Rothberg's framework in his study of Holocaust representation, and referring to the ideas of Ursula Le Guin, Theodor Adorno and others, I will consider the possible *complicity* of literature in acts of annihilation and the responsibility of those who write or speak about the issue. Third, I will consider the simultaneous necessity and impossibility of representing the unknown and unknowable, including the idea of measuring *absences* in historical texts articulated by Jean-François Lyotard and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. I will look at how certain works (such as those of Samuel Beckett and Franz Kafka) have been considered more or less successful representations of the unrepresentable, or, at the very least, writings that yearn towards the silence left by events of annihilation.

1.1 Literature and Nuclear Annihilation

How does one speak about silence, write about erasure, represent the impossibility of representation, or think the limit of thought? These difficult, paradoxical questions have become increasingly relevant in the last century, a critical time in which they threaten to break their philosophical bonds and become a terrifying reality. An interesting method can be found in Jonathan Schell's essay "The Fate of the Earth" (first published in 1982), where Schell considers the philosophical and ethical implications of the possibility of human extinction through nuclear annihilation. Schell locates the difficulty of thinking about the "unthinkable" in the nature of nuclear annihilation itself, rather than in the limits of the human mind:

> It might be well to consider for a moment the novel shape of the mental and emotional predicament that the nuclear peril places us in – a predicament that exists not because of a psychological failing or the inadequacy of the human mind but because of the actual nature of the thing we are trying to think about. Strange as it may seem, we may have to teach ourselves to think about extinction in a meaningful way.[14]

A Continuum of Annihilation: Death, Genocide and Extinction

Schell first considers the similarity between the difficulty of thinking of extinction – the death of humanity – and the paradox that confronts us when trying to think about our own personal death. We run up against an impassable limit of thought when trying to project ourselves beyond our own existence, a time when we no longer exist: we can only imagine being a spectator at our own funeral, or continuing to exist in an afterlife. The reality of death is unthinkable; death can be thought only as a fiction. This is also the case with human extinction.

However, Schell also notes the radical difference between death and extinction: extinction would not only put an end to the lives of human beings in large numbers, but also to the "common world" shared by human beings – a world made up of art, institutions, and social and political structures, pre-dating any individual's birth and outlasting her death. Schell points out that the common world links the dead, the living and the unborn; that individual lives and deaths acquire meaning with reference to it; and that the common world is the very thing that allows us to anticipate, fear, and hopefully prevent the death of our species.

It may seem, then, that the ultimate extinction of our species has no precedent at all which may help us begin to think about it. But there have been events in history which have also been called "unthinkable," events which pose special problems for comprehension and response: genocide, or the attempted annihilation of a group of human beings. Genocide is an attack on cultural continuity, on the *future* as well as on the present existence of a community, as Schell points out:

> The distinction between harm to people in the world and the end of the world – or even the end of *a* world – may give us some clue to the nature of what [Hannah] Arendt, borrowing a phrase of Kant's in order to describe the unparalleled crimes of Hitler's

[14] Jonathan Schell, "The Fate of the Earth," *The Jonathan Schell Reader* (New York: Nation Books, 2004) 103

> Germany and Stalin's Soviet Union, has called "radical evil." […] I would like to suggest that evil becomes radical whenever it goes beyond destroying individual victims (in whatever numbers) and, in addition, mutilates or destroys the *world* that can in some way respond to – and thus in some measure redeem – the deaths suffered. […] If this interpretation is correct, every episode of radical evil is already a small extinction, and should be seen in that light. Between individual death and biological extinction, then, there are other possible levels of obliteration, which share some of the characteristics of extinction. […] Genocide – the destruction of a people – which can be seen as an extinction *within* mankind, since it eliminates an element in the interior diversity of the species is another; in fact, genocide, including, above all, Hitler's attempt to extinguish the Jewish people, is the closest thing to a precursor of the extinction of the species that history contains.[15]

Thus, there is a qualitative difference between mass homicide and genocide: the latter also being the attempted destruction of the *context* in which human beings live meaningful lives and which can commemorate their deaths. Schell notes that the spectre of ultimate extinction is still qualitatively different from genocide, but that genocide is a forewarning that it is still possible:

> In its nature, human extinction is and always will be without precedent, but the episodes of radical evil that the world has already witnessed are warnings to us that gigantic, insane crimes are not prevented from occurring merely because they are "unthinkable." On the contrary, they may be all the more likely to occur for that reason.[16]

However, Schell's appropriation of Arendt's term "radical evil" and his implication that the Holocaust is "above all" a precursor of nuclear annihilation, and thus unique, fail to note Arendt's critical attitude towards these ideas. Michael Rothberg points out that Arendt contended that evil was *never* radical, only extreme.[16] In his study on the demands of Holocaust representation, Rothberg divides views on the representability of the Holocaust into broadly realist and anti-realist camps: the latter stressing the uniqueness and unrepresentability of the Holocaust, and the former (into which Rothberg places Arendt) arguing that the Holocaust is a historical event like any other – one that can and must be described rather than mystified. The real horror of genocide, according to

[15] Schell 190-111
[16] Schell 111

Arendt, comes from the *ordinariness* of its perpetrators. Despite Arendt's realism, however, she still concedes that these events pose a problem for linguistic representation and thought; Arendt's report on the trial of Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann ended by calling it a "lesson in fearsome, word-and-thought-defying banality of evil."[17] Even for realists, there seems to be a limit for comprehension and representation of genocidal annihilation.

Schell too writes that the spectre of total annihilation raises special problems for art, history and thought, not only in that it threatens to bring them to an end in a projected future, but also corrodes their significance and possibility in the present:

> Works of art, history and thought, which provide what Arendt calls the "publicity" that makes an intergenerational common world possible, are undermined at their foundations by the threat of self-extermination. […] There is no doubt that art, which breaks into the crusted and hardened patterns of thought and feeling in the present as though it were the very prow of the future, is in radically altered circumstances if the future is placed in doubt.[18]

Schell also draws a distinction between non-human animal life, where generations live and die without a consciousness of a common world, and the human species, which attains a sort of "immortality" through the transmission of ideas from past to future in the common world. This immortality is, of course, a fiction, the evident *mortality* of our species brought into stark view by the prospect of nuclear annihilation. Today's climate crisis in particular reminds us that the common world, the socio-historical context which gives meaning to art and life, is *further* dependent on the material, biological or ecological context that enables our existence at a more fundamental level.

In his reflections on nuclear annihilation, Schell raises an important paradox of extinction: it is at once "unthinkable," but impossible to personally experience. Therefore, he says, "when it comes to grasping the nature of this peril thinking about it is all we *can* do."[19] That is, the "unthinkable" hypothesis of human extinction can *only* exist in thought, in the imagination, and in speech or writing.

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[17] Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (London: Penguin, 2006) 275
[18] Schell 129
[19] Schell 105

This paradox is also central to Jacques Derrida's 1984 essay "No Apocalypse, Not Now," originally a speech given at a conference on "nuclear criticism," an attempt to find a method for students of the humanities to respond to the nuclear threat. Like Schell, Derrida draws attention to the paradox of nuclear annihilation: it is an event that has not happened yet and, thus, can only exist as an imagined representation, yet the occurrence of it would be the event to end the very possibility of representation. Derrida goes even further than Schell, stating that nuclear annihilation is *entirely* characterised by its textual, rhetorical, and fictional nature:

> [Nuclear annihilation is] a phenomenon whose essential feature is that of being *fabulously textual*, through and through […] [T]otal nuclear war […] as a hypothesis, or, if you prefer, as a fantasy, or phantasm, conditions every discourse and all strategies. Unlike the other wars, which have all been preceded by wars of more or less the same type in human memory (and gunpowder did not mark a radical break in this respect), nuclear war has no precedent. It has never occurred, itself; it is a non-event. […] The terrifying reality of the nuclear conflict can only be the signified referent, never the real referent (present or past) of a discourse or text. […] For the moment, today, one may say that a non-localizable nuclear war has not occurred; it has existence only through what is said of it, only where it is talked about. Some might call it a fable, then, a pure invention: in the sense in which it is said that a myth, an image, a fiction, a utopia, a rhetorical figure, a fantasy, a phantasm, are inventions. It may also be called a speculation, even a fabulous specularization. The breaking of the mirror would be through an act of language, the very occurrence of nuclear war.[20]

In *Letter Bomb*, a self-conscious work of nuclear criticism, Peter Schwenger criticises Derrida's separation of instances of prior use of nuclear weaponry (such as in Hiroshima and Nagasaki) from the spectre of *total* nuclear annihilation, or a "non-localisable nuclear war."[21] The question of whether those events which *have* occurred are representable is difficult to answer: on the one hand, we have testimony from survivors who experienced the material effects of the bomb on their bodies,

[20] Jacques Derrida, "No Apocalypse, Not Now: full speed ahead, seven missiles, seven missives," trans. Catherine Porter and Philip Lewis, *Diacritics* 14.2 (1984) 23, JSTOR <https://www.jstor.org/stable/464756> 10 Oct 2011

[21] Peter Schwenger, *Letter Bomb: Nuclear Holocaust and the Exploding Word* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992) 109

and on the other hand, much of the discourse about those events stresses the inadequacy and poverty of language. I will explore some of these ideas and their implications in the second section of this chapter.

According to Derrida, *literature* is particularly relevant to the question of nuclear annihilation. He defines literature as an institution, which includes the material archive of all texts, as opposed to a particular conceptual category. All creation of new literary works depends upon reference to this archive, looking back to what came before and forward to their survival in the future, as noted by Schell. For Derrida, the threat of nuclear annihilation is intimately bound to literature, the essence of which he locates in its historicity, which is also its mortality or destructibility. Derrida defines the nature of the nuclear threat as that which "shares the condition of literature," and vice versa:

> If "literature" is the name we give to the body of texts whose existence, possibility, and significance are the most radically threatened, for the first and last time, by the nuclear catastrophe, that definition allows our thought to grasp the essence of literature, its radical precariousness and the radical form of its historicity; but at the same time, literature gives us to think *the totality* of that which, like literature and henceforth in it, is exposed to the same threat, constituted by the same structure of historical fictionality, producing and then harboring its own referent.[22]

Schell and Derrida both raise the paradox of the nuclear threat as simultaneously real and fictional: it is unthinkable yet exists *only* in thought. They both identify art, language, and literature, which for Schell makes up the common world, as that which is threatened. The difference in their thought lies in the fact that Schell locates the problem in the nature of the threat rather than the inadequacy of the human mind, while Derrida problematises thought and representation as well. Derrida's method of deconstruction exposes the originary assumptions of Western philosophy as a set of hierarchies: the division of the world into strict logical oppositions, elevation of one term over another, and attempt to violently assimilate "the Other" in a totalising gesture. Nuclear annihilation, according to Derrida, problematises philosophical distinctions as the one between *doxa* (belief or opinion) and *epistēmē* (objective truth), and the related distinction between the fictional and the real. Thus, the unprecedented threat of annihilation requires us to think beyond the limits of thought and

[22] Derrida, "No Apocalypse" 27

confront the aporias of conceptual thinking itself. It is not the human mind as such that Derrida finds inadequate, but representation based on "logocentric" ideology and its violent hierarchies (a theory I will explore further in Chapter 3).

1.2 The Responsibility and Complicity of Literature

In the early 1990s, a series of poems were published, purporting to have been written by an atomic bomb survivor from Hiroshima, but were soon discovered to be fabrications. The Yasusada hoax, named after the pseudonymous author of the poems, raised troubling questions about the ethics of (mis)representing events of annihilation. Marjorie Perloff attributes the hoax to the loss of faith in the link between author and text in a world dominated by impersonal mass media, as well as to the Western desire to find "remote and improbable locations" in the trauma of the Other.[23] Hosea Hirata continues Perloff's critique, arguing that the "unspeakable event" of Hiroshima cannot be represented. He uses a psychoanalytic framework to explain the desire to use Hiroshima as a subject of poetry:

> What we read in the literature of the atomic bomb is not only the rage of the people but the shame of language. Hiroshima is not merely an improbable but an *impossible* site for poetry. But that very impossibility beckons our poetry. It is our perverted envy (call it guilt, if you will) of the victimhood, of the ultimate horror, of the Real. […] Let me state this again: Hiroshima is the impossibility of poetry. Nothing can represent, express, replace that annihilation adequately.[24]

Although Hirata implicitly condemns the hoax, he also suggests that the enormity of the act of destruction metonymised by the name "Hiroshima" renders the wrong insignificant. In fact, according to Hirata, Hiroshima problematises *all* representation by its inability to be represented,

[23] Marjorie Perloff, "In Search of the Authentic Other: The Poetry of Araki Yasusada" (1998) <http://writing.upenn.edu/epc/authors/perloff/boston.html> 13 Aug 2019

[24] Hosea Hirata, "Longing for the Real," *Boston Review* (Summer 1997) <http://bostonreview.net/archives/BR22.3/Hirata.html> 15 Dec 2012

exposing the essential weakness, inadequacy, and shame of language. In psychoanalytic terms, Hiroshima is Jacques Lacan's "Real": that which is inassimilable through representation.[25]

Hirata then refers to Hiroshima as "that total annihilation of beings and language" and frames that event as the *author* of the fabricated works. Rather than the "death of the author," we now have Death *as* the author: it is the disaster that writes. The metaphor of annihilation as an artist reappears frequently in the literature of the nuclear age. Schwenger refers to the story of Sumiteru (retold in *The Postman of Nagasaki* by Peter Townsend), a fifteen-year-old postal worker who survived the bomb in Nagasaki, who later exposes the scars on his back – marks written or inscribed by the bomb – to onlookers. Schwenger interprets this act as Sumiteru "admitting that his body itself is a message whose meaning has yet to be made, initiating a perpetual return inquiry."[26] In a diary he kept while filming his adaptation of *King Lear*, Grigori Kozintsev uses the metaphor of sculpture to describe the annihilating effects of the nuclear bomb. While contemplating an exhibit at the Hiroshima museum showing a shadow of a man left on a stone after being "disappeared" by the extreme heat of the bomb, Kozintsev writes:

> Here man was destroyed; he was neither struck down, nor cut to pieces, nor were his tortured bones and flesh thrown away, nor was he burnt. He simply disappeared. His shadow was left behind.
>
> It is a new manifestation of the sculptor's art carried out by the most advanced technology.[27]

In these descriptions, it is not only the link between the artist and creator which becomes severed by an event of annihilation, but the distinction between art and destruction too becomes unclear.

Pornography of the "Unspeakable"

Since the inauguration of the nuclear age, there have been many instances of "post-apocalyptic" science fiction which try to imagine a world ravaged by a catastrophic nuclear war. In her 1982

[25] Schwenger 53; See Tom Eyers, *Lacan and the Concept of the 'Real'* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) for a more in-depth explanation of this concept in Lacan's works.
[26] Schwenger 9
[27] Grigori Kozintsev, *King Lear: The Space of Tragedy*, trans. Mary Mackintosh (London: Heinemann, 1977) 18

essay on nuclear annihilation, "Facing It," Ursula Le Guin considers why so much post-apocalyptic science fiction comes out of Western Anglophone countries, but very little from other parts of the world. She hypothesises that those who refrain from writing these narratives do so due to ethical concerns, then declares that most works in the genre are pornographic:

> [P]erhaps those Russian and Polish science-fiction writers who are not timid yes-men, and often use their art to say quite subversive and unacceptable things, feel it ethically wrong to write about the nuclear holocaust, because by doing so they would trivialize and familiarize the ultimate act of evil.
>
> And this is a real issue, I think: the question of the "unspeakable." If one believes that words are acts, as I do, then one must hold writers responsible for what they do. […] Exploiting the apocalypse, selling the holocaust, is a pornography; the power fantasies of the survivalists […] are pornographic.[28]

Le Guin points out that the term "unspeakable" refers to the ethical problem of representing annihilation: "unspeakable" implies that annihilation *should* not be spoken of. Jonathan Schell also invokes the notion of pornography when he talks about the meaningless war games indulged in by powerful military leaders in the nuclear age:

> Military hostilities, having been stopped by dread of extinction from occurring on the field of battle, are relegated to a mental plane – to the world of strategic theory and war games, where the generals of our day sit at their computer terminals waging shadow wars with the ostensible aim of making sure that no real hostilities ever happen. Love, too […] has tended to withdraw to a mental plane peculiarly its own, where it becomes an ever more solitary affair: impersonal, detached, pornographic. It means something that we call both pornography and nuclear destruction "obscene."[29]

Schell implicitly problematises representation by contrasting "real" military hostilities with fictional war games, which he finds analogous to the contrast between human sexual connection and its (mis)representation in pornography. However, all representation – all art and literature – involves a

[28] Ursula Le Guin, "Facing It," *Dancing at the Edge of the World* (London: Paladin, 1989) 103
[29] Schell 125

fictionalisation of reality. The distinction between representation and reality thus becomes a central issue in the post-nuclear, post-Holocaust age. Here, Schell locates the problem in the extreme separation of the mental and physical spheres, a critique that, several decades earlier, Theodor Adorno and George Steiner had taken to its radical limits.

The Ambivalence of Literature

Theodor Adorno's famous pronouncement, "To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric," has been the basis of much of the later thought about the possibility (and ethics) of representing annihilation, particularly the critique of literature, culture, and literary and cultural studies as an academic discipline. Rothberg reminds us that the quote is often taken out of context and situates it within Adorno's wider "modernist" critique of modernity, particularly his critique of the ideology of infinite progress which (according to Adorno) enabled the Holocaust.

In "Cultural Criticism and Society" (written in 1949), Adorno issues a blistering condemnation of cultural critics of his day, whom he accuses of collaborating with and reproducing violent systems of domination and oppression. They do so, Adorno says, by removing an exalted concept of "culture" from the material conditions of production on which it depends:

> Where there is despair and measureless misery, [the cultural critic] sees only spiritual phenomena, the state of man's consciousness, the decline of norms. By insisting on this, criticism is tempted to forget the unutterable, instead of striving, however impotently, so that man may be spared. Characteristic of culture's pretension to distinction, through which it exempts itself from evaluation against the material conditions of life, is that it is insatiable. […] The exaggerated claims of culture, which in turn inhere in the movement of the mind, remove it ever further from those conditions as the worth of sublimation becomes increasingly suspect when confronted both by a material fulfilment near enough to touch and by the threatening annihilation of uncounted human beings.[30]

[30] Theodor W. Adorno, "Cultural Criticism and Society," *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997) 18-19

For Adorno, the separation of mental and physical labour was the original sin of capitalist modernity. In Marxist terms, "culture" is part of the ideological superstructure, which depends on the material base, the economic relations of production. Marxist dialectic, a materialist transformation and critique of idealist Hegelian dialectic, attempts to reconcile logical oppositions through the complex process of *Aufhebung*, here translated as sublimation: a complex process whereby opposing ideas are negated and conserved, discarded and elevated at the same time. Adorno's critique rests on the notion that culture reifies itself – and its ideological concepts – into an alternate "reality," forgetting and remaining wilfully blind to the material reality of annihilation.

According to Rothberg, Adorno uses "Auschwitz" as a metonymic figure which stands for the entire modern notion of culture and civilisation, which has been rendered indistinguishable from barbarism. The hitherto evident opposition between culture and barbarism no longer makes sense in the post-Auschwitz age: it is the very barbarism of culture that creates "unutterable" human misery and "the threatening annihilation of uncounted human beings." Even the causal relationship between superstructure and base becomes problematic under the "integrated" society of late capitalism:

> In the open-air prison which the world is becoming, it is no longer so important to know what depends on what, such is the extent to which everything is one. All phenomena rigidify, become insignias of the absolute rule of that which is. There are no more ideologies in the authentic sense of false consciousness, only advertisements for the world through its duplication and the provocative lie which does not seek belief but commands silence. […] The more total society becomes, the greater the reification of the mind and the more paradoxical its effort to escape reification on its own. Even the most extreme consciousness of doom threatens to degenerate into idle chatter. Cultural criticism finds itself faced with the final stage of the dialectic of culture and barbarism. To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. And this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today.[31]

Adorno's critique of representation in this essay is not a theoretical one, valid for all ages, but a historically specific one, caused by social relations under late capitalism. The totalisation and integration he identifies in the post-war period in which he wrote has only intensified in the twenty-

[31] Adorno 33-34

first century, enabled by technologies of virtual surveillance and monitoring and the hegemony of digital media. In such a situation, poetry, literature, art and human discourse become commodified, meaningless "idle chatter."

Taking Adorno's point even further, George Steiner applies it specifically to the study of literature. In his 1965 essay "To Civilize Our Gentlemen," Steiner traces the origins of literary studies to the humanist project, specifically the ideas of Matthew Arnold and his intellectual heirs who viewed literary studies as a discipline with a moral, civilising function. According to Steiner, university arts faculties in war-time Germany "offered very little moral resistance" or "gave servile or ecstatic welcome to political bestiality" during the Nazi genocide. The complicity of those engaged in studying the arts in Nazi barbarism shocked and unsettled the confident belief in the humanising mission of the arts. Steiner points out the disturbing truth that barbaric acts were committed by people who had a deep appreciation for literature:

> Knowledge of Goethe, a delight in the poetry of Rilke, seemed no bar to personal and institutionalized sadism. Literary values and the utmost of hideous inhumanity could coexist in the same community, in the same individual sensibility, and let us not take the easy way out and say "the man who did these things in a concentration camp just said he was reading Rilke. He was not reading him well." That is an evasion. He may have been reading him very well indeed.[32]

Steiner hypothesises that a literary education may even make one *more* susceptible to moral indifference towards the suffering of others, if not brutality, precisely because of our preoccupation with fiction and the imaginary:

> The capacity for imaginative reflex, for moral risk in any human being is not limitless; on the contrary, it can be rapidly absorbed by fictions, and thus the cry in the poem may come to sound louder, more urgent, more real than the cry in the street outside. The death in the novel may move us more potently than the death in the next room. Thus

[32] George Steiner, "To Civilize Our Gentlemen," *Literature and Silence: Essays on Language, Literature and the Inhuman* (New York: Open Road Integrated Media, 2013) 72

> there may be a covert, betraying link between the cultivation of aesthetic response and the potential of personal inhumanity.[33]

Steiner ultimately abandons this provisional hypothesis to conclude that the responsibility for the atrocity of the Holocaust lies with nationalism, rather than with literature. He also asserts his belief that literature (comparative literature, in particular) may be able to bring human beings closer together, enabling communication and respect between groups of people, and thus, offer a measure of resistance to genocidal nationalism. Despite this, it is clear that literature has lost its apparent humanising function and can, at best, be seen as amoral or ambivalent. For Derrida, the irresponsibility of literature – its "freedom to say everything" – is also its great hope and promise: it exists in a place where irresponsibility (to power) becomes the highest degree of responsibility (to the democracy to come):

> The freedom to say everything is a very powerful political weapon, but one which might immediately let itself be neutralized as a fiction. This revolutionary power can become very conservative. The writer can just as well be held to be irresponsible. He can, I'd even say that he must sometimes demand a certain irresponsibility, at least as regards ideological powers […] This duty of irresponsibility, of refusing to reply for one's thought or writing to constituted powers, is perhaps the highest form of responsibility. To whom, to what? That's the whole question of the future or the event promised by or to such an experience, what I was just calling the democracy to come.[34]

As these critics point out, the responsibility of those who read, write, and study literature (and the related distinction between the fictional and the real) is a deeply moral issue, especially in the political climate of the post-nuclear, post-Holocaust age of late capitalism. The moral ambivalence of literature means that the weapon is double-edged, allowing it to resist totalitarian violence as well as potentially being complicit with it.

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[33] Steiner 71-72

[34] Jacques Derrida, "'This Strange Institution Called Literature': An Interview with Jacques Derrida," *Acts of Literature* (London: Routledge, 1992) 38

1.3 Speaking Silences: Representing the Unrepresentable

Two terms are used in Japan to refer to survivors of the nuclear bombings: *hibakusha*, explosion-affected person, and *mugamuchu*, without self, or without centre.[35] Schwenger notes that dream imagery occurs frequently in survivor testimony, quoting from Robert J. Lifton's study of testimony that referred to "a people who walked in the realm of dreams." He draws attention to one survivor, quoted by Lifton, who could only say, "Hiroshima didn't exist; Hiroshima just didn't exist."[36] These expressions show that the bomb annihilates people as well as the survivors' sense of reality, problematising the distinction between reality and fiction.

Perloff notes that the subject of the bombings does not seem to occur in contemporary Japanese poetry. One reason for this, explained to Perloff by a Japanese poet, may be the double consciousness of many Japanese people: the feeling that collectively, they are both victims *and* perpetrators of gigantic war crimes. According to W. G. Sebald, this double consciousness also partly explains the paucity of representations of the air-raid bombings of several German cities during the Second World War. In *On the Natural History of Destruction*, Sebald's examination of the sparse testimony and few fictional representations of that destruction, he remarks on the astonishing silence around these horrific events, noting that when they *are* spoken of, survivors tend to resort to clichés which give no indication of the magnitude of the suffering. Echoing the Japanese poet interviewed by Perloff, Sebald hypothesises that the reason for this silence may be a strong sense of guilt and humiliation on the part of the German people.[37]

The important question that hovers in the background of Sebald's study and other studies of destruction is always the same: Are events of annihilation essentially unrepresentable? Jean-François Lyotard famously describes the difficulty of representing the horrors perpetrated at Auschwitz through the metaphor of an earthquake so powerful that it destroys all the instruments which can measure it:

> "It's not for nothing that Auschwitz is called the extermination camp." […] Millions of human beings were exterminated there. Many of the means to prove the crime or its

[35] Jim Garrison, *The Darkness of God: Theology After Hiroshima* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983) 69
[36] Schwenger 49
[37] W. G. Sebald, *On the Natural History of Destruction*, trans. Anthea Bell (New York: Random House, 2003) 67

> quantity were also exterminated. […] What could be established by historical inquiry would be the quantity of the crime. But the documents necessary for the validation were themselves destroyed in quantity. […] But the silence imposed on knowledge does not impose the silence of forgetting, it imposes a feeling. Suppose that an earthquake destroys not only lives, buildings and objects but also the instruments used to measure earthquakes directly and indirectly. The impossibility of quantitatively measuring it does not prohibit, but rather inspires in the minds of the survivors the idea of a very great seismic force. The scholar claims to know nothing about it, but the common person has a complex feeling, the one aroused by the negative presentation of the indeterminate. *Mutatis mutandis*, the silence that the crime of Auschwitz imposes upon the historian is a sign for the common person.[38]

The unrepresentability of annihilation does not lie merely in the hypothesis that the enormity of the evil seems to render language shameful, inadequate or meaningless, as Hirata implied; Lyotard points out that perpetrators of genocide also literally destroy documents which can prove the crime. This problem also affects historiography of imperialism in the post-colonial era; the burning of documents en masse occurred simultaneously with the collapse of colonial power structures in India and other formerly colonised countries. The destruction of books and other written records can also be considered an attack on the cultural context in which people's lives have meaning, constituting a genocidal act according to Schell's definition. Mass burnings of texts often accompany genocide and are intended to erase a people and historical facts from collective memory, removing the possibility of redeeming their suffering and deaths through the work of mourning.[39]

This puts historians in a difficult dilemma. In so far as there is survivor testimony, certain facts can be recovered through historical research, and the words of the Nazis themselves can be studied, realist thinkers like Arendt and Zygmunt Bauman argue that the Holocaust is knowable and representable.[40] By contrast, Lyotard points to all the facts that *cannot* be recovered: the indeterminate, the unknowable, the absence left by the annihilation of beings and documents. He argues that the term “Auschwitz” becomes a signifier that points to an enormous silence rather than

[38] Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988) 56

[39] For a more detailed examination of the phenomenon of the destruction of written texts and their relation to genocidal annihilation, see Amy Hungerford, *The Holocaust of Texts: Genocide, Literature, and Personification* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003)

[40] Rothberg 4

its actual referent, where the addressee of the sign "senses" it as "an unresolved problem, an enigma perhaps, a mystery or a paradox." Like Schell, speaking about nuclear annihilation, Lyotard argues that the nature of the referent of Auschwitz itself creates problems for language:

> The silence that surrounds the phrase, *Auschwitz was the extermination camp*, is not a state of the mind, it is the sign that something remains to be phrased which is not, something which is not determined. This sign affects a linking of phrases. The indetermination of meanings left in abeyance, the extermination of what would allow them to be determined, the shadow of negation hollowing out reality to the point of making it dissipate, in a word, the wrong done to the victims which condemns them to silence – it is this, and not a state of mind, which calls upon unknown phrases to link onto the name of Auschwitz. […] [W]ith Auschwitz, something new has happened in history […] which is that the facts, the testimonies which bore the traces of here's and now's, the documents which indicated the sense or senses of the facts, and the names, finally the possibility of various kinds of phrases whose conjunction makes reality, all this has been destroyed as much as possible.[41]

Lyotard then considers the responsibility of the historian, which is greater than merely a description of the knowable facts in this case: the historian must also deal with the fact of destruction and the absence of documents, the unknowable within history, which Lyotard terms "the differend." He argues that this task, far from being mystical, absurd or nonsensical, is a real, important task that the historian must take upon herself, one that is necessary to make sense of events of annihilation:

> Is it up to the historian to take into account not only the damages, but also the wrong? Not only the reality, but also the meta-reality that is the destruction of reality? Not only the testimony, but also what is left of the testimony when it is destroyed (by dilemma), namely, the feeling? Not only the litigation, but also the differend? Yes, of course, if it is true that there would be no history without a differend, that a differend is born from a wrong and is signalled by a silence, that the silence indicates that phrases are in abeyance of their becoming event, that the feeling is the suffering of this abeyance. But then, the historian must […] venture forth by lending his or her ear to what is not

[41] Lyotard 57

> presentable under the rules of knowledge. Every reality entails this exigency insofar as it entails possible unknown senses. Auschwitz is the most real of realities in this respect. Its name marks the confines wherein historical knowledge sees its competence impugned. It does not follow from that that one falls into non-sense. The alternative is not: either the signification that learning establishes, or absurdity, be it of the mystical kind.[42]

Reading Silences and Absences

Victims of genocide cannot speak, in more ways than one. But this inability to speak also applies to people on the extreme margins of society: women all over the world, indigenous people in settler-colonial states, homosexual men and women, people in poverty, religious minorities, the stateless, the disabled, and other subaltern groups far from the centre of power – the very groups that are favourite scapegoats for reactionary political leaders and targets for genocide. People in these communities also suffer constant violence through systems of institutional domination and oppression; they are denied justice as well as a voice to represent themselves. As scholars of colonialist genocides point out in response to statements like Lyotard's, the Holocaust is both unique – a new event that has never happened before – *and* a repetition and continuation of earlier colonial genocides, which also annihilated millions.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak rejects the tendency towards fetishisation of the agency of the subaltern by intellectuals far removed from their situation, pointing out that "the subaltern cannot speak." This is particularly true in history, where the only representations of marginalised and subaltern groups come from the ruling classes. These representations are not only ideological *mis*representations, but become historical "realities" used to bolster the systems of domination and oppression by which their authors gain power. In order to understand the reality of the subaltern in history, Spivak emphasises the importance of ideological critique of existing historical documents, quoting Pierre Macherey's words on interpreting ideology:

> What is important in a work is what it does not say. This is not the same as the careless notation "what it refuses to say," although that would in itself be interesting: a method might be built on it, with the task of *measuring silences*, whether acknowledged or

[42] Lyotard 58

> unacknowledged. But rather this, what the work *cannot* say is important, because there the elaboration of the utterance is carried out, in a sort of journey to silence.[43]

As an example, Spivak interprets the silence of historical documents (both colonial and native) referring to the Hindu religious obligation of self-immolation of widows on their husbands' funeral pyres, a practice abolished by the British colonial state. She points out the double erasure faced by subaltern women through both colonialist oppression *and* native systems of male domination:

> Within the effaced itinerary of the subaltern subject, the track of sexual difference is doubly effaced. The question is not of female participation in insurgency, or the ground rules of the sexual division of labor, for both of which there is "evidence." It is, rather, that, both as object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow.[44]

Spivak asserts that subaltern women are silenced by the ideological construction of gender and race, and thus, can only be read in the silences left by historical texts. Ursula Le Guin points out all women are silenced by the patriarchal identification of women with mute Wilderness, or "Nature, which listens, as against Man, who speaks." In the patriarchal view of the world, women are thought of "as having nothing to say, as sweet silence or monkey-chatterers." By contrast, male history becomes Civilisation, the story of "Man," leaving unknown and unknowable the history of "the Muted group, the silent group, the group within the culture that is *not spoken*, whose experience is not considered to be part of human experience, that is, the women." Women are simultaneously conceived of as unknowable, therefore something to be feared, and *replaced* with the idea, image or representation of "Woman," a male construct. But Le Guin finds hope in the present moment, with the rise of feminist consciousness: "We who live at this time are hearing news that has never been heard before. A new thing is happening […] The women are speaking." But because of the

[43] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' *Abahlali basMjondolo* <http://abahlali.org/files/Can_the_subaltern_speak.pdf> 17 Mar 2019: 82
[44] Spivak 82-83

millennia of male domination of language and representation, a new way of speaking is required: "[W]e are just beginning to find words for, our words not their words: the experience of women."[45]

Realist and Anti-Realist Literature of Annihilation

In her essay about the importance of facing nuclear annihilation, Le Guin proposes Samuel Beckett as "the prophet of the post-apocalypse," saying that "his writings are drawn towards, yearn towards, the condition of utter silence."[46] Beckett's work is often cited for its ability to approach the limit of representation; Adorno, too, found his work significant in its ability to respond to events of annihilation, due to its ability to *arouse* the fear of genocidal annihilation – in contrast to the politically committed existentialists who can only talk *about* the horror. According to Rothberg, Adorno identifies the task of the artist as confronting the audience with the reality of the brutality of the modern age.

Rothberg identifies Adorno's main problem with representation as its essential non-synchronicity with what it represents, which gives art the capacity to induce a sadistic pleasure in the audience. He points out that Adorno later softened his stance about the barbarism of poetry "after Auschwitz," changing his wording to "lyric poetry," and even seemingly contradicting his earlier assertion by arguing that art is the *only* thing that can resist the barbarism of the modern age. According to Rothberg, Adorno's "Auschwitz" – and later "Hiroshima" –represents not the concentration camp by that name, and not only the event of annihilation that occurred there, but metonymically refers to the entire modern "chronotope" (using a term from Mikhail Bakhtin to describe the unique quality of combined space-time). He then shows that Adorno finds Beckett's post-apocalyptic play *Endgame* an exemplary depiction of the condition of humanity – or rather, inhumanity – in the modern age.

In *The Conflagration of Community*, J. Hillis Miller explores fiction before and after Auschwitz to find ways that writers use to speak the unspeakable. Miller sees Franz Kafka's novels as particularly relevant in their seeming capacity to foresee the Holocaust, although Kafka did not live to witness or experience the horror. Miller quotes Werner Hamacher's description of Kafka's novels which identifies "a shift […] to the literary form of a virtually endless postponement that no longer serves

[45] Ursula Le Guin, "Woman/Wilderness," *Dancing at the Edge of the World* (London: Paladin, 1989) 162-163
[46] Le Guin, "Facing It" 102

as an introduction to a teaching, doctrine, moral, law, but has the task of deferring what is coming." Miller describes the way in which Kafka's novels attempt to defer this end, imagined as a horrific, nightmarish event of annihilation: "a situation that is not death but an interminable process of dying or a haunting situation of interminable imminence to some infinitely threatening distant goal […] the endpoints to which [his protagonists] are rushing almost too intolerable to confront."[47] The horror of the bureaucratic system and alienation of individuals in Kafka's novels can also be said to depict the extreme banality that Arendt found so fearsome. The fact that Kafka's works preceded the Holocaust and yet depicted its horror so well supports Adorno's argument that the barbarism of the Holocaust implicates the modern economic and political systems out of which it arose.

Derrida too identifies the works of Kafka, along with those of Stéphane Mallarmé and James Joyce, as exemplary texts of the nuclear epoch, much more so than speculative fiction which tries to imagine a post-nuclear world. Rather than referring to the horror they arouse, like Adorno, or looking at the way they defer the end, like Hamacher and Miller, Derrida stresses they are forms of writing which are aware of and address their own "nuclear" condition of possibility: their fictionality, their historicity, their dependence on the archive of literature, and ultimately their destructibility. In another conversation on literature, Derrida expands on this identification:

> These "twentieth-century modernist, or at least non-traditional texts" all have in common that they are inscribed in a critical experience of literature. They bear within themselves, or we could also say in their literary act they put to work, a question, the same one, but each time singular and put to work otherwise: "What is literature?" or "Where does literature come from?" "What should we do with literature?" These texts operate a sort of turning back, they *are* a sort of turning back on the literary institution. Not that they are only reflexive, specular or speculative, not that they suspend reference to something else, as is so often suggested by stupid and uninformed rumor. And the force of their event depends on the fact that a thinking about their own possibility (both general and singular) is put to work in them in a *singular* work […] texts which are very sensitive to this crisis of the literary institution (which is more than, and other than, a crisis), to what is called "the end of literature," from Mallarmé to Blanchot, […]). But given the paradoxical structure of this thing called literature, its beginning is

[47] J. Hillis Miller, *The Conflagration of Community: Fiction Before and After Auschwitz* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011) 41

> its end. It began with a certain relation to its own institutionality, i.e., its fragility, its absence of specificity, its absence of object. The question of its origin was immediately the question of its end. Its history is *constructed* like the ruin of a monument which basically never existed. It is the history of a ruin, the narrative of a memory which produces the event to be told and which will never have been present.[48]

Here Derrida cites the work of Maurice Blanchot, who attempted to respond to the Holocaust in *The Writing of the Disaster*. The book consists of a series of aphorisms which are both theoretical reflections on the relationship between literature and annihilation and an attempt at *practising* "the writing of the disaster" or "the disaster of writing" – attempting to destroy traditional forms of literary representation and to reveal the problematic relationship between representation and reality. Rothberg and others have noted that Blanchot contributed articles to anti-Semitic right-wing journals before the Holocaust, but that he later moved to the political left. According to Rothberg, *The Writing of the Disaster* is Blanchot's attempt at keeping a vigil over his own thought and writing, to remain aware of his responsibility and the responsibility of literature in an age of annihilation.

As a realist counterpoint to the anti-realist works of Beckett, Kafka and Blanchot, Peter Weiss' 1965 play *The Investigation* is a verbatim drama composed of testimony from the Frankfurt trials (that took place between 1963-1965). Weiss' play is composed of the words of survivor-witnesses describing the horrific events they experienced in the Auschwitz concentration camp, as well as words spoken by the defendants on trial, who are frequently described as laughing at the witness accounts. Weiss intervened to select which parts of the testimony he would include and to efface the identities of the witnesses, each nameless character being an amalgamation of several people. His method confronts the audience with the reality of the events, described in excruciating detail. Weiss is considered a surrealist, avant-garde writer; with the documentary technique of this play, he demonstrates how realism and the anti-realist critique of representation are not incompatible.

I found reading the play to be a deeply distressing experience; after finishing it, I was unsure of the ethics of turning survivor testimony into a play, which could be consumed as fictional entertainment – as Adorno feared. Weiss' play raises many questions about the line between fiction and reality, but

[48] Jacques Derrida, "'This Strange Institution Called Literature': An Interview with Jacques Derrida," *Acts of Literature* (London: Routledge, 1992) 41-42

unlike the other works I mentioned, it affirms a commitment to realism rather than rejecting it. I believe that it is a very important work, part of the process of mourning and memorialising the reality of genocidal annihilation experienced by millions of people in the Holocaust, as well as bringing survivor testimony to those who would otherwise not engage with it.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I examined the difficulty of representing events of annihilation, particularly of the spectre of total extinction (whether that occurs due to nuclear war, ecological disaster, or other event of annihilation). As noted by the writers I have referred to, annihilation problematises the distinction between the real and the fictional, belief and knowledge, culture and barbarism, and other eminent conceptual oppositions. At the heart of these paradoxes is the question of art, literature, and representation. The question of moral responsibility is also paramount in the study of literature in the post-Holocaust, post-nuclear age. While realist views of representation focus on what *can* be recovered and known about events of annihilation such as genocide, anti-realist positions focus on the theoretical, ethical, and methodological *limits* of representation, arguing that it is equally important to study the unknown, the indeterminate, the absences and silences in texts as it is to study the words of the text itself.

Like Schell, Derrida highlights the rhetorical or fictional nature of nuclear annihilation, a projected future event which can only be spoken about in the present. In this it is paradoxical, both unrepresentable and something which can *only* be represented, never experienced. Derrida's proposed method of nuclear criticism allows any text from the literary archive to be read to understand the essential nature of the nuclear threat, both literature and nuclear annihilation being constituted by the same structure of historical fictionality, but Derrida identifies modernist texts of the early twentieth century in particular as texts which show an awareness of their own condition of possibility, their historicity and destructibility. He also dates the emergence of the institution of literature to the seventeenth century and argues that the emergence of literature is intimately connected with its possible end. Thus, a study of early modern texts – like Shakespeare's plays – is also important to nuclear criticism. To this end, in Chapter 4, I will look at four modern film adaptations of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, showing how they all use the play to reflect on the threat of nuclear annihilation, in particular, on cinematic representation in the nuclear age. In Chapter 6, I

will apply nuclear criticism to *Hamlet*, analysing the way in which the politics and rhetoric of the play has been linked to our modern experience of war, violence, and annihilation.

In the next chapter, I will examine apocalypticism from early modernity to the present day, considering apocalypticism as a possible precedent for today's discourse on annihilation. I am interested in both the religious origins and the later secularisations of the apocalypse, with a special emphasis on religious debates around the interpretation of the Book of Revelation during the Reformation period.

CHAPTER 2

Crises of Representation from Apocalypse Then to No Apocalypse, Not Now

Jacques Derrida's essay on nuclear criticism, "No Apocalypse, Not Now," ends by telling a story of the circumstances of the writing of the Book of Revelation, its final word being the name of its writer: John. Derrida defines Apocalypse as the proper name of a series of messages that a man was once commanded to write in a book, one that was given to it by others:

> One day, a man came, he sent messages to the seven churches and they called that the Apocalypse. The man had received the order, "What you see, write in a book and send to the seven churches." When the man turned around to see what voice was giving him this order, he saw in the middle of seven golden candlesticks, with seven stars in his hand, someone from whose mouth "a sharp double-bladed sword" was emerging, and who told him, among other things: "I am the first and the last." The name of the man to whom he was speaking, the one who was appointed to send messages, to deliver the seven messages, was John.[49]

Derrida's essay also starts off in a Biblical fashion: "Let me first say a word about speed. *At the beginning there will have been speed.*" He explicitly rejects the New Testament pronouncement that the universe began with language ("In the Beginning was that Word, and the Word was with God and that Word was God."[50]), as well as notion that the universe began through action, saying: "No! At the beginning – faster than the word or the act – there will have been *speed,* and a speed race between them."[51] Thus, for Derrida, "speed" is the characteristic experience of the nuclear age: an experience of a precipitous acceleration of time or history towards its end. But speed also characterised "the beginning" before language and before action. In this, the situation of the nuclear age may not be totally unprecedented, but a continuation of an earlier process. Derrida identifies the question we must ask in order to begin speaking about nuclear annihilation, stating it in two different forms and stressing the great importance of the *form* of the question:

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[49] Derrida, "No Apocalypse" 31

[50] John 1:1. All references to the Bible in this thesis will be to *The Bible, that is, The Holy Scriptvres conteined in the Old and New Testament. Tranflated according to the Ebrew and Greek, and conferred with the beft Tranflations in diuers Languages. Geneva Bible 1599*, typeset Tigran Aivazian (11 Apr 2004) <http://www.bibles.org.uk> 15 Mar 2013

[51] Derrida, "No Apocalypse" 20

> Is this new? Is it the first time "in history"? Is it an invention, and can we still say "in history" in order to speak about it? […] Are we having, today, *another*, a different experience of speed? Is our relation to time and to motion qualitatively different? Or must be speak prudently of an extraordinary – although qualitatively homogeneous – acceleration of the same experience?
>
> [. . .]
>
> [I]s the war of (over, for) speed (with all that it entails) an irreducibly new phenomenon, an invention linked to a set of inventions of the so-called nuclear age, or is it rather the brutal acceleration of a movement that has always been at work? This form of the question perhaps constitutes the most indispensable formal matrix, the keystone or, if you will, the *nuclear* question, for *any* problematics of the "nuclear criticism" type, in *all* its aspects.[52]

Derrida gives another warning not to let this historical search blind us to the unprecedented, stressing the need to find the *right* speed to talk about our present experience of speed: to slow down by retaining a historical perspective and go faster by trying to recognise what is new in our present predicament and where this "new invention" might lead us. Stressing the historicity of the institution of literature and its link with nuclear annihilation, Derrida also dates the "nuclear epoch" to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries:

> We may henceforth assert that the historicity of literature is contemporaneous through and through, or rather structurally indissociable, from something like a nuclear *epoch* […] Literature belongs to this nuclear epoch, that of the crisis and of nuclear criticism, at least if we mean by this the historical and ahistorical horizon of an absolute self-destructibility without apocalypse, without revelation of its own truth, without absolute knowledge. This statement is not abstract, it does not concern general and formal structures, some equation between a literarity extended to any possible archive and a self-destructibility in general. No, according to my hypothesis it would be a question of the sudden "synchronous" appearance, of a cohabitation of two formations: on the one hand, we have the principle of reason (interpreted since the seventeenth century

[52] Derrida, "No Apocalypse" 20-21

> according to the order of representation, the domination of the subject/object structure, the metaphysics of will, modern techno-science, and so on) […] and on the other hand we have the project of literature in the strict sense, the project which cannot be shown to antedate the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.[53]

The specific epoch that Derrida refers to as the "nuclear epoch" can also be called the *modern* epoch, which is generally thought to have originated in, or even before, the seventeenth century. Derrida identifies two synchronous formations that characterise the nuclear or modern epoch: "the principle of reason" interpreted in a specific way (including through "the order of representation" and "modern techno-science") and "the project of literature in the strict sense." He also mentions capitalism, which originated during this period, stressing that it too is "a certain potentialisation of speed." Thus, Derrida's hypothesis is that the invention that led to the nuclear bomb – which is structurally indissociable from the emergence of literature as an institution – appeared at the beginning of modernity. Early modern literary works, like Shakespeare's plays, would then also be contemporaneous with this new epoch.

The title and last paragraph of Derrida's essay point to a possible historical precedent of the nuclear age: today's experience of speed, or consciousness of living near the end of history, seems to resemble millennia-old apocalyptic discourse. Certainly, the language of apocalypticism still gets used to describe the predicament of the nuclear age. In this chapter I will examine the hypothesis that an ideological shift occurred during early modernity (the context in which Shakespeare wrote his plays) from one mode of consciousness of time to another, and that this shift involved apocalypticism, the experience of speed or consciousness of time, and representation. The context of the Protestant Reformation was the biggest religious shift at the time, so I will pay special attention to Reformation interpretations of the Apocalypse. Rather than a detailed historical study, my focus will be on the general or theoretical aspects of apocalypticism from the medieval and early modern period to today, assessing their implications for the nuclear age.

First, I will look at the shift identified by Benedict Anderson from an apocalyptic consciousness of time in the medieval era to a modern understanding of time, which he links to Erich Auerbach's idea of the "figural" view of history predicated on the typological structure of the Bible. Second, I will

[53] Derrida "No Apocalypse" 27

consider the important early modern debate between literal and spiritual readings of the Book of Revelation (the former exemplified by millenarianism, the idea of the earthly paradise to come), focusing on the debaters' anxieties about authority to fix meaning to verbal representation in Scripture. Third, I will trace the continuation of the apocalyptic consciousness of time in its secular or "millennialist" form in dominant political ideologies of late modernity. My aim is to examine the historical continuities and ruptures in the apocalyptic consciousness of time, and to understand whether early modern apocalypticism can be considered a historical precedent for late modern discourses of annihilation.

2.1 A Modern Shift in the Consciousness of Time

The Bible conceptualises history as a linear movement from creation, described in the Book of Genesis, to the total destruction of the present world, followed by the creation of a new world, at the end of history (the *eschaton*). This movement is, moreover, pre-determined by God to fulfil His purpose (*telos*) for humanity. Apocalypticism is therefore a combination of *eschatology*, thought about the end or terminal point of history, and *teleology*, its ends, purpose or aim. Many modern scholars consider apocalypticism to be the dominant mode of religious thought in Christian theology.[54]

Today, we use the word apocalypse to refer to a projected event of total destruction (such as nuclear annihilation or the climate catastrophe), but in Shakespeare's day, the word was linked to one all-important text: the Book of Revelation, or the Apocalypse of John. The Book of Revelation also portrays God's judgement in the form of violent acts of destruction inflicted on unrepentant sinners and former persecutors of faithful Christians. This is followed by the *end* of suffering and persecution for the righteous, who will live forever in a state of peace, perfection, and eternity in the paradisiacal city of New Jerusalem.

The apocalypse is so important to the Christian faith because of its promise of redemption for the incomprehensible, seemingly senseless suffering experienced within history. The Last Judgement

[54] The most famous being German Lutheran theologian Ernst Käsemann's statement in 1960 that the "apocalyptic – since the preaching of Jesus cannot really be described as theology – was the mother of all Christian theology," quoted by Bernard McGinn, "Early Apocalypticism: the ongoing debate," *The Apocalypse in English Renaissance Thought and Literature: Patterns, Antecedents and Repercussions*, eds. C. A. Patrides and J. A. Wittreich. (Manchester University Press, 1984) 2

promises an eventual reckoning, that is, true, ultimate, divine justice for injustices suffered in the past and present that cannot be resolved by earthly law. The Book of Revelation also promises an ultimate revelation of the truth of God at the end of history: "[E]uen the mysterie of God shalbe finished, as he hath declared to his seruants the Prophets." (Revelation 10:7) Derrida also stresses the etymological origin of the word apocalypse as "uncovering" or "revelation."

The Apocalyptic Consciousness of Time and Figural Interpretation

The apocalyptic worldview necessarily affects how people understood history and experienced their situatedness in time. In his study of the fictive or "imagined" construction of nationalisms, Benedict Anderson argues that an apocalyptic apprehension of time characterised the medieval period in Europe, referring to Marc Bloch's *Feudal Society* to support this claim:

> [T]he medieval Christian mind had no conception of history as an endless chain of cause and effect or of radical separations between past and present. […] Bloch observes that people thought they must be near the end of time, in the sense that Christ's second coming could occur at any moment.[55]

Anderson then quotes an illustrative example from Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis* to describe this type of consciousness of time. I will give a fuller context of the quote here, with the context of Auerbach's thesis of the apocalyptic mode of consciousness being related to what he termed "figural interpretation" of the Bible:

> Figural interpretation "establishes a connection between two events or persons in such a way that the first signifies not only itself but also the second, while the second involves or fulfils the first. The two poles of a figure are separated in time, but both, being real events or persons, are within temporality. They are both contained in the flowing stream which is historical life, and only the comprehension, the *intellectus spiritualis*, of their interdependence is a spiritual act." […] This type of interpretation obviously introduces

[55] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London; Verso, 2006) 23. Paula Fredriksen also defines apocalypticism, particularly in the medieval era, by this belief in the *imminence* of the End: "Apocalypticism holds that the End, however conceived, is imminent," in her essay, "Tyconius and Augustine on the Apocalypse," *The Apocalypse in the Middle Ages*, eds. Bernard McGinn and Richard K. Emmerson (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992) 20

> an entirely new and alien element into the antique conception of history. For example, if an occurrence like the sacrifice of Isaac is interpreted as prefiguring the sacrifice of Christ, so that in the former the latter is as it were announced and promised and the latter "fulfills" […] the former, then a connection is established between two events which are linked neither temporally nor causally – a connection which it is impossible to establish by reason in the horizontal dimension […]. It can be established only if both occurrences are vertically linked to Divine Providence, which alone is able to devise such a plan of history and supply the key to its understanding.[56]

The figural form of interpretation identified by Auerbach, where events or persons in the Old Testament are interpreted as phenomenal prophecies prefiguring events and persons in the New Testament, is also called *typological* interpretation. The events described in the Book of Revelation are particularly important for this type of interpretation because they represent the fulfilment of all the prophecies in the Old and New Testament alike. Auerbach's innovation was to connect typology with the term "figure," introducing a rhetorical element to this type of interpretation.

In his essay, "Figura" (which he quotes in the excerpt from *Mimesis* above), Auerbach traces the semantic history of the word "figure" from its earliest use in ancient Roman texts, showing how it became the basis for Biblical interpretation and an apocalyptic view of history in the Middle Ages. Auerbach draws a contrast between the figural mode of interpretation and a purely allegorical one, since the figural mode simultaneously emphasises the material reality of historical events *and* their spiritual significance. Apocalypticism is central to this mode of interpretation: one event points to its "fulfilment" in another event not only in history, but also *after* history. Events within history are given meaning by reference to Divine Providence, which is eternal and "knows no difference of time."[57]

In "Figura," Auerbach shows that the word "figure" was initially used by ancient Roman writers to denote "plastic form" and then to signify rhetorical tropes and figures – "ornaments" of speech which give it a persuasive quality. He reveals the semantic richness and plasticity of the word, which is also used to mean "form," "image," "idol," and "shadow." Auerbach's analysis shows that

[56] Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, Fiftieth Anniversary ed., trans. Willard Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003) 73-74

[57] Erich Auerbach, "Figura," *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984) 59

the word “figure” functioned as a meta-linguistic word, a word that described its own nature and condition of possibility.

In the transformation of the word “figure” in the medieval era, Auerbach stresses the importance of the notion that God made man in His “image.” The medieval use of the word “figure” reveals the paradoxical nature of representation in two ways. First, there is a linguistic slippage between representation and reality: figure means both the mould *and* that which is formed from the mould (the shadow and that which casts the shadow, the idol or image and that which it represents). Second, all things contain a deeper concealed meaning, pointing to an ultimate meaning which shall be revealed only on Judgement Day. Not only will be there be an end to suffering, but also an end to the problem of representation and its relationship with reality: representations will merge with their ultimate meaning, the revelation of the truth of God.

In his essay on apocalypticism in American cultural history, Martin Procházka too stresses the self-consciously typological narrative of the Book of Revelation: the succession of horrors loosed on the world in Revelation is structured upon the plagues loosed on Egypt as a demonstration of the power of God in Exodus.[58] Along with typological interpretation, medieval exegetes also used the mode of recapitulation to interpret Revelation, where the same events are described again in different ways, giving the book a repetitive, cyclical structure. Irena Backus identifies the first medieval exegete who applied the principle of recapitulation to the text: “Victorinus saw the Apocalypse not as a prophecy but as an unveiling by Christ of the true *sense* of Scripture. […] according to him, the Apocalypse relates the same events in different ways […] It is not chronology but *understanding* that is of crucial importance in John's Revelation.”[59] (emphasis mine)

Recapitulative narrative and typological or figural interpretation both depend upon a mythological structure of historical consciousness which is at once circular and differential, as Procházka points out: events repeat themselves, but differently, gaining a new significance with each iteration. Both of these modes stress sense, understanding, and comprehension over chronological sequence: events link to other events in the horizontal dimension (of time or history) by reference to the vertical dimension (of God's plan for history, or Divine Providence) mentioned by Auerbach. The

[58] Martin Procházka, “Apocalypticism in American Cultural History,” *After History* (Prague: Litteraria Pragensia, 2006) 392-393

[59] Irena Backus, *Reformation Readings of Revelation: Geneva, Zurich and Wittenberg* (Oxford: Oxford University press, 2000) xiii

eschatological events described in Revelation finally put an end to that circular/differential repetition. Revelation promises that this end will be accompanied by a revelation of the meaning of history as a whole: no longer fragmentary earthly events but predestined, prefigured, and fulfilled by Divine Providence.

From Messianic Time to Homogeneous Empty Time

Anderson links Auerbach's notion of medieval apocalyptic consciousness of time with Walter Benjamin's "Messianic time," which he contrasts to the modern experience of "homogeneous, empty time":

> [Auerbach] rightly stresses that such an idea of simultaneity is wholly alien to our own. It views time as something close to what Benjamin calls Messianic time, a simultaneity of past and future in an instantaneous present. In such a view of things, the word "meanwhile" cannot be of real significance.
>
> Our own emergence of simultaneity has been a long time in the making, and its emergence is certainly connected, in ways that have yet to be well studied, with the development of the secular sciences. […] What has come to take the place of the medieval conception of simultaneity-along-time is, to borrow again from Benjamin, an idea of "homogeneous, empty time," in which simultaneity is, as it were, transverse, cross-time, marked not by prefiguring and fulfilment, but by temporal coincidence, and measured by clock and calendar.[60]

The idea of "meanwhile" is important for Anderson's account of the emergence of various nationalisms; he argues that this thoroughly modern notion of "homogeneous, empty time" was created through modern forms of representation such as newspapers and novels. Two events could be described in newspapers and novels as happening simultaneously in different places, connected solely by temporal coincidence. This view of history would allow the modern historian to establish cause and effect by looking at time as a chain of events succeeding each other from past to the present. The modern view of history would not, however, allow for figural connections between events with perceived resemblances that could be read as linked by reference to some divine,

[60] Anderson 24

providential teleology. However, the modern consciousness of time is no less teleological: it simply re-locates purpose from the *divine* plan to *human* reason, replacing a consciousness of the imminence of the end (a messianic or apocalyptic consciousness) with a view of history as a march towards infinite progress.

The central idea of Divine Providence in the apocalyptic worldview resembles the pagan ideas of fate and fortune. This posed a great intellectual problem: an entirely fatalistic or providential view of history denies both free will and human moral responsibility. According to Antonino Poppi, many medieval and early modern thinkers attempted to reconcile the contradictory ideas of providence and human freedom: Erasmus, for example, attempted to find a middle ground where both could coexist. Others came down on one side or the other, denying either providence or free will. Many humanists argued for the importance of will and human freedom of action, decrying fatalistic notions of human destiny.

Reformation leaders, by contrast, asserted the complete and absolute domination of Divine Providence on all human activity. Protestant leaders like Martin Luther and John Calvin argued for a rigid concept of predestination in which humans had no free will at all: God had already planned the choices they would make in advance and intervened constantly in the world to direct them to their ultimate choices, whether to virtue or to sin.[61] Protestants emphasised the unknowable mystery of God's purpose: central to their doctrine was St Paul's assertion that man could only attain salvation through faith, by the free gift of God's grace rather than through good works. Thus, it would only be a small Elect – chosen in advance, their identities known only to God – who would be saved on Judgement Day. The Reformers saw a conflict between human teleology, indeed human will and reason themselves, and the sovereign teleology of God. For them, God's purpose could only be understood through the Scripture, the Word of God, which was to be interpreted in a much more *literal* way. They distrusted abstract allegory or spiritual interpretations of the Bible, as I will show in the next section of this chapter.

[61] Antonino Poppi, "Fate, fortune, providence and human freedom," *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy*, eds. Quentin Skinner, Eckhard Kessler, and Jill Kraye (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988) 641-667

2.2 Literal Interpretations of Revelation: Anxieties of Authority and Rhetoric

The figural or typological method of reading Revelation looks back at the prefiguring of its narratives in the past – in the Old Testament. As mentioned, the plagues released by the recapitulative events (the opening of the sealed book, the blowing of the trumpets and pouring of the bowls of God's wrath) in Revelation are typologically prefigured in the story of Exodus, where God afflicted Egypt with a succession of plagues in a demonstration of His power and as an act of judgement against the persecutors of the Jewish people. Auerbach points out that the figural mode of interpretation interpreted all of Jewish history as described in the Old Testament as a prefiguration of the story of Christ and his followers. That is, the Old Testament was considered a description of actual historical events, but the material reality of that history was subsumed under their more important aspect of spiritual significance, being read as a phenomenal prophecy that points to another meaning: the coming fulfilment in the incarnation of Christ. By the same token, Revelation was read as the fulfilment of the events described in the Old and New Testament, which also functioned as phenomenal prophecies pointing towards the apocalypse, when the *ultimate* meaning of all historical events will finally be revealed.

However, interpreting the significance of the events described in Revelation for the earthly historical present and future was a hotly contested question for medieval and early modern exegetes. The most significant differences in interpretation centred around the correct way to interpret the *millennium*, or the thousand-year reign of Christ and his saints on Earth described in Revelation 20:

> And I saw an Angel come downe from heauen, hauing the keye of the bottomles pit, and a great chaine in his hand. And he tooke the dragon that olde serpent, which is the deuill and Satan, and he bounde him a thousand yeeres: And cast him into the bottomles pit, and he shut him vp, and sealed the doore vpon him, that he should deceiue the people no more, till the thousand yeeres were fulfilled: for after that he must be loosed for a litle season. And I sawe seates: and they sate vpon them, and iudgement was giuen vnto them, and I saw the soules of them that were beheaded for the witnes of Iesus, and for the word of God, and which did not worship the beast, neither his image, neither had taken his marke vpon their foreheads, or on their handes: and they liued, and reigned with Christ a thousand yeere. But the rest of the dead men shall not liue againe, vntill the thousand yeres be finished: this is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is hee, that

> hath part in the first resurrection: for on such the second death hath no power: but they shalbe the Priests of God and of Christ, and shall reigne with him a thousand yeere. (Revelation 20:1-8)

Millenarianists (also called chiliasts) interpreted this passage as indicating a period of one thousand years of peace on earth before the final war and Last Judgement, reading that passage as a literal prophecy that foretold events to come in history. They were convinced that this millennial paradise would soon occur (or had already passed) and attempted to calculate the precise date of the millennium and other events described in Revelation. However, the foremost medieval exegetes, Augustine and Jerome, argued strongly against literal millenarian readings of the text. Augustine emphasised instead the unknowability and opacity of God's plan, claiming authoritatively that the time of the End cannot be known. Jerome declared that literal millenarianism was a particularly "Jewish" (and therefore wrong) way of reading. Both Augustine and Jerome followed earlier exegetes like Tyconius (repudiating the millenarianism of Victorinus, who wrote the first Latin commentary on Revelation) in reading Revelation as an allegory of the history of the Church rather than a literal prophecy of the last days.[62]

This abstract allegorisation of Revelation became the orthodox way of reading and interpreting the text in the medieval era; the authority of these exegetes exerted an effective "prohibition" or "taboo" on millenarian readings of Revelation, which were considered heretical. The few medieval commentators who expounded this literal millenarianist view, such as Joachim of Fiore, faced persecution for the publication of their opinions.[63] However, literal millenarianism began to flourish towards the late Middle Ages and particularly in the early modern period. Penn Szittya claims that this process began in continental Europe in the late Middle Ages but "[i]n England, there is very little chiliastic or millenarian thought in the Middle Ages, despite its florescence in the English Renaissance."[64] Focusing on readings of the millennium in Revelation, Irena Backus too characterises the two forms of interpretation used by Reformation exegetes as either "spiritual," which saw Revelation as an abstract allegory, or "historico-prophetic," which read the text in a more

[62] Fredriksen 31-35
[63] Robert E. Lerner, "The Medieval Return to the Thousand-Year Sabbath," *The Apocalypse in the Middle Ages*, eds. Bernard McGinn and Richard K. Emmerson (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992) 53-54
[64] Penn Szittya, "Domesday Bokes: The Apocalypse in Medieval English Literary Culture," *The Apocalypse in the Middle Ages* 378

literal vein. In contrast to the medieval authorities, Reformation leaders tended to prefer more literal readings, but the question was still furiously contested, and the debates were far from over.

The Bible's Concealment of Meaning and Claim to Absolute Truth

Comparing and contrasting the Bible with the epic poems of Homer, Auerbach describes the Bible's claim to truth as "tyrannical," not just because it claims to represent everything – including our own lives – or because it insists it is the only true reality, but also, surprisingly, because the form of its narratives *conceals* everything but the most pertinent information, thus demanding constant reinterpretation. He argues:

> The Bible's claim to truth is not only far more urgent than Homer's, it is tyrannical – it excludes all other claims. The world of the Scripture stories is not satisfied with claiming to be a historically true reality – it insists that it is the only real world, is destined for autocracy. […] Let no one object that this goes too far, that not the stories, but the religious doctrine, raises the claim to absolute authority; because the stories are not, like Homer's, simply narrated "reality." Doctrine and promise are incarnate in them and inseparable from them; for that very reason they are fraught with "background" and mysterious, containing a second, concealed meaning. In the story of Isaac, it is not only God's intervention at the beginning and the end, but even the factual and psychological elements which come between, that are mysterious, merely touched upon, fraught with background; and therefore they require subtle investigation and interpretation, they demand them. Since so much in the story is dark and incomplete, and since the reader knows that God is a hidden God, his effort to interpret it constantly finds something new to feed upon. Doctrine and the search for enlightenment are inextricably connected with the physical side of the narrative – the latter being more than simple "reality"; indeed they are in constant danger of losing their own reality, as very soon happened when interpretation reached such proportions that the real vanished.[65]

According to Auerbach, it is not only later forms of interpretation or religious doctrine but the very narrative and rhetorical *structure* of Biblical stories which problematises the connection between representation and reality. This is done through concealment of all extraneous information, that act

[65] Auerbach, *Mimesis* 14-15

of concealment evoking a hidden mystery: a "covering" or veiling of a secret, in other words. The Bible's "autocratic" claim to absolute truth also means that all events described contain a deeper significance, given to them by the "hidden God": every historical event in the Bible, while claiming to be factual reality, also represents something else. Everything described in the Bible "incarnates" a promise of future fulfilment, redemption and most importantly, final revelation of that hidden meaning at the moment of "uncovering" or apocalypse. Auerbach continues by arguing that the Bible's claim to absolute authority and simultaneous demand for interpretation of its concealed meaning places its own authority in danger, especially when historical circumstances change so drastically that contemporary events can no longer be read as fulfilments prefigured in its narratives:

> If the text of the Biblical narrative, then, is so greatly in need of interpretation on the basis of its own content, its claim to absolute authority forces it still further in the same direction. […] [I]t seeks to overcome our reality: we are to fit our own life into its world, feel ourselves to be elements in its structure of universal history. This becomes increasingly difficult the further our historical environment is removed from that of the Biblical books; and if these nevertheless maintain their claim to absolute authority, it is inevitable that they themselves be adapted through interpretive transformation. This was for a long time comparatively easy; as late as the European Middle Ages it was possible to represent Biblical events as ordinary phenomena of contemporary life, the methods of interpretation themselves forming the basis for such a treatment. But when, through too great a change in environment and through the awakening of a critical consciousness, this becomes impossible, the Biblical claim to absolute authority is jeopardized; the method of interpretation is scorned and rejected, the Biblical stories become ancient legends, and the doctrine they had contained, now dissevered from them, becomes a disembodied image.[66]

Auerbach's thesis that the Bible simultaneously demands a literal *and* spiritual interpretation explains the intensity of the debates in the early modern period, with some exegetes emphasising the physical actuality and others the spiritual significance of Biblical narratives. The modern period, as Auerbach implies, also brought about the "great change in environment" and "awakening of critical consciousness" which eventually led to a much more sceptical view of the truth claims of the Bible.

[66] Auerbach, *Mimesis* 15-17

But during the early modern period itself, particularly the debates during the Reformation, scepticism coexisted with absolute dogmatism – and a totally literal, historico-prophetic reading of the Bible, particularly for interpretations of the Book of Revelation. These debates reveal an anxiety about the connection between representation of the word of God and contemporary reality, and the main question that fuelled the doubts about Revelation had to do with its uncertain authorship and authority.

Anxieties of Authority and Rhetoric in Revelation

"John of Patmos" is now regarded by Biblical scholars to be a different person from St John the Apostle (the author of the Gospel of John), but in the medieval and early modern period, they were generally assumed to be one and the same. However, several influential figures in the early modern era doubted or rejected the apostolic authorship of the Book of Revelation, even going so far as to suspect the text of heresy. Backus describes several of Erasmus' reasons for doubting the apostolic authority of Revelation:

> [H]e invokes the authority of (anonymous) "learned men" who have found the text to be lacking apostolic weight (*apostolica grauitas*), a mere historical account (*historia rerum*) expressed in allegorical terms. […] He does, however, consider two factors as quite decisive in undermining the authority of the book: Both are to do with the name John. First, he repeats his name, ego Johannes, as if he were writing "a promissory note" instead of divinely conferred revelations […]. Second, notes Erasmus, the Greek manuscripts of the Apocalypse that he consulted bear the name, not of *Ioannes Euangelista* but of *Ioannes theologus*. As if those two arguments were not enough to seriously damage the authority of the book, Erasmus adds a third: The style of the Apocalypse is quite different from that of John's Gospel and Epistle, and it would be easy to disprove Johannine authorship from the passages which some have maligned, "suspecting them of certain heretical doctrines."[67]

Martin Luther went even further than Erasmus in his severe estimation of the Book of Revelation in his earliest preface to Revelation, published in 1522. Luther believed that Revelation could not have been written by St John the Apostle, calling it "neither apostolic nor prophetic." This, for him, cast a

[67] Backus 4

shadow on its truthfulness and utility. His doubt sometimes amounted to extreme suspicion, if not condemnation, going so far as to say in his first preface to Revelation that his "spirit [could not] abide this book" and that "Christ was neither taught nor recognized in it."[68] Luther completely changes his tune in his greatly expanded and revised Preface to Revelation published in 1530, in which he interprets Revelation as a historical allegory. However, he still made his objections to Revelation known; rather than merely the doubtful authorship of the book, it was the very rhetorical quality of the book that he objected to:

> [One kind of prophecy] expresses itself with words without using images and figures. […] The second type employs images but includes interpretation in specific words […] The third type uses only images without either words or interpretation, like this book of Revelation and like the dreams, visions, and images that many holy people have through the Holy Spirit. Peter preaches in Acts 2 [:17] from Joel (2.28), "Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams."
>
> As long as such a prophecy remains unclear and is not precisely interpreted, it is a hidden and inarticulate prophecy that has not yet fulfilled its usefulness and fruitfulness for Christendom. Such has been the case with this book. Many have attempted to interpret it but to this point have not come up with anything certain. Some have imbued the book with many silly notions out of their own heads.[69]

The unease around the concealed meaning of Scripture that Auerbach mentioned (which he dated to the end of the Middle Ages) could already be seen in Luther's Prefaces to Revelation. A prophecy's claim to truth meant that it had to be fulfilled in actuality, and for that it required precise interpretation. For Luther, the claim to truth in Revelation sat uneasily with the hiddenness and inarticulacy of its visions. John Calvin also railed against abstractly allegorical interpretations of Scripture, preferring simplicity, transparency, and straightforwardness in textual representation. This preference for plainness in speech and condemnation of excessive rhetorical ornamentation was a Protestant cultural phenomenon (taken to its extreme in Puritanism) which influenced Shakespeare, and can be seen in many of his works.

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[68] Martin Luther, "Preface to the Revelation of St. John (1522)," *Luther's Spirituality*, trans. E. Theodore Bachmann, eds. Philip D. W. Krey and Peter D. S. Krey (New York: Paulist Press, 2007) 47

[69] Martin Luther, "Preface to the Revelation of St. John (1530 and 1546)," *Luther's Spirituality* 49

To definitively answer the question of authorship was extremely important for the early modern Reformers; it was the authority of the apostolic author that could pin down the meaning of the text. As we saw, Erasmus invoked the authority of learned men to promote his moderate interpretation. But in his responses to Luther's interpretations, as Backus shows, Erasmus showed his awareness that Luther recognised only the authority of Scripture itself. Authority is not just key concerns for early modern exegetes, but inform the very "revelation" portrayed in the Book of Revelation: it is the sovereignty of God that fixes meaning to Scripture. In Revelation, sovereignty is also bound up with the power to annihilate one's enemies and a shift in the understanding of law and justice – these concerns would influence "millennialist" secularisations of apocalyptic thought in early and late modern ideologies, as I shall show next.

2.3 Annihilation and Justice: The Ambivalence of Millennialist Fictions

Martin Procházka stresses the importance of the transfer of sovereignty in the Book of Revelation from the God of the Old Testament to His son Jesus Christ. Procházka argues that this occurs together with a change in understanding of law and justice: the Laws handed down to Moses in Exodus are abolished, while the followers of Jesus attain salvation through pure faith. Procházka links this transfer of power to two economic metaphors he sees as paradigmatic structures of the apocalypse: the first describes human lives as grapes gathered to be trodden in "the great winepress of God's wrath" in Revelation 14, being replaced by a new paradigm in the "free gift" of the water of life in Revelation 20. These metaphors indicate a movement from a *restricted* economy of harvest, processing, and storage to the *general* economy of salvation through faith, characterised by the free gift "which cannot be reciprocated."[70]

Procházka concludes that the Book of Revelation does *not* present the creation of the new world as the revelation of an ultimate truth, but rather as a "distinct deployment of power." Rather than an ultimate *truth*, it is the absolute power or *sovereignty* of God that is revealed – and this revelation occurs through the complete annihilation of the enemies of Christianity in two destructive wars. The second war is the final conflagration, or "holocaust," originally signifying a burnt offering, but also

[70] Procházka 396. This understanding of sovereignty through the concepts of the general and restricted economy comes from Derrida's reading of Georges Bataille: a restricted economy is characterised by scarcity, involving the exchange, the production and circulation of resources; in this economy, thriftiness, re-use and recycling are valued. The *general* economy, on the other hand, is characterised by an excess of resources: in it, resources are wasted or sacrificed, constituting an absolute expenditure without reserve.

containing a second meaning: the destruction of excess lives thought to have no purpose within an autocratic, ideologically rigid, totalitarian power structure. The term has also come to signify the Nazi genocide of the Jewish people, also deeply influenced by a secularised apocalyptic mentality.[71] The revelation of the Book of Revelation is thus inseparable from annihilation of God's enemies as a manifestation of God's supreme power. The restricted economy of apocalyptic genocide moves from exploitation and recycling of human spiritual potential to the complete *destruction* of what are considered "unclean," superfluous human lives. The contrast between "pure" and "unclean" human lives is another constant theme in Revelation, which would become a central obsession in fascist ideology, being used to justify the genocide of millions of people.

Metaphors involving control (or destruction) of female sexuality and reproductive capacity are also important for this transfer of patriarchal power. The genocide is perpetrated against "people, and multitudes, and nations, and tongues" (Revelation 16:16) who dwell in the corrupt city of Babylon, personified as a great whore, who is utterly destroyed by the judgement of God: "For true and righteous are his iudgements: for he hath condemned that great whore, which did corrupt the earth with her fornication, and hath auenged the blood of his seruants shed by her hand. And againe they saide, Hallelu-iah: and that her smoke rose vp for euermore." (Revelation 19:2-3) The destruction of the whore is succeeded by the marriage of the Christ to his bride, the perfect, heavenly, incorruptible city of New Jerusalem. The image of the whore of Babylon is also contrasted with the image of the "woman robed in the sun," identified with the Virgin Mary, who flees into the wilderness to escape the dragon and is rescued by God. Her deliverance from evil enables her to give birth to Christ, so that he can assume the place of God the Father. In this theme, too, the purity of the virgin mother (or Madonna) is contrasted with the "corrupt" and "unclean" sexuality of the whore.

Apocalyptic and Literary Fictions

Anderson stressed the *rupture* in historical consciousness after the Middle Ages, describing it as a shift *away* from apocalypticism to a radically different form of consciousness. But modern-day

[71] See Procházka 398, note 11: "Holocaust, then, is a manifestation of the supreme power of God, but also an act of getting rid of things that have lost their purpose in the events leading to the end of time or could prevent it. That latter meaning also involves the monstrosity of the Nazi extermination of the Jews (the "final solution" of the Jewish question was believed to be a decisive step towards the millennial German Reich)."

patriarchal and genocidal violence influenced by apocalypticism shows that the apocalyptic consciousness continues in various forms today. Frank Kermode stresses this continuation of an apocalyptic or "end-determined" tradition in literature, which he traces from the texts of antiquity to the present. The difference for Kermode is not a radical shift into Benjaminian "homogeneous, empty time" but a *transformation* of the apocalyptic tradition by a loss of "naive" belief in the imminence of the end. Kermode argues that the end is still *immanent*, casting its shadow on present-day fictions.

Citing Hans Vaihinger's philosophy of "As If" (in which fiction is conceived as distinct from mere lies or untruths, but seen as a map or model that forms the very basis of human interpretation of reality), Kermode argues that the apocalypse is a powerful fiction that continues to structure our relation to time in the present day because of "our deep need for intelligible Ends." For Kermode, the apocalypse is an essential fiction that gives meaning to our situatedness in time and allows us to make intelligible connections between past, present and future:

> When we survive, we make little images of moments which have seemed like ends; we thrive on epochs […] We project ourselves – a small, humble elect, perhaps – past the End, so as to see the structure whole, a thing we cannot do from our spot of time in the middle. Apocalypse depends on a concord of imaginatively recorded past and imaginatively predicted future, achieved on behalf of us, who remain "in the middest."[72]

Despite this seemingly positive view of the apocalyptic tradition, Kermode also conjures its dark side, making a connection between the Nazi genocide, the apocalypse, and fiction in general. Kermode hypothesises that literary fictions are analogous to fiction in general, comparing religious or mythical fictions – which structure the human understanding of reality and involve some measure of belief – with literary ones, which are hyper-aware of their constructed status and do not seek belief. He also points out that even scientific disciplines require the use of fictional models, giving the example of theoretical physics, and cites the horror of the Nazi concentration camps as part of the danger of (particularly apocalyptic) fictions. Kermode then argues that Shakespeare's *King Lear*, also "an image of the promised end," may be seen as analogous to the apocalyptic fictions of the Nazis and the fictions used by scientists:

[72] Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) 7

> On the one hand you have a relatively innocent theory [that we can only believe in fictions, rather than attain truth], a way of coming to terms with the modern way of recognizing the gulf between being and knowing, the sense that nature can always be made to answer our questions, comply with our fictions […] But on the other hand, you have the gas-chambers. […] Hannah Arendt […] argues that the philosophical and anti-philosophical assumptions of the Nazis were not generically different from those of the scientist, or indeed of any of us in an age "where man, wherever he goes, encounters only himself." How, in such a situation, can our paradigms of concord, our beginnings and ends, our humanly ordered picture of the world make sense? If *King Lear* is an image of the promised end, so is Buchenwald; and both stand under the accusation of being horrible, rootless fantasies, the one no more true or more false than the other, so that the best you can say is that *King Lear* does no harm.
>
> I think we have to admit that the consciously false apocalypse of the Third Reich and the consciously false apocalypse of *King Lear* imply equally a recognition that it is ourselves we are encountering whenever we invent fictions. There may even be a real relation between certain kinds of effectiveness in literature and totalitarianism in politics.[73]

Here Kermode repeats the hypothesis of George Steiner, the notion that literature might be complicit in the most horrific atrocities by taking us farther from reality and deeper into the mirror of our own constructions. But in a similar manoeuvre to Steiner, he immediately absolves literature on the basis of the fact that it is a self-conscious fiction which allows us to encounter deeper truths about ourselves, in contrast to the Nazis, who projected their fiction onto others and "degenerated" that fiction into myth. This is an important analogy, however, because it shows the importance of literature to understanding ideologies of annihilation; both reveal the way that fiction can structure and effect great changes in reality. As Kermode argues, *apocalypticism* is also very relevant to this question, not as a mere precedent for ideologies of annihilation, but as a fiction which continues to shape our thinking today.

Kermode's analogy between literature and totalitarian fictions occurs in the context of his analysis of readings of Revelation as a literal prophecy emphasising the millennium in Revelation 20, which

[73] Kermode 37-39

he shows continued even in the twentieth century. *Millenarianism* is a particularly religious belief, occurring in a narrowly Christian context and being tied to the interpretation of the Book of Revelation. The term *millennialism*, by contrast, is applied to political ideologies which take the millenarian philosophy of the earthly paradise and apply it to a different – often secular – context. An apocalyptic origin can be found in such diverse political ideologies as fascism, communism, and liberalism, lending credence to Kermode's argument that an apocalyptic consciousness of history continues in secularised form today (if not that it is a universal fiction).

In his essay on apocalypticism, Procházka shows how American millennialists of the seventeenth century used a typological interpretation of the Book of Revelation to argue that the American nation represented the fulfilment of a promise prefigured in the election of the Jewish people. This American millennialist view re-contextualises the apocalypse, applying religious ideas to a political project of settler-colonialism underpinned by a nationalist ideology. The same combination of religious and secular apocalyptic elements continues today in the notion of "Manifest Destiny," used by modern-day US politicians as the ideological foundation for interventionist wars in the Third World. The collapse of the Soviet Union also brought a wave of millennialist triumphalism, which declared that US-style liberal democracy constituted an earthly paradise at the "end of history."

Marxism and Messianic Time

Communism and other revolutionary ideologies are also underpinned by millennialist thought. The terms "Messianic time" and "homogeneous, empty time" both occur in Walter Benjamin's essay "Theses on the Philosophy of History," written in 1940 as a response to the rise of fascism in Germany. In the essay, Benjamin contrasts the modern "historicist" view, which envisages time as a chain of successive events, with the "historical materialist" or Marxist view, in which the past is charged with significance by the contradictions and tensions of the present. He attributes to the latter "a weak Messianic power," containing a revolutionary potential "to make the continuum of history explode." Benjamin criticises historicists for their conformism to a view of history which treats violent domination by ruling classes as a historical norm rather than a state of emergency. He also criticises the historicists' notion of infinite progress, illustrating the violence of this view with

the famous image of the "angel of history" being carried off into the future while the wreckage of the past piles up at his feet.[74]

Anderson implied that the clock and calendar are equally responsible for creating the modern sense of "homogeneous, empty time." However, in his essay, Benjamin *contrasts* the calendar with the clock: the calendar reminds people in the present of their responsibility to the past by highlighting significant days of remembrance, while the clock contributes to the meaningless homogenisation of time where all moments are equally significant or insignificant. For Benjamin, both the Messianic project of historical materialism and Jewish tradition await the imminent arrival of a future redeemer (the revolutionary potential embodied in the working class and the Messiah, respectively) while simultaneously memorialising significant events in the past.[75]

Guy Debord too addresses this question, specifically identifying late medieval and early modern millenarianism as a precursor of Marxist theory and practice. In *The Society of the Spectacle*, Debord argues that pre-historical agricultural societies were characterised by a view of cyclical time, which imagines time as reversible. However, he says, history began with the concentration of political power and the rise of ruling dynasties who kept written records showing the linear progression of time. It was then that the true, irreversible nature of time was understood for the first time:

> Writing is the rulers' weapon. In writing, language attains its complete independence as a mediation between consciousnesses. But this independence coincides with the independence of separate power, the mediation that shapes society. With writing there appears a consciousness that is no longer carried and transmitted directly among the living – an impersonal memory, the memory of the administration of society. "Writings are the thoughts of the state; archives are its memory."[76]

However, Debord argues that the externalisation of time consciousness into written records and archives weakens the lived experience of the true nature of time. Against this, Debord says, if large

[74] Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations*, trans. Henry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 2007) 261-262

[75] It is important to note the difference between the specifically Jewish form of Messianism invoked by Benjamin and Christian apocalypticism: the former awaits a Messiah who is yet to arrive, and the latter awaits the *Second* Coming of a Messiah who has already arrived once, having been incarnated once in the person of Jesus Christ.

[76] Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Ken Knabb (London: Rebel Press, 2004) 76

numbers of people are able to form a consciousness of their situatedness in the present, then history itself would become conscious. This is double-edged: "Those for whom irreversible time truly exists discover in it both the *memorable* and the threat of *oblivion*."[77]

As noted before, the apocalyptic consciousness of time involves both cyclical repetition *and* a linear movement towards the end of history. Debord explains this paradox by calling the apocalypticism of monotheistic religions a compromise between cyclical and linear historical consciousness, or even an inversion of cyclical time. Coming from a Marxist perspective, Debord sees religious apocalyptic belief as an illusion, a form of false consciousness with no basis in material reality. He emphasises that all the ideological changes he describes occurred due to changes in material conditions of production (rather than being purely mental processes), identifying the Reformation view of apocalypticism, in particular, as being caused by the acceleration of capitalism:

> The religions that evolved out of Judaism were abstract universal acknowledgments of an irreversible time that had become democratised and open to all, but only in the realm of illusion. Time is totally oriented toward a single final event: "The Kingdom of God is soon to come." These religions were rooted in the soil of history, but they remained radically opposed to history. The semi-historical religions establish a qualitative point of departure in time (the birth of Christ, the flight of Mohammed), but their irreversible time – introducing an accumulation that would take the form of conquest in Islam and of increasing capital in Reformation Christianity is inverted in religious thought and becomes a sort of *countdown*: waiting for time to run out before the Last Judgment and the advent of the other, true world. Eternity has emerged from cyclical time, as something beyond it. It is also the element that restrains the irreversibility of time, suppressing history within history itself by positioning itself *on the other side of irreversible time* as a pure point into which cyclical time returns and disappears. Bossuet will still say: "By way of time, which passes, we enter eternity, which does not pass."[78]

Debord connects the millenarian utopianism of the late medieval and early modern era with the peasant revolts happening at the same time; the goal of "*creating heaven on earth*" was a response

[77] Debord 77
[78] Debord 78-79

to this crisis. But, he says, this millenarian hope was dismissed by medieval authorities like St Augustine, who encouraged a spiritual interpretation of Revelation in which the established church was identified with the Kingdom of God, in effect claiming that the Kingdom of God had already arrived. Debord argues that this interpretation is part of the universal strategy of the ruling classes to protect their power, to defuse the revolutionary struggles for justice and equality. He disputes Norman Cohn's argument that modern-day millennialist movements retain irrational religious beliefs of the millenarian apocalypticists, defending millenarianism as "already a modern revolutionary tendency." However, he says that their religious conviction was their weakness, since they attributed their revolution to God rather than their own power:

> The millenarians were doomed to defeat because they were unable to recognize their revolution as their own undertaking. The fact that they hesitated to act until they had received some external sign of God's will was an ideological corollary to the insurgent peasants' practice of following leaders from outside their own ranks.[79]

Echoing Benjamin's conception of "homogeneous, empty time," Debord states that the extreme homogeneity experienced in the twentieth century is an effect of globalised capitalism. The material conditions of advanced capitalism necessarily bring about a universal conception of history, with time being experienced homogeneously (simultaneously) around the world:

> But this history that is everywhere simultaneously the same is as yet nothing but an intra-historical rejection of history. What appears the world over as *the same day* is merely the time of economic production, time cut up into equal abstract fragments. This unified irreversible time belongs to the *global market*, and thus also to the global spectacle.[80]

This form of consciousness of time is *also* a false consciousness, characterised by the "spectacle" or domination of the visual image (a concept I will explore further in Chapter 3). Debord argues that this spectacle denies people the *experience* of the reality of irreversible time. Both Benjamin and Debord advocate for a secularised apocalyptic (Marxist) consciousness of time, which, they argue, can open up the space for revolutionary change and justice in history. But Benjamin differs from Debord in his implication that historical materialism should engage with the power of theology and

[79] Debord 81
[80] Debord 85

use religious notions rather than dismissing religion as mere illusion. Without the aid of theology, for Benjamin, historical materialism simply possesses a "*weak* Messianic power." (emphasis mine)

Utopia as Dystopia: the Danger and Hope of Apocalypticism

Millennialism is a secularisation of religious apocalypticism, which looks forward to the possibility (and even inevitability) of creating a paradise or perfect society on earth, constituting the end of history (characterised by change, conflict, oppression, and suffering). Utopianism is often indistinguishable from millennialism, since it too envisages a possible paradise on earth. As a continuation or transformation of apocalypticism, however, utopianism involves the transfer of agency from Divine Providence to Human Reason, moving the author of *telos* from God to Man. Utopian ideas originated from early modern humanist thought (the origin of the term being Thomas More's *Utopia*), which generally emphasised human freedom of choice and moral responsibility above a providential view of history.

The examples of Soviet totalitarianism and fascism, among others, show that this belief is a dangerous one: utopian (and other millennialist) forms of thought are susceptible to degeneration into terrorism. In an essay pondering on the dangers and necessity of utopia, Ursula Le Guin quotes Milan Kundera's description of totalitarianism as a utopia turned into a dystopia precisely *because* of its guiding dream of paradise:

> Totalitarianism is not only hell, but the dream of paradise – the age-old dream of a world where everybody would live in harmony, united by a common will and faith without secrets from one another […] If totalitarianism did not exploit these archetypes, which are deep inside us all and rooted deep in all religions, it could never attract so many people, especially during the early phases of its existence. Once the dream of paradise starts to turn into reality, however, here and there people crop up who stand in its way, and so the rulers of paradise must build a gulag on the side of Eden. In the course of time, this gulag grows ever bigger and more perfect, while the adjoining paradise gets ever smaller and poorer.[81]

[81] Ursula Le Guin, "A Non-Euclidean View of California as a Cold Place to Be," *Dancing at the Edge of the World* (London: Paladin, 1989) 86-87

The "dream" can also be called a fiction, an ideal model of reality that exists in the imagination. Kundera also cites the roots of totalitarianism in religious archetypes, a particularly powerful one being the apocalypse. What Kundera is describing is what Kermode also noticed: when powerful groups start to value their apocalyptic fiction above reality, they build concentration camps to contain inconvenient reality, leading to annihilation. Finally, every utopia has the capacity to become a dystopia, in which there is only the gulag – a nightmarish mockery of paradise. Le Guin locates the danger in the "euclidean, European and masculinist" character of utopian thinking, which places inordinate, misguided faith in the power of Human Reason to mould society:

> The purer, the more euclidean the reason that builds a utopia, the greater is its self-destructive capacity. I submit that our lack of faith in the benevolence of reason is well-founded. We must test and trust our reason, but to have *faith* in it is to elevate it to godhead. Zeus the Creator takes over. Unruly Titans are sent to the salt mines, and inconvenient Prometheus to the reservation. Earth itself comes to be a wart on the walls of Eden.[82]

An intensely end-focused apocalyptic ideology can justify any means used to achieve its ends. In an effort to create a society without inequalities in power, it is all too easy to advocate the destruction of the powerless (as has been advocated as a solution to the current refugee crisis). Human beings are seen as problems rather than people endowed with rights and dignity and valuable in themselves. The Nazis called their genocidal project "The Final Solution," a sinister and banal term which could very well be used to describe the ideological message of Revelation. Modern rationalist millennialism, like the apocalypse described in the book of Revelation, can easily lead to justifications for the annihilation of all those who are identified as the enemies of the utopian dream. No truth is revealed; only power, violence and domination.

Toni Morrison also presents this danger of millennialist, masculinist utopia in her novel *Paradise*, in which the male inhabitants of a thriving, all-Black town in the United States eventually attempt to massacre the women living at the margins of the town, blaming them for the evils that have befallen their paradise. This is accompanied by a generational shift in interpretation of a significant and sacred text inscribed in iron letters on the communal oven by their fathers and grandfathers: the

[82] Le Guin, "A Non-Euclidean View" 87

elder generation interprets it as directing the town's inhabitants to fear God ("Beware the furrow of His brow"), while the younger generation interprets it as a directive to take it upon themselves to do God's will ("*Be* the furrow of His brow").

However, as Benjamin and Debord have argued, an apocalyptic consciousness of time is also essential for opening up the possibility of justice for the injustices of the past. Without the Messianic hope of justice to come, time is hopelessly fragmented and meaningless. Le Guin proposes a "non-euclidean, non-European, non-masculinist" utopia (or *yin* utopia, borrowing from Taoist philosophy), a paradoxical notion since utopia is defined by its euclidean, European and masculinist (*yang*) character. Le Guin's utopia would then be a utopia *without* utopia, in which the hope of justice is preserved but whose end or *telos* would be redirected towards the present rather than the future, towards process rather than progress, and towards a habitable reality than an inhabitable, static, perfect fiction. The *telos* of this paradoxical utopia would be *non*-teleological, its goal one of "persevering in one's existence."[83] The redirection of *telos* described by Le Guin is especially important in an age of climate change, where industrial "progress" threatens to lead to total annihilation (without revelation of truth).

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have shown the important relationship between debates about Scriptural interpretation and the shifting consciousness of time and history from the medieval and early modern period to today. This shift involved both ruptures and continuities – the apocalyptic, providential view of history was not so much replaced by a modern, homogeneous one, as *transformed* into secular forms in response to changing realities. My hypothesis was that apocalyptic discourse could be a precedent for today's discourses of annihilation, but this formulation is too simplistic to explain the connection between the two discourses. In fact, apocalypticism has *always* been an ideology concerned with annihilation due to its anxieties about authority: the Book of Revelation reveals not an ultimate truth (though it promises to do so), but the sovereignty or absolute power of God in the form of annihilation of the corrupt world. Modern-day millennialist traditions too run the risk of proposing destructive, even genocidal "solutions" to

[83] Le Guin, "A Non-Euclidean View" 91

perceived problems. What should be preserved in the apocalyptic, millennialist, or utopian tradition, however, is the demand for justice inherent in their Messianic view of time.

Derrida's concept of “no apocalypse” or “apocalypse without apocalypse” (an end without a revelation) aims to describe our predicament in the nuclear age. In Chapter 5, I will read *King Lear* alongside the Book of Revelation, assessing its attitude towards apocalypticism, examining the hypothesis that *King Lear* presents Derrida's apocalypse without revelation. Derrida also proposes (after Benjamin) a paradoxical “messianism without messianism,” a similar concept to Le Guin's paradoxical utopia, which I will explore in relation to the portrayal of the Last Judgement in *Hamlet* in Chapter 7.

In Chapter 1, I emphasised the importance of literature and other forms of representation to the question of annihilation. As I showed in this chapter, apocalyptic debates emphasise questions of interpretation and representation. I showed that the use of obscure symbols which *conceal* their meaning is the most prominent feature of the Book of Revelation, which early modern exegetes distrusted. But its promise of ultimate revelation also involves fixing meaning to Scripture, finally revealing the true meaning of God's word and ending all the debates about interpretation. In the next chapter, I will examine the philosophical debates about different forms of representation (verbal and visual, oral and textual) from antiquity to the modern day, with a special focus on early modern iconomachy, or distrust of visual representation. My aim is to consider in more detail the paradoxes of representation, fiction, and mimesis that were lightly explored in this chapter and the previous one.

CHAPTER 3

"What's in a Name - or An Image?": Paradoxes of Representation from Antiquity to Modernity

In "No Apocalypse, Not Now," an essay on the projected final war in history, Derrida refers to the *first* war described in the Bible, waged by God against the sons of Shem, who tried to "make a name for themselves" by building the Tower of Babel. God punished them by splitting humanity into different linguistic groups, and this "Confusion of Tongues" is considered to be the second general curse, the first being the Fall of Adam and Eve. Thus, in Christian doctrine, linguistic unintelligibility is an important characteristic of the fallen human condition, a problem which will be resolved – or so it is promised – at the apocalypse.

Derrida points out that God's war with the Shemites was fought "in the name of the name" (punning on the fact that Shem means name), just like the projected final nuclear war would be. But the first war was not fought to the end:

> [T]he conflict was temporarily interrupted: tradition, translation, transference have had a long respite. Absolute knowledge too. Neither God nor the sons of Shem (you know that Shem means "name" and that they bore the name "name") knew absolutely that they were confronting each other in the name of the name, and of nothing else, thus of nothing. That is why they stopped and moved on to a long compromise. We have absolute knowledge and we run the risk, precisely because of that, of not stopping.[84]

According to Derrida, the "name" is a "nothing," not worth fighting for; yet the name also enables "tradition, translation [and] transference," human communication and continuity. But what *is* a name? And why is language so problematic that wars are fought in the name of the name, and the difficulties of interpretation and translation considered an original curse on humanity? I have been referring to the notion of linguistic (and other forms of) "representation" in previous chapters, when I asked whether it is possible to represent annihilation, or when I examined the importance of representation to apocalypticism. But the question of representation and its relationship with reality is far from straightforward. In order to ask the questions about representing annihilation or

[84] Derrida, "No Apocalypse" 31

apocalypse, we must consider the problem of representation: What is the relationship of representation to reality? Can there be truth in representation? Are some forms of representation more truthful than others? In this chapter, in order to understand how to think about and answer these questions, I will trace a history of debates about representation from antiquity to the twentieth century. My aim is to identify certain relevant features of this ancient philosophical debate around representation that are still important in the nuclear age.

First, I will trace a line from the debates around representation and reality from classical antiquity to the early modern era, focusing on conflicting attitudes towards rhetoric and changing conceptions of the purpose of art. Second, I will explore formalist views of representation in the twentieth century, focusing on Derrida's essay "Plato's Pharmacy," where he defends written representation and rhetoric against Plato's condemnation and puts forward an alternative theory of representation. Third, I will consider the validity of realist criticism of Derrida's theory of representation, in particular, the critique of formalism put forward in A.D. Nuttall's defence of mimetic interpretation of Shakespeare. I will also articulate my own critical anti-realist position. Fourth, I will look at the way visual representation was problematised by iconomachs in Reformation Europe, as well as the continuing relevance of their concerns about representation in twentieth-century theories of spectacle and simulation.

3.1 Attitudes to Rhetoric from Antiquity to the Early Modern Period

The commonsense notion of linguistic expression in speech and writing (as well as sign language and gestures, pictorial representation, hieroglyphics, etc.) is that language represents reality, the world of objects or things. The term "re-presentation" implies trying to make an *absent* reality present *again*. Thus, representation is essentially a paradox: words, images, and other signs are both present and absent at once – present in that they can be perceived by the senses, having a material reality in the form of ink, paint, sound, or other medium, but absent in that they stand in for something else which is not present.

René Magritte's famous painting "The Treachery of Images" contains an image of a pipe and reminds the viewer that "this is not a pipe." This view of representation sees it as a substitute (replacement) or even simulacrum (false copy) of its intended referent: it makes *nothing* present, but

in itself, it is both “nothing” and “a thing.” The prohibition of idolatry in the Abrahamic religions has its origin in this problem of representation: when a representation (an idol or an image) is made of God, that lifeless substitute or “nothing” may be worshipped instead of the original referent. God cannot be represented; any representation could only reveal God's absence and not presence.

If representation is complicated, what constitutes reality itself has been disputed since the origins of Western philosophy. The Platonic view states that the “Idea” is the true reality and the material world simply a shadow, or imperfect reflection, of that reality. The “real” world of Ideas, in this view, is inaccessible to us because we are tied to our material bodies. The *soul*, however, can enter the world of Ideas when the body dies, after which it is reborn in a new body. It can still remember the world of Ideas, which it tries to imitate through speech. This imitative aspect of representation is referred to as mimesis. The term “idea” also has its root in the Greek word *idein*, “to see”; the ancient Greeks privileged vision over the other senses.

From antiquity to the early modern period, rhetoric was one of the fundamental subjects of education. Rhetoricians taught the art of crafting and delivering a speech for the purpose of persuasion. In *Phaedrus* and other texts, Plato condemns rhetoric, arguing that its practitioners' concern with the form of language (the words) led people away from its content, or *what* words represented (the true Ideas closest to truth, or *Logos*). He also condemns pre-Socratic rhetoricians (Sophists) for arguing for both sides of a case, which indicates a relativistic approach to truth. For Plato, rhetoric was untrustworthy because it dealt with mere opinions and beliefs, whose truth is uncertain. Instead, he promoted the study of dialectic or philosophy, which sought certain knowledge. Plato also distrusted poetry (often indistinguishable from rhetoric due to its concern for the form of language), which led him to banish poets, whom he considered liars, from his ideal commonwealth.

Aristotle, however, defended rhetoric as an essential counterpart of dialectic. In his *Rhetoric*, he gives practical advice on the use of rhetoric: how to use logical syllogisms, “enthymemes,” and tropes and figures in specific situations to speak to different audiences, in order to achieve maximum persuasive power. Aristotle also rehabilitated poetry from Plato's condemnation. In *Poetics*, Aristotle analyses the formal features of poetry and suitable rhetorical tropes and figures. Aristotle's conception of poetry is teleological: the poem should be characterised by structural unity among all its parts, all defined by one unified purpose. Therefore, a poem would represent the

integrity and wholeness of *Logos* itself. This view considers the rhetorical figure of the synecdoche (where a part stands for the whole) to be the essence of truth, since truth is characterised by unity.

Aristotle had a positive view of imitation, which he considered natural for human beings. He believed the purpose of art – particularly tragedy – was "imitation of action," but in an intensified or exaggerated form which would lead to catharsis, or purging of pity and terror. When Hamlet names the purpose of theatre as "to hold […] the mirror up to nature, to show virtue her / own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body / of the time his form and pressure," he is espousing an Aristotelian view of art.[85] It is important to note that Aristotle's defence of rhetoric was always moderate, counselling moderation in the use of rhetorical figures (to avoid unsuitable metaphors or *catachreses*, for example), and for rhetoric to be governed by a unity of purpose. As Carlo Ginzburg points out, Aristotle emphasised that rhetoric required proof and logical argument, not just persuasive use of language.[86] The purpose of rhetoric was to act together with dialectic to get closer to truth, or *Logos*. However, Aristotle rejected the existence of Plato's world of Ideas, seeing ideas, forms, or universal essences as inseparable from objects in the material world.

Ancient Roman authors like Horace, Quintilian, and Cicero were much more ardent defenders of rhetoric and poetry; their praise of rhetoric went so far that it was even elevated above philosophy. They moved away from Aristotelian mimesis to a different conception of the purpose, or *telos*, of poetry – for Horace, the purpose of poetry was "to please and instruct," rather than to imitate reality. Quintilian examined the many different definitions of rhetoric, many of which had cast a normative judgement on the practice – defining rhetoric as the art of deceit, for example. He defended the worth of rhetoric as speech characterised by purpose, and he identified this purpose as promoting goodness: leading people by speaking in specific situations to promote certain objectives. This entailed a teleological shift away from the work of art towards the audience, as well as a shift towards moral instruction: attempting to *change* society, to move the audience to virtuous action, rather than imitating reality as it existed. The practice and study of rhetoric was considered a duty, the highest form of action and divine gift from the gods, in stark contrast to Platonic scepticism and emphasis on the dangers of rhetoric.

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[85] *Hamlet*, III, ii, 20-22. All references to *Hamlet* in this book will be to William Shakespeare, "The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark," *The Norton Shakespeare*, 2nd ed., eds. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard, Katharine E. Maus, and Andrew Gurr, (New York: W. W. Norton, 2008)

[86] Carlo Ginzburg, *History, Rhetoric, and Proof* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England) 22

Many texts by these classical authors were newly rediscovered and translated in Europe in the early modern period, particularly in the sixteenth century, along with an explosion in commentaries on those texts. Humanists were particularly influenced by classical ideas of rhetoric. The passionate defence of rhetoric in many texts in early modern Europe was inspired by the Ciceronian image of the orator as a political leader and hero, along with Cicero's idea that reason is useless without being "bodied forth in speech."[87] The search for truth in logic and dialectic was considered useless without rhetoric or oratory, considered a gift which defined humanity and bonded society.

The early modern debate about rhetoric was also a debate about the relative value of action and contemplation. Rhetoric was equated with action, since it was a practical art: the use of language applied to *specific* situations for the purpose of promoting virtue. Contemplation, or thought, referred to the theoretical and general purpose of philosophy to seek objective knowledge and absolute, eternal truth, without concern for utility in particular social situations. According to Brian Vickers, the debate was conclusively resolved in favour of action: "All Renaissance rhetoric, and much of its poetics, is premised on the superiority of action over contemplation, and of the necessity of communicating." He gives the example of Petrarch, an early humanist deeply influenced by Cicero's ideas, who saw "thought and language as mutually dependent" and "denounced silence as withdrawal from society." Thus, early modern defenders of rhetoric were aware that speech was intimately bound up with power. Rhetoric for them was a weapon, following Quintilian's idea that "conceived in the mind without power, all accomplishments are as useless as a sword permanently kept in its sheath." Action – *using* the weapon of rhetoric – was valorised; contemplation or thought without action was denigrated.[88] This can also be seen in *Hamlet*: despite Hamlet's expressed mimetic view of art, the central debate in the play is between action and contemplation, a debate I will explore in Chapter 6.

3.2 Rhetoric as *Pharmakon*: Derrida's Critique of Platonic Logocentrism

The early-twentieth-century emergence of formalist, semiotic and structuralist theories of language is generally referred to as the linguistic turn, but it could very well be described as a rhetorical turn. In structuralist terms, words and other signs are "signifiers"; the idea, meaning, or intention towards

[87] Brian Vickers, "Rhetoric and poetics," *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy*, ed. C. B. Schmitt, Quentin Skinner, Eckhard Kessler, and Jill Kraye (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988) 726-729
[88] Vickers 730

which signs point is the "signified"; and the material objects to which with signifiers refer are "referents." Structuralists also distinguish between the general system of language (*langue*) and particular instances of its use (*parole)*. Central to the structuralist view is the idea that there is an *arbitrary* connection between the signifier and the signified, and that meaning arises of the difference between signifiers – for instance, "dog" and "bog" are able to signify different ideas because of the difference of their first phonemes (or graphemes). Thus, meaning in any particular language is created by the place that a signifier occupies within the entire structure of that language. Structuralists sought to study the entire linguistic structure in order to understand it, believing that a complete analysis of the system would yield up a governing code.

Like the rhetoricians condemned by Plato, the formalists shifted the emphasis from the content to the form of language, from the theme to the structure, from the signified to the signifier: from *what* you say to the *way* you say it. In fact, the idea of content, theme, or subject matter being separate or separable from the form in which it is said becomes a false duality: the content arises from the form, or meaning is produced through the way the words differ from each other. Ideas are seen as being produced within, through, and after language, rather than language being a mere reflection, imitation, or re-presentation of ideas.

Post-structuralists like Derrida retained much of the structuralist heritage but criticised its totalising tendencies – the fact that structuralists saw language as a closed system or complete structure, an analysis of which would uncover the foundation of its meaning. The transcendental signified or *Logos* (whose authority would affix meaning to all other signifiers) in this case becomes the entire linguistic system. In this attitude, the structuralists repeated what Derrida saw as Plato's mistake and the original sin of Western philosophy: belief in the possibility of pinning down absolute truth through their method of analysis, or their logocentrism.[89]

Truth vs. Speech and Speech vs. Writing

In "Plato's Pharmacy," a reading of Plato's *Phaedrus,* Derrida exposes logocentrism as an ideological, even totalitarian, project more dependent on power and control than knowledge or truth.

[89] See Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," *Writing and Difference* (London: Routledge, 2001) 351-370

He points out that the word *logos* in the text refers both to the divine reason and order which, according to Plato, is the source of philosophical truth (the absolute, transcendental signified) *and* to speech, collapsing the essential distinction between representation and reality. He says that Plato cannot explain the distinction between truth and speech except through the same rhetorical means he sees as inferior to philosophical dialectic, that is, through metaphors and self-created myths.

Derrida's deconstruction of Plato's metaphors reveals that the relationship between speech and truth is one of patriarchal power. In *Phaedrus*, Plato explains – through the character of Socrates – that *logos* (speech) can be seen as the offspring of *Logos* the father (truth). Derrida points out that in this metaphor, it is the father's absolute authority transferred to the son which gives meaning to speech. Patriarchal authority is combined with another metaphor which is at once economic and ethical: *Logos* (truth, father) is also "the good" or goods, capital or parent sum; *logos* (speech, son) is the interest created out of that capital which is put into circulation and exchange to create meaning and value.

Logos (truth) is also described as the sun, which is impossible to look at directly. Therefore, *logos* (speech) is a necessary substitute for human beings to prevent blindness. This last metaphor brings to fore the cultural priority of the sense of vision in ancient Greece, making an analogy between the visible and the sensible: seeing *is* understanding. It also implies that attaining absolute knowledge would also be the end of vision, and thus of knowledge, which echoes the paradox of apocalyptic revelation. However, Plato does not trust visual representation either: he calls painting an optical illusion, a mere imitation of the shadowy, unreal material world. Imitation for Plato suggests falsity and deception. Since the material world itself is an imitation of Ideas, then, painting would simply be an imitation of an imitation, twice removed from the world of Ideas, from *Logos*.

The central myth that Plato refers to is the myth of Theuth, the messenger-god and inventor of writing in Egyptian mythology. In the voice of Socrates, Plato describes Theuth presenting his invention to the King of the gods (Thammuz or Ra) to be judged and then accepted or rejected, as was the right of the sovereign (and of the father). Theuth argues that writing can improve memory, but the King rejects his argument as well as the invention, saying that writing is a mere supplement to memory, a *substitute* rather than an aid – and that this substitution would destroy living memory rather than establishing it. (Derrida also points to another myth in which that Theuth once *replaced* Ra, the sun, in the sky, which also illustrates this fear.)

Speech is not just the offspring, but the only *legitimate* offspring of the father. The rejection of Theuth's invention makes writing a discarded son, an illegitimate orphan who threatens the power of the father. For Plato, true, living representation can only exist in speech, which comes directly from human presence; speech is connected to the soul and thus to the ultimate authority which fixes meaning to words. Plato gives two reasons why it is impossible to reach Ideas through reading: first, writing inscribes or repeats mere words devoid of content; second, the writer is absent, and the written text has no intention and cannot defend itself. Plato's reference to painting is made when he compares it to writing: both writing and painting are an imitation of an imitation, several times removed from *Logos*, thus, an illusion and a falsehood. Writing has a visual component too, but rather than being imitative of the material world, it is imitative of speech: it de-composes the sounds of speech and reproduces them graphically by marks on the page.

The Pharmakon and Différance

In “Plato's Pharmacy,” Derrida exposes the elevation of speech above writing as the originary hierarchy within Western philosophy. For Derrida, writing is not just an imitation of speech but a form of representation with a unique ability to generate meaning. This ability rests in the essential condition of writing noted by Plato: its separation from its origin, a quality which allows the text to open itself up to new, multiple meanings according to Derrida. The text therefore has intentions separate from the author.

With multiple metaphorical leaps, Derrida explains his vision of the text as a woven fabric (textile), composed of a vertical loom, its warp and woof made of metaphors (the transfer of sense from one signifier to a different signifier) and metonymies (one signifier substituting another associated signifier, such as a part for a whole). Reading involves an active production of meaning, not just a passive reception: it involves following a particular thread in the text as well as adding a thread. Derrida argues that writing is not mere identical repetition of empty words, as Plato imagines, but that each repetition is different, and each different repetition (or iteration) opens up new meanings. These meanings are produced through what Derrida calls a “play of substitutions,” where one signifier is substituted for another, endlessly deferring a stable, fixed, ultimate meaning.

Derrida's neologism *différance* describes this endless process of deferral of meaning: words refer to other words (or signifiers refer to other signifiers), generating temporary ideas or meanings (signifieds) but never reaching an ultimate meaning or "transcendental signified" – Plato's *Logos* – which can arrest this process. At the same time, *différance* describes how words attain significance only through difference, through what they are *not*, referring paradoxically to what they do *not* refer to: their Other. The meaning of the word is produced in this difference, which is a relation rather than an essence: something therefore comes out of nothing, presence out of absence. Logocentrism invokes an absolute authority to arrest this power and fix a stable meaning to words: it does so by attempting to exorcise, assimilate, or destroy the excluded Other, the absence or non-meaning which haunts the word. But this ghostly Other cannot be exorcised; without this difference, there would be no meaning at all. (Derrida explores this ghostly quality of representation by a reading of the ghost in Hamlet in *Specters of Marx*, a reading I examine in Chapter 7.) Rather than denying the significative power of language, Derrida locates meaning-production in the play of substitutions, the generative process of transformation of metaphors and metonymies in a text. Plato dismisses writing as trivial, childish play, but for Derrida, this "play" escapes the distinction between trivial and serious. It is simultaneously absolutely serious and absolutely playful, and neither: it is the very condition of the possibility of meaning.

For Plato, representation is a closed system that tries to pin down absolute truth through dialectic, or logical oppositions which constitute the totality of the world: the only relation is between *logos* (speech) and *Logos* (the source of truth that has absolute authority to endow words with meaning). For Derrida, however, certain signifiers can come from outside this system to open up spaces of meaning and enable "tradition, translation, transference" (in the reflection on the war of Babel, given at the beginning of this chapter). A text is not a closed structure that simply repeats itself, but a dynamic one. The ambiguities and undecidable nature of writing give it the ability to open up channels of communication between different cultures and social groups. God's curse of unintelligibility after the destruction of Babel, thus, refers not only to the differences between languages but the *différance* within language.

Derrida's example of the ghostly signifier that comes from the outside of Plato's system in *Phaedrus* is the term *pharmakon.* The first instance of the term in Plato's text occurs when Socrates calls the scroll that Phaedrus is carrying a *pharmakon,* or magic spell, to lure him out of the city: a dangerous, seductive drug that moves him to do what he normally would not do. Another use of the

word occurs when Plato says that rhetoricians liken their art to medicine, thus the *pharmakon* is a dangerous drug used to influence and manipulate the bodies of its hearers, with no concern for their souls. The *pharmakon* is seductive, occult, mysterious, and dangerous and ambivalent in its ability to heal and to harm. Derrida even equates the *pharmakon* with the death potion given to Socrates to emphasise his view that rhetoric is always a matter of life and death.

Derrida also relates the *pharmakon* to a similar word from Greek vocabulary that is not in the text: the *pharmakos* or scapegoat, from a ritual performed in times of crisis where the sins of the community are transferred onto a substitute, which is then given offerings, mutilated, and destroyed. The *pharmakos* is treated as both sacred and accursed, ambivalent like the *pharmakon*, both poison and remedy. Importantly, the ritual of the scapegoat is enacted on the boundary between the inside and outside of the political community. The despised, outcast, annihilated Other enables the coherence and continuation of the body politic.[90]

Plato uses the *pharmakon* as a figure of speech, a word without inherent meaning. Derrida points out that Plato even uses writing figuratively, when he describes speech as "writing in the soul" or writing on water. According to Derrida, the *pharmakon* and other essentially meaningless words – that is, rhetorical figures, empty forms which can take on many meanings – not only disrupt the totalising intent of logic or dialectic (which seeks to find a complete theory of the world, providing absolute, certain, incontestable knowledge), but actually form the condition for the possibility of the project of dialectic, or philosophy. Such rhetorical figures constitute a reserve of non-meaning outside the system of dialectic, from which dialectic can draw the terms it needs to function. Thus, rhetoric is the store from which Plato puts his *pharmakon* into circulation in his dialogue: Plato's pharmacy. Rhetoric is ambivalent like the *pharmakon*, since it both enables dialectic and contains a dangerous, uncanny power which threatens it. According to Derrida, Plato's appeal to the authority of the king of gods, the father, capital and *Logos* to fix meaning in speech expresses his fear of this power of rhetoric to disrupt the totalising – even totalitarian – intent of philosophical dialectic.

In "Plato's Pharmacy," Derrida makes a radical critique of traditional mimesis, or the idea of representation of reality: his theory of signification through *différance* casts doubt on the idea that signs even have a referent in reality. He also questions the possibility of reaching objective, certain

[90] See Giorgio Agamben's *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998) for a history of the similar figure of the "sacred man."

knowledge in the form of a transcendental signified, seeing this attempt at pinning down absolute truth as a violent exercise of power. These ideas have been heavily criticised by many camps. In the next section, I will consider the validity of a critique of formalism from a realist perspective and explain my own materialist (critical anti-realist) position on representation and my use of Derrida's theory.

3.3 Realist Critiques of Derrida's Theory of Representation

In *A New Mimesis,* A. D. Nuttall defends realist interpretation of Shakespeare's plays and the value of the concept of mimesis, art as imitation or representation of reality. For Nuttall, literary mimesis involves verisimilitude: an attempt to portray a possible reality which resembles objective reality rather than reality itself. Nuttall defines reality through its representability (or referential potential): "reality is such that our terms can be used referentially in a fruitful manner […] If reality is such that *horse* can be used referentially, there are horses." Nuttall is aware of the teleological implication in this definition (and in his use of the term object), but insists that he doesn't mean it that way, pointing out that Orthodox Darwinists use teleological language to talk about adaptations brought about by natural selection. This belief in evaluating representation and reality through its "usefulness" and "fruitfulness" occurs several times in Nuttall's defence of mimesis.

Nuttall's definition of reality illustrates my problem with the realist view: defining reality through usefulness is underpinned by the notion that reality (or nature) exists to be exploited by human beings, and is thus dependent on the "domination of the subject/object structure" identified by Derrida in "No Apocalypse, Not Now." And the very fact that language betrays the intentions of the speaker – as it does when Darwinists use teleological language – problematises transparent representation in language.

Nuttall cites Derrida's work when he disputes radical formalist literary theory which, he says, is underpinned by three assumptions: first, that there are no things, only relations; second, that truth is socially constructed, fictitious, or even created by the human mind; and third, that it is impossible to represent objective reality. In his critique, Nuttall points out that even the formalists' arguments presuppose the existence of an external, objective reality, often exempting themselves from their own scepticism, but that "the alternative is a Derridean flux of *écriture*." He agrees with Barbara

Johnson's view that "Derrida's readings do not so much analyse the impossibility of a final interpretation as enact that impossibility," but he finds fault with the "complaisant nihilism" which finds this satisfactory instead of enervating. After first finding the origins of Derrida's thought in radical Cartesian idealism, Nuttall admits that "certain passages suggest not so much free-floating formalism as a peculiarly tense engagement with reality." He concludes however that there is, in Derrida's thought, a "bias towards idealism. We must remember that there are many idealisms – of image, concept, language, text – united by their common opposition to material substance."[91]

As a materialist, I agree with Nuttall's critique of subjectivist or idealist theories which deny the existence of an external, material reality, or which argue that reality is determined or constructed by the human mind. However, I disagree with realist mimesis precisely because of this materialism. Words can refer to imaginary, abstract, or false ideas with no material referent, and a realist view that sees all words as representations of material reality is thus in danger of reifying abstract ideas, treating them as existent, material things. The realist view also fails to distinguish between the literal and ideological dimensions of words, collapsing them into one. As an example, Nuttall argued that England was clearly not a fiction, seemingly to point out that the land called England exists in material reality. But "England" (when considering the ideological dimension of the term) also clearly *is* a fiction, a socio-historical construction which, rather than reflecting a pre-existing reality, determines certain elements of social reality, such as where the borders are drawn and who is allowed to reside there. The traditional Marxist position considers representation to be part of the ideological superstructure rather than the material base. In this view, representation does not refer to reality, but becomes an illusion or false consciousness. Thus, one can have a materialist critique of mimesis without denying that material reality exists; an anti-realist critique of representation is not necessarily a critique of reality.

Nuttall may be right about Derrida's bias towards idealism, but Derrida's intent, as Marian Hobson points out, is to question the very distinction between materialism and idealism. Hobson shows how this is illustrated in Derrida's reading of Stéphane Mallarmé's "Mimique" in "The Double Session" (which immediately follows "Plato's Pharmacy" in *Dissemination*). According to Derrida, Mallarmé's writing is a type of "mime" or "gestural writing" – it is not a *mise en abyme* (writing that refers to itself), but rather, writing that refers to some other writing (which may not exist) and

[91] A. D. Nuttall, *A New Mimesis: Shakespeare and the Representation of Reality* (Yale University Press, 2007) 20-30

furthermore, attempts to translate unrepresentable silence. Thus, in Mallarmé's work, the distinction between imitation and imitated breaks down, illustrating Derrida's contention that the distinction between reality and representation is unstable.

According to Hobson, Derrida's theory of representation hinges on the difference between two terms for truth highlighted by Heidegger: the Greek *aletheia*, or "the revealing of what is hidden in forgetfulness," and Latin *adequatio*, "the measured equality of proportion to a model." The former term does not imply a division between appearance and what appears, unlike the latter. Derrida shows that Platonic mimesis is self-contradictory: the copy is simultaneously seen as inferior to its model and dangerous in its ability to replace it. This contradiction, in which imitation is halfway between existence and non-existence, becomes a logical trap that determines our thinking of art and representation even into modernity. Rather than rejecting mimesis altogether, however, Derrida develops a theory of mimesis based around another contradiction: the copy is inferior to the model, but this disymmetry (impossibility of adequation) confers on the copy an *advantage* over the model. His view of representation is based on truth as *aletheia* rather than *adequatio*. Derrida's theory focuses on syntax rather than the theme of writing, where "the operation of a certain syntax" gives a sentence two different, sometimes opposing, always undecidable meanings. Hobson argues that Derrida's shift of focus thus allows the contradictions of mimesis to operate, rather than attempting to suppress or assimilate them in a Platonic totalising gesture.[92]

The openness of Derrida's method to radical self-critique necessarily denies an (apocalyptic) end to the process; it is predicated on an endless process of questioning without definite answers, only provisional ones which are themselves subject to question. The strength of Derrida's thought lies in its challenge to all forms of dogmatism. But at the same time, as Hobson shows through her illustration of Derrida's problematisation of the materialist/idealist distinction, Derridean scepticism cannot be reduced to idealist Cartesian scepticism. (Derrida's paradoxical theory troubles even the distinction between dogmatism and scepticism: his extreme scepticism can also be seen as a radical faith in mystery, the secret, difference, and the unknowable, so much so that it has been called a form of negative theology.)

[92] Hobson 138-139

However, I agree with Nuttall that a radically sceptical stance which denies the very existence of – and possibility of reaching – any form of external truth risks falling into obscurantist mysticism, relativism, or nihilism. Such a denial could allow language to be manipulated in an Orwellian sense to equate truth and lies, reject well-founded scientific and historical facts, and replace reality with false representations. This accusation has been levelled at deconstruction too. In *History, Rhetoric, and Proof*, Carlo Ginzburg examines how Paul de Man (an influential deconstructionist and friend of Derrida's) was revealed after his death to have written anti-Semitic propaganda at the height of fascism – and concealed this fact all his life. Ginzburg argues that de Man used rhetoric to proclaim innocence and to escape responsibility for his actions, and further, that this incident implicates the entire field of deconstruction. Ginzburg promotes a critical realism that sees representation as a distorted mirror, which nevertheless allows for the possibility of knowledge.

The second decade of the twenty-first century has been dubbed the "post-truth age," in which reactionary forces are using what Derrida calls "sophistry, psycho-rhetoric […], the most crudely opinionated psychagogy, [and] the most vulgar psychology" to consolidate their power.[93] In my opinion, it is important than ever to keep faith with the idea of truth, but also remain self-critical and be vigilant to the danger of dogmatism. In some of his writings, I find Derrida's political thought somewhat impoverished, especially in comparison to the richness of his thought on literature and religion. I believe that social and political action to create change requires communication of the *material* reality of power, powerlessness, exploitation, and common experiences of oppression through class analysis. But one must also recognise to what level the paradoxes of representation make this impossible. Derrida has a tendency towards individualism, and his idea of infinite responsibility to the Other can, in my opinion, end up simply being irresponsibility. To counteract this tendency, I try to introduce a Marxist and materialist feminist perspective to supplement Derridean analysis throughout this book. Ultimately, it is his method of reading and interpreting texts that I find most valuable. His oblique method of approaching issues and texts often leads to more insights than much of the "transparent," direct, or apparently straightforward method of argument. Derridean irony is comparable, in my opinion, to the Socratic one: the philosophical insights of Socrates too were based on his playful self-questioning, as well as the knowledge that he knew nothing.

[93] Derrida, "No Apocalypse" 24

In the next section, I will consider another debate about forms of representation – this time, looking at the distrust of *visual* representation by early modern iconomachs and then comparing them with similar arguments of "spectacle" and "simulation" by modern theorists.

3.4 From Iconomachy and Idolatry to Spectacle and Simulation

Plato's preference for speech and mistrust of writing occurred in the context of a largely oral culture that was only beginning to become literate. By the early modern period in Europe, however, the written word was firmly established. The religious context, too, was entirely different: not only had Christianity replaced the pagan religions of antiquity, but Christianity itself was being wracked by schisms, the domination of the Roman Catholic church being threatened by challenges from Protestant Reformers. Two reasons are often cited for the success of the Reformation in various countries, including England: first, the translation of the Bible into the vernacular languages of Europe; and second, their reproduction and dissemination enabled by the new technology of printing. Christianity itself had grown out of Jewish religious tradition; its sacred texts had mostly been composed within a Semitic culture which valued *hearing* as the most important of all senses, and therefore distrusted visual representation. This meant that one of the strictest prohibitions in the Jewish and Christian religious texts was against idolatry, or worship of a statue or "image" of God.

The word "image" in the early modern period – unlike today – referred primarily to three-dimensional representations, or statues, but was frequently extended to two-dimensional forms of representation as well. Medieval religious practice used all kinds of images freely: statues of saints, wall paintings in churches, stained glass windows, and other ornaments and decorations. During the Reformation, however, many Roman Catholic practices were denounced as idolatrous and as pagan accretions with no basis in Scripture. Significant examples were the doctrine of purgatory and the sacrament of the Eucharist, the latter interpreted by Catholics as *literal* transubstantiation of bread and wine into the flesh and blood of Christ.

Widespread iconomachy (distrust of visual representation) among Reformers led to iconoclastic movements in which zealous Protestants defaced or destroyed statues and stripped the altars in churches. The iconoclasts had revolutionary ambitions to restore a purified form of worship which in their view preceded what they saw as paganised and corrupted practices of the Catholics. Many

of them called upon the authority of the Second Commandment forbidding "other gods," "graven images," and bowing down to and serving "any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth."[94] In her study of iconoclasm in England, Margaret Aston draws attention to the way in which Reformers' arguments pointed to the representational quality of the Eucharist as the reason why it was so objectionable:

> The principle of representation enabled the Eucharist to be spoken of in terms of art. Calvin, for instance, referred to the sacrament of the Lord's Supper as a peinture of the gift of Christ, and Wycliffe placed the communicant's reception of the host alongside his use of images. […] There was obviously a near relationship between the doctrine of transubstantiation, by which the substance of the bread was transformed into the substance of Christ, and the theory of images, in which the worship given to the image returned to its prototype.[95]

Above all, iconoclasm was a movement of "ideological destruction" that mistrusted "external signs," which they believed *covered up* the spirit or Word of God. Aston quotes prominent iconoclasts condemning external (visual) signs which they saw as devaluing and corrupting the spiritual text:

> Ceremonies, the operation of the senses, had proliferated at the expense of spiritual worship. Externals had pushed out the word. "They have plucked away from the people the Holy Communion, the word of God, from whence all comfort should be taken […] and given us […] an endless rabble of ceremonies." […] Men had "magnified the external signs more than the quickening power of the spirit," and brought in "a deluge of ceremonies."[96]

Ironically, the destruction of images and other signs may be seen as an equally idolatrous act to worshipping them. Quoting the prominent iconoclast Andreas Karlstadt, Keith Moxey points out that the impetus for destruction implicitly acknowledges the power or spirit that animates these objects:

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[94] Keith Moxey, "Mimesis and Iconoclasm," *Art History* 32.1 (2009): 67, Wiley Online Library <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8365.2008.00648.x> 03 Jan 2014
[95] Margaret Aston, *England's Iconoclasts, Vol. I: Laws Against Images* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988) 7
[96] Aston 12

> The violence of the animosity directed at images directly reflects the religious power once ascribed to them. As Bruno Latour reminded us not so long ago, in an exhibition entitled *Iconoclash*, it takes an iconodule to become an iconoclast – one must endow images with power to think them worth destroying. The iconoclast Karlstadt, for example, revealingly acknowledges his own past addiction to images when he writes, "My heart from childhood has been brought up in the veneration of images, and a harmful fear has entered me which I would gladly rid myself of, and cannot […] When someone pulls someone firmly by the hair, then one notices how firmly the hair is rooted. If I had not heard the spirit of God crying out against idols, and had not read His Word, I would have thought thus, 'I do not love images.' 'I do not fear images.' But now I know how I stand in this matter in relation to God and the images, and how firmly and deeply images are seated in my heart."[97]

Aston also reminds us of the many moderate voices who spoke out against iconoclastic destruction, citing Martin Luther, who condemned the excessive and fanatic zeal of some of his followers (such as Karlstadt, quoted above), noting in them a power to destroy human life as well as images. Karlstadt's *On the Abolition of Images*, published in 1522, and Ulrich Zwingli's iconoclastic writings provoked a great deal of violent destruction of church images and objects. John Calvin also supported the iconoclastic movement, writing tracts that refuted arguments supporting the use of images in Christian worship.[98] Even though it was the Puritans and Calvinists who were at the extreme end of iconoclastic fervour, iconomachy was widespread among Reformers, even among the moderates. This caused the iconoclastic movement to even be adopted by the English state, which had an official drive to remove images from churches in the reign of Elizabeth I. As a note of interest, it was this drive which led to the whitewashing of a "Doom" painting (depicting scenes from the Book of Revelation) in Shakespeare's parish church shortly before he was born.[99]

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[97] Moxey 68

[98] Jaroslav Pelikan, "Some Uses of Apocalypse in the Magisterial Reformers," *The Apocalypse in English Renaissance Thought and Literature: Patterns, Antecedents, Repercussions* 84

[99] Kate Giles, Anthony Masinton and Geoff Arnott, "Visualising the Guild Chapel, Stratford-upon-Avon: digital models as research tools in buildings," *Internet Archaeology*, 32 (2012/2013) <https://intarch.ac.uk/journal/issue32/1/toc.html> 22 Feb 2015

Logocentrism and Logolatry in Anti-Theatrical Iconoclasm

Iconoclasts wrote and disseminated anti-theatrical tracts which equated watching theatrical performances with idolatry. Theatre is both a verbal *and* visual medium, but these tracts highlighted its visual aspect. Michael O'Connell goes further in arguing that the theatre was not only visual and verbal but a specifically corporeal or *incarnational* form of representation, with characters being represented by the bodies of actors; thus, it was seen by the Reformers as operating on the same principle as the Eucharist, even when presenting secular themes. O'Connell argues convincingly that there was a great emphasis placed on the importance of the material body of Christ in the Middle Ages, to counter the sects which argued for a purely spiritual and immaterial God. This conflict between idealist spiritual abstraction and materialist emphasis on the body (or letter of the text) is a constant in the debates around representation, as I have shown in this chapter and the last.

Many early modern scriptural exegetes also had a strong faith in the capacity of words to authentically represent God; O'Connell argues that it was this "logocentrism" which led to their iconomachy. (Here, the term refers to the faith in *written* representation, upsetting Plato's hierarchy.) As a prime example, O'Connell describes a section of Erasmus' catechism for adults which defends verbal representation on the basis of the arbitrariness of the signifier, stemming from the fact that a word is "nothing like the thing represented." Thus, he concludes, it is impossible to confuse signifier and signified in verbal representation. Images, on the other hand, can be confused for what they represent due to their imitative quality. Early modern defences of images, on the other hand, argued that the same principle of distinction between signifier and signified applies for visual representation, pointing out that the venerated object of a religious image is clearly the represented person rather than the image itself. O'Connell places the cause of Erasmus' iconophobia in his logocentrism:

> Later, Thomas More, while not addressing himself to his friend's argument, would stand Erasmus' position on its head: if we agree to revere the verbal symbol for God, it is illogical to fear idolatry in revering visual symbols. In both cases, he insists, the human mind has the power to distinguish between the signifiers it creates and the signified, even when the mode of signification, as in the case of the image, involves visual resemblance. In the case of Erasmus' argument, a sophisticated understanding of the

> verbal mode of signification may appear to result in a kind of almost wilful misunderstanding of the visual.[100]

O'Connell argues further that this shift into logocentrism was precipitated by print technology, which could make many true copies of a text and disseminate them widely. He even goes so far as to argue that certain iconomachs practiced "logolatry," believing that God was *literally* the Word and resided in the words of the Biblical text.

Marion O'Connor argues that Reformation debates about idolatry form the context for the living statue scene in Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, as well as other early modern plays in which three-dimensional "images" play a significant part. With reference to the official Elizabethan Homily Against Idolatry, which called all images "lyes," O'Connor argues that early modern iconomachy ultimately stemmed from anxiety around the problem of representation of the sacred – and that the arguments of the iconomachs could theoretically be extended to verbal representation as well:

> Regardless of use, religious images were deemed idolatrous merely because they were similitudes, representations of that which could not or should not be represented. […] In disallowing that spirit might be figured in matter, and in denying that whatever has not been seen can ever be truly imaged, such reasoning takes two giant steps down the path to rejecting all representation. […] The iconoclasts could not push their case to the point at which it would have undermined its own basis in scripture. Despite ample and recent evidence of uncertainty in the transmission, translation, and transparency of Judaeo-Christian sacred texts, the word of God was privileged on its own authority. Biblical texts displaced most visual images in English churches, and Elizabethan English Christianity became a religion of words centred on the Word.[101]

O'Connor also shows how iconomachs equated idolatry with pagan prophecy and oracles, conjuration of spirits, and witchcraft, particularly the then-prevalent idea that witches worked their black magic with the use of a model of their intended victims out of wax. She examines how statues

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[100] Michael O'Connell, *The Idolatrous Eye: Iconoclasm and Theater in Early-Modern England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) 37

[101] Marion F. O'Connor, "'Imagine Me, Gentle Spectators": Iconomachy and *The Winter's Tale*'," *A Companion to Shakespeare's Works, Vol. IV: The Poems, Problem Comedies, and Late Plays*, eds. Richard Dutton and Jean E. Howard (Malden: Blackwell, 2003) 368

(including waxen figures) were used in early modern plays to respond to the debates around images, the "pseudo-statue scene" in *The Winter's Tale* being a prime example of this. O'Connor concludes that Shakespeare's play validates neither logocentrism nor iconophilia, but problematises *both* visual and verbal representation (which collaborate in equal measure to create the fiction of theatre) by drawing attention to the paradoxes of representation:

> Images may be less reliable than words in *The Winter's Tale*, but the difference is one of degree, not of kind. Verbal signification is not to be trusted either, not in a play which deploys dialogue of disturbing opacity, obscurity, and indeterminacy, and which recurrently mocks narratives as norms of implausibility […] The caution of Gentleman 1 is one of the play's reminders that both words and images are languages, sign systems. Images may be the more difficult to interpret – particularly when they fall outside the interpreter's experience or expertise. […] Words, however, have no advantage of proximity to, let alone plenitude of, truth: they are part of a coordinated deception, one which people willingly purchase.[102]

This conflict between the visual and the verbal evokes the rhetorical trope of the *paragone*, in which different forms of representation are compared. In her examination of early modern drama in the iconoclastic context, Marguerite Tassi shows that painted portraits were often used as stage properties to present a *paragone*, where painting was presented as a mere mechanical craft to argue for the superiority of the theatre. Since theatre uses real people to re-present fictional characters, the argument went, it is closer than painting to a true imitation of life. However, this appeal to mimesis was a dangerous argument, since it bolstered the iconoclastic arguments that theatre promoted idolatrous enjoyment whereby the audience took representation for reality. In other cases, Tassi shows, early modern plays defended theatre against iconoclastic arguments by highlighting its verbal component – for example, through the use of *ekphrasis*, or verbal descriptions of visual representation and spectacle (while keeping the actual spectacle unseen). Tassi argues that the use of vivid rhetoric to create images in the minds of the audience can be seen as an iconophilic act rather than one complicit with iconoclasm.

[102] O'Connor 393

In their studies of theatre in the context of iconomachy, both Tassi and O'Connell accuse the iconomachs of *wilfully* confusing representation and reality, implying that representation and reality can be easily distinguished. However, I would argue that this distinction is by no means straightforward, as evidenced by the fact that debates about representation have been raging for millennia. Debates about the Eucharist, purgatory, and images in the early modern period should be seen not just as elements in religious debates, but also as philosophical debates about the nature and function of artistic representation. As we have seen, the iconomachs' mistrust of visual representation was accompanied by absolute faith in verbal, particularly textual, representation. But, as O'Connor pointed out, arguments against one form of representation necessarily implicate all forms of representation. Indeed, this slippery slope argument formed the basis for the defence of images which iconophiles used to refute the arguments of the iconomachs.

Spectacle and Simulation in Late Capitalism

The intense concern over idolatry in the Reformation period may seem strange to us now, but concerns over the domination of visual representation (and its relationship to reality) have not ceased. In fact, these concerns have intensified in our age of complete media saturation. As an example of this continuing relevance of early modern iconomachy, O'Connell quotes Fredric Jameson as saying that "the visual is *essentially* pornographic".[103] Two other important critiques of visual representation in the late modern context are Guy Debord's critique of the "spectacle" and Jean Baudrillard's "simulation."

Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* puts forward the argument that modern conditions of production have transformed all aspects of reality into spectacle, so that we are no longer able to distinguish representation and reality. Examples of the spectacle include news, advertising, propaganda, and entertainment, which Debord says are both means and end in the ideology of global capitalism: "The spectacle is capital accumulated to the point that it becomes images." But the spectacle is even more useless than money, since it can only be seen and not exchanged for goods: "The spectacle is money one can *only look at*, because in it all use has already been exchanged for the totality of abstract representation."[104] According to Debord, spectacle is not "merely" a collection of images, but the form of social relations materialised into an objective

[103] O'Connell 4
[104] Debord 17, 24

reality, emanating from a central power which keeps all spectators isolated from each other and contributing to an overwhelming sense of alienation from reality.

As I mentioned in the first chapter, Theodor Adorno argued that this abstraction of reality and reification of "culture" ultimately stems from the separation between physical and mental labour. As life becomes increasingly contemplative, material reality dissolves into appearance. Reversing this proposition, Debord argues that the spectacle is also *materialised* in the form of objects defined by their exchange value, or commodities: "The real consumer has become a consumer of illusions. The commodity is this materialised illusion, and the spectacle is its general expression."[105] Therefore, every material reality is *also* an appearance: automobiles and cities too are spectacles. According to Debord, the invisible bureaucracy of Soviet totalitarianism merely sought control over the *perception* of reality through the police state. Advanced capitalism, on the other hand, manages to turn reality itself into appearance.

Debord also traces the domination of the spectacle in the modern day to the privileging of the sense of vision from the earliest foundations of Western philosophy, that is, from ancient Greece. This philosophical tradition of "speculation" attempts to understand reality by grasping it through the sense of vision, which allows appearance and reality to be easily conflated, turning the concreteness of material, physical life into abstraction. Debord also considers the modern society of the spectacle as a secularisation of religious illusions: "The illusory paradise that represented a total denial of earthly life is no longer projected into the heavens, it is embedded in earthly life itself." Commodities, which Marx identified as already possessing the quality of mystical or religious fetishes, become even more fetishised due to their abundance in modern society. Manufactured "pseudo-needs" replace actual needs, and "[t]he cumulative power of this *autonomous artificiality* ends up by *falsifying all social life*."[106]

Jean Baudrillard makes a similar point, arguing that the simulacra of late capitalism not only precede reality but have the power to turn reality into simulacra, which are nevertheless an unreal "hyperrreality." Like Debord, Baudrillard argues that the distinction between representation and reality has all but disappeared in the modern day. Simulation differs from representation in that the former troubles the difference between the true and the false, the real and imaginary. While the

[105] Debord 23
[106] Debord 10, 34, 67

ideology of representation involves a distinction, relationship, and exchange between sign and reality, simulation involves exchanges between signs, transforming the model into yet another map, another simulacrum. Giving the example of psychosomatic illnesses which produce real symptoms, Baudrillard argues that a simulation is a lie that becomes true, in a sense, problematising the very distinction between truth and lies.

Debord and Baudrillard both see this problem as historically determined, brought about by material forces of production and power structures of late capitalism, rather than purely general, theoretical, or essential problems with all representation. But both of them find their precursors in the early modern age. Baudrillard draws a direct connection between the modern problems of simulation and the iconoclasts, and then argues that this problem of representation unsettles the foundations of Western philosophy itself:

> [W]hat becomes of the divinity when it reveals itself in icons, when it is multiplied in simulacra? Does it remain the supreme power that is simply incarnated in images as a visible theology? Or does it volatilize itself in the simulacra that, alone, deploy their power and pomp of fascination – the visible machinery of icons being substituted for the pure and intelligible Idea of God? This is precisely what was feared by the Iconoclasts, whose millennial quarrel is still with us today. This is precisely because they predicted this omnipotence of simulacra, this faculty simulacra have of effacing God from the conscience of man, and the destructive, annihilating truth that they allow to appear – that deep down God never existed, that only the simulacrum ever existed, even that God himself was never anything but his own simulacrum – from this came their urge to destroy images. If they could have believed that these images only obfuscated or masked the Platonic Idea of God, there would have been no reason to destroy them. One can live with the idea of distorted truth. But their metaphysical despair came from the idea that the image didn't conceal anything at all, and that these images were in essence not images, such as an original model would have made them, but perfect simulacra, forever radiant, with their own fascination. Thus this death of the divine referential must be exorcised at all costs. […] This way the stake will always have been the murderous power of images, murderers of the real, murderers of their own model, as the Byzantine icons could be those of divine identity. To this murderous power is opposed that of representations as a dialectical power, the visible and

> intelligible mediation of the Real. All Western faith and good faith became engaged in this wager on representation: that a sign could refer to the depth of meaning, that a sign could be exchanged for meaning and that something could guarantee this exchange – God, of course. But what if God himself can be simulated, that is to say can be reduced to the signs that constitute faith? Then the whole system becomes weightless, it is no longer anything but a gigantic simulacrum – not unreal, but a simulacrum, that is to say never exchanged for the real, but exchanged for itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference.[107]

Baudrillard also connects the problem of representation with the apocalypse, implying that there is no longer any apocalypse in the modern age of simulacra and simulation:

> The transition from signs that dissimulate something to signs that dissimulate that there is nothing marks a decisive turning point. The first reflects a theology of truth and secrecy (to which the notion of ideology still belongs). The second inaugurates the era of simulacra and of simulation, in which there is no longer a God to recognize his own, no longer a Last Judgment to separate the false from the true, the real from its artificial resurrection, as everything is already dead and resurrected in advance.[108]

Derrida's view of visual representation resembles that of Debord and Baudrillard in so far as he argues that a visual representation (such as painting) creates a virtual reality rather than representing an external reality. However, he does not reduce representation to simulacra, arguing instead that there is a *truth* in painting. In *The Truth in Painting*, Derrida reads Heidegger's interpretation of a painting of shoes by Van Gogh as a depiction of shoes belonging to a peasant woman (and Meyer Schapiro's response, which gives the shoes back to Van Gogh). Heidegger sees the painting as revealing the truth (*aletheia*) about the essential nature of the shoes as "stuff" or a product, and in the process endowing it with great value, rather than imitating or representing a prior model (*adequatio*). For Derrida, what painting reveals is not an external truth, but the truth *about* painting: the quality of its imaginary space and the traits of the painted object. Going beyond a self-referential *mise en abyme* (where the representation refers to itself), the truth in the painting also concerns the

[107] Jean Baudrillard, *Siimulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994) 4-6
[108] Baudrillard 9

relationship between the inside and outside of the work: Derrida re-defines Kant's term “parergon” (“beyond the work”) to describe the way the painting holds itself together and apart, presenting itself as a product in the world rather than re-presenting something else.[109]

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have traced a history of debates about representation, rhetoric and mimesis from antiquity – the foundations of Western philosophy in Plato and Aristotle – to late modernity. While Plato condemned rhetoric for its lack of truth as well as its imitative quality and distance from the world of Ideas, Aristotle believed in the power of rhetoric (if used moderately) to work together with dialectic to approximate truth. Rhetoric was an important art in early modernity, indistinguishable from poetics – speech was imagined as a weapon to be wielded to promote moral virtue. In Derrida's critique of Plato, he shows that dialectic depends upon rhetoric, a reserve of non-meaning which endows dialectic with meaning through a play of substitutions that cannot be arrested by a transcendental signified, or ultimate meaning.

Plato condemned writing, whose author is absent, because of his preference for speech, which requires the presence of the speaker. He also considered painting to be as false as written representation despite the cultural priority of the sense of vision in Ancient Greece. In the Reformation period, however, the early modern iconoclasts not only destroyed images used in religious practice, considering them to be idols, but also directed their condemnation at the secular theatre, since it was largely a visual – even corporeal – form of representation. On the other hand, the faith in written representation exhibited by the iconomachs can be said to amount to logolatry. Early modern plays responded to the iconoclastic context in various ways; Shakespeare drew the audience's attention to the paradoxes of representation, playing with the illusion and sense of reality of the theatrical fiction. The late modern critiques of spectacle and simulation can be compared to early modern iconomachy, though they arose from very different historical contexts; both unsettle the relationship between reality and appearance, expressing a deep distrust for visual representation in particular. What these continuing debates show is that the transparent, mimetic view of representation cannot be regarded as a completely self-evident truth. All these arguments tap into a genuine paradox of representation, in its ability to influence, and in some cases, replace reality.

[109] Hobson 146

I find myself unable to answer the questions I posed in the introduction conclusively (as did all the philosophers before me), but I hope that I have argued for the validity of the anti-realist critique of mimesis by showing that the idea of representation of reality is far from straightforward. Representation exists, like a ghost, in a liminal space between the oppositions of absence and presence, real and imaginary, ideas and matter, action and contemplation, and even life and death. Although mine is a materialist critique of representation, I find Derrida's theory – which honours these paradoxes rather than trying to violently assimilate them – to be the most illuminating reflection on the problem. *The Truth in Painting* is written as a polylogue, with multiple voices putting forward different views. Hobson points out that Derrida is more concerned with how critics *speak* about art rather than answering the question of referentiality in painting. This shift in emphasis can also be seen in his essay on nuclear criticism. In this chapter, I have shown a long philosophical tradition obsessed with the question of truth in representation. However, as Derrida implies, a better question may be: How can we speak to each other in the nuclear age?

In the next chapter, I will look at four late-twentieth-century film adaptations of *King Lear* which are all implicitly or explicitly concerned with nuclear annihilation. Jean-Luc Godard's avant-garde appropriation of *King Lear* is the most explicit, meditating on the problem of (both literary and cinematic) representation and considering the responsibility of the artist in the nuclear age. I will try to understand how the theme of nuclear annihilation is portrayed in all the films through various cinematic techniques, as well as their differing attitudes towards eschatology, in order to understand why all four directors chose to adapt Shakespeare's *King Lear* to talk about this issue.

CHAPTER 4

Representing "No Thing": Nuclear Film Adaptations of *King Lear*

"Mount Fuji in Red," a short vignette from Akira Kurosawa's 1990 film *Dreams*, portrays the meltdown of a nuclear power plant caused by the eruption of Mount Fuji, and its aftermath: crowds of people flee in terror, most eventually running to their deaths in the sea. Three people remain, watching the spread of the radioactive toxins released by the explosion, rendered in the film in various colours. One of the survivors describes the deleterious effects of these poisons on the human body, and after confessing that he is one of those responsible for the accident, drowns himself, preferring a quick death to the inevitable slow one. A woman with two young children screams in despair: "They told us that nuclear plants were safe. Human accident is the real danger, not the nuclear plant itself. No accidents, no danger. That's what they told us. What liars!"[110]

"Mount Fuji in Red" proved eerily prophetic after the 2011 Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster, caused by an earthquake and tsunami and worsened by official incompetence, corruption and false or misleading information. It was the second to be rated a seven (the highest possible rating) on the sliding scale of nuclear disasters. The only other accident to be given this rating had occurred at Chernobyl in the former Soviet Union in 1986 – a catastrophe indelibly imprinted on the memory of the world.[111]

In 1987, Jean-Luc Godard made an avant-garde, intensely self-referential film titled *King Lear*, which we are repeatedly reminded is set "after Chernobyl." The nuclear accident is used as a synecdoche for near-total annihilation in the film: "And then suddenly it was the time of Chernobyl, and everything disappeared. Everything. And then after a while, everything came back: electricity, houses, cars. Everything except culture and me." The man who speaks these lines then introduces himself as William Shakespeare Junior the Fifth and explains how he was engaged to recover the lost culture, "starting with the works of [his] famous ancestor."[112]

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[110] "Mount Fuji in Red," *Dreams [Yume]*, dir. Akira Kurosawa (Akira Kurosawa USA: 1990)

[111] "Fukushima Nuclear Accident Update Log," *International Atomic Energy Agency*, 12 Apr 2011 <https://www.iaea.org/newscenter/news/fukushima-nuclear-accident-update-log-15> 09 Oct 2019

[112] *King Lear*, dir. Jean-Luc Godard, perf. Peter Sellars, Jean-Luc Godard, and Molly Ringwald (Cannon Films, 1986). All quotes from the film given in this chapter will be my own transcriptions.

In the decade preceding Godard's film, there had already been several film adaptations of Shakespeare's play, including the two *King Lear*s directed by Grigori Kozintsev and Peter Brook, both released in 1971, and Akira Kurosawa's *Ran*, in 1985. None of these films refer to the idea of nuclear annihilation as explicitly as Godard's film but they all refer to it in some capacity: one could even say each one is obsessed with the subject.

In a 1986 interview with the film critic Michael Wilmington, Kurosawa explained that his main concern while filming *Ran* was the threat of nuclear annihilation: "My greatest concern about the world we live in today is the competition of the world powers for nuclear preeminence. I feel that until this problem is solved, we are always on the verge of a conflagration that will end us all."[113] Looked at with the nuclear theme in mind, *Ran* can be considered a deeper exploration of the same story of Kurosawa's 1955 film *Record of a Living Being.* The plot of the earlier film is strikingly reminiscent of that of *King Lear*: an old man who believes that nuclear war is imminent starts spending his money trying to prepare for it. Worried about their inheritance, his children petition the courts to have him declared mentally incompetent. He finally goes mad after learning that no place on earth is safe from nuclear fallout. Like in *King Lear*, the question of which behaviours constitute madness and which sanity are complicated: the family court judge finds the old man's "madness" to be a rational response to the reality of the nuclear threat. The film thus argues that it is those who continue to live normally in the face of the looming catastrophe who are truly mad.

Brook's stage and screen adaptations of *King Lear* too invoke the nuclear threat, being heavily influenced by Jan Kott's comparison of Shakespeare's *King Lear* to Samuel Beckett's post-apocalyptic play *Endgame* (a reading I will explore in this chapter). Kozintsev's *King Lear*, made at the same time as Brook's, was influenced by his conversations with Kurosawa and Brook. In the first chapter, I referred to Kozintsev's metaphor of the nuclear bomb as a sculptor in the diary he kept while filming *King Lear*, later published as *King Lear: The Space of Tragedy* (with a foreword by Peter Brook). The context of that metaphor was what he witnessed in the Hiroshima museum:

> In the Hiroshima museum, I watched the behaviour of some school children. […] Man invented fire in order to make life easier. There was a picture of our ancestors, primitive man, gathered around their first fire. From then on it would be easier for them, warmer and

[113] Michael Wilmington and Peter Hogue, "Akira Kurosawa: 1910-1998," *Film Comment* 35.1 (Jan/Feb 1999): 18-25, JSTOR <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43454645 > 13 Dec 2019

> lighter. […] The entrance leads from behind a small fence on the street. What is there to fence off? There is nothing to look, only a modest inscription, "When the heat reached 5000 degrees man disappeared."
>
> Now, as I looked, I could distinctly see a shadow on the stones, the silhouette of a man quietly sitting there. […] Here man was destroyed; he was neither struck down, nor cut to pieces, nor were his tortured bones and flesh thrown away, nor was he burnt. He simply disappeared. His shadow was left behind.
>
> It is a new manifestation of the sculptor's art carried out by the most advanced technology. […] Evidently both the traces of suffering and words describing the suffering had become unreal to the younger generation, referring not to the comparatively recent past but to pre-history or ancient legend, a fiction which could not possibly happen in real life. I worked on *King Lear* and pondered over all this.[114]

Kozintsev's observation that the suffering of the people has become "unreal" and "a fiction" to the younger generation shows that Derrida's idea of the fictional nature of nuclear annihilation can apply equally to the way that historical events of nuclear destruction are remembered: the past is as "fictional" as the future. The connection he makes in his diary between *King Lear* and nuclear annihilation is not made explicitly in the film, as in Godard's, but finds expression in a subtler, but still powerful way.

Shakespeare's *King Lear* then seems to serve a common function in all four films trying to represent or respond to the threat of nuclear annihilation. In this chapter, I will try to understand why all four directors chose to use *King Lear* to present the theme of nuclear annihilation. First, I will closely read Jan Kott's "King Lear, or Endgame," exploring both his idea of the paradox of theatre and his reading of the grotesque eschatology of *King Lear*. I will then consider critiques of Kott's method, as well as Edward Bond's Marxist apocalypse in his rewriting of *King Lear*. Second, I will compare and contrast the three films of Brook, Kozintsev, and Kurosawa, looking in particular at their attitudes to eschatology and the cinematic strategies they employ to present the idea of nuclear annihilation. Third, I will analyse Godard's film as a work of Derridean nuclear criticism of

[114] Kozintsev 17-18

Shakespeare's play, both as a response to *King Lear* as a text (and as an institution) and a philosophical reflection on the implications of nuclear annihilation for art and culture.

4.1 Adapting *King Lear* in the Nuclear Age: Jan Kott and Critics

In *Hamlet Versus Lear*, R. A. Foakes examines critical commentary on the two plays and observes that *King Lear* surpassed *Hamlet* in the estimation of critics as "Shakespeare's greatest play" largely in the latter half of the twentieth century. This, he argues, coincided with a change in the interpretation of the play from a tale of ultimate redemption to "Shakespeare's bleakest and most depressing vision of suffering, all hints of consolation undermined and denied." What caused this shift in attitudes? Foakes answers this question by referring to the threat of nuclear annihilation:

> The 1950s saw the development of the hydrogen bomb in 1952, an explosion of one being shown on television in 1954; by the end of the decade, "anxiety over fallout had become a powerful force around the world" […] in October 1962 […] the fear of nuclear destruction reached its peak. If nuclear fear gradually diminished into a more cynical acceptance that the world was going to be permanently near the brink, at two minutes to the midnight of obliteration, there was no going back to a pre-nuclear world.[115]

Foakes shows that *Hamlet* was considered Shakespeare's greatest play in the first half of the twentieth century due to its seemingly "modernist" character (something I will explore by looking at its use in James Joyce's modernist novel, *Ulysses*, in Chapters 6 and 7). But *King Lear*, with its bleak, subversive ending, almost seemed to portray existence in a world which lives in the shadow of the threat of nuclear annihilation.

Jan Kott advances a similar line of thought in his essay "King Lear, or Endgame" in his 1964 book *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, where Kott reads Shakespeare's plays in the light of his own political context of totalitarian repression in Poland in the 1950s and '60s. In the book, Kott is primarily concerned with finding the best way to adapt Shakespeare to the stage in the modern day,

[115] R. A. Foakes, *Hamlet Versus Lear: Cultural Politics and Shakespeare's Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 4

describing how Polish theatrical companies used Shakespeare's plays to critique, subvert and portray the political violence they suffered under the totalitarian regime.

In "King Lear, or Endgame," Kott begins by tracing a history of theatrical productions of *King Lear* from the Romantic era to the twentieth century: the Romantics used new theatrical technology to produce convincing illusions of wild natural landscapes, which represented for them the torment undergone by the human soul. He notes that this trend towards mimetic perfection continued in later eras, with painted landscapes replaced by real trees and other objects, along with perfect copies of historical props on "solid and imposing sets." In considering these developments, Kott argues that the quest for a perfect illusion of reality rendered Shakespeare's play "untheatrical." The beginning of the twentieth century saw a reversal in the trend, with attempts to recreate the traditions of the Elizabethan theatre, which was believed to have used minimal sets and relied instead on the language and acting to create an imaginative response in the audience. In Kott's view, the bare stage made *King Lear* more "theatrical," but it also rendered the play less tragic and more ridiculous, Lear being portrayed as a "demented old man, tearing his white beard."[116]

Kott's analysis of the scene of Gloucester's suicide attempt is central to what he calls "the paradox of pure theatre": Edgar, in the guise of Poor Tom the madman, pretends to lead his blinded father up to the top of a cliff, and then describes a vivid, Breughelesque scene populated with objects seen and heard from a dizzying height. Gloucester makes his suicidal leap on a bare, even stage, after which Edgar pretends to be a bystander who witnessed Gloucester's "fall" and describes a new scene from the bottom of the cliff. In his reading, Kott particularly emphasises Edgar's use of *absences* in his descriptions: sights and sounds so far away that they *cannot* be seen and heard. His paradox of theatre occurs due to the theatrical conventions of the bare stage, which momentarily deceives the audience (as Edgar does Gloucester) into believing that the scene is real. Only a bare stage could achieve this paradoxical effect:

> By a few words of dialogue Shakespeare often turned the platform stage, the inner stage, or the gallery into a London street, a forest, a palace, a ship, or a castle battlement. But these were always real places of action. […] The white precipice at Dover performs a different function. Gloucester does not jump from the top of the cliff,

[116] Jan Kott, "King Lear, or Endgame," *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, trans. Boleslaw Taborski (Garden City: Doubleday, 1964) 82

> or from a stone. For once, in *King Lear*, Shakespeare shows the paradox of pure theatre. […] In the naturalistic theatre one can perform a murder scene, or a scene of terror. The shot may be fired from a revolver or a toy pistol. But in mime there is no difference between a revolver and a toy pistol: in fact neither exists. Death is only a performance, a parable, a symbol.[117]

The paradox of theatre comes from the tension between allegory and literality in representation (which so troubled the early modern Scriptural exegetes, as I showed in Chapter 2). While the naturalistic theatre tries to convince the audience that what they are watching is real, mime uses non-existent props to reveal its fiction. According to Kott, Gloucester's mime is only the *symbol* of a suicide, an allegory pointing to a deeper meaning, even a parable (invoking Biblical parables). Kott then tries to work out the deeper meaning of the parable of *King Lear*, which involves the apocalypse.

The Grotesque Apocalypse of King Lear

Comparing tragedy and the contemporary theatre of the grotesque (exemplified in the plays of Samuel Beckett), Kott says that the only difference between two lies in their attitudes to the "transcendental absolute" that underpins the action: "The downfall of the tragic hero is a confirmation and recognition of the absolute; whereas the downfall of the grotesque actor means mockery of the absolute and its desecration."[118] He gives examples of this transcendental absolute in tragedy: Nature, the Christian God or pagan gods, Fate, and History. In the grotesque, however, this absolute is reimagined as a mechanism created and set in motion by human beings, which cannot be stopped. "But this absurd mechanism is not transcendental any more in relation to man, or at any rate to mankind. It is a trap set by man himself into which he has fallen."[119] The grotesque is characterised by a "philosophy of buffoonery" and adopts a clownish attitude towards the absolute:

> Between tragedy and grotesque there is the same conflict for or against such notions as eschatology, belief in the absolute, hope for the ultimate solution of the contradiction

[117] Kott 92-93
[118] Kott 83
[119] Kott 85

> between moral order and every-day practice. Tragedy is the theatre of priests, grotesque is the theatre of clowns.[120]

Kott argues that *King Lear* fits into the grotesque genre because of its "philosophical cruelty" and the centrality of the fool; moreover, the absurd world of the play turns even kings and noblemen into clowns. Comparing *King Lear* with Beckett's post-apocalyptic *Endgame*, Kott argues that buffoonery and clowning can be the only possible response to the absurdity of the world of both plays, a rigged game in which the characters can only lose, whatever move they try to make. Gloucester's suicide attempt is again central to this grotesque eschatology:

> Gloucester's suicide has a meaning only if the gods exist. It is a protest against undeserved suffering and the world's injustice. This protest is made in a definite direction. It refers to eschatology. Even if the gods are cruel, they must take this suicide into consideration. It will count in the final reckoning between gods and man. Its sole value lies in its reference to the absolute.
>
> But if the gods, and their moral order in the world, do not exist, Gloucester's suicide does not solve or alter anything.[121]

Kott then compares the journeys of Lear and Gloucester to the biblical parable of Job as well as to medieval mystery plays, contrasting Christian apocalyptic thinking with nuclear annihilation:

> The Christian view of the end of the world, with the Last Judgement and its segregation of the just and the unjust, is pathetic. The end of the world caused by the big bomb is spectacular, but grotesque just the same. Such an end of the world is intellectually unacceptable, either to Christians or to Marxists. It would be a silly ending.[122]

Similar to Derrida's "no apocalypse," Kott identifies the eschatology of the nuclear era as an absurd, "silly" end: meaningless annihilation by the nuclear bomb, destruction by an impersonal mechanism that human beings ourselves created, an apocalypse *without* any revelation of an ultimate truth. The combined terror and dark humour of this situation is characteristic of the work of Beckett and other

[120] Kott 90
[121] Kott 96
[122] Kott 86-87

absurdist playwrights. Kott points out that although *King Lear* resembles the Book of Job and makes use of Biblical themes, it ultimately presents a grotesque eschatology – one that better describes nuclear annihilation than the Christian apocalypse, which it mocks. Nor does it present a secular humanist eschatology, being "written towards the close of the Renaissance":

> *King Lear* makes a tragic mockery of all eschatologies: of the heaven promised on earth, and the Heaven promised after death; in fact – of both Christian and secular theodicies; of cosmogony and of the rational view of history; of the gods and the good nature, of man made in the "image and likeness." In *King Lear*, both the medieval and the Renaissance orders of established values disintegrate.[123]

As I remarked in Chapter 1, Ursula Le Guin called Beckett "the prophet of the post-apocalypse" whose "writings are drawn towards […] silence." This description is never more apt than when one considers Beckett's *Act Without Words* (which follows the post-apocalyptic *Endgame*): a totally silent piece of theatre performed entirely in mime with a few props on an empty stage. It illustrates both the pure theatricality that Kott admires, forgoing even language, *and* the absurd experience of living in the nuclear age, in which the only possible response is clowning, or giving up and refusing to play the game. Kott describes Beckett's *Act Without Words* as a pure, distilled "parable of universal human fate," in which humanity is completely trapped:

> A total situation. Man has been thrown on to the empty stage. He tries to escape into the wings, but is kicked back. From above a tree with some leaves, a jug of water, tailoring scissors, and some cubes are pulled down on ropes. The man tries to hide in the shade of the leaves, but the tree is pulled up. He tries to catch hold of the jug, but it rises into the air. He attempts suicide, but this, too, proves impossible. "The bough folds down against the trunk." […] The man sits down and thinks. The jug and the tree appear again. The man does not move.[124]

[123] Kott 94
[124] Kott 94-95

According to Leanore Lieblein, Kott's book has been so influential because it privileges the reader's experiences, empowering the reader to read Shakespeare's plays from her own context and assess their relevance for her own time. Citing Kott's evocation of the Holocaust in his analysis of *Richard III*, Lieblein agrees that it is important to take events which have "marked us" into account while reading and interpreting Shakespeare's plays:

> Kott's method invited egotism ("Shakespeare is like the world, or life itself. Every historical period finds in him what it is looking for and what it wants to see"), but it also invited altruism ("One must find in [Richard III] the night of Nazi occupation, concentration camps, mass-murders"). It was a combination that could appeal to a generation that was thought to believe it could save the world by dropping out. It also made an important point. Our experiences do mark us; the holocaust has marked us. We cannot pretend that it makes no difference to who we are – or to how we read. Kott quite properly treats his own historical moment as a textual field within which Shakespeare's work lives. He frankly argues that we can only encounter Shakespeare – or any author, for that matter – from within the context in which we find ourselves.[125]

Lieblein also mentions that Kott's method has been heavily criticised, even described as "nihilistic," for its interpretation from the subjective position of the reader. Lieblein points out that the tension in Kott – and Brook, who was heavily influenced by Kott – lies in the contradiction between their invocations of both Beckett and Brecht, two playwrights with very different attitudes to combining politics and theatre. While the Beckettian stage universalises the absurdity of the human condition trapped by fate, Brecht's epic theatre tries to use the potential of alienation – confronting the audience with the overt fictionality of theatrical representation – to provoke political action. Lieblein defends Brook's stage and screen productions of *King Lear* from the charge of nihilism by reference to its Brechtian influence.[125]

Adorno, on the other hand, rejected Brecht's politicised literature, accusing him of trivialising fascism. Michael Rothberg points out that Adorno preferred the work of Beckett for its "*proximity*

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[125] Leanore Lieblein, 'Jan Kott, Peter Brook, and *King Lear*," *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 1.2 (Spring 1987): 41. Journals@KU. <https://journals.ku.edu/jdtc/article/download/1651/1615/0> 25 Feb 2014

to silence" – what Adorno called his "imageless image" and "wordless expression." Adorno's reading of *Endgame* interprets it not as a "universal parable of human fate," like Jan Kott, but as a commentary on the way that the sense of history itself has disappeared under the conditions of late capitalism in the post-Auschwitz, post-Hiroshima age. Ultimately, Rothberg argues, Adorno's later writings assert the ability of certain types of literature, such as Beckett's, to represent "the rifts that realist mimesis represses."[126]

Bond's Lear and the Marxist Apocalypse

Edward Bond wrote his 1971 play *Lear* to correct what he saw as the inadequacy of Shakespeare's *King Lear* from a Marxist perspective. In Bond's play, Lear recognises that the brutal murders of his daughters were brought about by his attempt to build a wall and realises he must act to destroy it. Cordelia in this play starts off as an ordinary character who experiences terrible brutality at the hands of Lear's soldiers. By the end of the play, however, she becomes Lear's successor and continues building the wall. Lear and Cordelia switch places: now he is trying to act to prevent the barbarism, and Cordelia is the new tyrant. Like Kott and Lieblein, Bond too saw Shakespeare's *King Lear* as deeply relevant to our post-Holocaust, post-nuclear existence, but believed that it needed to be rewritten or re-imagined to effectively respond to the horrors of the late twentieth century. Daniel R. Jones quotes Bond as saying:

> Shakespeare does arrive at an answer to the problems of his particular society, and that was the idea of total resignation, accepting what comes, and discovering that a human being can accept an enormous lot and survive it. He can come through the storm. What I want to say is that this model is inadequate now; that it just does not work. Acceptance is not enough. Anybody can accept. You can go quietly into your gas chamber at Auschwitz, you can sit quietly at home and have an H-bomb dropped on you. Shakespeare had time. He must have thought that in time certain changes would be made. But time has speeded up enormously, and for us, time is running out.[127]

The urgency, or the imperative to act as quickly as possible, that Bond mentions was also identified by Derrida in "No Apocalypse, Not Now" as the defining feature of the consciousness of time in the

[126] Rothberg 39-46
[127] Daniel R. Jones, 'Edward Bond's "Rational Theatre,"' *Theatre Journal* 32.4 (Dec 1980): 505, JSTOR <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3207412> 01 Mar 2014

nuclear age – the ever-accelerating speed race towards the absurd end, the apocalypse without revelation. While Bond stresses the importance of action without delay, Derrida emphasises the need to confront the aporia of speed by finding the right speed at which to act: to slow down by retaining a historical perspective of the nuclear crisis, as well as to understand the importance of decisive action in the face of the totally unprecedented.

According to Jones, Bond's intentions include demolishing myths about the natural aggressiveness of human beings, emphasising the importance of combining action and awareness, and ultimately, providing hope through a combination of cautious optimism and unflinching realism. Jones ends his article on Bond's "Rational Theatre" by invoking the same terms levelled at Kott and Brook's interpretations of *King Lear*: "[I]n an age in which solipsism, nihilism, and defeatism are all too prevalent, Bond's views challenge people both to recognize corruption and to accept responsibility through action."[128] Despite Bond's intentions, I did not notice this optimism in *Lear*, which depicts extreme torture, mutilation, and sexual violence, which, when staged, could easily tip over into a pornography of violence rather than an effective critique of socially constructed power relations. Bond admits his intention in Lear was to "admit the dark things, the hopeless things, the destructive things;" his play ends on a bleak note with the tyrant Cordelia's victory.[129]

Jones quotes Bond's understanding of the purpose of theatre as thoroughly influenced by his faith in Marxist eschato-teleology: "Theatre, when it's doing what it was created to do, demonstrates order in the chaos, the ideal in the ordinary, history in the present, the rational in the seemingly irrational."[130] Bond's faith in the Marxist apocalypse is tempered by the understanding that "human beings aren't totally perfectible," but this faith in rationality raises a contradiction: it is the very ideology of progress and excessive rationality which he promotes that has led to the technological nightmare he opposes. Combining faith in rationality with an apocalyptic end-focused ideology (without awareness of accident, contingency, and our inability to predict and control the consequences of our actions) can easily turn a utopia into a dystopia, precipitating rather than preventing the disaster. The bleak ending of Bond's *Lear* itself acts against the author's stated intentions, showing that efforts to act in a spirit of urgency and a faith in human "perfectibility" can simply perpetuate the injustice, if not worsen it. It would be even more grotesque to hasten our

[128] Jones 517
[129] Jones 506
[130] Jones 506

annihilation while trying to prevent it, and this is precisely what Shakespeare shows: the tragic catastrophe in *King Lear* occurs as a result of the characters' *hubris* (arrogant pride) and *hamartia* (error in judgement) in trying to control the course of events.

4.2 Eschatology in Three Nuclear Film Adaptations of *King Lear*

The four films of Peter Brook, Grigori Kozintsev, Akira Kurosawa, and Jean-Luc Godard are vastly different, yet, as I showed at the beginning of this chapter, they all have two things in common: they are all adaptations of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, and they all respond to the threat of nuclear annihilation in some way or another. In this section, I will focus on the first three films, and then consider Godard's film in detail in the next section. To understand their differing, yet subtle, presentations of their theme, I will look at how the three interpretations of the play by Brook, Kozintsev and Kurosawa coincide with or contrast with Jan Kott's distinction between tragedy and the grotesque, asking the following questions: What is the attitude of these films to eschatology, to the transcendental absolute? Do they present a grotesque world that mocks the absolute, a tragic one that is given meaning through it, or an ambiguous eschatology?

Jan Kott also draws attention to the differences between various media when describing the "paradox of theatre" in *King Lear*. According to Kott, the "parable" of Gloucester's suicide scene, where Edgar describes a fiction which the audience believes and does not believe at the same time, *cannot* be shown in the cinema (or even in certain types of theatre) due to the inescapable naturalistic, illusionistic, or mimetic quality of cinema:

> The meaning of this parable is not easy to define. But one thing is clear: this type of parable is not to be thought of outside the theatre, or rather outside a certain kind of theatre. […] One cannot transpose Gloucester's suicide attempt to the screen, unless one were to film a stage performance. But in the naturalistic, or even stylized theatre, with the precipice painted or projected onto a screen, Shakespeare's parable would be completely obliterated.[131]

[131] Kott 92

Peter Brook's stage adaptations of the play tried to put Kott's ideas into practice, using Beckettian absurdism and Brechtian alienation to prevent the audience from identifying with the fiction – thereby revealing the grotesque and absurd quality of *King Lear*. Despite Kott's declaration of the untranslatability of the paradox of theatre to cinema, Brook did also adapt his stage production to the screen. While examining the eschatology of the films, I will also look at the cinematic techniques they use to deal with Kott's paradoxes.

Peter Brook's Metacinematic Grotesque

Peter Brook's film adaptation of *King Lear* draws attention to its cinematic medium by using extreme close-ups, abrupt zooms, cuts showing the same scene from different angles, characters speaking directly to the camera, and other alienating techniques. The film alternates between nearly silent scenes with very little movement and speeded up action accompanied by a flurry of movement and noise. The buildings are largely windowless, unornamented, solid and heavy, resembling fortresses or nuclear bunkers. Shot on location in the Jutland peninsula of Denmark, the thick snow, desolate landscape, and the thick furs the actors wear suggests the bitterest of cold climates.[132] The setting is historically unspecific: costumes of leather and fur and armour of roughly beaten iron suggest a world of primitive technology, which could either belong to pre-history or a post-apocalyptic nuclear winter, as in Beckett's *Endgame*.

In the important suicide scene, Brook attempts to translate Kott's paradox of theatre to cinema by largely avoiding showing the setting of the action, using close-ups on the characters' faces, legs, and mouths instead. As Edgar describes the non-existent scene from the top of the cliff, the camera shows only indistinct greyness. After Gloucester makes his suicidal leap, a slow zoom reveals the even ground on which Gloucester has fallen: the seashore. As Kott predicts, the paradoxical effect of the language is lost in cinema: the seashore is a “real” location, with sounds of waves in the background. The illusionistic quality of cinema remains despite Brook's attempts at metacinematic alienation.

He succeeds better in reminding the viewer of the fictionality of the film during the storm scenes, which employ even more extreme cinematic effects: often deliberately blurred to the point of grey

[132] R. B. Parker, 'The Use of “Mise-en-Scène” in Three Films of “King Lear,”' *Shakespeare Quarterly* 42.1 (Spring 1991): 76, JSTOR <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2870657> 13 Aug 2019

indistinction, the scenes of “reality” alternate with a surrealistic phantasmagoria. These techniques dissolve the boundary between nature and humanity, visualising Lear's disintegrating self. In the final scene, the banal references to the apocalypse made by Kent and Edgar (“Is this the promised end?” – “Or image of that horror?”) intrude uncomfortably into a scene where Lear totally loses touch with reality and falls into madness. At one point, Cordelia – whose hanging was shown earlier – appears behind Lear, alive, and gazes into the camera. These effects show the potential of the cinematic medium to visualise the subjectivity and interiority of the characters and to unsettle the strict boundary between the film's “reality” and fiction. (As I will show in the third section of this chapter, Jean-Luc Godard takes Brook's metacinematic effects even further.)

The acting is alienating as well: Lear is a tyrant who growls and barks his lines and trashes the scene when he doesn't get his way; most characters deliver their lines devoid of emotion, except two memorable instances where Goneril and Regan weep. In this way, Brook's film refrains from making a moral difference between “good” and “evil” characters. The violence is brought to the fore: the blinding scene is drawn-out, Cornwall using a spoon to gouge out Gloucester's eyes. After Cornwall is stabbed by the loyal servant, Regan proceeds to beat the servant to death. Oswald squeals in pain as he is stuck through with a spear by Edgar. Edgar kills Edmund (both helmeted with heavy armour) with one blow of an axe. Goneril smashes Regan's head against a rock; then, grasping at her leather dress and swaying her upper body, she commits suicide in the same manner. This brutal, surreal scene is followed by a close-up on Cordelia being hanged. All of these events are shown in a clipped, matter-of-fact manner, one after the other, providing no time for the viewer to assimilate the shocks.

Brook's film ruthlessly avoids sentimentality, portraying a brutal world in terms of unremitting cruelty and bleakness. The violence is shown without implied commentary or criticism (in the form of music, for example). There is no “humanity” in this film; it is a world where human beings are indistinguishable from monsters who prey upon each other in the deep. In his *King Lear*, Brook largely succeeds in presenting Jan Kott's vision of an absurd world where the characters are trapped, their choices meaningless because there is no transcendental authority to comment on them, not even the filmmaker. But whereas Brook resists the urge to appeal to any kind of transcendental absolute, the other two films contain multiple references to the gods, in constant search for – along with expressions of doubt regarding – an ultimate meaning to redeem the characters' suffering.

Grigori Kozintsev's Humanist Naturalism

Kozintsev, like Kott, saw Shakespeare as "our contemporary": his interpretations of *Hamlet* (1964) and *King Lear* (1971) were both deeply influenced by the political context of Soviet repression in which they were made. But deviating from Kott's anti-humanist reading of the play, Kozintsev's *King Lear* is informed from beginning to end by his humanist ideals. In contrast to Brook's metacinematic techniques, Kozintsev strives for naturalism, rejecting ostentatious clothing and makeup and directing the actors to speak their lines "as in real life."[133] Rather than imitation of society, Kozintsev's mimesis strives for depiction of true emotion, with everything else stripped away. In his diary, he writes that he watched war documentaries in preparation for the film, contrasting the depth of the emotion of the people with the "shameful" fictionality of conventional theatre:

> Their grief, immortalized by the camera, had to be stored in the memory. In comparison with them, conventional theatricality and pictorial tragedy seemed shameful. […] So should one imitate the style of the documentary? Of course not. That was not the point at all. The main point was the depth of the human suffering, and of the people's grief, not the style.[134]

The most characteristic feature of Kozintsev's film is its emphasis on the poor and dispossessed: Lear's castle is shown surrounded by those he rules over and whom he eventually becomes one of: the "unaccommodated" men and women, ragged beggars and madmen who spend the entirety of the film trundling their meagre possessions around a vast, desolate landscape. It is not the storm but the humanity of these people that enables Lear to truly see for the first time. Lear's fall and subsequent recognition of the falsity and hypocrisy of power is central to Kozintsev's film, which focuses on powerlessness to meditate on the nature of power. Cordelia's marriage takes place in front of a large cross erected in the earth. This suggests that Kozintsev interpreted the play through a Christian lens, and indeed Cordelia is presented as a kind of redeemer at the end of the film. Her death is charged with emotional significance: Lear cradles her body when speaking his last lines to her, creating a Pietà effect. The film emphasises the redemptive power of suffering: "How is one to define the development of the image of Lear? As a thawing. […] Grief warms him. Disaster melts the ice; his

[133] Kozintsev 42
[134] Kozintsev 40

heart quickens and begins to beat."[135] The emotional impact of Lear's epiphany in the storm scene (when he realises, "O, I have ta'en / Too little care of this") constitutes the heart of the film.[136]

In his diary, Kozintsev traces a direct line from our earliest use of technology to the devastation of Hiroshima: "Man invented fire to make life easier."[137] In the first scene of the film, Lear smiles while warming his hands above a roaring fire; at the end, however, all that is left are corpses being removed from a scene of burnt-out devastation, thick smoke rising from the ruins. The invention of fire is, for Kozintsev, the origin of the nuclear bomb, and he uses fire as a subtle metonymy for nuclear annihilation in his film. This vision locates the first general curse not in the disobedience of Adam and Eve, but in the Promethean myth when humanity stole the secret of fire from the gods. Amidst the devastation and carnage, the fool (played by the young actor Oleg Dahl) picks up a flute and starts playing. He is immediately kicked to the side by soldiers taking the bodies away. The fool is treated with a combination of cruelty and kindness by Lear, as though he is one of his animals; he is also shown several times with a rope tied around his neck in the manner of a leash. Kozintsev evokes the Holocaust in his description of the fool in his diary: "Art is in the grip of tyranny. He is the boy from Auschwitz whom they forced to play the violin in an orchestra of dead men; and beat him so that he should play merrier tunes."[138]

Unlike Brook's brutal world without music, however, Kozintsev's film swells with a moving score by Dmitri Shostakovich which highlights the emotional movement of the film. His humanist *King Lear* is a lament for what may be lost because of the threat of nuclear annihilation: the human capacity for love and redemption even – or especially – in the worst circumstances. By presenting human bonds as something worth preserving, and their dissolution as something to be grieved, Kozintsev's film makes a case for the relevance of tragedy in the nuclear age.

Akira Kurosawa's Stylised Ambiguity

While Kozintsev and Brook agreed that *King Lear* should be set in a non-specific time and place, Akira Kurosawa's *Ran* transposes the *King Lear* story to feudal Japan: Lear becomes the feudal lord

[135] Kozintsev 40
[136] *King Lear* III, iv, 32-33. All references to *King Lear* in the text will be to William Shakespeare, "The Tragedy of King Lear: the Folio Text," *The Norton Shakespeare* 2337+
[137] Kozintsev 17
[138] Kozintsev 72

Hidetora Ichimonji, and the three daughters become three sons named Taro, Jiro, and Saburo. It is as much an adaptation of a Japanese popular legend as it of Shakespeare's play.

The first difference that most viewers would notice is that the adaptations of Brook and Kozintsev are shot in black and white, while the scenes of *Ran* take place in vivid colour. The film is shot against gorgeous natural landscapes, around which hundreds of soldiers rush about on foot and on horses, with armour and banners in the colours of their respective camps – all vivid primary colours. This painterly beauty is also the backdrop of scene after scene of massacres in battle, scenes of intense, repetitive, and ceaseless brutality. The violence is shown in a stylised rather than illusionistic manner, with liberal use of bright red paint for blood. Hidetora's face is made up like a mask; his expressions change only when his situation changes. In a significant departure from Brook (with his love for close-ups), Kurosawa shoots almost the entire film in long shots with stable cameras. R. B. Parker connects this to the attempt to "flatten character" and present "detached objectivity" towards the action in the style of the Noh theatre.[139] Roger Ebert opines that this makes the audience feel like gods rather than participants.[140]

As for the gods *in* the film, the film's attitude remains ambiguous. In Kurosawa's film, many of the characters repeatedly invoke the Buddha, who, like the pagan gods in *King Lear*, remains absent. Sué, the wife of Hidetora's second son, urges Hidetora and her brother Tsurumaru (who was blinded as a child on Hidetora's orders) to have faith in the Buddha. Sué accepts suffering by reference to the concept of karma, an accumulation of good and bad deeds from past lives which determines the level of suffering in the present life. Like the apocalypse, the Buddhist doctrine of karma gives meaning to present events: it looks forward to a future life in which one's good deeds and patient endurance may be rewarded, explains the reason for seemingly senseless suffering inflicted on innocents, and offers the hope of salvation promised by the example of the Buddha. This life, then, is merely to be endured. Kurosawa challenges this transcendental absolute, but does not quite do away with it altogether. When leaving Tsurumaru alone for the last time (after which she would be senselessly killed), Sué gives him a scroll with the image of the "Amida Buddha" to keep him company. The last scene shows the blind Tsurumaru at the darkening cliff, groping towards the

[139] Parker 77
[140] Roger Ebert, "Ran movie review & film summary," *RogerEbert.com*, 01 Oct 2000 <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/great-movies-ran-1985> 14 July 2018

abyss, and accidentally dropping the scroll out of reach. This haunting ending reinforces the despair of the characters and bleak message of the film.

Power is shown as entirely hollow, consisting of nothing but ceremony and ritual, symbols, and shows of deference. Insults (perceived or intentional) necessitate action to save face. The Lady-Macbethesque character Kaede exploits this to get her revenge against the Ichimonji clan for the slaughter of her family, but finally succumbs to the same fate herself. In the first scene, Saburo laughs at his father's trust in his sons after having led a life of violent conquest and teaching them to show no mercy to their victims, the act of truth-telling for which he would be disowned. Although Hidetora is ultimately confronted with his brutal crimes, he never becomes one of the oppressed, as Kozintsev's Lear does. He can never divest himself of the stains of his crimes committed when in power; he can only try to flee from them in horror, slide into a senile madness, and perish along with his victims. There is no redemption, only the never-ending cycle of violence in *Ran.* The characters set the war mechanism in motion but it grows beyond their control, leading to mutual annihilation. The film makes it clear that the characters are responsible for their own fate: the annihilation is man-made.

A theme he would later return to in “Mount Fuji in Red,” in *Ran*, Kurosawa ponders on the theme of individual and collective responsibility for senseless events of mutual destruction caused by the pursuit of power – acts which destroy the actor as well as those targeted, which leave the world burning. Two types of madness are contrasted: the Mutually Assured Destruction of annihilation against the madness that Hidetora experiences when he becomes aware of his own responsibility for monstrous crimes. The second form of madness is true sanity, as Kyōami (the fool) points out: “In a mad world, only the mad are sane.” The film is an indictment of the human propensity (or those of the ruling classes, whose actions affect all) to destroy themselves and ravage the world for power. Rather than distancing the viewer from the events of the film, the historic setting brings the commonality and universality of the foolishness, madness, and lust for power that drives acts of destruction to the fore. Kurosawa doesn't show the nuclear crisis as something unprecedented but, like Kozintsev, shows it as a continuation of age-old evils.

4.3 Godard's *King Lear*: The Responsibility of Art in the Nuclear Age

The extreme metacinematic self-referentiality of Godard's *King Lear* makes even Peter Brook's film look like a straightforward mimetic adaptation: Shakespeare's dialogue ends up as so many decontextualised fragments, and even the characters lose their stable identities, being played by multiple actors. Linda Petříková points out that time and space are unfixed in the film, describing its setting as a "post-apocalyptic time-space with no beginning and no ending." She describes Godard's cinematic method as a rejection of metaphor to present a literal image, aspiring "to reach a kind of montage […] that escapes linguistic appropriation." Petříková argues that the film's "irrational cuts" trouble the viewer's efforts at finding a coherent narrative in the film, problematising the idea of cinematic unity. She concludes that Godard's film achieves a sort of philosophical discourse which *thinks* about Shakespeare's play, about adaptation, cinema, and its own ability to think.[141] In his biography of Godard, Richard Brody too stresses the importance of Godard's "ametaphorical" appropriation of *King Lear*, connecting it with Godard's intention to make the play relevant to the modern (nuclear) age:

> Godard avoided making a naturalistic drama adapted directly from a familiar object of high culture, instead presenting *King Lear* in an ametaphorical frame, as if to find out which aspects of that classic work were relevant to the modern age. […] [I]n *King Lear* he rendered the symbolic and the concrete inseparable, even indistinguishable. In this film, more than in any other, he brought together the material and the transcendent, life and art.[142]

Petříková's analysis sees the film as a deconstruction of adaptation; it can also be described as an "appropriation" of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, which sees the play less as a "source" and more as raw material that Godard mines to present his own vision. In his essay on apocalypse and historicity in *King Lear* and its Czech variants, Martin Procházka argues that adaptation and appropriation differ only in their perspective – adaptation being more closely related to the source text and appropriation emphasising the transposition of the text into a different context. He uses a Derridean model of thinking appropriation as an iteration or "repetition with variation," with a stress on the alterity and

[141] Linda Petříková, "Against Adaptation: Jean-Luc Godard's 'King Lear,'" *Litteraria Pragensia* 20.39 (July 2010): 42-46

[142] Richard Brody, *Everything Is Cinema: The Working Life of Jean-Luc Godard* (New York: Henry Holt, 2008) 498-500

singularity of the work. This is important for Derrida's theory of representation – particularly in writing, but also in other forms – as well as for nuclear criticism. For Derrida, writing is characterised essentially by its iterability, which Procházka defines as the potential for "the signifier [to] be severed from the signified and exist as a differential mark independent of its original production or its meaning in the original context."[143] Iterability also describes the ability of writing to survive the death (or absence) of its author and intended addressee. This gives writing a sort of immortality (one which so fascinated Shakespeare in his sonnets), but at the same time, connects it with death, which, for Derrida, reveals the absolute irreplaceable singularity of the individual. Derrida emphasises the *historicity* of writing as the key to understanding this paradox.

In "No Apocalypse, Not Now," Derrida stressed the historicity not only of the individual text, but also of the entire institution of literature, whose emergence he dates to the seventeenth century. Every text is thus dependent on the existing archive and on legal and literary conventions and rules which together constitute this institution. Thinking of the historical emergence of literature also leads to thinking of its end: for Derrida, the nuclear threat exposes the essential fragility, historicity, and "structure of historical fictionality" of the institution of literature, de-naturalising written representation and revealing both mortality of literature and that of humanity. The quality of iterability and historicity leads to another seeming contradiction, or paradox: writing is deeply dependent on its wider context – the institution of literature – for its meaning, yet it is also separable from its immediate context, or origin.

Procházka emphasises the link that Derrida makes in *The Gift of Death* between historicity and "responsibility for the other" (also responsibility for the past and the future, that is, for history), which is simultaneously necessary and impossible. The undecidability of responsibility renders history itself an undecidable object, the meaning of which cannot be known with absolute certainty, but which must remain open and unresolved. In the apocalyptic view, the "ideality" (which is also sometimes called the content, the meaning, or the spirit) of a work of art would be revealed at the end of history, with its identity guaranteed by an external authority. From the perspective of nuclear criticism (which looks at literature from the perspective of a "no apocalypse," or apocalypse without revelation of truth), the historicity, iterability, and undecidability of the meaning of the text would not be seen as problems to be resolved at the apocalypse, but essential characteristics which open up

[143] Martin Procházka, "Beyond Pragmatism: Apocalypse, Adaptation and Historicity in *King Lear* and Some of Its Czech Versions," *Litteraria Pragensia* 26.52 (2016): 110

the text to be appropriated in different contexts, enabling inter-cultural and inter-temporal communication.

Godard's film too relies on the appropriability and historicity of *King Lear*. With its explicit post-Chernobyl setting, it also concerns nuclear annihilation, using Shakespeare's play to reflect on art (literature and cinema) in the nuclear age. In this section, I will argue that the project of the film is an exemplary "nuclear text," a form of nuclear criticism of Shakespeare's play.

No Thing: Representation and Reality in the Nuclear Age

At the beginning of Godard's film, we are shown a series of intertitles, including "A Picture / Shot in the Back," "King Lear / A Study," and "No Thing" – which refer to the circumstances of the film's creation, its status as an appropriation (or more modestly, "a study" or "an approach"), and its main theme of annihilation, respectively. The audio that accompanies the intertitles is an actual phone conversation between Godard and a producer of the film who is complaining of the long delay in its release. After the word "Action!," we are shown two takes of the same scene, where the novelist Norman Mailer (playing himself) is visited in his hotel room by his (actual) daughter Kate. Kate anxiously flips through the script Mailer has written for the film (which went unused), commenting on the character names "Don Glostro" and "Don Learo" and complaining that her father is obsessed with the mafia. "I think the mafia is the only way to do King Lear," insists Mailer.

Through voiceover, Godard comments on the difficulty of filming this scene, describing Mailer's star behaviour and refusal to follow directions. He describes the contract that Mailer signed to take on an acting part in the film, which he implies was broken when Mailer and his daughter flew back to the US "after the fifth take of the first scene." According to Brody, however, Mailer quit the project due to his fear that Godard would imply an incestuous relationship between him and his daughter, a valid concern as it turned out.

Speaking of the broken contract, Godard opines, "Words are reckless. Words are one thing, and reality, gentle reality, is another thing. And between them is no thing." This problematic relationship between representation and reality, between words and things, would become the major obsession in the film, not only as a general philosophical problem but also specifically problematised by the nuclear age. Godard indicates this when he continues, "Anyway, I was fired. I

kept on thinking about the relation between art and fire." As in Kozintsev's film, fire is used as a metonymy for nuclear destruction in Godard's film, a theme made explicit through multiple references to Chernobyl – itself metonymic, a localised accident standing for the annihilation of "everything," especially culture, which fails to come back on its own (unlike "electricity, houses, and cars") and thus, must be painstakingly recovered.

In the second scene, we see William Shakespeare Junior V (the theatre director Peter Sellars, who also wrote much of the script eventually used for the film) sitting in a restaurant; in voiceover, he remembers the first names of various film directors. At this point, the film starts becoming completely fragmented: black-and-white photographs of the directors appear one by one, overlaid with melancholy music, howling winds, and squawking seagulls. Shakespeare Jr's voiceover is then interrupted by Godard's meditations on cinema in the modern age, where he quotes from Robert Bresson's *Notes on the Cinematographer*:

> A picture […] you could put it in a cell and condemn it to solitary confinement forever *without* it being an atrocity. ([…] which communicates by mobility and silence.) If an image, looked at separately, expresses something clearly, if it encourages its own interpretation, it will not transform itself in contact with other images. The other images will have no power over it, and it will have no power over the other images. No action. No reaction.

Godard leaves out the crucial last line in Bresson's text, which *rejects* the power of the separate image: "It is separate and unusable in the cinematographer's system." Bresson also writes that "[a]n image must be transformed by contact as is a colour by contact with other colours. […] No art without transformation."[144] But Godard's use of the quote is ambiguous – contrasting the atrocity of solitary confinement with the imprisonment of images on celluloid film, Godard asserts that it is precisely the silence of the separate image which enables it to communicate, unlike "reckless" words. Continuing his reflections, Godard explicitly problematises mimesis through a reference to perspectival art, emblematic of the illusionistic mode of representation in the modern age:

> Another world awakens […] hard, cynical, analphabetical, amnesiac, twisted without reason. Spread flat as if perspective has been abolished. The strangest thing is that the

[144] Robert Bresson, *Notes on the Cinematographer*, trans. Jonathan Griffin (Los Angeles: Green Integer, 1997) 20-21

> living dead of this world are a construction of the previous world. Their thoughts and their sensations are from before. The vanishing point has been erased.

Here Godard draws attention to the paradox of the vanishing point, which exists beyond visibility, creating the illusion of distance in a painting. The illusion of the visible depends on invisibility, which is itself erased, signifying the abolition of mimesis in the nuclear age: art must be completely re-thought and reinvented in the "new world." This is a world in which the old (modern) ideals of culture, literacy, and reason have been lost. Its inhabitants are the "living dead," who not only retain the patterns of thinking of the old world, but are themselves fictional "constructions of the previous world."

This reflection on art in the nuclear world continues in the next scene: Shakespeare Jr introduces himself by voiceover superimposed on several paintings (notably Goya's "Saturn Devouring His Son") illuminated by the flame of a lighter and interrupted several times by the intertitle "No Thing." This cuts to a shot of Shakespeare Jr walking along the seashore, where he tells us that the film is set "after Chernobyl" (a phrase used in Godard's film like Adorno's "after Auschwitz," which Rothberg pointed out represents the entire "chronotope" or combination of space and time of late modernity) and explains his mission to recover the works of his ancestor.

The process of recovery was shown earlier, where Shakespeare Jr recovers Cordelia's "nothing" from *King Lear* by overhearing the conversation of the mafioso Don Learo (Burgess Meredith) and his daughter (Molly Ringwald) in the restaurant. Shakespeare Jr informs us that he has just come from Denmark, where he has recovered Hamlet's "to be or not to be," and explains that he is now on his way to meet Professor Pluggy (Jean-Luc Godard), another survivor of Chernobyl working on a similar project, but in the visual field. He says he feels like the words he is recovering are not enough, and that they need to go together with something else:

> I don't know if I made this clear before, but this was *after* Chernobyl. We are in a time now when movies, and more generally art, have been lost. Do not exist, and must somehow be reinvented. Thanks to the old man and his daughter, I had some of the lines. Her answer was "Nothing. No thing." It does not mean anything. She has said "Nothing. *No thing*." […] And I was told this man Pluggy had, I still don't know what to

call them, they had to go together with the lines. Somehow I felt they needed to go together.

Words vs. Images

Both Pluggy and Shakespeare Jr are on a similar mission, but they fail to understand each other because they champion different forms of representation: the image and the word, respectively. When they meet, Pluggy does not understand why Shakespeare Jr is writing: “What are you writing for?” He takes the pencil from Shakespeare Jr's hand and examines it, commenting: “So *writing* still exists.” Shakespeare Jr questions him about his project, but Pluggy can only explain that he *can't* explain: “The trouble of what I'm looking for is that it doesn't make sense. Nobody does it.” Pluggy's assistant Edgar (Leos Carax) then lights a fire (parodying the post-apocalyptic setting by rubbing two sticks together, after which Pluggy passes him a lighter, saying, “It's been invented!”). Shakespeare Jr then describes the fire, and Pluggy tells him that he has found the answer to his question about Pluggy's project:

SHAKESPEARE JR It is born and it is burnt. It begins from the thing it ends. At the same time. Birth and death, linked, like mouth and breath.

PLUGGY The answer to your question is there. What we are looking for is like that fire. It is born from what it destroys.

Through what may be called an act of nuclear criticism, here Godard defines art through its historicity, linking together its creation and possible destruction. For Godard, as well as Derrida, the birth of art is contingent on the existence of the archive (the “culture” that has been lost as a result of near-complete nuclear annihilation in Godard's film), and the birth of art cannot be thought without considering its possible death. But Shakespeare Jr is not satisfied with this explanation; again, he demands to know the *name* of what Pluggy is looking for. This leads to a violent disagreement:

PLUGGY I ain't interested in names.

SHAKESPEARE JR [*shaking Pluggy by the neck*] Why is that? Look! No names, no lines. No lines, no story.

[…]

PLUGGY Do I need a name to see thy beauty?

SHAKESPEARE JR I don't agree.

PLUGGY Do you need to say red to see red?

SHAKESPEARE JR I disagree.

PLUGGY With the word, then come the mistake.

SHAKESPEARE JR I need the memory. […] How can I possibly reach words with no words?

PLUGGY First, the tragedy of choice. And then the second, the comedy of errors.

SHAKESPEARE JR Nothing will come of nothing.

PLUGGY Suppose we made a mistake, at the very very beginning, and we called red "green." How would we know today? […] I'll show you what it's like.

SHAKESPEARE JR Yes, tell me, professor.

PLUGGY Show!

Pluggy sees the arbitrary nature of verbal signifiers as problematising knowledge: all words are reckless, with an inherent capacity for errors, lies, deceit, and hypocrisy. Therefore, truth can only be expressed in images, which speak through silence. He will not even utter the word "image" in order to respect its purity. Shakespeare Jr, on the other hand, does not understand how meaning can exist without words; he constantly asks Pluggy to "tell" him the names of things, believing that this would lead to knowledge of the things themselves. He also repeatedly corrects Pluggy when he calls him "Mr Shakespeare," insisting on accuracy in naming: "Number Five." Along with Pluggy's explicit rejection of words for images, the film also problematises verbal representation by repeating lines from *King Lear* that express distrust in words, for example: "They are *not men of their words.* 'Tis a *lie*"; "I will be the pattern of all patience. I will *say nothing*"; and "Yes, forsooth, I will *hold my tongue*. So your face bids me though you *say nothing*." (emphasis mine) Several characters even try to silence Shakespeare's lines by saying: "*Peace*, Mr Shakespeare!"

Power vs. Virtue

This distrust of verbal representation reappears in the emphasis that Godard places on Cordelia's "violent silence," twice quoting the analysis of feminist essayist Viviane Forrester. (Brody points out that Godard described Forrester's words as "the first route on 'the Shakespeare map'."[145]) In the second iteration of the quote, Godard adds his own commentary, reading the relationship of Lear and Cordelia as characterised by an incestuous desire which becomes murderous:

> A violent silence, the silence of Cordelia. To the question of a king, a gangster, her father, her answer is: Nothing. He demands the essential. How is he loved? Desired? From where is he loved? He has power. He is king. He wants to be wanted. Who wants him? Nothing. Not will, not intelligence, not sex, but all the same a body, a little bit of flesh. Because for Learo, to hear is to see. (A man may see how this world goes with no eyes. Look with thine ears.) This is what he tries to do, the king who calls himself Lear. E A R. In listening to his daughters he hopes to see their entire bodies stretched out over their voices. What he wants is not what he desires. What he wants is to forget this desire that he cannot stand. The nothing of Cordelia. So that he can silence the silence, he listens as though he were watching television. But Cordelia, what she shows in speaking is not "nothing," but her very presence, her exactitude.

Following Forrester's feminist analysis, Godard interprets Cordelia's silence as an act of rebellion against patriarchal authority, an insistence on her presence to a tyrannical order which reduces her to an extension of the tyrant's desire. Her "nothing" incenses Lear, who wants to possess her materially – and he thinks to do this through demanding spoken words of love. But paradoxically, her "nothing" speaks volumes; Cordelia expresses her reality ("her very presence, her exactitude") through her silence, showing that she is neither a nothing nor a thing. Quoting Lear's words to the blind Gloucester ("look with thine ears"), and pointing out the E A R in Lear's name, Godard sees Lear's – and Learo's – tragic mistake as confusing words for images, and images ("television") for material reality ("a little bit of body").

[145] Brody 495

But Godard implies that *Cordelia* has faith in images, which, like her, speak through silence. Several times, we hear her voice reciting the first part of Shakespeare's Sonnet 47, which affirms the possibility of representing love through *visual* representation:

> Betwixt mine eye and heart a league is took,
> And each doth good turns now unto the other.
> When that mine eye is famished for a look,
> Or heart in love with sighs himself doth smother,
> With my love's picture then my eye doth feast
> And to the painted banquet bids my heart[146]

This message is reinforced by showing her contemplating her reflection in the mirror. She is also shown sleeping with a book of Doré reproductions under her arm – again allying her with images.

The film attains its metacinematic and intertextual peak when we are shown Cordelia and Don Learo sitting in a dark theatre watching Valentina Shendrikova and Jüri Järvet, a different Cordelia and Lear, interact in Kozintsev's *King Lear*. With this device, Godard emphasises the hybridity of Shakespeare's play and characters, reminding the audience that they always exist in multiplicity; their seemingly unified identity is mere illusion. Then, towards the end of the film, we are shown a striking image of Learo holding a shotgun, his back towards the camera and looking out at an expanse of water, with Cordelia's prone body stretched out on a rock in the foreground. This, the film implies, is the "image" that Pluggy has been searching for, which has finally been invented.

The meaning of the image can be found in an allegory that Godard makes explicit through the use of intertitles contrasting Learo's allegorical significance as "Power" with Cordelia's "Virtue" – as Learo murders Cordelia, Power ultimately triumphs over Virtue. Another layer of symbolism comes from Learo's preference for words and Cordelia's for images: for Godard, words have power and images have virtue, and although these values often conflict, they are combined in the cinematic medium. Shakespeare Jr makes the connection in the film but fails to understand the *ultimate* significance of the allegory: "Obviously this old man was power. Obviously this girl was virtue. They are fighting. I don't know what the issue is." Shakespeare Jr's inability to understand arises

[146] William Shakespeare, "The Sonnets and 'A Lover's Complaint'," *The Norton Shakespeare* 1962

from his confusion (like that of Learo) between words and things, as well as his mistaken belief that there *is* an ultimate – apocalyptic – meaning which he can reach by recovering the words and knowing the names of things.

It is not Pluggy who invents the image, but a character called Professor Kozintsev (Freddy Buache), who also gives it its name: “I was thinking of calling it 'image',” he says. “'Image', that's a good word,” Shakespeare Jr responds, then writes it down in his notebook. As Cordelia and Learo watch Grigori Kozintsev's adaptation in the theatre, Pluggy finally explains the image (in words) to Shakespeare Jr:

> The image is a pure creation of the soul. It cannot be born of a comparison, but of a reconciliation of two realities that come from more or less far apart. The more the connection between these two realities are distant and true, the stronger they get to be, the more they emote the power. […] An image is not strong because it is brutal or fantastic but because the association of ideas is distant and true. The result that is obtained immediately controls the truth of the association. Analogy is a major mode of creation. It is a resemblance of connections. The power or virtue of the created image depends on the nature of these connections. What is great is not the image but the emotions it provokes. If the latter is great, one obtains the image at its measure. The emotion thus provoked is true, because it is born outside of all imitation, all evocation, all resemblance.

In a Derridean gesture, Godard argues that the meaning of words and images lies in the connections between them, in the difference or “distance” between signifiers – this difference is the “No Thing” that generates the meanings of signs. Following the allegorical associations further will not lead to a fixed, *ultimate* meaning. The truth of an image does not exist in the image itself, but is produced in the soul of the viewer, through the “emotions it provokes.” This contradicts the apocalyptic view of the meaning of a work of art as fixed by a transcendental authority, instead allowing for multiple meanings generated by every individual viewer, who finds associations in her own life, experience, and context. Godard does not only appropriate Shakespeare's *King Lear* to present his own ideas; he also intends his own film to be appropriable by others.

The ethics of appropriation have been discussed by many critics, with some seeing it as always an unethical, even violent act. Godard clearly views appropriation positively, as a way to recover culture and renew art in the face of annihilation. Despite his claim to have never read Shakespeare's *King Lear*, he still manages to engage with the play in a deep, thoughtful, and respectful (though not always reverent) way. Though his film, Godard demonstrates the potential of appropriation to open up new interpretations of *King Lear* and reveal its hybrid dynamism and vitality.

However, Godard's appropriation of feminist literature, the words of Viviane Forrester and Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*, also quoted in the film, is less unambiguously positive. First, his allegorisation of Cordelia as "silence" and "virtue" turns her into a mute object for the male gaze. Second, Cordelia and Virginia (Edgar's girlfriend, named after Woolf, played by Julie Delpy) are shown performing gendered tasks like ironing and secretarial work for the men in their lives, contrasting with the creative and heroic "missions" of Pluggy and Shakespeare Jr, and ultimately reconfirming the patriarchal view of the mute and subordinate women. Third, he shows Cordelia as being sexually abused and finally murdered by her father, then turns her death into a beautiful image rather than presenting it as an atrocity. Godard's attempt at a feminist interpretation sits uneasily with these elements of the film, which show that he did not understand the complexity of Forrester's argument, even the part he appropriated for his first quote:

> Cordelia is not mute. It is not that she hasn't said anything. She has said: "Nothing." No thing. This girl's silence, which is not mute, does not lead to violence. But everything that conspires and organizes itself around her silence, that want to silence her silence, this produces violence.

This "everything" is the material system of patriarchal domination which promotes male (mis)representations of women at the expense of women's voices, which are silenced and mut*ed*, rather than mute. Godard's appropriation of Forrester's thought not only contributed to patriarchal misrepresentations of women; he also used the quote without permission or credit, which Forrester evidently saw as an act of violence. In response to this act, Forrester sued Godard for breach of copyright and won damages. Her name was also ordered to be included in the credits of the film.[147] This shows that appropriation is an ambivalent act, with the potential for respectful communication

[147] Brody 506

as well as violence, depending on the power dynamics at play between the appropriator and the appropriated.

The Responsibility of the Artist in the Nuclear Age

The distrust of words and importance placed on images in the film could be read as implying that literary (verbal) representation must be substituted by the cinematic (primarily visual) form to be relevant in the nuclear age. However, the entire film questions this idea, with Shakespeare Jr and Pluggy eventually coming to a collaboration: Shakespeare Jr recovers 99% of the play and the film is made. We are told that Pluggy sacrificed himself in Christ-like fashion in order to resurrect the art of cinema. At the end, there is a reference to the resurrection (of Christ and of culture, though, as Marc Robinson points out, these words do not appear anywhere in Scripture):

> Yes, they were Easter bells. The images were there as new. Innocent. Shy, strong. Now I understand that Pluggy's sacrifice was not in vain. Now I understand through his work St Paul's words that the image will appear in the time of the resurrection.

Godard's use of intertextual references to paintings, photographs, texts, and other films is comparable with James Joyce's heavy use of allusions in *Ulysses* (a text that is also in constant dialogue with Shakespeare, as I will show in Chapters 6 and 7). In "No Apocalypse, Not Now," Derrida identifies the works of Joyce as exemplary texts of the nuclear age due to this intertextual quality, their self-conscious dependence on the archive of literature, which is called into question by the threat of annihilation. In his film, Godard demonstrates that Derrida's ideas could also be applied to cinema. His *King Lear* can be called an exemplary *film* of the nuclear age, one that performs nuclear criticism by looking at cinema in the light of nuclear annihilation, meditating on the role of the artist in the nuclear age and contemplating the historicity, mortality, and fragility of the institution of cinema.

Surprisingly, the eschatology of Godard's film is the most optimistic out of all four films explored in this chapter. Godard uses experimental and innovative techniques to put forward a conservative (or conservationist) message, identifying the task of the critic in the nuclear age as preserving the very memory that is under threat from the ultimate nuclear event – whether we find that in the plays of Shakespeare, the films of Kozintsev, or the paintings of Goya. The film ends with a note of hope,

symbolised by a flower being plucked in reverse until it is restored, the implication being that we may be able to restore art and culture in the same way. The film contains no eschatological transcendental absolute, but suggests the existence of a meaning-generating immanent "non-absolute" located within the film and in its relationship to other films, paintings, and texts. Marc Robinson also interprets Godard's film as a plea for (and project of) conservation of culture in the face of nuclear annihilation:

> For this *Lear* moves past Shakespeare to chronicle an entire culture's demise, the waste of which Lear's tragedy is but a symptom. Sensing impoverishment in his and others' arts, Godard emerges from his characteristic cool detachment to voice a passionate plea for a reversal – for a rescue of what is about to disappear. In *Lear*, he evolves an inclusive form of conservatism, distant from one that strengthens culture only by guarding its borders. As though impatient with the easy talk of those who profess concern for cultural health, Godard does the manual labor any act of restoration entails. He transforms his film into a vessel for storage – one anxiously positioned between property and loss.[148]

Conclusion

As shown in this chapter, many critics and artists have made strong and significant connections between Shakespeare's *King Lear* and the threat of nuclear annihilation. R. A. Foakes, for example, cited the threat of nuclear annihilation to explain why *King Lear* was seen by critics and commentators as Shakespeare's greatest play – surpassing *Hamlet* – in the second half of the twentieth century. In his influential reading of *King Lear* alongside Samuel Beckett's post-apocalyptic *Endgame*, Jan Kott argued that *King Lear* was more similar to the contemporary theatre of the grotesque than tragedy due to its attitude of mockery towards the (absent) eschatological "absolute." I considered criticism of Kott's subjective, reader-focused method as potentially nihilistic, as well as the Marxist playwright Edward Bond's rewriting of Shakespeare's play to emphasise the importance of urgent action against the imminent threat of annihilation.

[148] Marc Robinson, "Resurrected Images: Godard's 'King Lear,'" *Performing Arts Journal* 11.1 (1988): 20, JSTOR <http:wwww.jstor.org/stable/3245522> 13 Sep 2011

The three film adaptations of Peter Brook, Grigori Kozintsev, and Akira Kurosawa have wildly differing attitudes to Kott's eschatological absolute and employ different cinematic techniques to present their implied theme of nuclear annihilation. Brook's metacinematic film presents a brutal Beckettian wasteland with no moral commentary. Kozintsev's naturalist film combines Christian references with humanism to present a tragic eschatology, but also ponders on the place of art in a world marked by the brutality of fascism and the threat of nuclear annihilation. Through stylised, Noh-inspired cinematic techniques, Kurosawa uses (and questions) Buddhist doctrine in his film to present an ambiguous eschatology which locates the responsibility for nuclear annihilation in humanity itself.

Godard's intensely self-referential film can be considered a form of Derridean nuclear criticism of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, an appropriation that reveals not just the hybridity of Shakespeare's text but also the historicity of both the institutions of literature and cinema. Using Chernobyl as a metonymy for near-total nuclear annihilation, the film philosophically contemplates the relationship between "art and fire" and "words and things," rejecting the value of realist mimesis in the nuclear age, arguing instead that art must be rethought and reinvented. Although it demonstrates the potential for appropriation to open up new meanings in its source text, it also brings the ambivalence of appropriation into view: Godard's attempt at a feminist interpretation of *King Lear* is weakened by his gendered allegorisation and portrayal of the female characters.

Instead of an apocalyptic view of ultimate meaning given to a work of art by a transcendental authority, Godard expresses a theory of representation – particularly of cinema – which has implications for nuclear criticism: meaning is generated by difference, or the connections between images, and remains unfixed; its truth ultimately rests in the soul of the viewer. This locates the meaning of the film in the multiplicity of interpretations by different viewers, an anti-apocalyptic view of representation that implies an eschatology without ultimate revelation. This resembles the predicament of the nuclear age only superficially: instead of a despair-provoking "no apocalypse," the eschatology of Godard's film is hopeful, demonstrating the possibility of conservation and renewal of culture in the nuclear age.

Jan Kott's powerful interpretation of *King Lear* as part of the theatre of the grotesque is still only one interpretation, as is evident from the many different ways in which artists have used the play to

reflect on the condition of the nuclear age. I believe it is the ambiguity and lack of a firm eschatological message in Shakespeare's play that allows it to be used in this way.

Kott and others have referred to the Christian apocalypse, contrasting it with the nuclear threat, suggesting that apocalypticism is important to understand why *King Lear* renders itself so appropriable to reflect on the nuclear theme. In the next chapter, I will read the two variants – Quarto and Folio – of *King Lear* alongside the Book of Revelation to try to understand the "broken apocalypse" that many critics have identified in *King Lear*.

CHAPTER 5

Apocalypse without Apocalypse in *King Lear*

The ending of *King Lear* has always been problematic for interpretation. The dramatic structure of the play, particularly the reunion of Lear and Cordelia, implies an emotionally satisfying – if not happy – resolution forthcoming. This is also suggested by the story of King Lear familiar to Shakespeare's audiences from earlier iterations of the story, which ends with Lear restored to his throne and succeeded by Cordelia. We anticipate an end to the senseless brutality suffered by the principal characters and a final revelation of the ultimate meaning of their fall into madness, abjection, and humiliation. But this resolution is abruptly withheld: at the very moment of the victory of the Lear camp, Edmund's revocation of his writ on Cordelia's life comes too late, she is killed, and Lear enters the stage with Cordelia dead in his arms. The reaction of the witnesses illustrates the nature of this scene, in which ultimate revelation has turned to senseless horror:

> KENT Is this the promised end?
>
> EDGAR Or image of that horror?
>
> ALBANY Fall and cease. (*Tragedy* V, iii, 236-238)[149]

The last word of Kent's question is a syllepsis which reveals the dual nature of the apocalypse. "The end" is the ultimate point, the limit, the *eschaton* – the termination of history, time, and the world. But Kent refers not to mere finitude, but also a promise, signalling the other meaning of "end": the *telos* or purpose of history. The hoped-for light of the apocalyptic revelation never appears, and Kent pronounces: "All's cheerless, dark, and deadly." (*Tragedy* V, iii, 263-265)

Many critics have used the term "apocalyptic" to describe *King Lear*. J. A. Wittreich argues that the play is apocalyptic precisely because its characters are denied a final resolution. His argument rests on the fact that Shakespeare chose to change the Christian setting of his main dramatic source into a prehistoric, pagan era, as indicated by the numerous references to Greek or Roman gods in the play. Wittreich argues that Shakespeare's choice to paganise the story serves an implicit apocalyptic

[149] All references to *Tragedy* in the text will be to the Folio edition of the play, from the following edition: William Shakespeare, "The Tragedy of King Lear: The Folio Text," *The Norton Shakespeare* 2337+

message: that only *Christian* characters in a Christian universe may attain "the promised end," together with the hoped-for revelation and salvation. There can be no end of history before history, no Revelation before and without Christ. Wittreich's interpretation counts on the *lack* of revelation to argue for an apocalyptic reading: an apocalypse by absence. Using a post-structuralist analysis, R. M. Christofides also attempts to reconcile the pagan and Christian references in the play, concluding that Shakespeare portrays a pre-Christian apocalypse "with a small 'a', a disaster dictated by the deified forces of the galaxy."[150] However, Christofides' implication that the play contains a transfer of teleology from the Christian God to natural forces fails to take into account the irony of the play, in which the gods, even conceived as demonic, malicious torturers, are notably absent, and nature is indifferent.

Others have called *King Lear* a "broken apocalypse" or "an apocalyptic dream of last judgement and redemption […] forever deferred."[151] It is the *lack* of apocalypse in an "apocalyptic" play that seems to confound audiences and readers of the play. But what is this paradoxical apocalypse without apocalypse in *King Lear*? What are its features, and how does it differ from apocalypse proper? Does the absent apocalypse in *King Lear* present an apocalyptic or anti-apocalyptic message, and what does that mean for our modern-day existence in the shadow of annihilation?

In this chapter, I will read the Quarto and Folio versions of the play alongside the Book of Revelation from the Geneva Bible (thought to have been the Bible used by Shakespeare, compiled and printed by followers of John Calvin). First, I will look at images of writing and text (including astrology, which reads the cosmos as a text) in both the Book of Revelation and in the two versions of Shakespeare's play, comparing their respective attitudes towards textual representation. Second, I will compare the attitude of the characters in *King Lear* with the Biblical attitude towards mystery, prophecy, and the paradoxical injunction towards revelation and concealment in the Book of Revelation. Third, I will look at the paradox of the "nothing" which generates everything and the relationship between sovereignty, truth, and language in *King Lear* with reference to Derrida's use of Georges Bataille's concepts of the general and restricted economy. My aim is to understand the paradoxical apocalypse in *King Lear*, which I hypothesise can be illuminated by Derrida's concepts in his writings on the apocalypse.

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[150] R. M. Christofides, *Shakespeare and the Apocalypse: Visions of Doom from Early Modern Tragedy to Popular Culture* (London: Continuum, 2012) 155

[151] Kermode 88; and Stephen Greenblatt, "King Lear," *The Norton Shakespeare* 2332

5.1 The Apocalypse of Texts: Astrology and Wayward Missives/Missiles

King Lear, History and Apocalypse

Shakespeare's play exists in two versions, referred to as the Quarto version, *The True Chronicle History of King Lear and His Three Daughters*, printed in 1608, and the First Folio version, *The Tragedy of King Lear*, printed in 1623. The Folio version is now seen by many critics as Shakespeare's more theatrical revision of the Quarto, which may represent an early version of the play from a manuscript of Shakespeare's before it was acted.[152] The titles of the two versions were both given by their first editors and makes the generic classification of *King Lear* problematic. Is it a "true chronicle history" or a tragedy, or both? The Quarto's title relates to Shakespeare's main dramatic source, the anonymous play called *The True Chronicle History of King Leir* (first printed in 1605) which showed Lear as a Christian king and concluded with the traditional "happy" ending: Lear's restoration to the throne.

In his classic study of the English chronicle play, Felix Schelling says that Elizabethan playwrights and audiences did not differentiate between mythical legends and histories, taking their sources at their word as true narratives of the past. He attributes the boom in history plays after the English victory over the Spanish Armada to an intent to unite the nation and create a sense of English identity stretching back to the distant past. Nicholas Grene, on the other hand, disputes this patriotic intent, pointing to later twentieth-century interpretations which read Shakespeare's history plays as "a contribution to a radical historiography reflecting the political unease at the time."[153]

If we look at *King Lear* as a history, we can read it as the (possibly apocalyptic) culmination of Shakespeare's history plays, although it refers to a distant past. The central motif of Shakespeare's histories is the cyclical image of history as the Wheel of Fortune, on which the characters rise to power and fall without cease. Kent refers to this when he is put in the stocks: "Fortune, turn thy wheel." (*Tragedy* II, ii, 158) There is also a reference to being "bound / Upon a wheel of fire" (*Tragedy* IV, vi, 40) and stretched out "upon the rack of this tough world" (*Tragedy* V, iii, 288),

[152] See G. Taylor and M. Warren, eds., *The Division of the Kingdoms: Shakespeare's Two Versions of King Lear* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983); and Stephen Urkowitz, *Shakespeare's Revision of King Lear* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981)

[153] Felix E. Schelling, *The English Chronicle Play: A Study in the Popular Historical Literature Environing Shakespeare* (New York: Macmillan, 1902), Questia <https://www.questia.com/read/2957521/the-englishchronicle-play-a-study-in-the-popular> 17 Jun 2019; and Nicholas Grene, *Shakespeare's Serial History Plays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) 7

metaphors of torture instruments which show the violence and suffering that characterises the postlapsarian condition of history.

Kent, Edgar, and Albany perform a chorus-like function at the end, commenting on the apocalypse without apocalypse they are witnessing. It ends with Albany's utterance “Fall and cease,” which recalls the “Fall” of Adam and Eve into sin, thought to be the beginning of history in Christian theology, and anachronistically referenced in the play to give Cordelia Messianic or Christ-like attributes: “Thou hast a daughter / Who redeems nature from the general curse / Which twain have brought her to.” (*Tragedy* IV, v, 195-197) Albany's line could be a prayer to the gods to end the suffering he is witnessing, to end history itself. However, to “cease” implies that there will be nothing after history: no revelation, no eternity, no paradise, simply the end.

King Lear portrays neither a pre-historic Eden, nor a post-historic New Jerusalem, nor a vision of history as anything other than meaningless brutality, repeatedly ceaselessly. Its characters are trapped by the same twists of fortune as in Shakespeare's other histories. However, there is a sense that the Wheel itself is broken: although there are survivors, and Edgar has been selected to become the new ruler of the kingdom, we cannot imagine the Wheel rising again in the future, as in the (other) history plays. Instead, *King Lear* presents another image of the wheel: the fool's metaphor of the dispossessed king as a great wheel rolling downhill, which only a fool would cling to. Something has happened to Fortune's Wheel in *King Lear*: the time is out of joint (as Hamlet might say) and the wheel is going down the wrong path into an unknown and uncertain future. The “image of horror” has thus become the possible annihilation of the future. The self-conscious anachrony of *King Lear* reflects on the nature of history, not from its end but from its midst.

Images of Writing in King Lear and Revelation

In Shakespeare's day, the word “Apocalypse” referred to the Book of Revelation written by John of Patmos, the last book of the canonical Christian Bible, which contains prophecies and visions of the events that will accompany the “promised end.” The Book of Revelation is a book about books, about itself, and about the essence of the book. Its central vision of the opening of the sealed book best illustrates the revelatory nature of apocalypse: “I saw in the right hand of him that sat upon the throne, a Book written within, and on the backside, sealed with seven seals.” (Revelation 5:1) John weeps because no one is found worthy to open the seals of the book, until Jesus Christ arrives in the

form of a lamb. What is loosed when the seals are opened is "that horror" mentioned by Edgar: disaster, destruction, and death. The first four seals release the four horsemen of the apocalypse, who blight humanity with war and famine. The fifth releases the souls of the martyrs; the sixth, an earthquake and disasters in the sun, moon, and stars. It continues thus, with another of its many images of writing and text, comparing heaven to a rolled scroll: "heaven departed away, as a scroll when it is rolled, and every mountaine and isle were moved out of their places." (Revelation 6:14)

In the Apocalypse, the universe is modelled after a book, but not simply any book: the sacred book (the sealed book) within the sacred Book (the Bible). The Bible explains the meaning of the world that humans inhabit; the world and Scripture are related intertextually. However, there is no straightforward correspondence between the world and the Book: Scripture must still be interpreted, and exegetes argue over the *correct* meaning of the word of God. The Book of Revelation in particular is difficult to interpret, and, as we have seen in Chapter 2, has been distrusted or disliked by influential theologians for its obscure symbolism. But the Book itself is anxious that it not be misinterpreted: it explains its own symbolism several times. What is important here is the *promise* made that the gap between word and meaning will disappear, and that truth will unveil itself in full presence at the apocalypse.

The Book of Revelation also describes many heavenly portents in the form of falling stars and eclipses. Maurice Blanchot also emphasises the link between disaster and the star, playing on the etymology of the word: "If disaster means being separated from the star (if it means the decline which characterizes disorientation when the link with fortune from on high is cut), then it indicates a fall beneath disastrous necessity."[154] Dis-aster is inextricably linked with astrology, the reading of human fate or fortune whose provenance comes from the stars, the signs of God. Without this link, human beings are cut off, adrift in empty time and bereft of God. In *King Lear*, several characters attempt to interpret the signs in the heavens as signalling "apocalyptic" disasters. Kent (a character with an apocalyptic temperament, who later invokes "the promised end") explains the difference between Cordelia and her sisters, in a scene that appears only in the Quarto: "It is the stars, / The stars above us, govern our conditions / Else one self mate and make could not beget / Such different

[154] Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986) 2

issues." (*History*, 17, 33-36)[155] Gloucester also believes that the heavens govern the conditions of human beings, interpreting recent eclipses as portents of imminent catastrophe.

> 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 scourg'd by the sequent effects. Love cools, friendship falls off, brothers divide. In cities, mutinies; in countries, discord; in palaces, treason; and the bond crack'd '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.[156] (*Tragedy* I, ii, 95-105)

In the Quarto version of the play, Edmund pretends to hold the same beliefs as his father, making – and parodying for the audience – the same observations as Gloucester in order to play upon his brother Edgar. Moreover, he emphasises the textuality of astrology by saying that he read these predictions in a book:

> EDMUND I am thinking, brother, of a prediction I read this other day, what should follow these eclipses.
>
> EDGAR Do you busy yourself about that?
>
> EDMUND I promise you, the effects he writ of succeed unhappily, as of unnaturalness between the child and the parent, death, dearth, dissolutions of ancient amities, divisions in state, menaces and maledictions against king and nobles, needless diffidences, banishment of friends, dissipation of cohorts, nuptial breaches, and I know not what.
>
> EDGAR How long have you been a sectary astronomical? (*History* 2, 124-134)

John F. Danby has argued that there are two vastly different conceptions of "nature" in

[155] All references to *History* in the text will be to the Quarto version of the play, from the following edition: William Shakespeare, "The History of King Lear: the Quarto Text" *The Norton Shakespeare* 2336+

[156] The last lines of the quoted section where Gloucester connects celestial events to recent events he has personally witnessed and experienced (from "the King falls" to "our graves") are absent from the Quarto version of the play.

Shakespeare's plays: the first, a conception of nature as a rigidly hierarchical chain of being, with correspondences between the levels from heaven to the kingdom to the family; the second, a conception of nature as opposed to "custom," law, or moral principle. The first view, which Gloucester typifies, is an apocalyptic one that sees space, time, and the social order as structured and pre-determined by Divine Providence. The second is the new, modern ideology of the "New Man" or the "Machiavel" in which might is right and "right" is an unnecessary fiction. Edmund (the bastard or "natural son" of Gloucester) invokes this ideology when he declares that Nature is his goddess and argues that bastards are stronger and more intelligent than "legitimate" sons, mocking the idea of the "legitimate" itself. In *King Lear*, the action *does* inevitably lead to "all ruinous disorders"; Gloucester's prediction ultimately comes true, but they are shown as proceeding from human action rather than through cosmic influence. Shakespeare thus promotes neither Edmund's nor Gloucester's philosophy, but problematises both.

After convincing Gloucester of his legitimate son's villainy, Edmund warns Edgar that his father has sentenced him to death and urges him to flee: "I have told you what I have seen and heard but faintly, nothing like the image and horror of it." (*History* 2, 149-150) "Image and horror" anticipates Edgar's words in response to Kent's apocalyptic question in the last scene: "Or image of that horror?" Both references to "image" and "horror" say something about the characters' attitudes towards representation. For Edmund, image *is* reality, appropriate to his skill at acting an inauthentic part and convincing others of the truth of his words. Edgar, by contrast, uses "image" and "horror" to express his distrust of the vision he witnesses, a *mere* representation of the horrors which accompany "the promised end." Edgar's distrust of the "image" indicates an iconomachic disposition, which considers visual representation particularly dangerous and deceitful. Here, the *true* reality would be God's promised revelation, of which the tragic scene involving Lear and the dead Cordelia is only a *false* image, or simulacrum.

Besides the images of the sealed book and the scroll of heaven in Revelation, another important image of a text reappears in the "book of life" in which the names of the saved have been written, constituting a predetermined Elect. In Revelation, we are told that God's judgement sorts the sinners from the saved on the basis of their works, but the book of life shows that He already knows who will be saved and has always known, being beyond time, the creator of that "Which is, and Which was, and Which is to come." (Revelation 1:4)

Another injunction John dutifully writes down at the end takes this form: “Seal not the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is at hand.” (Revelation 22:10) A seal is both a lock, something that closes and prevents access, and a sign, a signature, or mark that represents the sender of a message. In the two chapters that follow before the opening of the seventh seal, large numbers of the faithful are “sealed” in their foreheads so that they will ultimately be saved. Both the plagues released by the opened seals of the book and this image of sealing the foreheads of the saved are typologically prefigured in Exodus, where God spared those whose lintels were marked with lamb's blood from destruction. (Exodus 12:21-23) The seal therefore has a protective function as well.

Destinerrance: The Apocalyptic Missile/Missive

The Book of Revelation contains many references to itself, particularly of the circumstances of its writing, and ends by placing a curse on anyone who would take away from or add to the book. Furthermore, Revelation consists of a series of written messages addressed to the seven churches and dictated to John by Jesus Christ or his angels, who punctuate their messages with the command to write. Derrida emphasises the textuality of the apocalypse, defining the apocalypse as a kind of wayward message, one that sends itself – illustrating what he calls the quality of *destinerrance*:

> So John is the one who already receives some letters […] through the medium yet of a bearer who is an angel, a pure messenger. And John transmits a message already transmitted, testifies to a testimony that will be yet that of another testimony, that of Jesus: so many sendings, *envois*, so many voices, and this puts so many people on the telephone line. […] And there is no certainty that man is the exchange […] of these telephone lines or the terminal of this computer without end. No longer do we know very well who loans his voice and his tone to the other in the Apocalypse; no longer do we know very well who addresses what to whom. But by a catastrophic overturning here more necessary than ever, we can as well think this: as soon as we no longer know very well who speaks or who writes, the text becomes apocalyptic.[157]

Destinerrance is the condition of writing, something that Derrida also stresses in “Plato's Pharmacy,” where he defends writing against Plato's charge that it is inferior to speech and

[157] Jacques Derrida, “Of an Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted in Philosophy,” trans. John P. Leavy, Jr, *Semeia* 23 (1982) 86

dangerous, even parricidal: an orphan son separated from its father. Derrida does not dispute the dangerous power of writing. Like a missile, he argues, the missive too can go astray, working against the intentions of the person who sent it. Writing always disseminates itself, breeding meanings, and finding its own destinations unintended by its author. Derrida identifies the Book of Revelation as the greatest example of this "destinerrant" quality of writing, suggesting not only that the apocalypse is rhetorical and textual, but that all discourse, rhetoric, and texts are inescapably apocalyptic:

> And if the dispatches […] always refer to other dispatches without decidable destination, the destination remaining to come, then isn't this completely angelic structure, that of the Johannine Apocalypse, isn't it also the structure of every scene of writing in general? This is one of the suggestions I wanted to submit for your discussion: wouldn't the apocalyptic be a transcendental condition of all discourse, of all experience itself, of every mark or every trace?[158]

King Lear, too, is full of messages: the first letter is forged by Edmund in Edgar's hand, a forgery so convincing that Gloucester says Edgar cannot deny it. Another is the letter from Lear to Gloucester that Kent fails to deliver as he is put in the stocks by Regan and Cornwall. A flurry of letters go back and forth between Goneril and Regan, as well as between Kent and Cordelia. It is such a wayward missive that leads to Gloucester's blinding. Gloucester trusts the silence and secrecy of writing (particularly its ability to be hidden, locked, or sealed) over "dangerous" speech: "I have received a letter this night – 'tis dangerous to be spoken – I have locked the letter in my closet." (*Tragedy* III, iii, 8-10) He is aware that he might die for it, but what he suffers may be a fate worse than death: brutal torture that leads to spiritual despair. More letters are intercepted and go astray, like the one Edgar retrieves from the corpse of Oswald.

Finally, at the end of the play, Edmund's letter of reprieve for Cordelia comes too late, enabling the false apocalypse commented upon by Kent, Edgar, and Albany. Edmund confesses, trying to do "some good […] / Despite of my own nature" (*Tragedy* V, iii, 217-218), and urges them to intercept it: "Quickly send, be brief in it, to th' castle; for my writ is on the life of Lear and on Cordelia. Nay, send in time." (*Tragedy* V, iii, 218-221) The race to intercept the missile-missive is a speed race or a

[158] Derrida, "Of an Apocalyptic Tone" 87

race against time, but the revocation arrives too late to counteract the writ and fails to prevent ultimate annihilation.

5.2 Revelation and Concealment of Mystery: Poetry vs. Prophecy

The horrors described in Revelation become more and more terrifying with the opening of each subsequent seal. What happens immediately after the last and seventh seal is opened? John writes, "And when he had opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven about half an houre." (Revelation 8:1) *Nothing*. It's a stark anti-climax. It could very well be to contrast with and intensify the noise of the seven trumpets which are blown shortly afterwards. Or perhaps the silence itself has a meaning, one that is not explained. Another "silence" or curious absence appears in Revelation 10:

> And I sawe another mightie Angel come downe from heauen […] And hee had in his hande a little booke open […] And cried with a loude voyce, as when a lyon roareth: and when he had cried, seuen thunders vttered their voyces. And whe the seuen thunders had vttered their voyces, I was about to write: but I heard a voice from heauen saying vnto me, Seale vp those things which the seuen thunders haue spoken, and write them not. (Revelation 10:1-4)

Here John is narrating what he has *not* written in the book, what he has been commanded to "seale up" – that is, to conceal rather than reveal. He is then told to "sweare" that the *eschaton* will arrive, when "time shall be no more," together with the ultimate revelation when "euen the mysterie of God shalbe finished." The event marking this occurrence is precisely given as the "days of the voice of the seuenth Angel, when he shall beginne to blow the trumpet." (Revelation 10:7) This promise that the secret of God shall be revealed is then accompanied by *another* significant mystery and act of concealment:

> And the voyce which I heard from heauen, spake vnto me againe, and said, Go and take the litle booke which is open in the hand of the Angel […] So I went vnto the Angel, and saide to him, Giue me the litle booke. And he said vnto me, Take it, and eate it vp, and it shall make thy belly bitter, but it shalbe in thy mouth as sweete as honie. Then I tooke the litle booke out of ye Angels hand, and ate it vp, and it was in my mouth as

> sweete as hony: but whe I had eaten it my belly was bitter. And he said vnto me, Thou must prophecie againe among the people and nations, and tongues, and to many Kings. (Revelation 10:8-11)

This extraordinary image underscores the importance of the written text to the apocalypse, not as a signifier which points to another end, but as an end in itself. Here this ambivalent object transforms John's body so that he experiences bitterness and sweetness simultaneously: the little book is double-edged like the sword he saw coming out of Jesus' mouth. The Book of Revelation warns several times against idolatry, specifically the eating of meats sacrificed to idols (connecting food with prohibited visual representation of God), but the written word – as shown here – is food that *must* be ingested, incorporated so that the Word joins the flesh. After the first warning against idolatry in Revelation, Jesus also promises the faithful Christian a mysterious and secret new name engraved on a stone, along with the holy food (which is also secret, hidden, concealed): "To him that ouercommeth, will I giue to eate of the Manna that is hid, and will giue him a white stone, and in the stone a newe name written, which no man knoweth sauing he that receiueth it." (Revelation 2:17)

In Revelation 19, when the marriage of the Lamb to the bride of New Jerusalem is announced, John falls down to worship the representative of God, taking the Angel to be God Himself, and he is warned not to – such an act being one of idolatry. This is followed by a man on a horse with a concealed, mysterious name:

> Then he said vnto me, Write, Blessed are they which are called vnto the Lambes supper. And he said vnto me, These wordes of God are true. And I fell before his feete, to worship him: but he said vnto me, See thou doe it not: I am thy fellowe seruant, and one of thy brethren, which haue the testimonie of Iesus. Worship God: for the testimonie of Iesus is the Spirit of prophecie. And I sawe heauen open, and behold, a white horse, and he that sate vpon him, was called, Faithfull and true […] and he had a name written, that no man knewe but himselfe. (Revelation 19:9-12)

The secret of the written name is again connected with the supper of the Lamb, which Martin Procházka has pointed out invokes the "suppressed cannibalistic meaning" of the Eucharistic

ritual.[159] As mentioned in Chapter 2, the Eucharist was another highly contested form of representation in the early modern era, engendering fierce battles over whether the sign literally becomes the thing itself, or merely points to it. The Eucharistic mystery and the mystery of the little book that John ingests are revealed not to the eyes or ears, but to the mouth, which both takes in food, and puts forth words, and the belly, the innermost part, where the word becomes flesh and where the spirit resides. The *revelation* in Revelation is thus paradoxically hidden, secret, and concealed within the text, which must be incorporated into the body – in a further act of covering – rather than perceived with the senses. This act then enables John to prophesy to the multitude of people of different nations and tongues.

Subversion of Revelation and Prophecy in King Lear

The Book of Revelation uses cryptic symbols and other strategies of concealment and places great importance on the unknowable mystery of words. But it also betrays an anxiety that the symbols it describes may be misinterpreted. The allegorical meanings of certain figures and symbols are explained several times, inviting the readers to make connections with historical figures, cities, and churches. To name a prominent example, the "mystery" of the great Whore is explained to be no mystery at all, but the city of Babylon. The Second Beast or false Messiah (the Antichrist, prefigured in the Man of Sin in 2 Thessalonians 2:3-10) is explained to be a man whose identity can be deciphered through numerology. This is a message doubly encrypted, a word transformed into a number: "his number is sixe hundredth threescore and sixe."

The first instance of explication of a mystery in Revelation occurs when Jesus explains the significance of the symbols in John's initial vision:

> The misterie of the seuen starres which thou sawest in my right hand, and the seuen golden candlestickes, is this, The seuen starres are the Angels of the seuen Churches: and the seuen candlestickes which thou sawest, are the seuen Churches. (Revelation 1:20)

[159] Procházka, "Apocalypticism" 384

King Lear parodies and subverts this apocalyptic revelation of mystery, revealing that there is no meaning behind the stars, or that meaning is arbitrary, depending only on ultimately meaningless difference. As Gloucester's apocalyptic reading of the heavens is immediately mocked by Edmund, the fool and Lear mock the mystical, symbolic, or allegorical significance of the seven stars:

> FOOL The reason why the seven stars are no more than seven is a pretty reason.
>
> LEAR Because they are not eight.
>
> FOOL Yes, indeed, thou wouldst make a good fool. (*Tragedy* I, v, 31-33)

What *King Lear* reveals is that the apocalypse reveals *nothing*, that there is no revelation in Revelation. The mysteries which the characters long to understand are not pregnant with meanings (known only to God) like the mysteries in the Book of Revelation, but rather, they signify an absence of meaning. The fool's mockery of the seven stars is only one example of the way in which *King Lear* demystifies and unsettles hitherto unshakable truths; belief in unshakable, absolute truth may be said to be the essence of the apocalypse. The fool also has a paradoxical conception of time, where past, present, and future can be turned on their heads, which unsettles the apocalyptic temporal consciousness. His prophecy, a significant addition in the Folio, is addressed to an audience that is for him in the far future:

> I'll speak a
> prophecy ere I go:
> When priests are more in word than matter;
> When brewers mar their malt with water;
> When nobles are their tailors' tutors,
> No heretics burned, but wenches' suitors,
> Then shall the realm of Albion
> Come to great confusion.
> When every case in law is right;
> No squire in debt nor no poor knight;
> When slanders do not live in tongues,
> Nor cutpurses come not to throngs;
> When usurers tell their gold i'th' field,

> And bawds and whores do churches build:
> Then comes the time, who lives to see't,
> That going shall be used with feet.
> This prophecy Merlin shall make; for I live before his time. (*Tragedy* III, ii, 78-94)

This is a cryptic and confounding addition, if the Folio text does indeed represent Shakespeare's revision of the play. The structure of the prophecy takes the form of a riddle, but its message is inconsistent. The first lines point to typical corruption: presumably "priests are more in word than matter" and "brewers mar their malt with water" are common complaints in any day. It also makes an opposition between word and matter, or sign and true meaning, form and content, betraying a distrust of representation. The "matter" or the content of words is equivalent to liquor, marred or mutilated by an excess of words, empty signifiers, or water which dilutes the strength of liquor. The third line inverts social hierarchies, and the fourth line equates "heretics" with "wenches' suitors," criticising the extreme punishment meted out to those he implies are ordinary men – implying that heresy is no crime. "[E]very case in law is right" anticipates Lear's ultimate recognition of the law as false and hypocritical: the justicer and thief being equal, or indistinguishable, after which he pardons all the accused (despite lacking the sovereign power to enforce the pardon due to his fall from power).

The rest of the prophecy subverts a utopian vision of the future, improbably foreseeing the end of common vices through an ironic reversal of expected behaviour from slanderers, cutpurses, usurers, bawds, and whores. One implication of the prophecy seems to be that things will not substantially change in the future, for every age is characterised by the same problems and vices and thus, we cannot expect true change in human nature. It is a cyclical conception of history, though only a few may "live to see't." The last line ("This prophecy shall Merlin make; for I live before his time") is particularly remarkable for its view of time. The "history" of King Lear was narrated in one of Shakespeare's main sources, Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain*. In it, the reign of Lear is described as pre-dating the reign of the legendary King Arthur, whose reign was prophesied by Merlin. Merlin's prophecies are described in detail in Monmouth's book. Like those of the Book of Revelation, Merlin's prophecies are highly symbolic (representing people and nations as dragons, boars, wolves, worms, and other animals), but they explain their symbolism to a greater extent than Revelation.

At this moment in the play, self-conscious anachrony is at its most evident: the fool is aware of the future Merlin's existence. Prophesying a prophecy that will be made in the future, the fool's is a meta-prophecy, both a parody of the riddling nature of the prophecies described in Monmouth's book (and elsewhere) and a comment on the *idea* of prophecy itself. Shakespeare writes from the perspective of God, creator of his world, from a perspective outside the time of the play – he knows that history will continue, with reign after reign, war after war, with the continued turning of the Wheel of Fortune. He knows that the reign of Lear occurs in pre-history rather than a utopia (or apocalypse) at the end of history. In a meta-theatrical gesture, the fool's prophecy draws the audience's attention to the real course of history, the "outside" of the play. The expectation that the "promised end" will arrive imminently is revealed to be a false hope; the Fool's prophecy therefore also subverts the conditions of Messianic time.

Overturning the Sacred Book as the Model of the World

The fool *speaks* his meta-prophecy while John is commanded to write it down and disseminate it through messages sent to the seven churches. As I showed in Chapter 3, Plato preferred speech as the form of representation closest to truth, dismissing writing as a dangerous imitation, while the Reformation iconomachs preferred the written word to images. However, they both sought to fix the meaning of words by reference to an ultimate authority, a transcendental signified. I also explored arguments that the most radical Reformation iconomachs rejected idolatry in favour of logolatry, or worship of the written word, locating the ultimate authority in the sacred text and striving for a completely literal interpretation of the words of God. The world, in their view, was subordinated to the book.

As mentioned in Chapter 2 and reiterated in this one, the Book of Revelation also structures itself as a fulfilment of the promise made in Exodus: the plagues in Revelation are connected to the plagues in Exodus, and the faithful are protected from both plagues by being marked or "sealed" by God. Revelation, however, breaks with this cyclical repetition and deferral of meaning through the promise of the *ultimate* revelation of God's mystery, when the word and the reality become one. It also abolishes the Mosaic law given by God in Exodus, transferring sovereignty from the Old Testament God to Jesus Christ. In his essay "Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book," which looks at the importance of writing to Jewish tradition, Derrida points out that the tables on which the law was written were *already* broken in Exodus, after which God no longer spoke to humanity,

withdrawing into silence and hiddenness. The mystery or silence of God has its origin in these broken tables; Derrida argues that this silence is also the origin of poetry, the autonomous writing of human beings. Contrasting religious prophecy with poetry, Derrida calls poetry analogous to an idol: "Poetry is to prophecy what the idol is to truth."[160]

As a prophecy of the future to come, of history and post-history, the Book of Revelation speaks with a claim on absolute truth. Poetry, on the other hand, does not claim truth; it is aware of its form, drawing attention to its fiction and questioning its own meaning and condition of possibility. For this reason, for Derrida, the interpretation of poetry is incommensurable with the exegesis of Scripture; the difference between the two is that poets *question* while religious authorities *declare* certain truth. However, the word of God too is "duplicitous" and questionable: throughout the Bible, God speaks in cryptic riddles, hiding or veiling Himself in written texts where the meaning is unfixed and undecidable. The Book of Revelation, the very text which promises God's ultimate presence, reveals only His absence. In this essay, too, Derrida stresses that this lost presence or absence is a condition of all texts: writing is characterised by separation from its origin and lack of decidable destination.

Texts wander through the desert, never reaching an eschatological endpoint of full presence: "Writing is displaced on the broken line between lost and promised speech."[161] All representation is characterised by absence (of that which is represented), but writing even more than speech because of its separation from its author: "For in its representation of itself the subject is shattered and opened. Writing is itself written, but also ruined, made into an abyss, in its own representation."[162]

As explored in Chapter 2, the intense debates over interpretation of Revelation in the medieval and early modern era centred around the two dimensions that Derrida identifies in writing: the literal and the allegorical. Literal millenarianists saw Revelation as a historical prophecy, whereas other exegetes favoured more abstract allegory. Auerbach argued that the two modes were combined in

[160] Jacques Derrida, "Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book," *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 2001) 81. In Exodus, Moses breaks the stone tables of God's commandments after seeing his people worshipping a calf made of gold: "So Moses returned and went downe from the mountaine with the two Tables of the Testimonie in his hande: the Tables were written on both their sides, euen on the one side and on the other were they written. And these Tables were the worke of God, and this writing was the writing of God grauen in the Tables. [. . .] Nowe, as soone as he came neere vnto the hoste, he sawe the calfe and the dancing: so Moses wrath waxed hote, and he cast the Tables out of his handes, and brake them in pieces beneath the mountaine." (Exodus 32:15-19)
[161] Derrida, "Edmond Jabès" 68
[162] Derrida, "Edmond Jabès" 79

figural interpretation. For Derrida, meaning is created in the *difference* between literality and allegory: “Between the too warm flesh of the literal event and the cold skin of the concept runs meaning.” Difference, nothingness, and absence (including the spaces between the texts and between the signifiers connected by metaphor) give meaning to the text: “Metaphor, or the animality of the letter, is the primary and infinite equivocality of the signifier as Life.”[163] In Derrida's view, the apocalypse, or final revelation of presence, would not *fix* meaning, but rather, put an end to the process of generating metaphoric meanings (without revelation).

In the apocalyptic or Messianic consciousness, the sacred book is the model of the world: “To be is to-be-in-the-book, even if Being is not the created nature often called the Book of God during the Middle Ages. […] But the book can only be threatened by nothing, non-Being, nonmeaning.” Even in a play like *King Lear*, ostensibly set in a pre-Christian world, the principal characters operate under this assumption, trying to read the events they witness as signs that point to another meaning. They try to decipher the world through astrology, with what Derrida calls “the unpenetrated certainty that Being is a Grammar; and that the world is in all its parts a cryptogram to be constituted or reconstituted through poetic inscription or deciphering.”[164]

In his madness, Lear ultimately encounters the essential illegibility of the world (which the fool already knows): the handy-dandy, the topsy-turvy, the nonsensical and absurd paradoxes of reality. Lear asks, “Who is it that can tell me who I am?” and the fool responds, “Lear's shadow.” (*Tragedy* I, iv, 195-196) In the Quarto, “Lear's shadow?” is a question spoken by Lear himself. (*History* 4, 210) In either case, it is the Other, the absence, that he must appeal to in order to know himself. The shadow, however, is mute and does not answer his questions.

The other riddles spoken by the fool have the same answer: Lear is nothing. This is reinforced by the ending, where Lear fails to receive any answers to his questions, such as “Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life, / And thou no breath at all?” (*Tragedy* V, iii, 281-282) *King Lear* is an endless question with no answers. It cannot be decrypted or deciphered because its world is outside the Book, outside the world seen as the book of God, outside the apocalyptic consciousness – its “prophecies” are made through speech, not writing. The Book of Revelation is cryptic and needs to conceal its meaning precisely to demonstrate the faith in the sacred book as the model of the world.

[163] Derrida, “Edmond Jabès” 88
[164] Derrida, “Edmond Jabès” 94

But the fool's cryptic prophecy in *King Lear* has no meaning, except in its mockery of prophecy itself. There is no apocalypse, no mystery to be revealed in *King Lear*, only the hollow image of an apocalypse.

In "Edmond Jabès," Derrida asks whether it is possible to radically do away with the sacred book as the model of the world, replacing it with a world or Being conceived as illegible (though not absurd or nonsensical):

> But what if the Book was only, in all senses of the word, an *epoch* of Being […]? If the form of the book was no longer to be the model of meaning? If Being was radically outside the book, outside its letter? […] If the Being of the world, its presence and the meaning of its Being, revealed itself only in illegibility, in a radical illegibility which would not be the accomplice of a lost or sought after legibility, of a page not yet cut from some divine encyclopedia? […] The radical illegibility of which we are speaking is not irrationality, is not despair provoking non-sense, is not everything within the domains of the incomprehensible and the illogical that is anguishing. […] Original illegibility is not simply a moment interior to the book, to reason or to logos; nor is it any more their opposite, having no relationship of symmetry to them, being incommensurable with them. Prior to the book (in the nonchronological sense), original illegibility is therefore the very possibility of the book and, within it, of the ulterior and eventual opposition of "rationalism" and "irrationalism." The Being that is announced within the illegible is beyond these categories, beyond, as it writes itself, its own name.[165]

The false apocalypse, the lack of a final answer to the multitude of questions it raises, and the absence of a transcendental absolute in *King Lear* certainly provokes despair in many audiences and readers. Jan Kott and Peter Brook both saw it as grotesque and absurd, portraying an eschatology more reminiscent of the nuclear age than of Christian apocalypticism. *King Lear* both is and is not literature: it was written for theatrical performance, where "live" actors would represent the characters with their bodies, their speech, and their voices. But it responded to a culture in which the sacred book was so important that it was a matter of life and death; for the iconoclasts, no other representations could be admitted – not even the secular theatre. Whether as theatre or literature,

[165] Derrida, "Edmond Jabès" 94-95

however, *King Lear* is aware of its own status as an idol, exemplifying the constant questioning that Derrida identified in poetry (as opposed to prophecy), and steadfastly refuses to provide the final revelation of truth.

5.3 The Generative Nothing and the Economy of Silence

In the first scene, Lear tries to force his daughters to speak, and Cordelia responds with "Nothing." Lear replies that "Nothing will come of nothing." Brian Vickers calls Lear's tautology an echo of the "most famous of all paradoxes" in Christian theology, where God is supposed to have created everything out of nothing (*omnia ex nihilo*), as well as classical philosophy, in which *nihil ex nihilo* is an example of an absurdity or impossibility. He shows how apparently absurd paradoxes were treated seriously in many early modern texts, the union of contradictions seen as revealing the essence of the Christian doctrine.[166]

In the Quarto version, Cordelia says "nothing" just once:

> LEAR What can you say to win a third more opulent than your sisters?
>
> CORDELIA Nothing, my lord?
>
> LEAR How? Nothing can come of nothing. Speak again.
>
> CORDELIA Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave my heart into my mouth. (*History* 1, 76-81)

But in the Folio, Shakespeare adds more nothings:

> LEAR [W]hat can you say to draw
> A third more opulent than your sisters? Speak.
>
> CORDELIA Nothing, my lord.
>
> LEAR *Nothing?*
>
> CORDELIA *Nothing.*

[166] Brian Vickers, '"King Lear" and Renaissance Paradoxes,' *The Modern Language Review* 63.2 (Apr. 1968): 305-314, JSTOR <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3723241 > 03 Aug 2016

> LEAR Nothing can come of nothing. Speak again.
>
> CORDELIA Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave my heart into my mouth. (*Tragedy* I, i, 83-90, emphasis mine)

Several critics have drawn attention to the bawdy use of the word "nothing" in Elizabethan slang to signify female genitals, associating women's bodies with absence. The play even opens with a bawdy, misogynistic reference in the first scene: Gloucester asks Kent if he "smells a fault" and puns on the double meaning of conception as a reference to understanding and to the reproductive capacity of the female body. Peter L. Rudnytsky's psychoanalytic reading of the "dread of the vagina" in *King Lear* centres around Edgar's identification of the "dark and vicious place" from which Edmund was born as the ultimate cause of Gloucester's blinding.[167] The dread of the female body and its fearful "nothing" culminates in Lear's tirade against the "sulphurous pit." The sexualised misogyny of this scene was brought viscerally to the fore in a November 2012 stage production of *King Lear*, where Jonathan Pryce's Lear mimes a sexual act with his fingers during this scene. Gloucester asks to kiss his hand, and Lear wipes his fingers on his robe, giving a whole new meaning to his response: "Let me wipe it first; it smells of mortality." (*Tragedy* IV, v, 122-126)

Terry Eagleton disputes the tendency to over-interpret every reference to "nothing" as a reference to the vagina, using the above quote as his example: Cordelia is not saying "female genitals, my lord" in response to Lear's question or command.[168] However, the context of the male characters' hatred and fear of the female body, exemplified in their rhetorical attempts to turn threatening female body parts into absences or abysses, lends a significance to all words spoken by female characters. Dympna Callaghan points out that there are no women in Shakespeare: the "female" characters were written by a man, and at the time were played by boys, with real women excluded from the stage. Cordelia and the other female characters are not representations of women, but of male fear and male desire. However, according to Callaghan and other feminist critics, their absence and silence have the capacity to speak; Cordelia's silence is particularly loud – even explosive.

Miriam Jacobson attempts to read this silence by exploring the association of the "cipher" (from the Arabic word for zero, a relatively new mathematical concept and symbol in Shakespeare's time)

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[167] Peter L. Rudnytsky, '"The Darke and Vicious Place": The Dread of the Vagina in "King Lear,"' *Modern Philology* 96.3 (Feb. 1999): 291-311, JSTOR <http://www.jstor.org/stable/439219>, 25 May 2011

[168] Terry Eagleton, *William Shakespeare* (New York: Blackwell, 1986) 107

with women's speech, silence and writing in *The Rape of Lucrece*. She points out that the cipher signifies not only nothing, but a nothing with a generative capacity: adding a zero to the end of a number multiplies it by ten, and every new zero increases the quantity exponentially. The generative nothing of the cipher is not simply an absence but one which *brings about* presence, quantity, and meaning. The cipher also emphasises the quality of writing as cryptic concealment of information, through the notion of "de-ciphering" a text. Jacobson argues that Lucrece's body becomes a printed text marked by the numerous instances of "O" in the poem, which reveal the truth of her experience of rape despite her rapist's attempt to silence her. In Jacobson's analysis, the silence and absence of the female characters can speak, write, and be read.[169]

Cordelia, rather than being forced into silence, is forced to speak. But Cordelia, demonstrating a Puritan streak, views rhetoric as inherently deceitful and plain speech as more honest. But even plain speech does not suffice to represent love, which is unrepresentable. She refuses to use that "glib and oily art" after listening to her sisters use rhetorically florid, convincing, but ultimately empty words to flatter their father. Equating rhetoric with lies, and silence with truth, Cordelia chooses silence. But as Viviane Forrester points out, Cordelia does not remain mute. She doesn't say nothing; she says "nothing" – a very different thing altogether. The paradox of Cordelia's "nothing" is even more interesting than Lear's famous paradox – *her* "nothing" being a speech which expresses silence, a word signifying absence which nevertheless announces her presence.

The play centres around this question of the (im)possibility of representing inner truth through words. As we saw in the second section in the chapter, there is an apocalyptic tension in the play between the desire to reveal and the desire to conceal the mystery or secret of truth. According to Derrida, words, rather than pointing directly to a meaning, point to other words in an endless process of *différance* (another generative nothing, which Derrida argues creates meaning in text). The apocalypse promises to reveal the ultimate truth of Scripture, affixing the meaning of the entire process. Recalling the bawdy use of "nothing" in the Elizabethan era, Derrida makes a connection between the apocalypse, speech, and the concealed and secret pudenda:

> *Apokalupto* – no doubt was a good word, a witticism for [the Hebrew] *gala.*

[169] Miriam Jacobson, "The Elizabethan Cipher in Shakespeare's *Lucrece*," *Studies in Philology* 107.3, Summer 2010: 336-359, Project Muse <https://doi.org/10.1353/sip.0.0056> 15 Oct 2019

> *Apokalupto* – I disclose, I uncover, I unveil, I reveal the thing that can be a part of the body, the head or the eyes, a secret part, the genitals or whatever might be hidden, a secret, the thing to be dissembled, a thing that does not show itself or say itself, that perhaps signifies itself but cannot or must not first be handed over to its self-evidence. *Apokekalummenoi logoi* are indecent remarks. So it is a matter of the secret and the *pudenda*.[170]

Cordelia finds the unveiling of her inner truth as obscene as the uncovering of genitals; it is something which cannot be revealed in words. Her silence is a sovereign act which is unthinkable in a woman in the patriarchal world of the play. Secrecy and concealment are the privileges of men, the preserve of those in power. Commentators often describe the first scene as Lear dividing the kingdom among his three daughters, but he actually gives the portions to his sons-in-law – the female characters *are* property to be exchanged among men. After being disowned, Lear describes how Cordelia's "price is fallen" and describes her as "dowered by truth," something which Lear considers worthless. However, the same process soon happens to Lear as well. The Fool constantly reminds Lear that without his power, *he* is nothing:

> Now thou art an O without a figure. I am better than thou art, now; I am a fool, thou art nothing. (*Tragedy* I, iv, 157-158)

With the loss of his power, Lear has become less than a man: a mere shadow, two crowns of an egg with nothing in the middle, or a "shelled peascod." Lear's identity vanishes, along with his power, like an illusion: it is only later that he would realise that it was indeed an illusion. The "nothing" that the fool refers to is an O unbounded by the figure of the circle and a *non*-generative absence, unlike the cipher:

> FOOL Can you make no use of nothing, nuncle?
>
> LEAR Why, no, boy; nothing can be made of nothing. (*Tragedy* I, iv, 116-118)

[170] Derrida, "Of an Apocalyptic Tone" 64

Sovereign Silence in the General Economy of Discourse

The fool consistently connects the question of identity and "nothing" to sovereignty, or absolute power. Lear dwells on the paradoxes of "nothing" and "all" in his journey from tyrannical king with absolute power to a dispossessed madman, who is nevertheless "every inch a king." This paradox of sovereignty in *King Lear* can be understood through the idea of the restricted and general economy, a concept Derrida borrows from Georges Bataille. The *restricted* economy is one characterised by thrift, exchange, calculation, recycling, and reuse: putting resources to work to attain profit. The *general* economy, on the other hand, is characterised by an excess of resources and an expenditure without reserve. Both the sacrifice and the free gift belong to the general economy.

In his essay on the restricted and general economy, Derrida considers Hegel's dialectic of the master and the slave, which he says belongs to the restricted economy, putting logical oppositions to work to attain a profit – his method of sublimation (*Aufhebung*) attempts to conserve and negate opposing concepts at the same time. Hegelian mastery depends upon the recognition of the slave, but the slave can become the master through work; each is dependent on the other. Derrida points out that Bataille's "sovereignty" belongs to the general economy, going beyond Hegelian dialectic, beyond power and powerlessness, to true independence. Derrida focuses on the relation of *discourse* to sovereignty, maintaining that all significative discourse is "servile," and concludes that only silence is "sovereign." His description of Bataille's "sovereign silence" describes the paradoxical relationship of silence and speech in Cordelia's "Nothing":

> We must find a speech which maintains silence. Necessity of the impossible: to say in language—the language of servility—that which is not servile. "That which is not servile is unspeakable. […] The idea of silence (which is the inaccessible) is disarming! I cannot speak of an absence of meaning, except by giving it a meaning it does not have. Silence is broken because I have spoken." […] If the word *silence* "among all words," is "the most perverse or the most poetic," it is because in pretending to silence meaning, it *says* nonmeaning, it slides and it erases itself, does not maintain itself, silences *itself*, not as silence, but as speech. This sliding simultaneously betrays discourse and nondiscourse. It can be imposed upon us, but sovereignty can also play upon it in order rigorously to betray the meaning within meaning, the discourse within discourse. "We

> must find," Bataille explains to us, in choosing "*silence*" as "an example of a sliding word," "words" and "objects" which "make us slide" […] Toward what?
>
> Toward other words, other objects, of course, which announce sovereignty.[171]

Derrida says that this concept of sovereignty – unlike Hegelian mastery – "uncovers the limit of discourse" and "the beyond of absolute knowledge." It can only be approached through sovereign moments such as laughter and in poetic, ecstatic speech (which is speech that renounces signification, rather than a different type of significative discourse):

> The poetic or the ecstatic is that *in every discourse* which can open itself up to the absolute loss of its sense, to the (non-)base of the sacred, of nonmeaning, of unknowledge or of play, to the swoon from which it is reawakened by a throw of the dice. What is poetic in sovereignty is announced in "the moment when poetry renounces *theme* and meaning."[172]

Like his description of the reserve of non-meaning from which Plato takes his *pharmakon*, Derrida argues that the restricted economy of meaning exists in the much wider general economy of non-meaning, in which meaning is sacrificed or wasted, undergoing a process of expenditure without reserve.

Lear's absolute power at the beginning of the play resembles Hegel's mastery more than Bataille's understanding of sovereignty. The ruse is only maintained up to the point when Lear foolishly attempts to separate the "name" of the king from his responsibilities and the exercise of power, which almost immediately leads to his absolute *loss* of power and later, his realisation of the servile, false condition of his former kingship:

> They flattered me like a dog, and told me I had white hairs in my beard ere the black ones were there. (*Tragedy* IV, v, 95-97)

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[171] Jacques Derrida, "From Restricted to General Economy: a Hegelianism Without Reserve," *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 2001) 317-350

[172] Derrida, "From Restricted" 330

> Thou hast seen a farmer's dog bark at a beggar? […] An the creature run from the cur, there thou mightst behold the great image of authority. A dog's obeyed in office. (*Tragedy* IV, v, 145-149)

Lear's speech is characterised by oaths, curses, apostrophes to inanimate things, and invocations of the authority of the gods. He fully believes in the divine power of his words, but later, he comes to realise the limits of discourse:

> When the rain came to wet me once, and the wind would not peace at my bidding, there I found 'em, there I smelt 'em out. Go to, they are not men o' their words. They told me I was everything; 'tis a lie, I am not ague-proof. (*Tragedy* IV, v, 97-102)

At the beginning, he *is* a man of his words, but in that he is as deluded, if not more, than those who flatter, lie, and forswear themselves. For the latter only deceive others, whereas he deceives himself.

Lear finds Goneril's and Regan's insistence that he reduce his train of one hundred knights to be greatly insulting. As Kozintsev points out, the significance of this train is not clear: they are neither guards nor servants, since none of them step up to defend Lear while he is being insulted, nor do they serve him in his time of need. The moment he loses his power, they effectively disappear, following by instinct or self-interest the Fool's dictum that one must let go of a great wheel rolling downhill. Kozintsev concludes that the function of these men is to be "the halo of power." By an act of mathematical magic, it is this "addition" of one hundred men which makes *one* king; without them, Lear is not even a man – he is nothing.[173]

Regan and Goneril only understand the restricted economy of need and utility, which leaves no room for sacred value (created by the sacrifice of superfluous excess). When Lear is humiliated by his daughters, he points out that he gave them "all." But Lear and Cordelia also try to calculate the incalculable through the logic of the restricted economy, Lear when he calculates that Goneril has twice Regan's love since she will allow him twice as many knights, and Cordelia, when she tells Lear that her husband will take half her love when she gets married. However, Lear appeals to the *general* economy of excess in response to Regan's question about the necessity of Lear's knights,

[173] Kozintsev 35

exhorting her to “reason not the need.” Pointing out her “gorgeous” clothing as evidence, he says that it is superfluous excess that gives value to human life, or else “man's life is cheap as beast's.” (*Tragedy* II, ii, 430-433) Edgar then demonstrates and modifies Lear's argument when he sinks to the position of a creature even baser than the “basest beggar,” making visible to the other characters what becomes of human life when stripped of all superfluity. The vision of Edgar as the naked, wretched Poor Tom makes Gloucester “think a man a worm” but brings about Lear's recognition of *true* sovereignty, or complete independence:

> 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 a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art. (*Tragedy* III, iv, 93-97)

This prompts Lear immediately to throw off his garments in order to reach the “unaccommodated” man beneath: “Off, off, you lendings! Come, unbutton here.” (*Tragedy* III, iv, 97-98) Lear expresses this desire several times during the course of the play, and it is always accompanied by a realisation of the injustice and hypocrisy that accompanies the exercise of power, where “accommodated” men can hide their offences with their rich garments, while the deprived are punished for their very deprivation:

> Through tattered clothes small vices do appear;
> Robes and furred gowns hide all. Plate sin with gold,
> And the strong lance of justice hurtless breaks;
> Arm it in rags, a pygmy's straw does pierce it.
> None does offend, none, I say, none. I'll able 'em.
> Take that of me, my friend, who have the power
> To seal the accuser's lips. (*Tragedy* IV, v, 154-160)

It is only when he has been reduced to an almost animal existence and witnesses this deprivation in others that Lear becomes “every inch a king.” It is not a loss but a *gain* of sovereignty that Lear experiences from his fall (or ascent) from absolute power to absolute powerlessness. Unlike mastery, Derrida says, “sovereignty *does not govern itself*. And does not govern in general: it

governs neither others, nor things, nor discourses in order to produce meaning."[174] In this view, Poor Tom is the true image of sovereignty, since nothing is subordinate to him. Gloucester makes the same paradoxical connections after losing his eyes, turning the conventional wisdom about accommodation and deprivation on its head:

> I have no way, and therefore want no eyes.
> I stumbled when I saw. Full oft 'tis seen
> Our means secure us, and our mere defects
> Prove our commodities. (*Tragedy* IV, i, 18-21)

The fool speaks by "[folding] discourse into strange shapes," as Derrida calls the speech of sovereignty.[175] The fool is permitted to speak because he is a fool. He is regarded as too foolish to speak sense, and thus, can speak the truth "fictionally," through paradoxes, cryptic analogies, puns, and jokes. His speech often seems like nonsense setting itself against self-evident common sense, inverting all commonly accepted values. He also reveals the truth about truth, that truth is always threatened by violence and corrupted by power: "Truth's a dog must to kennel; he must be whipped out, when Lady the brach may stand by the fire and stink." (*Tragedy* I, iv, 95-96)

The fool's frank humour often compounds the cruelty of Lear's daughters, but can be seen as a kindness, revealing the harsh truth to Lear and prompting him to open his eyes to reality. One of the cruellest of the fool's jokes anticipates Goneril's assessment of old age, which is included only in the Quarto:

> FOOL [T]hou madest thy daughters thy mother; for […] thou gavest them the rod, and put'st down thine own breeches. (*Tragedy* I, iv, 138-140)

> GONERIL Idle old man, that still would manage those authorities that he hath given away! Now, by my life, old fools are babes again, and must be used with checks as flatteries, when they are seen abused. (*History* 3, 19-20)

[174] Derrida, "From Restricted" 334
[175] Derrida, "From Restricted" 319

Paradox is the mode of Bataille's sovereignty, which exists outside Hegelian logical oppositions and overturns them. The image of the sovereign operation can be seen in *King Lear* in the game of handy-dandy, where power and powerlessness, mastery and servility, justice and criminality, fool and wise man, and madman and philosopher "change places" and become indistinguishable from one another. By then, both the opposition between laughter and tears and the one between madness and sanity have been overturned, presenting a sovereign reason-in-madness that exposes reason *as* madness.

Sovereign Shame and the Apocalypse of Speech

Sovereignty is mentioned twice in the play, both only appearing in the Quarto version of the play: first, by Lear who sees sovereignty as something closer to Hegelian mastery, or the absolute power of a tyrant, and allied with knowledge and reason. But he is already starting to question the truth of his convictions:

> Who is it that can tell me who I am?
> Lear's shadow? I would learn that, for, by the marks
> Of sovereignty, knowledge, and reason,
> I should be false persuaded I had daughters. (*History* 4, 209-212)

Sovereignty also appears (in adjectival form) when Kent explains why Lear is avoiding seeing Cordelia:

> A sovereign shame so elbows him; his own unkindness,
> That stripped her from his benediction, turned her
> To foreign casualties, gave her dear rights
> To his dog-hearted daughters, these things sting
> His mind so venomously, that burning shame
> Detains him from Cordelia. (*History* 17, 43-48)

It is the condition of absolute humility and shame caused by his recognition of his tyrannical behaviour that causes Lear to understand sovereignty. It is no longer to be found within the restricted economy of reason, but outside reason, in the general economy of madness (which,

according to Derrida, enables reason). William F. Zak emphasises this feature of "sovereign shame," an ironic humiliation suffered by several of the "good" characters which paradoxically reveals their true heroism and greatness. Zak argues that this saves the play from the grotesque absurdity often attributed to it. Ewan Fernie points out that the word "sovereign" is also a syllepsis, combining absolute power with a "pharmacological resonance as in 'sovereign remedy'" which Shakespeare also uses elsewhere. Fernie contends that the pharmacological meaning of sovereignty combined with "burning shame" implies a spiritual purification, or purging of Lear's sins by fire. Both these readings of "sovereign shame" point to an apocalyptic hope of redemption in the play.[176]

However, the play does not end there. It ends on a note of apocalyptic horror, felt by the surviving characters at the sight of the dead Cordelia in Lear's arms. Words are inadequate as a response to Cordelia's death, but so too is silence. Though at first Lear is only able to utter non-human, non-significative "howls," he also manages to condemn the audience for their lack of response. For Lear, the only human response would be unimaginably violent, destroying itself as well as God: "Howl, howl, howl, howl! O, you are men of stones. / Had I your tongues and eyes, I'd use them so / That heaven's vault should crack." (*Tragedy* V, iii, 231-233) The play then ends with a banal reminder of the inadequacy of speech: "The weight of this sad time we must obey; / Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say." (*Tragedy* V, iii, 298-299) Balancing the thin line between tragedy and farce, the play has shown through all the preceding acts that it is *impossible* to "speak what we feel." Whereas Hamlet names the rest "silence" at the moment of his death, *King Lear* cannot even name (and so pervert) the sovereign silence it calls for.

Conclusion

As noted by many critics, *King Lear* is an "apocalyptic" play that evokes imagery from the Book of Revelation and has an evident eschatological theme. However, the play also rejects or subverts the apocalyptic mentality, presenting a world in which the gods are absent. The glimmers of hope and redemption in the play, such as the scene where the servants help Gloucester after his blinding, are excised in the Folio version. Combined with the deletions from the Quarto, important additions to the Folio such as the fool's prophecy serve to mock and demystify important elements of the

[176] William F. Zak, *Sovereign Shame: A Study of King Lear* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1984); and Ewan Fernie, *Shame in Shakespeare* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002) 201

apocalypse. The Folio version of the play ultimately presents a much darker, more bleak and sardonic vision than that of the Quarto. If the Folio is indeed Shakespeare's own revision, then the changes made from the Quarto arguably demonstrate his intent to reinforce the *anti*-apocalyptic message of the play.

Instead of "the promised end" with final revelation of God's truth, *King Lear* presents something that even Edgar (who believes in providence) calls a mere "*image* of that horror." This is an apocalypse *without* revelation, or an apocalypse without apocalypse, a term that better describes the end of the world through nuclear annihilation or the climate crisis than the "promised end" of the Book of Revelation. Jan Kott identified this as the "grotesque" eschatology of the play, an ambiguous non-apocalypse driving many critics, adapters, and appropriators to use *King Lear* to respond to annihilation in the modern day, as I explored in Chapter 4.

In "No Apocalypse, Not Now," Derrida talks about the fiction of nuclear annihilation (which can only be spoken of, and never experienced in reality) as an apocalypse without revelation of truth. But Derrida does not simply *contrast* the Christian apocalypse with the "no apocalypse" of nuclear annihilation, arguing that they are two incommensurate fictions. In the first section of this chapter, I examined Derrida's concept of *destinerrance*, the wayward quality of written texts and messages, which Derrida argues is the essence of John's Apocalypse – thus, the apocalypse is a fiction which structures literature itself. All literature would then be apocalyptic. Taking this argument to its radical conclusion, Derrida argues that there is no such thing as an apocalypse, no revelation of ultimate truth, *even* in the Book of Revelation. The apocalypse without revelation is not foreign to John's Apocalypse. It is, in fact, the apocalypse (the end, or finitude) *of* the apocalypse:

> But then what is someone doing who tells you: I tell you this, I have come to tell you this, there is not, there never has been, there never will be an apocalypse, the apocalypse deceives, disappoints? There is the apocalypse *without* apocalypse. The word *sans, without,* I mention here in Blanchot's so necessary syntax, who often says X without X. The *without*, the *sans* marks an internal and external catastrophe of the apocalypse, an overturning of sense […] that does not merge with the catastrophe announced or described in the apocalyptic writings without however being foreign to

> them. Here the catastrophe would perhaps be *of* the apocalypse itself, its *pli* and its end, a closure without end, an end without end.[177]

Paradoxically, then, *even* the Apocalypse is a "no apocalypse." *King Lear* could then be said to be apocalyptic precisely for its rejection and mockery of apocalypticism. It presents the paradox inherent in apocalypticism: it simultaneously reveals and conceals, and what it reveals is nothing.

As I concluded in my examination of apocalypse and representation in Chapter 3, apocalypticism is not merely a historical precedent for modern-day discourses of annihilation. Rather than presenting a revelation of truth, what the Book of Revelation really presents is annihilation, or the destruction of the enemies of Christianity to demonstrate the absolute sovereignty of God. Thus, annihilation is *already* built into the apocalypse, and revelation was *already* absent from the original Apocalypse. Our use of the word "apocalypse" to describe the threat of annihilation without revelation may, then, be less of a bastardisation of the original meaning of the word (revelation or uncovering) than I first thought. This paradoxical apocalypse/annihilation without revelation structures our thought even today, as I showed in Chapter 2, and a study of medieval and early modern apocalypticism – in both self-consciously theological and literary texts – can reveal the origins of the way we think and speak about threats of annihilation in the modern day.

In this chapter, I examined the relationship between apocalypse and representation in *King Lear*, and found that speech, silence, and missives can act like bombs and missiles, uncontrollable after being initially set in motion and leading to ultimate annihilation. In the next chapter, I will examine the relationship between representation (imagined by Shakespeare's contemporaries as the weapon of rhetoric) and annihilation presented in *Hamlet*.

[177] Derrida, "Of an Apocalyptic Tone" 94-95

CHAPTER 6

The Nuclear Weapon of Rhetoric in *Hamlet*

In his essay "Hamlet of the Mid-Century," Jan Kott emphasises the importance of the political context in which the events of the play take place: all men in Denmark have been pressed into service to counter the threat of war posed by young Fortinbras of Norway, who is driven by the desire to gain back the lands lost after his father was killed by the elder Hamlet. But for Prince Hamlet, the threat does not merely come from outside: he finds out that Claudius, the new king, got his throne by murdering Hamlet's father (the erstwhile king, and Claudius' brother). A criminal sits on the throne, and war threatens Denmark from without. This, Kott says, is the reason for Hamlet's declaration that "Denmark's a prison." Kott shows that Polish stage productions of *Hamlet* of the mid-twentieth century emphasise the condition of war, violence, and terror in the play to respond to totalitarian repression in their own context. Grigori Kozintsev and other Russian humanists made the same connections, seeing Hamlet as a "titan of conscience" and "brother-in-arms," a political actor who fought to retain his right to freedom of thought even under constant surveillance from those in power.[178]

Hamlet has also been seen as highly relevant to our condition in the nuclear age. In an essay applying Derrida's nuclear criticism to *Hamlet*, Nicholas Royle makes a connection between rhetoric and the nuclear bomb. He cites Derrida's characterisation of the bomb as a rhetorical tool, since its stated purpose is deterrence, a form of dissuasion, or negative persuasion: using the threat of mutually assured destruction to persuade "the enemy" *not* to act. Royle first compares the tendency of modern editors to surround the text of *Hamlet* with appendices and introductions with the stockpiling of nuclear weapons during the Cold War:

[178] Arthur P. Mendel, "Hamlet and Soviet Humanism," *Slavic Review* 30.4 (Dec. 1971): 733-747, JSTOR <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2493845>13 Aug 2019

> *Hamlet*, perhaps the greatest or best-known literary monument in the English language, swallows up texts, incorporates anything in its path, and its path goes everywhere, adds to itself ceaselessly, inescapably, relentlessly stockpiling itself[.][179]

Quoting from Derrida's "No Apocalypse, Not Now," Royle calls *Hamlet* an exemplary "nuclear text," historically coinciding with the beginning of Derrida's "nuclear epoch":

> Shakespeare's *Hamlet* belongs to the nuclear epoch; it is a nuclear drama, a nuclear text. *Hamlet* concerns nuclear catastrophe – and in an exemplary way, perhaps, insofar as it coincides historically with the emergence or beginning of what Derrida calls "the project of literature," a project that "cannot be shown to antedate the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries."[180]

Royle also emphasises Derrida's idea of the *fictional* quality of nuclear annihilation – in which fiction refers not to a mere fantasy or illusion, distinct from reality, but our very mode of structuring and interpreting reality. Nuclear annihilation is a very *real* fiction, a "death machine" with the power to destroy us:

> Derrida provides a special focus on the notion that if nuclear holocaust has any kind of existence at all, it is in language, as rhetoric and fiction. There is only the rhetoric of nuclear deterrence and the exchanges of messages, codes, dispatches. Nuclear missiles are missives […] But not "simply" that: it is also a question of "that which, in writing, always includes the power of a death machine."[181]

Royle then analyses the way this death machine works in *Hamlet* through espionage and exchanges of missives and codes, similar to the nuclear strategy of Cold War politics. In the last chapter, I analysed the same quality of *destinerrance* – the wayward nature of written messages, with their capacity to lead to annihilation – in *King Lear*. In this chapter, however, I will examine the hypothesis that *Hamlet* is a "nuclear text" because of the way it explores certain paradoxes of representation, and in so doing, illuminates the connection between rhetoric and violence or war

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[179] Nicholas Royle, "Nuclear Piece: *Memoires* of *Hamlet* and the Time to Come," *Diacritics* 20.1 (1990): 41, JSTOR <http://www.jstor.org/stable/465227 > 15 Aug 2014
[180] Royle 42
[181] Royle 43

leading to ultimate annihilation. First, I will examine Hamlet's ambivalent attitude to rhetoric in the context of political repression and deception in the play. Second, I will look at the interpretation of *Hamlet* by Stephen Dedalus in the ninth chapter of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, focusing on the connections Stephen makes between speech and violence in *Hamlet* and comparing Stephen's attitude to the paradoxes of rhetoric with Hamlet's. Third, I will consider the way Hamlet identifies women as idols while investing men with spirit, as well as his fear of the female body and female sexuality. Fourth, I will examine the male characters' linked attitude towards female speech and the reproductive capacity of the female body, with a focus on their reactions to Ophelia's speech of madness. Then I will look at Hamlet's final transformation into a man of action (that is, a man of violence) as a movement from the restricted economy of thrift to the general economy of sacrifice.

6.1 The Paradoxes of Rhetoric in *Hamlet*

Hamlet's use of words is reminiscent of the speech of Shakespeare's clowns: he uses riddling puns, bawdy *double entendres*, paradox, sarcasm, and cruel humour in a similar way to Lear's fool. The first words that Hamlet speaks are riddles, punning on the family relationships he has come to distrust: “A little more than kin and less than kind” and “Not so, my lord, I am too much i'th' sun.” (I, ii, 65;67)[182] It doesn't take him long to talk about the obsession that will plague him throughout the play: the difference between inner truth and outward appearance. His mother asks him why he still seems to be mourning his father, and Hamlet responds,

> Seems, madam? Nay, it *is*. I know not “seems.”
> 'Tis not alone my inky cloak, good-mother,
> Nor customary suits of solemn black,
> Nor windy suspiration of forced breath,
> No, nor the fruitful river in the eye,
> Nor the dejected haviour of the visage,
> Together with all forms, moods, shows of grief
> That can denote me truly. These indeed “seem,”

[182] All in-text citations in Chapters 6 and 7 will be to 'The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark' in *The Norton Shakespeare*, which is based on the text of *Hamlet* in the First Folio but which includes the passages from the Second Quarto indented and italicised to set it apart from the main text. Where relevant I will make a note of the Quarto passages and make clear their absence from the Folio.

For they are actions that a man might play;
But I have that within which passeth show –
These but the trappings and the suits of woe. (I, ii, 76-86)

Hamlet's examples of deceitful appearance invoke costuming and miming in theatrical performance. His reference to “actions that a man might play” invokes the dramatic players of the theatre, who will appear later to play a large part in the action. Having just returned from his university studies at Wittenberg, the centre of Luther's Reformation, Hamlet's attitude towards visual representation here is a particularly Protestant one: a distrust of images verging on iconomachy.

Three scenes later, the ghost confirms for him what his “prophetic soul” had already divined: the foul circumstances of his father's death and his uncle's guilt. Hamlet finds himself confronted with the human capacity for deceit and hypocrisy, and he immediately reaches for his “tables” to write this realisation down: “O villain, villain, smiling damned villain! / My tables, / My tables – meet it is I set it down / That one may smile and smile and be a villain.” (I, v, 106-109) As a good student and good Protestant, Hamlet here demonstrates a logocentric faith in written representation and continued distrust for the visual. He also refers to the ghost as “this fellow in the cellarage” (I, v, 153), making a meta-theatrical reference to the staging conditions and reminding the audience of the theatrical medium, and thus, the fictionality of what they are witnessing. Both intrigued and disturbed by Claudius' hypocrisy, Hamlet then joins the political game, attempting to conceal his own inner state and secret by the use of what Horatio calls “wild and whirling words,” a speech of seeming madness. (I, v, 137)

The World of Deception in Hamlet

Hamlet is not the only character acutely aware of the importance of concealing truth through outward representation. Conflating appearance and reality, Polonius tells Laertes that “the apparel oft proclaims the man.” (I, iii, 73) Polonius and Laertes both warn Ophelia not to trust Hamlet's words and shows of affection. In the third act, Claudius employs a visual metaphor of cosmetic concealment and painting to describe the disconnect between his words and deeds:

The harlot's cheek, beautied with plast'ring art,
Is not more ugly to the thing that help it

Than is my deed to my most painted word. (III, i, 53-55)

The play relies heavily on a multi-layered dramatic irony: the audience is informed of and witnesses many instances of spying and various other political-rhetorical stratagems, so we are always aware of more information than at least one of the characters present in any one scene. But neither the audience nor the characters are fully aware of their true motivations; even Hamlet, during his soliloquies, wrestles ceaselessly with the question of his own true inner being. Every character lives in a world of deception, each trying to fathom the truth that the other conceals. Interrogation and manipulation are the main methods of communication. There is no trust or faith between any of the characters, no speech free from its political purpose.

The "logocentrism" or faith in written representation that Hamlet demonstrated in the first act is undermined by the second. Still acting mad, Hamlet deliberately misunderstands Polonius' question as regarding the *form* rather than the content (or "matter") of the book he is reading:

POLONIUS What do you read, my lord?

HAMLET Words, words, words.

POLONIUS What is the matter, my lord?

HAMLET Between who?

POLONIUS I mean the matter that you read, my lord.

HAMLET Slanders, sir; for the satirical rogue says here that old men have grey beards; that their faces are wrinkled; their eyes purging thick amber and plum-tree gum; and that they have a plentiful lack of wit, together with most weak hams. All which, sir, though I most powerfully and potently believe, yet I hold it not honesty to have it thus set down; for you yourself, sir, should be old as I am if, like a crab, you could go backward.

POLONIUS Though this be madness, yet there is a method in't. (II, ii, 191-195)

With his two answers to Polonius' question, Hamlet demonstrates a Platonic distrust of writing as mere repetitions of graphic characters, devoid of intention and meaning. He defines slander as too much honesty, telling truths which are better left unsaid. The author of the text is a "satirical rogue":

satire is the art of revealing the truth by fictional hyperbole, but this is a satire turned in on itself – revealing the truth through stating obvious (though insulting) facts about old men. Truth and lies and youth and age are both turned on their heads. The irony and paradoxes that Hamlet plays with are not lost on Polonius, who detects a method in Hamlet's madness, his replies being “pregnant,” or full of meaning.

Rhetoric as a Nothing and Rhetoric as a Weapon

After the arrival of the theatrical troupe in Elsinore, the First Player delivers a speech to Hamlet in which he describes the destruction of Troy and the death of its queen, Hecuba. Hamlet is struck by the intensity of the player's gestures, movements, and delivery of the speech, which lends a persuasive quality to his “fiction” or “conceit.” In the ensuing soliloquy, Hamlet contrasts the imagined passion of the player for the “nothing” that is Hecuba with his own inability to represent the passion he feels in response to the murder of his father:

> Is it not monstrous that this player here,
> But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,
> Could force his soul so to his whole conceit
> That from her working all his visage wanned,
> Tears in his eyes, distraction in 's aspect, A
> broken voice, and his whole function suiting
> With forms to his conceit? And all for nothing.
> For Hecuba!
> What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba,
> That he should weep for her? What would he do
> Had he the motive and the cue for passion
> That I have? He would drown the stage with tears,
> And cleave the general ear with horrid speech[.] (II, ii, 528-540)

“Conceit” is a specifically Elizabethan term to describe a fictional creation, more specifically an extended metaphor. Hamlet is impressed by the player's skill, describing him as an early version of a method actor, who expresses the fiction so well because he “force[s] his soul” to believe in it. But it is still a mere conceit, an empty rhetorical form without inherent matter. A conceit can

metamorphose to take the appearance of any subject: Hecuba is a nothing not only because she doesn't exist "in real life," but also because she could be replaced by any other subject.

By comparing his situation with the Player's, Hamlet is again reminding the audience of the conceit that *they* are watching: Hamlet too is represented by a player, forcing his soul to grieve for the "nothing" that is his father. Jan Kott's "pure paradox of theatre" is present everywhere in Shakespeare's plays, not just in Edgar's description of the non-existent cliff in *King Lear*. The pleasure of fiction also lies in this paradox. But Hamlet is not a typical actor. He imagines that the player would "drown the stage with tears, / And cleave the general ear with horrid speech" if he had Hamlet's motive – but Hamlet does not do this. From his first appearance, he represents by refusing to represent, by *concealing* his inner secret rather than revealing it. Theatrical representation works by showing, rather than telling. But even more effective than this is *refusing* to show, and instead, telling what one is *not* showing.

In his soliloquy, Hamlet condemns himself for his inability to speak: "Yet I, A dull and muddy-mettled rascal, peak / Like John-a-dreams, unpregnant of my cause, And can say nothing!" But he contradicts himself two lines later: "I, the son of the dear murderèd, / Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell, / Must, like a whore, unpack my heart with words." Unlike Claudius' metaphor of the harlot's painted cheek to represent verbal hypocrisy, Hamlet's reference to the "whore" implies useless and *excessive* speech, comparing his tendency to "unpack [his] heart with words" to the tendency of "drab[s]" to "fall a-cursing." (II, ii, 560-564) Here, Hamlet introduces another paradox of speech: contrasted with thought, speech is a form of action, but when it becomes excessive, speech can also be a way to defer or avoid action. He accuses himself of cowardice for his excessive speech, and then tries to use speech to provoke himself into action. At the end of this soliloquy, he defers his duty of revenge even further: he comes up with the idea of testing the truth of the ghost with more words, in the form of the Mousetrap play.

Hamlet's advice to the players to use naturalistic, subtle gestures follows on from his recognition in Act 1 that everybody plays a part, some of them villains feigning innocence, and hiding their true motives with smiles – "reality" is as fictional as the theatre. Therefore, it is important that actors in the play disguise their true selves and play their parts as well as Claudius plays his (or Hamlet his), rather than "imitat[ing] humanity so abominably."

> Suit the action to the word, the word to the action, with this special observance: that you o'erstep not the modesty of nature. For anything so overdone is from the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is to hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure. (III, ii, 16-22)

Hamlet's advice to the players has been frequently interpreted as Shakespeare's own defence of Aristotelian mimesis as the end of theatre. However, when Hamlet stages his own play, he is no longer simply holding a mirror up to nature but playing a calculated political game. The "Mousetrap" play is a rhetorical weapon that Hamlet thinks to wield to achieve (poetic) justice. By clearly discriminating between virtue and vice – as the early modern defenders of rhetoric urged, inspired by the classical Romans – Hamlet uses the play to "catch the conscience of the King." The hypocrisy he bitterly railed against at the beginning of the play is now his own political strategy. The disconnect between appearance and reality still troubles him, but it is the only way to effect change and bring about justice.

Through an important prosopopoeia, Hamlet conceives that "murder, though it have no tongue, will speak / With most miraculous organ." (II, ii, 582;570-571) After Claudius asks if there is any offence in the play, Hamlet replies, "No, no, they do but jest. Poison in jest. No offence i'th' world." (III, ii, 210) These metaphors reveal Derrida's nuclear paradox: Hamlet acknowledges the power of words to be used as weapons; however, he still holds on to the belief that their effect may be less dangerous than "real" weapons, such as in this pronouncement:

> I will speak daggers to her, but use none.
> My tongue and soul in this be hypocrites –
> How in my words somever she be shent,
> To give them seals never my soul consent. (III, ii, 366-369)

Here, Hamlet is afraid that his anger might lead him to commit unnatural matricide. But he believes that the daggers he speaks would only become literal daggers if his soul consents, which would seal it with his approval. Later, he uses an official seal to authorise his forged document to sentence Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to death. Speech, therefore, would not become murderous unless it is backed by the seal of a sovereign authority. Hamlet's attitude to representation is ambivalent:

though he distrusts visual representation for its inability to portray inner truth, he also believes that the end of theatre is mimesis, or imitation of society. From a logocentric faith in the written word, he moves to dismissing the text he is reading as mere “words, words, words.” This ambivalence corresponds to the paradox of fiction he identifies in his reflection on Hecuba: “conceit” is both an empty form without inherent matter, and something powerful enough to move the soul of the actor and persuade the audience of its truth.

The importance of Hamlet's hesitation to act (to carry out his duty of revenge), which he ceaselessly questions in his soliloquies, has been emphasised by many influential critics as the central mystery of the play. James Joyce alludes to many of these influential interpretations in the ninth chapter of *Ulysses*. Its protagonist Stephen Dedalus too has his own theory of *Hamlet.* In the next section of this chapter, I will focus on Stephen's meditations on the ambiguous place of speech within the action/contemplation dichotomy (action strongly evoking violence and war), as well as the links that Stephen makes between *Hamlet* and the violence of Joyce's day. I will consider Stephen's reflections on the question of the ghost and the apocalypse in Chapter 7.

6.2 Rhetoric and War: *Hamlet* and the Concentration Camp in *Ulysses*

The ninth chapter of James Joyce's *Ulysses* contains an evocative dialogue about *Hamlet*, the paradoxes of artistic representation, and the relationship between art and life. During the dialogue, Stephen Dedalus explains his provocative theory to his audience at the National Library: he asserts that Shakespeare is the ghost of Hamlet's father; therefore, his wife must be the “guilty queen” – that is, guilty of sexual infidelity with Shakespeare's own brother. Before expounding on his theory, Stephen first reminds himself to pay attention to the form of his speech and use his rhetorical training to move his listeners. Like Hamlet, Stephen compares his speech to daggers:

> Unsheathe your dagger definitions. Horseness is the whatness of allhorse. Streams of tendency and eons they worship. God: noise in the street: very peripatetic. Space: what you damn well have to see. Through spaces smaller than red globules of man's blood

> they creepycrawl after Blake's buttocks into eternity of which this vegetable world is but a shadow. Hold to the now, the here, through which all future plunges to the past.[183]

This densely allusive reflection occurs in response to his Theosophist friend Russell's attitude to art, inspired by his Platonic philosophy: "Art has to reveal to us ideas, formless spiritual essences […] the words of *Hamlet* bring our mind into contact with the eternal wisdom, Plato's world of ideas."[184] Stephen declares his preference to Aristotle, who rejected Plato's "shallow" ideas to seek knowledge in the natural world. Mocking the Platonic ideal horse, Stephen brings metaphysical concepts down to earth, to one's immediate perceptions: his definitions of "God" and "space" refer to sights and sounds in the material world, rather than abstract, spiritual, or mystical ideas. Stephen declares his allegiance to the materiality of the body which belongs to the "vegetable world," which the followers of the Theosophical cult – to which many of Joyce's contemporaries belonged – considered to be a mere shadow of the true spiritual reality.

With his "dagger definitions" inspired by Aristotle's peripatetic method, Stephen tries to unsettle what might be called his friends *ideolatry*, in which they assign esoteric, mystical significance to past ideas instead of evaluating them against their perceptions in the here-and-now. The "eons they worship" is also a reference to George William Russell's pseudonym, AE, from the mystical concept of "aeon" in Theosophical lore: "an emanation from Deity, and the medium of its expression."[185] "Emanations" also appear in William Blake's visionary poetry. This causes Stephen to imagine his Theosophist friends crawling through Blake's buttocks to reach their mystical knowledge of "eternity," which they sought through esoteric interpretations of religious doctrine – secrets imparted to the select few initiated into their secret society. Stephen gently mocks the inherent elitism of these practices: "The life esoteric is not for ordinary person. O. P. must work off bad karma first."[186]

Unlike Hamlet's dagger words and poison in jest, however, Stephen's word-weapon metaphor is ironic – *Ulysses* is well-known for its mockery and satire of all forms of violence. Stephen does not unsheathe his daggers to use against his friends, despite their philosophical disagreements, nor for

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[183] James Joyce, *Ulysses: The 1922 Text* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) 178
[184] Joyce 177
[185] Don Gifford and Robert J. Seidman, *Ulysses Annotated: Notes for James Joyce's Ulysses*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1989) 199
[186] Joyce 178

political ends, like Hamlet. Instead, he sees rhetoric as a weapon to be trained against human aggressiveness and intolerance itself, a weapon to use *against* weapons, and in service of life, the present, the here and now. Alluding to St. Augustine, Stephen also imagines the future "plunging" through the present and back to the past. This reversal of causality resembles the apocalyptic or messianic consciousness of time, which looks forward to the imminent end of history (the arrival of the Messiah) to redeem the suffering of the past. Instead of an apocalyptic eagerness for the end, however, Stephen advocates for living with an intense awareness for the present moment, finding God in our immediate perceptions rather than in tradition.

The conversation of Stephen and his friends in the ninth chapter of *Ulysses* soon shifts from the ancient Greek authorities to Joyce's contemporary (modernist) context, when Richard Best quotes a line from "Hamlet et Fortinbras," a prose poem by Stéphane Mallarmé: "*il se promène, lisant au livre de lui-même,* don't you know, *reading the book of himself*."[187] This description identifies the book that Hamlet reads while walking in Act 2 as "the book of himself," or Shakespeare's play, *Hamlet*. The whole of the text is imagined as inside the text, troubling the inside/outside duality, and drawing attention to Shakespeare's metafictional paradoxes: Hamlet is aware of his own quality of textuality, himself being a conceit or "nothing" like Hecuba, composed of words.

Best continues, remembering Mallarmé's description of "*Hamlet* given in a French town, don't you know, a provincial town. They advertised it. […] *Hamlet / ou / Le Distrait / Pièce de Shakespeare*."[188] With the epithet, "the distracted one," Mallarmé refers to a long critical tradition which debates the cause of Hamlet's hesitation. Goethe's influential characterisation of Hamlet in *Wilhelm Meister* locates its cause in Hamlet's personality, described by the librarian at the opening of the chapter: "A hesitating soul taking arms against a sea of troubles […] The beautiful ineffectual dreamer who comes to grief against hard facts." The librarian approves of Goethe's reading because of its verisimilitude or resemblance to "real life." But Stephen "sneers" at what he considers to be a tautology, rejecting both the Platonist conception of art as an expression of "formless spiritual essence" *and* the mimetic conception of art as a representation of reality.[189]

[187] Joyce 179
[188] Joyce 179
[189] Joyce 176

In response to Best, Stephen translates "*le distrait*" as "the absentminded beggar," and another phrase from Mallarmé's poem comes to Stephen's mind: "Sumptuous and stagnant exaggeration of murder." This phrase emphasises the violence of Shakespeare's play, caused by too much action and too *little* thought, or hesitation. *Hamlet* deconstructs the traditional revenge tragedy: Fortinbras and Laertes play the role of the traditional hero in a revenge tragedy, jumping rashly into action to avenge their fathers and boasting of their rashness (Laertes declares that any hesitation would make his father a cuckold and his mother a whore). Hamlet, by contrast, spends four acts thinking and speaking about his dilemmas, castigating himself for excessive thought and excessive speech, and trying to goad himself into action while simultaneously devising ways to further *defer* his act of revenge. In the fifth act, all three vendettas converge in the final massacre, showing the absurdity of the concept of revenge as justice. The cycles of violence only end with near-complete annihilation: the deaths of eight of the main characters.

In "Hamlet et Fortinbras," particularly in the part quoted by Best and Stephen, Mallarmé draws attention to the violence which saturates the play:

> He walks in a leisurely fashion, reading in the book of himself, a high and living sign; he scorns to look at any other. Nor will he be content to symbolise the solitude of the Thinker among other men; he kills them off aloofly and at random, or at least, they die. The black presence of the doubter diffuses poison, so that all the great people die, without his even taking the trouble, usually, to stab them behind the arras. Then, evidently in deliberate contrast to the hesitator, we see Fortinbras in the role of general, but no more efficaciously lethal than he; and if Death deploys his versatile appliances – phial, lotus-pool, or rapier – when an exceptional person flaunts his sombre livery, that is the import of the finale when, as the spectator returns to his senses, this sumptuous and stagnant exaggeration of murder (the idea of which remains as meaning of the play, attached to Him who makes himself alone) so to speak achieves vulgar manifestation as this agent of military destruction clears the stage with his marching army, on the scale of the commonplace, amid trumpets and drums.[190]

[190] Gifford and Seidman 200-201

In this passage, Mallarmé describes Hamlet as a self-absorbed narcissist, obsessed with being a "living sign" or symbol of the solitary and exceptional Thinker. He describes Hamlet killing off the other characters "aloofly and at random" in order to realise his idea of himself, in the manner of a modern-day terrorist. Referring to Hamlet's first speech where he draws attention to his mourning apparel (while insisting that it cannot truly represent his inner being), Mallarmé accuses him of "flaunting his sombre livery." This description implies that Hamlet *has* no inner being; he is all surface, a sign without meaning, a costume without an actor – even *more* of a "nothing" than Hecuba. Mallarmé reinforces this lack of identity or character by referring to him with epithets like "the hesitator" and "the doubter" rather than using his name.

Despite Shakespeare's attempt at "deliberate contrast," Mallarmé continues, *both* Fortinbras and Hamlet are merely playing a role, the former of a general and the latter of a Thinker. Instead of being an "ineffectual dreamer," as Goethe described him, Mallarmé points out that Hamlet's violence is just as "efficacious" as that of Fortinbras. The only difference between the two is that Hamlet uses more subtle instruments of murder, while the violence of Fortinbras is the "vulgar manifestation" of Hamlet's: as the head of an army, he can cause destruction on a bigger – yet still "commonplace" – scale. Mallarmé locates the cause of "the sumptuous and stagnant exaggeration of murder" in the last scene in Hamlet's attempt to act the part of the Thinker. In this reading, the man of thought and the man of action are not two different characters, but Hamlet's hesitation becomes the very cause of "action," which inevitably leads to annihilation.

Mallarmé's interpretation of *Hamlet*, first published in 1896, anticipates Jan Kott's reading: both emphasise the role of Fortinbras and the conditions of war in the play. Kott makes a connection between theatre and politics, comparing individuals resisting totalitarianism to actors preparing for their roles. Mallarmé's reading also makes a connection between Hamlet's self-aware literariness and annihilation, arguably fitting into Derrida's vision of a "nuclear criticism." In fact, Derrida identifies the works of Mallarmé and Joyce as exemplary texts of the nuclear age, arguing that they illuminate the condition of the nuclear age far better than later texts which attempt to portray the aftermath of a nuclear holocaust. To support this assertion, he cites their intertextual dependence on the archive, meta-textual quality of turning back on themselves, and questioning of their own conditions of possibility – in short, they exemplify literature which has become aware of its historicity, and therefore, its mortality. Joyce's intertextual use of Mallarmé's poem about *Hamlet* (in a chapter centring around an idiosyncratic reading of *Hamlet*, within a book modelled on *Hamlet* as

much as on *The Odyssey*) leads one to think that Shakespeare's *Hamlet* may also be seen as a "nuclear text" which illuminates the essence of both literature and nuclear annihilation.

Khaki Hamlets and Imperial Propaganda

Stephen's gloss of "*le distrait*" as "the absent-minded beggar" is not only a description of the hesitating Hamlet, but also a reference to a poem by Rudyard Kipling used to raise money for British soldiers (called "gentle[men] in *khaki*" in the poem) fighting in the Boer War.[191] This brings to Stephen's memory another propaganda poem by A. C. Swinburne, which defends British soldiers against the charge of atrocities against civilians in the same war. Like Mallarmé, Stephen places great emphasis on the violence in *Hamlet*, even reading the final massacre as a "forecast" of the British concentration camp for Boer civilians:

> A deathsman of the soul Robert Greene called him, Stephen said. Not for nothing was he a butcher's son wielding the sledded poleaxe and spitting in his palm. Nine lives are taken off for his father's one, Our father who art in purgatory. Khaki Hamlets don't hesitate to shoot. The bloodboltered shambles in act five is a forecast of the concentration camp sung by Mr Swinburne.[192]

Stephen then remembers a line from Swinburne's poem: "*whelps and dams of murderous foes whom none / But we had spared.*" With this, Swinburne is trying to defend British soldiers from "liars" claiming that the British committed atrocities against Boer women and children. According to Swinburne, the uniquely civilised British spared the Boer "whelps and dams," a mercy which no others would have shown to their "murderous foes."[193] The actual concentration camp (which led to mass deaths) is absent in Swinburne's song, which is a *denial* rather than portrayal of the reality. But for Stephen, the absent concentration camp is the matter of Swinburne's poem and the "bloodboltered shambles" in the final scene of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is a "forecast" of the (mis)representation and reality alike.

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[191] Rudyard Kipling, "The Absent-minded Beggar," *The Kipling Society* <http://www.kiplingsociety.co.uk/poems_beggar.htm> 15 Oct 2019.
[192] Joyce 180
[193] Algernon Charles Swinburne, "On the Death of Colonel Benson," 04 Nov 1901, *Public Domain Poetry* <http://www.public-domain-poetry.com/algernon-charles-swinburne/on-the-death-of-colonel-benson-8009> 12 Oct 2019.

With “Khaki Hamlets don't hesitate to shoot,” Stephen is referring to a command (“Don't hesitate to shoot”) said to have been made by a British officer while suppressing a protest against British imperial activities in Ireland and later adopted as a slogan to express the anger of the protesters. These events were contemporaneous with the Boer War, with Irish public opinion being on the side of the Boers, a solidarity felt because of similar acts of repression and terror experienced by the Irish at the hands of British colonisers (whose use of khaki uniforms was a new phenomenon at the time).[194] But the anti-polemical thrust of Stephen's critique is not limited to imperialist violence, but also to the violence of the Irish nationalists: in this chapter, he imagines Socrates being killed by the “archons of Sinn Fein and their naggin of hemlock.”[195]

Staying consistent with his theory, Stephen conflates Shakespeare and Hamlet's father, imagining Shakespeare as “wielding the sledded poleaxe,” a weapon the elder Hamlet is described using to smite his enemies on the ice (although it is debated whether the word in question is meant to refer to his weapon, the poleaxe, or his enemies, the Polacks). This weapon aligns Shakespeare/the elder Hamlet with the “vulgar” and “commonplace” style of Fortinbras' warfare described by Mallarmé. It may also have been the very weapon with which he smote the elder Fortinbras on the ice of Norway and took possession of his land, the original act of violence for which young Fortinbras threatens war against Denmark, promising more bloodshed.

Stephen points out that Hamlet *père* is in purgatory precisely because of his violent crimes in life, a brutal warlord no better than Claudius except in Hamlet *fils'* idealised fantasy. Stephen also conflates Shakespeare with the younger Hamlet, calling him a “butcher's son” who avenges the death of his father by murdering nine others. Although Stephen's count is off (only eight characters die in *Hamlet*), the extreme disproportion of the massacre reveals the absurdity of the cycle of revenge. Like a nuclear-armed state, each avenger stockpiles grievances, which proliferate until they initiate a chain reaction which, once set in motion, cannot be stopped, ending only with Mutually Assured Destruction.

Shakespeare is not simply a playwright who revels in bloodshed (“a deathsman of the soul”) but also an icon of the imperial power responsible for the violence that Stephen alludes to. Transformed

[194] Thomas Cartelli, “The Face in the Mirror: Joyce’s *Ulysses* and the Lookingglass Shakespeare,” *Native Shakespeares: Indigenous Appropriations on a Global Stage*, eds. Craig Dionne and Parmita Kapadia (Aldershot, Ashgate, 2008) 22

[195] Joyce 183

into a mythical figure, Shakespeare has been used in later centuries as propaganda to argue for the superiority of British literature and culture (and thus, its imperialist domination) in its various colonies – from Ireland to India. Nor is Shakespeare the historical figure innocent: comparing Shakespeare to Shylock, Stephen points out that he was a capitalist who hoarded grain during periods of food scarcity, used enclosures to take public land into his ownership, and pandered – in his plays – to the interests of the rulers and wrote propaganda for the state, all to maximise profit. Stephen also alludes to Shakespeare's portrayal of the colonised native in the character of "Patsy Caliban, our American cousin," a phrase that imparts a sense of brotherhood with other colonised peoples.[196] Art is not divorced from the context of imperialist domination: as a young Irish writer who aspires to write his national epic, Stephen's relationship with the bard is both one of admiration and antagonism. Joyce expresses this through the character of John Eglinton (the pseudonym of the writer William Kirkpatrick Magee): "Our young Irish bards […] have yet to create a figure which the world will set beside Saxon Shakespeare's Hamlet though I admire him, as old Ben did, on this side idolatry."[197]

Like Mallarmé, Joyce draws attention to the political nature of *Hamlet*, specifically the violence that conditions it from beginning to end, inherited from the past and promising to continue into the future. Like Jan Kott, Joyce reads Shakespeare as his contemporary, emphasising the ways in which *Hamlet* speaks to his own socio-political context. In fact, Joyce goes even further than Kott in likening Shakespeare's play to a prophetic vision of the future. The concentration camp that Stephen mentions was later refined by the Nazis into death camps for the systematic annihilation of millions of people. Thus, the "bloodboltered shambles" of *Hamlet* may be seen as a forecast of the Nazi genocide, and of every genocide, as well as every prison camp and refugee detention centre in the modern age.

The Paradoxes of Rhetoric in Ulysses

With "[k]haki Hamlets *don't* hesitate to shoot" (emphasis mine), Stephen draws an implied contrast between the British soldiers in Ireland and Shakespeare's Hamlet, who *does* hesitate to kill. This contradicts Mallarmé's thesis that Hamlet's hesitation (or thought) is the very cause of his action, or the violence he perpetrates. Despite the brutality he reads in the play, Stephen seems to find hope in

[196] Joyce 196
[197] Joyce 177

Hamlet's hesitation. (He may also disagree with Mallarmé's disgust for Hamlet's “sombre livery,” being dressed in black mourning attire himself. Joyce explicitly intended Stephen to be a counterpart both of Odysseus' son Telemachus and of Prince Hamlet; the associations between them are numerous, starting from the first chapter where Stephen conflicts with “Claudius” in the form of Buck Mulligan.)

As noted in the first section of this chapter, Hamlet reveals one of the paradoxes of speech when he accuses himself of an inability to speak (aligning speech with action) and excessive speech at the *expense* of action (aligning it with useless thought or inaction). Hamlet's famous soliloquy names the question: “To be, or not to be […] / Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer / The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, / Or to take arms against a sea of troubles, / And by opposing, end them.” (III, i, 58-62) But this is not simply a question of ontology, but rather, a dilemma between action and thought, as he makes explicit later in the soliloquy:

> Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,
> And thus the native hue of resolution
> Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of *thought*,
> And enterprises of great pith and moment
> With this regard their currents turn awry
> And lose the name of *action*. (III, i, 85-90, emphasis mine)

Action here is equated with self-destruction, taking up arms to end one's life, while continued existence is implied to be weakness and passivity, at the receiving end of the weapons of fortune. Speech, however, is a ghostly thing between existence and non-existence, between presence and absence, and between action and inaction. Speech thus occupies an uncertain place in the action/contemplation dichotomy that is so important in *Hamlet*. Early modern defenders of rhetoric saw it as language in action, linking it to violence and force, conceiving of it as a sword which is useless if kept in its sheath. They strongly advocated *using* the sword of rhetoric to promote virtue and move the will of others with one's own, seeing the rhetorician as a political hero and leader of society. Hamlet too attempts to use the sword of rhetoric to achieve his political ends.

Stephen, however, has a very different attitude to this paradox of speech. Spinning a rhetorical tale that vividly envisions Shakespeare's life, he begins to convince his listeners of his theory that Shakespeare is Hamlet's father (and his wife the guilty queen). When he is asked which of Shakespeare's brothers he suspects as the Claudius to his wife's Gertrude, Stephen thinks of his own brother: "Where is your brother? Apothecaries' hall. My whetstone. Him, then Cranly, Mulligan: now these. Speech, speech. But act. Act speech. They mock to try you. Be acted on."[198]

Stephen's paradox of speech extends even further than Hamlet's: he simultaneously contrasts speech with action ("Speech, speech. But act"), envisions every speech as an act ("Act speech"), *and* reminds himself to remain passive, allowing the speech to act on him ("Be acted on"). He recognises that there is a reciprocal relationship between the weapon and its wielder: rhetoric affects the orator or poet as much as the audience. Despite his word-weapon metaphors, Stephen does not conflate action with violence as Hamlet does. While Hamlet hates and fears passivity (peace, or continued existence), Stephen embraces it. He admires Hamlet's hesitation, or use of speech to *defer* action, rather than his attempt to wield it as a sword for political ends. In its capacity to avoid violence and promote peaceful existence, Stephen recognises that the power of rhetoric goes far beyond the power of arms.

Stephen had earlier imagined his friend Cranly as a soldier or a man of action wielding the weapon of speech, and Stephen himself as "his mute orderly, following battles from afar." In this passage, however, Cranly becomes one of the whetstones for his own speech. Stephen also recalls his arguments with Synge in Paris as a war conducted "[i]n words of words for words, palabras."[199] These are not actual battles that lead to destruction, but rhetorical battles, which are nevertheless not unreal, being Stephen's poetic training to fulfil his destiny as an artist. The speech that he sharpens on the whetstones of his brother and friends is not a weapon of war, but a blacksmith's tool to "forge in the smithy of [his] soul the uncreated conscience of [his] race."[200]

[198] Joyce 203
[199] Joyce 191
[200] James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) 213

Art and Life, or the Book and the World

For Stephen, the purpose of art is neither imitation nor representation of the real world, nor revelation of an ideal Platonic truth existing in a spiritual dimension beyond material reality. The relation between art and life is far more complex and reciprocal: an artist takes the stuff of life and transforms it into something entirely other, and in the process, the artist's life itself becomes art. In response to Eglinton's contention that "the world" views Shakespeare's marriage as a mistake, Stephen argues, "A man of genius makes no mistakes. His errors are volitional and are the portals of discovery."[201] He also connects the tone of hope and reconciliation in his later plays (after the "hell of time" portrayed in the great tragedies, including *King Lear* and *Hamlet*) to Shakespeare's becoming a grandfather. John Eglinton finally sums up Stephen's theory:
"[Shakespeare] is the ghost and the prince. He is all in all," and Stephen agrees: "He is. […] The boy of act one is the mature man of act five. All in all. In *Cymbeline*, in *Othello* he is both bawd and cuckold. He acts and is acted on."[202]

Stephen then gives his view of representation: art reflects not the world but the artist. Rather than imitating the real world, the artist creates a new one. In this, the artist is analogous to God who created the world and wrote the Bible ("the folio of this world"):

> He found in the world without as actual what was in his world within as possible. Maeterlinck says: *If Socrates leave his house today he will find the sage seated on his doorstep. If Judas go forth tonight it is to Judas his steps will tend.* Every life is many days, day after day. We walk through ourselves, meeting robbers, ghosts, giants, old men, young men, wives, widows, brothers-in-love. But always meeting ourselves. The playwright who wrote the folio of this world and wrote it badly (He gave us light and the sun two days later), the lord of things as they are whom the most Roman of catholics call *dio boia*, hangman god is doubtless all in all in all of us[.][203]

The ninth chapter takes place in the National Library, surrounded by the archive of books on which *Ulysses* is dependent. In it, Stephen reflects on the nature of books, libraries, and reading, seeing

[201] Joyce 182
[202] Joyce 204
[203] Joyce 204

books as “mummycases” where “coffined thoughts” are “embalmed in spice of words.”[204] But he doesn't see reading as opening the coffin to examine the mummy's lifeless corpse, but as resurrecting the vitality or the spirit of the text, a process which happens in the reader's mind. Texts inspire thought not about reality, or the existent, either in the past or present, but the absent, the imagined possibilities of “things that were not”: “what Caesar would have lived to do had he believed the soothsayer: what might have been: possibilities of the possible as possible: things not known: what name Achilles had when he lived among women.”[205]

At the end, Stephen declares that he doesn't believe his own theory, causing his interlocutors to dismiss it as worthless: since it is merely fiction (a self-conscious untruth), it is not worth paying Stephen to publish it. This is the other paradox that Hamlet identified: speech is both “nothing” and something with the power to move the soul of the listener and the speaker. But Hamlet distrusted what he called “words, words, words” due to their inherent meaninglessness, their ability to function as empty conceits or forms which can present any “matter,” truthful or not. For him, this capacity for deceit in verbal – particularly textual – representation turned even facts into “slander” and dishonesty. But *Ulysses* draws attention to the importance of its words. For Stephen, a word – or a name – is not a mere nothing: his own name is extremely significant to him, “Dedalus” being an allusion to the myth of the great artificer who constructed the labyrinth of the Minotaur, prefiguring his destiny as an artist. By the end of the play, Hamlet becomes a man of violence, emulating the rash, thoughtless, warlike Fortinbras. Stephen, by contrast, is neither a man of action, nor a man of thought, but a man of words (which are both and neither).

6.3 The Female Idol and the Male Spirit

Dympna Callaghan draws attention to the way in which Shakespeare's female characters and racialised Others, particularly racialised women like Cleopatra, were performed at the time of their writing by male English actors. For her, this tradition of female impersonation brings into view the *absence* of women in early modern drama, the substitution of female reality by male representations. Callaghan argues that the “structural effects of mimesis” contribute to the erasure of women: both artistic and political representation work through visibility and through “inclusion”

[204] Joyce 186
[205] Joyce 186

within existing systems of power instead of enacting structural change. But, she points out, hypervisibility does not necessarily translate to political power. Power is often characterised by *in*visibility (the power to see without being seen), and the visibility of male representations of women often serves to objectify and disempower them further.

Callaghan's emphasis on the absence of women in Shakespeare's plays challenges what she calls the fetishistic insistence on presence in artistic representation. However, she argues that it is possible to read the absences of real women and racialised people as meaningful in themselves. Joyce too made this point in *Ulysses*, showing how Stephen reads the absence of Anne Hathaway in Shakespeare's plays, and specifically pointing out that "his boywomen are the women of a boy. Their life, thought, speech are lent to them by males."[206] The female character who is arguably the most dependent on males for her life, thought, and speech (both within and without the play) is *Hamlet*'s Ophelia.

Ophelia as Idol

Ophelia is generally submissive and obedient to the men who direct and circumscribe her actions, though she sometimes subtly rejects their hypocrisy, as in her response to her brother's advice to guard her sexual virtue: "Do not […] / Show me the steep and thorny way to heaven / Whiles, like a puffed and reckless libertine / Himself the primrose path of dalliance treads / And recks not his own rede." (I, iii, 47-51) Even so, she is always tied to the male characters, seen as an allegory, image or empty form upon which they can project their own meanings. Unlike Hamlet, she never asserts her personhood or her own inner truth.

In one of Hamlet's love letters to her (which Polonius reads out to Claudius to prove his theory that love is the cause of Hamlet's madness), Hamlet refers to the "beautified" Ophelia as "[his] soul's idol," transforming her into a lifeless object which he nevertheless worships. (II, ii, 110) He then goes on to declare the truth of his love, comparing it to the indubitable truth of the geocentric model of the universe (a line which may strike modern audiences as deeply ironic, and which may have been intended as such by Shakespeare, the Copernican theory being well-known at the time):

> "Doubt thou the stars are fire,
> Doubt that the sun doth move,

[206] Joyce 183

> Doubt truth to be a liar,
> But never doubt I love.
> "O dear Ophelia, I am ill at these numbers; I have not art to reckon my groans; but that I love thee best, O most best, believe it. […]" (II, ii, 116-121)

As I showed in the first section of this chapter, Hamlet's attitude is that rhetoric is mere appearance, and appearance is always deceitful, concealing, replacing, and painting over truth. If rhetoric is deceitful, then artlessness must be honest. Thus, Hamlet's drawing attention to his lack of skill with rhetoric is itself a rhetorical strategy. Hamlet continues this anti-rhetorical theme in his encounter with Ophelia in the third act, but now, instead of trying to convince her of the truth of his love, he accuses *her* of deceit since she is both beautiful and honest. To this, Ophelia defends the natural commerce of honesty and beauty. Hamlet contradicts her, arguing that beauty is always deceitful (and a sexually wanton bawd), as proved by recent events:

> [T]he power of beauty will sooner transform honesty from what it is to a bawd than the force of honesty can translate beauty into his likeness. This was sometime a paradox, but now time gives it proof. (III, i, 113-116)

Echoing Claudius' metaphor of his "painted word" as the "harlot's cheek," he accuses women of deceit due to their use of cosmetics: "I have heard of your paintings […] God hath given you one face and you make yourselves another." (III, i, 114-143) This is a point he will darkly reiterate in the graveyard scene of Act 5, when he advises his lady to "paint an inch thick" to hide from certain death. According to Marguerite Tassi, Shakespeare's frequent use of painting as a metaphor for deceit was influenced by the iconoclastic context, in which early modern anti-theatricalists attacked the use of cosmetics ("fayre Cosmetica") in the theatre as inherently deceitful, even idolatrous.[207] The fact that Ophelia was always played by a young man in makeup and costume adds an additional layer of irony to Hamlet's accusations: he is directing his ire at a man in makeup and costume pretending to be a woman, but attributing the deceit to the nature of women.

[207] Marguerite A. Tassi, *The Scandal of Images: Iconoclasm, Eroticism, and Painting in Early Modern English Drama* (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 2005) 45

The Male Soul, the Female Body, and Sacred Representation

Stephen Dedalus' theory about *Hamlet* identifies Gertrude as Shakespeare's representation of his unfaithful wife, or rather, a representation of his own fear, jealousy, and desire, women being absent in the play. Sigmund Freud famously used the relationship between Hamlet and Gertrude to illustrate his theory of the Oedipus complex. Although one may disagree with Freud's theory, he was not wrong to read this relationship as central to the play. Hamlet speaks obsessively about his disgust for his mother's sexuality, which for him is inseparable from his grief for his father.

In his first soliloquy, Hamlet describes his father's love for his mother in idealised, spiritual terms: "so loving to my mother / That he might not beteem the winds of heaven / Visit her face too roughly!" But his mother's love for his father is described in terms of the body: "Why, she would hang on him / As if increase of appetite had grown / By what it fed on." He attributes her remarriage to her lust and sexual appetite, which in his eyes is part of the nature of women, a moral frailty caused by bodily weakness. This view of women's mental and moral capacity as determined by their bodies sees women as closer to animals, in contrast to men, who have the capacity for reason: "a beast that wants discourse of reason / Would have mourned longer!" (I, ii, 140-151)

His confrontation of Gertrude in her bedroom in Act 3 is the true climactic scene in the play. In this scene, he first tells Gertrude that he will "set [her] up a glass / Where [she] may see the inmost part of [her]." (III, iv, 19-20) After rashly killing Polonius behind the arras, Hamlet accuses Gertrude (rather than Claudius) of killing his father. She demands to know what she has done to deserve his harsh accusations, and he responds:

> Such an act
> That blurs the grace and blush of modesty,
> Calls virtue hypocrite, […] makes marriage vows
> As false as dicer's oaths. – O, such a deed
> As from the very body of contraction plucks
> The very soul, and sweet religion
> Makes a rhapsody of words. Heaven's face doth glow
> Yea, this solidity and compound mass
> With tristful visage, as against the doom

Is thought-sick at the act. (III, iv, 40-49)

He shows her a painted portrait of his father along with that of his brother, comparing the former to a variety of gods and calling the latter "a mildewed ear / Blasting his wholesome brother." At first, he denies that a woman of Gertrude's age could experience sexual passion: "You cannot call it love, for at your age / The heyday in the blood is tame, it's humble, / And waits upon the judgement". He then accuses her of lacking sense, recalling a Biblical passage about idolaters: "Eyes without feeling, feeling without sight, / Ears without hands or eyes, / smelling sans all."[208] He describes her wanton lust and sexual appetite with disgust and horror, castigating her for her lack of shame, so that Gertrude is finally moved: "You turns't mine eyes into my very soul / And there I see such black and grainèd spots / As will not leave their tinct" and "These words like daggers enter in mine ears." (III, iv, 53-85)

The ghost then makes his final visitation and urges Hamlet to continue speaking to Gertrude: "O, step between her and her fighting soul. / Conceit in weakest bodies strongest works." (III, iv, 103-104) But the ghost is invisible to Gertrude. She identifies the ghost as a "bodiless" fiction, created by Hamlet's madness:

HAMLET Do you see nothing there?

QUEEN GERTRUDE Nothing at all, yet all that is I see.

HAMLET Nor did you nothing hear?

QUEEN GERTRUDE No, nothing but ourselves.

[…]

QUEEN GERTRUDE This is the very coinage of your brain.
This bodiless creation ecstasy
Is very cunning in. (3.4.122-124)

[208] See Psalms 115:2-9: "Wherefore shall the heathen say, Where is nowe their God? But our God is in heauen: he doeth what so euer he will. Their idoles are siluer and golde, euen the worke of mens hands. They haue a mouth and speake not: they haue eyes and see not. They haue eares and heare not: they haue noses and smelll not. They haue handes and touche not: they haue feete and walke not: neither make they a sound with their throte. They that make them are like vnto them: so are all that trust in them."

When Hamlet tells Gertrude that he has “that within which passeth show” in the first act, he is not only making a theoretical reflection on the inadequacy of visual representation. This is also a barb directed at his mother's conduct, implying that her remarriage has revealed her earlier “shows” of love for her father to be false (mere actions which a woman might play). According to Hamlet, Gertrude is all appearance; while *he* “is,” *she* only “seems.”

Hamlet consistently reduces women to idols, bodies, and beasts without reason or sense. Somewhat paradoxically, Hamlet and the ghost imply that women are idolaters as well: particularly susceptible, because of bodily weakness, to belief in representations or conceits. By contrast, Hamlet invests *men* with spirit and reason. The bedroom scene occurs immediately after Hamlet decides not to kill Claudius when he finds him at prayer; his excuse is that he doesn't want to reward Claudius by sending him to heaven, which may occur if he dispatches him “in the purging of his soul.” Even his hated uncle has a soul and a chance to redeem himself of the most terrible crime of a brother's murder. Women not only seem to have no inner soul, in Hamlet's eyes, but their incomprehensible nature problematises the most sacred and true forms of speech and writing. The enormity of his mother's crime of lust reveals religion to be a mere “rhapsody of words,” marriage vows “false as dicer's oaths,” and “plucks the very soul” out of the “body” of the marriage contract. Heaven and earth are “thought-sick at the act,” awaiting the day of “doom” at the apocalypse to reveal God's true judgement. (I will explore this passage and other references to doomsday, or the Last Judgement, further in Chapter 7.) This is in contrast to the portraits that Hamlet confronts her with, which, despite being “counterfeit presentments,” Hamlet sees as accurate representations of the two men, showing a waning of his earlier iconomachy.

The dialogue in Gertrude's bedroom makes it clear that it is not Claudius' murder of his father that affects Hamlet the most, but the subsequent remarriage and his realisation of his mother's uncontrollable sexuality. Hamlet's real fear is that Gertrude *does* have something within which is invisible to him, that she is a person in her own right with feelings and experiences that he cannot understand or control. Although Gertrude says that Hamlet has turned her eyes into her soul, what he actually shows her in the mirror is not her soul, but his own. Female sexuality is, of course, necessary for reproduction, for life itself. Hamlet's suicidal melancholy arises out of the fact that his mother's sexuality – which so disgusts and horrifies him – is also responsible for his existence, now rendered hateful and corrupt. In the next section, I will consider the possible connection between the male characters' fear of the reproductive female body (a dangerous, generative “nothing”) and

descriptions of Ophelia's speech as “nothing,” which nevertheless contains a dangerous power to “breed” excess meanings.

6.4 Pregnant Speech and the Economy of Annihilation

For centuries, there has been a great debate among critics whether Hamlet is “truly” mad or not. In the play, Hamlet confesses to his mother that his madness is a calculated strategy: “That I essentially am not in madness, / but mad in craft.” (III, iv, 171-172) But Hamlet, ironically, is not a good actor. The mime of madness he performs for Ophelia can only be described as “overdone” (to borrow from Hamlet's own criticism of bad actors). The speech he adopts is less Tom o' Bedlam and more Lear's fool. He cannot resist playing linguistic jokes and showing off his skill at reasoning with paradoxes; even Polonius detects a method in his madness.

The critical debate about the “truth” of Ophelia's madness is very different from the debate about whether Hamlet is “truly” mad. In the case of the latter, it is a dramaturgical question, relating to the individual character. But Ophelia's madness has been interpreted as representing the truth of all women. Tracing the genealogy of Ophelia's representation from early modern Europe to the twentieth century, Elaine Showalter shows that the “picturesque” quality of Ophelia's madness was institutionalised by male critics and artists as a true representation of women. Significantly, she cites an influential psychologist who called Ophelia a “copy from nature,” an interpretation that betrays complete faith in Shakespeare's mimesis. But she also shows how the representation started to “infiltrate reality,” being used by women to express their own sense of mental distress. Despite occasional feminist appropriations attempting to give her more substance, she concludes that Ophelia was frequently reduced, in her madness, to an “absence” or a “nothing,” lacking personhood. For Showalter, part of the responsibility of feminist criticism is to expose the “patriarchal ideology of representation” of which the character of Ophelia is a prime example.

Carol Thomas Neely identifies fragmentation and cultural quotation – singing of ballads and use of ritualised phrases – as some of the features of Ophelia's speech of madness. She points out that the latter quality makes the mad character's discourse a cultural discourse, rather than a personal one. However, in this section, I am more interested in other characters' descriptions of Ophelia's speech than her speech itself.

Pregnant Ophelia

The word “pregnant” is used in the play to describe Hamlet's, rather than Ophelia's, madness – but it is used by Ophelia's father, immediately after a conversation in which Hamlet compares Ophelia's possible conception of a child to the breeding of maggots in a dead dog:

> HAMLET For if the sun breed maggots in a dead dog, being a good kissing carrion – have you a daughter? […] Let her not walk i'th' sun. Conception is a blessing, but not as your daughter may conceive.
>
> […]
>
> POLONIUS How pregnant sometimes his replies are! A happiness that often madness hits on, which reason and sanity could not so prosperously be delivered of. (II, ii, 18-15; 206-8)

Later, Hamlet reiterates his view that the female reproductive body is corrupt and sinful when he asks Ophelia why she would be a “breeder of sinners” and urges her to go to a nunnery. (III, i, 122-123) Hamlet also obscenely twists Ophelia's own words (“I think nothing, my lord”) into a reference to the vagina as they wait for the opening of the “Mousetrap” play (“That's a fair thought to lie between maid's legs”). (III, ii, 106-107)

When describing dramaturgical possibilities of the play, Jan Kott mentions his view that Hamlet and Ophelia have “slept together.” For evidence, critics with the same opinion point to two bawdy songs that Ophelia sings in her madness:

> Then up he rose, and donned his clothes,
> And dupped the chamber door;
> Let in the maid, that out a maid
> Never departed more.
> […]
> Young men will do't if they come to't,
> By Cock, they are to blame.
> Quoth she 'Before you tumbled me,
> You promised me to wed.'

So would I 'a' done, by yonder sun,
An thou hadst not come to my bed. (IV, v, 51-64)

Combined with Hamlet's references to conception, this could suggest that Ophelia was pregnant at the time of her death. This interpretation was emphasised in Soviet productions of the 1920s, according to Grigori Kozintsev. He quotes the actress N. A. Belevtseva's memoirs, where she describes how she rejected an offer to work with the theatre director Vsevolod Meyerhold after "[h]e portrayed the character in coarse, naturalistic terms. 'Ophelia loves Hamlet,' he said, 'but she loves him with earthly love. She is carrying his child and here one should not apply any lacquer. She is pregnant, heavy, simple, without any clouds.'" According to Kozintsev, the brilliance of Meyerhold's interpretation committed violence on past interpretations of Ophelia, as he intended:

> He tarred those Ophelias like the gates of prostitutes in old villages. And he stripped off the lacquer, this is where the brilliance would have come from! […] Applause would have broken out in the auditorium – a stooping middle-aged man with a hooked nose and untidy hair would have become in the eyes of the company the irrevocably pregnant, undoubted Ophelia. And all other Ophelias would have perished – Gretchens with flowers in their long curly hair. Away with "clouds"! No more "clouds"!
>
> The next day he would have said to the actress, "Pregnant? Why pregnant? Who ever thought of such an idiotic idea?"[209]

Echoing Showalter's critique, Kozintsev notes both the actress' distaste for this interpretation of a female character and the way in which the male interpreter is celebrated for his brilliance. Meyerhold's interpretation sees Ophelia as an empty vessel (a "belly," an important word for Meyerhold, in Kozintsev's estimation) waiting to be filled by male theories of her inner truth and subjectivity. Rather than reveal the personhood of Ophelia, this interpretation simply reproduces Hamlet's misogynistic view of women as mere bodies without souls, without reason, and only relevant in connection with the man she loves – as well as the men who interpret her, until they "become" her.

[209] Kozintsev 103-104

Kozintsev himself describes Ophelia's tragedy as a "tragedy of submission."[210] His 1964 film version of *Hamlet* highlights the severe restrictions imposed on Ophelia – the ways in which the patriarchal society in which she is trapped makes her full personhood impossible. In one scene, Ophelia is shown being dressed by her attendants in constricting iron underclothes resembling torture devices; in another, she dances with puppet-like motions to the music of a lute. Her last scenes of madness are some of the most poignant and memorable parts of the film. First, the mad Ophelia is still followed around by her attendants, who attempt to re-cover her with the veil that keeps sliding off her head. She grasps several times at the neck of her rigid dress as if being choked; at the end of the scene, she loosens the back of the dress, revealing her underclothes. In the next scene of madness, she is a small figure in her nightgown, surrounded by Laertes' silent, armoured soldiers. But the film also shows that Ophelia is trapped as much by words, objectified, negated, and imprisoned by male representations as by her clothing or the stone walls of the castle. If Hamlet feels that Denmark is a prison, it is so much more one for Ophelia. It succeeds in showing her desire for freedom, but also the impossibility of her attaining it in those circumstances.

Ophelia's Dangerous Speech

Before we even see or hear the mad Ophelia, we already get a detailed description of her speech from Horatio:

> Her speech is nothing,
> Yet the unshaped use of it doth move
> The hearers to collection. They aim at it,
> And botch the words up fit to their own thoughts,
> Which, as the winks and nods and gestures yield them,
> Indeed would make one think there might be thought,
> Though nothing sure, yet much unhappily. (IV, v, 7-13)

Though Gertrude initially refuses to speak to Ophelia, she changes her mind after hearing Horatio's description, saying, "'Twere good she were spoken with, for she may strew / Dangerous conjectures in ill-breeding minds." (IV, v, 14-15) Gertrude sees Ophelia's words as (unintentional) rhetorical weapons with the ability to disseminate thoughts in their hearers, which may proliferate

[210] Kozintsev 70

uncontrollably and cause trouble for her and the court. The queen's own words, spoken with her royal authority, are necessary to thwart their dangerous effects. The generative power identified by Gertrude and Horatio in Ophelia's speech rests, paradoxically, in its quality of nothing, of contentlessness. It is an empty form that can fit any content, dangerous not because of a *lack* of meaning but rather in its capacity to breed an *excess* of meaning in the minds of its hearers. Later, Laertes would echo the same observation, describing Ophelia's speech thus: "This nothing's *more* than matter." (IV, v, 172, emphasis mine).

But Laertes remarks upon her madness even before she says a word; the actor playing Ophelia presumably enters the stage performing a mime of madness. Her silence already speaks. When she does speak, Laertes comments on the moving quality of her speech, which he attributes due to its lack of persuasive intent: "Hadst thou thy wits, and didst persuade revenge, / It could not move thus." (IV, v, 167-168) Ophelia's speech of madness (as described by Laertes and Horatio) differs from Hamlet's feigned madness due to its utter lack of calculation; it is a madness without method. Ophelia's speech is non-rhetorical, having no persuasive intent, but at the same time, it can only be called rhetorical in its emphasis on form at the expense of content.

In the last chapter, I analysed the paradox of the generative nothing in *King Lear*: Cordelia's "nothing" generates everything – it is supremely powerful and fearsome, in the eyes of men, with the potential for annihilation of male identity, life, and power. In Hamlet, too, the male characters attempt, rhetorically, to turn women's bodies and women's speech into "nothing," mere appearance without content, bodies without souls, or idols. In Chapter 3, I showed that the iconoclasts feared images for the power they supposedly didn't have. Similarly, male characters in *Hamlet* fear women for the uncontrollable power of their bodies, "nothings" with the capacity to generate everything. Women are a paradox in the patriarchal ideology; despite all attempts to turn women into nothing, they remain real, existent, uncontrollable and inassimilable.

The General Economy of Annihilation

In the last chapter, I also argued that both Cordelia's silence and the paradoxes of the mad Lear approached a sovereign, non-significative discourse – a movement from what Derrida (using concepts from Bataille) called a restricted economy of significance to the general economy of non-meaning: a speech that slides towards silence. Ophelia's speech is also non-significative; but rather

than approaching a paradoxical sovereignty like Lear, it only illustrates her utter powerlessness and subjugation, ending in ultimate annihilation.

Laertes' vow to avenge Ophelia's madness, on the other hand, uses the logic of the restricted economy, characterised by calculation and exchange: “By heaven, thy madness shall be paid by weight / Till our scale turns the beam.” (IV, v, 155) Revenge exists in the restricted economy, demanding a life in exchange for a life, to balance the account between men – a view which imagines that one person can be substituted for another. Stephen Greenblatt points out another reference to the restricted economy made by Hamlet (I, ii, 152-153), a reference which invokes the desired opposite: a general economy of the sacred, characterised by excess, sacrifice, and waste.

> “Thrift, thrift, Horatio. The funeral baked meats / Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables” [. . .] In Hamlet's bitter jest, food prepared for his father's funeral has been used for his mother's marriage, a confounding of categories that has stained both social rituals in the service of thrift. At issue is not only […] an aristocratic disdain for prudential virtue, but a conception of the sacred as incompatible with a restricted economy, an economy of calculation and equivalence.[211]

This attitude finds its ultimate expression in Hamlet's accusation that his mother's crime of lust turned religion into a mere “rhapsody of words.” As Greenblatt explains, Hamlet is disgusted by what he sees as the commodification, desacralisation, or cheapening of the sacred by the logic of the restricted economy. But the ghost's injunction towards revenge is also part of the same logic, demanding a life for a life, forming the prison in which Hamlet is ensnared. His hatred for the restricted economy of revenge comes from his longing for the general economy of justice.

Hamlet's turning point from procrastination to action occurs at his chance meeting with Fortinbras' captain, who tells him that the army is headed to Poland to fight for “a little patch of ground / That hath in it no profit but the name.” Hamlet's first reaction is horror at the wastefulness and absurdity of the endeavour, calling it an invisible, internal, fatal disease caused by “much wealth and peace.” (IV, iv, 9.1-9.18) However, when Hamlet thinks it over, his initial horror turns to admiration and a desire to emulate Fortinbras' heroism and courage. His change of mind starts with a question that

[211] Stephen Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013) 242

echoes Lear's “O, reason not the need. Allow not nature more than nature needs, / Man's life is cheap as beast's” (*King Lear*, II, ii, 430-433):

> What is a man
> If his chief good and market of his time
> Be but to sleep and feed? – a beast, no more.
> Sure, he that made us with such large discourse,
> Looking before and after, gave us not
> That capability and god-like reason
> To fust in us unused. (IV, iv, 9.23-9.29)

Fortinbras' sacrifice of thousands of lives for a “straw” makes sense in the logic of the general economy, characterised by waste, or an expenditure without reserve, rather than thrift. For Hamlet, this may indeed be a rash and foolish act, but what matters is that it is also a sovereign act:

> Witness this army of such mass and charge,
> Led by a delicate and tender prince,
> Whose spirit with divine ambition puffed
> Makes mouths at the invisible event –
> Exposing what is mortal and unsure
> To all that fortune, death, and danger dare,
> Even for an eggshell. (IV, iv, 9.37-9.43)

Hamlet's estimate of the size of the armies fighting over this land goes from “two thousand souls and twenty thousand ducats” to “twenty thousand men” within the span of thirty-five lines, suggesting that distinctions between great and small numbers (or even between gold and men) matter little in the mathematics of the general economy. In the same way, Hamlet's estimate of the length of time elapsed after his father's death shrinks from two months to one in his first soliloquy, and then even further, to two hours by the third act. Not only is the time out of joint, but in the sacred, sacrificial, and sovereign general economy, time is also experienced differently according to the strength of the mourner's grief.

Conclusion

Throughout the play, Hamlet castigates himself for his lack of action, his tendency towards thought, contemplation, and the use of speech to defer action. Fortinbras is Hamlet's foil, a mirror that (like all mirrors) reflects him backwards. Fortinbras is the Hamlet in khaki (or armour) who truly does not "hesitate to shoot." Unlike the anti-polemical Stephen Dedalus, who recognises and values the reciprocal relationship between the weapon of speech and its wielder, Hamlet hates his tendency towards speech, which he sees as mere hesitation, cowardice, and delaying his important duty. He desires to become the Übermensch he sees in the mirror of Fortinbras and finally follows his example, upholding rashness as the best of virtues. Hamlet's strategy of "madness" becomes a different kind of madness, identified by Jan Kott: the essential madness of politics and war. Unlike Lear's reason-in-madness, the Hamlet of Act 5 exemplifies the madness-in-reason of the ideology of modernity – a madness that leads to mutually assured destruction, to annihilation within the play, and even forecasting the concentration camps and open-air prisons in our time. It is only in Hamlet's initial hesitation, inaction, and attempt to defer the end through speech that one can find seeds of resistance; what he is resisting then is not an external power but his own capacity for destruction. Stephen Dedalus sees speech as a weapon to wield against war itself, urging himself to embrace passivity and "be acted on"; Hamlet, on the other hand, literalises the daggers of speech, and finds that they escape his control: the dagger-words and poison-in-jest turn into actual swords and poison.

Hamlet's mistake is thinking that he could control the power of rhetoric and fiction and use them for his own particular political ends; fiction is no mere nothing, and has a power of its own that acts against its wielders' intentions. The daggers of speech proliferate and go astray; the strategy of rhetorical hypocrisy winds up ensnaring Hamlet and six other characters along with the intended target of Hamlet's revenge. Unforeseen contingency and accident shape the events brought about by this initial act as well as by the characters' responses to each subsequent act. Even Claudius' plans for defusing Hamlet's threat go awry, mirroring the devastation that results from Hamlet's confidence in being able to control the consequences of his strategy. Hamlet finds himself unable to control the weapon he initially devised, and it leads to his own undoing. "For 'tis the sport to have the engineer / Hoised with his own petard," (III, iv, 185.5-185.6) Hamlet declares with evident pleasure at the anticipation of the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, but this declaration turns out to be ironic, since the same darkly humorous fate befalls Hamlet and every other character trying to use the weapon of rhetoric to their own ends. The awareness of this paradoxical

contingency, finding themselves trapped in a situation that the characters are responsible for instigating but which is ultimately beyond their control, is the tragedy of *Hamlet*. It is also the tragedy of our nuclear age (which, however, extinguishes the "existence, possibility and significance" of all tragedy and all literature).[212]

In the next chapter, I will look further at the conflict between revenge and justice in *Hamlet*, particularly with reference to doomsday, or the Last Judgement, which is referred to several times in the play. Again starting with Stephen's reflections on the ghost, then moving on to Derrida's thoughts on messianic justice in his combined reading of Marx and the ghost in *Hamlet*, I will try to understand what kind of apocalypse is presented in *Hamlet.*

[212] Derrida, "No Apocalypse" 27

CHAPTER 7

Spectres of the Apocalypse in *Hamlet*

Death is intellectually incomprehensible to Hamlet; it is an inassimilable mystery which he dwells on incessantly throughout the play. In his meditation on suicide, Hamlet refers to death as "the undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveller returns," (III, i, 81) an ironic description since he has spoken with a *revenant* from that country: the ghost of his own father, who has commanded him to avenge his death. Instead of revealing the ultimate truth about death and the afterlife, the ghost presents Hamlet with a new mystery. It is an undecidable and terrifying apparition: simultaneously visible and invisible, existent and non-existent, in a liminal space between life and death – therefore impossible to ascertain whether it is "honest" or dishonest.

Death cannot be experienced by the dead, only by the living, who survive to mourn the death of the Other. In "No Apocalypse, Not Now," Derrida points out that the difference between death and nuclear catastrophe is that the latter event *cannot* be mourned, being an annihilation without remainder, and therefore without survivors. The spectre of nuclear annihilation is a grotesque parody of the awaited apocalypse, which promises to redeem the suffering of history by delivering true, conclusive justice at the Last Judgement. But the fiction of the apocalypse also illuminates the nature of nuclear annihilation: the mirror of the apocalypse reflects its twin ghost, darkly, in reverse, presenting an illusion without substance.

In the last chapter, I examined how the characters in *Hamlet* attempted and failed to wield the weapon of rhetoric for their own political ends, leading finally to a scene of total destruction, a massacre which could appropriately be termed "image of that horror." But what about "the promised end," the apocalypse? In Chapter 5, I argued that *King Lear* presented something close to Derrida's "apocalypse without apocalypse" by demystifying and subverting Biblical prophecy and presenting only annihilation, rather than a final revelation of truth. Unlike the pagan *King Lear*, *Hamlet* is set in a Christian world, containing numerous references to Christian doctrine and scripture, including repeated references to doomsday and the trumpets which announce the Last Judgement in the Book of Revelation. In this chapter, I will try to understand the attitude towards the apocalypse in *Hamlet*, how it may resemble or differ from the paradoxical apocalypse of *King Lear*.

In the first section of this chapter, I will refer again to the theory about *Hamlet* presented in the ninth chapter of Joyce's *Ulysses*, focusing on Stephen Dedalus' meditations on the nature of the ghost and the soul in the context of Christian apocalypticism. In the second section, I will examine Derrida's appropriation of the ghost in *Hamlet* to conjure up the spirits of Marxism in *Specters of Marx.* I'm interested in the way that Joyce and Derrida connect the paradoxes of the ghost to the paradoxes of representation (both existing in a liminal space between presence and absence, spirit and matter, body and soul, and life and death). I will also look at Derrida's reflections on the irreducibility of law and justice illuminated by the ghost's injunction, and then his proposed "messianism without messianism" which may open up a space for justice-to-come through disjointed time. In the third section, I will examine the references to doomsday, purgatory, and heavenly justice in *Hamlet*, Hamlet's changing attitude to death in the graveyard scene, and finally, Hamlet's seeming acceptance of "special providence" towards the end. I take as a hypothesis the notion that Derrida's paradoxical "messianism without messianism" may illuminate the attitude towards justice and the apocalypse presented in *Hamlet*.

7.1 The Ghost, Mourning, and the Day of Doom in *Ulysses*

In the ninth chapter of *Ulysses*, Stephen Dedalus tries to convince his friends of his theory that Shakespeare is Hamlet's father, and by implication, his wife Anne Shakespeare (née Hathaway) must be "the guilty queen." John Eglinton dismisses the relevance of Shakespeare's wife to the interpretation of the play by saying that "[h]er ghost at least has been laid for ever. She died, for literature at least, before she was born."[213] Stephen responds that "she died sixtyseven years after she was born" and paints a vivid picture of her life in marriage and widowhood. Eglinton also mocks Stephen for believing that "*Hamlet* is a ghoststory" and warns the others that "he wants to make our flesh creep." Instead of denying this, Stephen uses one of his Aristotelian "dagger definitions" to define a ghost:

> What is a ghost? […] One who has faded into impalpability through death, through absence, through change of manners. Elizabethan London lay as far from Stratford as

[213] Joyce 182

> corrupt Paris lies from virgin Dublin. Who is the ghost from *limbo patrum*, returning to the world that has forgotten him? Who is king Hamlet?[214]

Stephen implies that Shakespeare had become a ghost when he returned to his hometown after a long absence: a returnee from exile, or *revenant*. The ghost in *Hamlet* too comes back from his "prison-house" in purgatory, a liminal space between heaven and hell, where souls of the dead go to be purged of any remaining sins for which they could not seek absolution in life. Stephen also remembers the ghost's line revealing his identity as: "*Hamlet, I am thy father's spirit.*" The question of the ghost is also the question of the soul, or the spirit.

The Ghost and the Aristotelian Soul

In the last chapter, I showed that Stephen used an Aristotelian-inspired ("peripatetic") philosophical method to gently mock the mysticism of his Theosophist friend Russell, who believed that the purpose of art was to reveal the "formless spiritual essences" existing in "Plato's world of ideas." Plato also believed in metempsychosis, or the transmigration of souls after death from one material body to another – a concept that Aristotle rejected, along with Plato's world of ideas. This word and concept are woven through the text of *Ulysses*, figuring most prominently when Bloom explains its meaning to Molly in the fourth chapter.

In Stephen's view, Hamlet's views on the soul are similar to Plato's: Aristotle, he says, "would find Hamlet's musings about the afterlife of his princely soul, the improbable, insignificant and undramatic monologue, as shallow as Plato's."[215] In his first soliloquy, too, Hamlet wishes that his "too, too solid flesh would melt, thaw and resolve itself into a dew," suggesting a Platonic disdain for the material body. He refers to the immortality of the soul several times, but this is derived from Christian doctrine, rather than Plato. The "improbable, insignificant and undramatic monologue" referred to by Stephen is Hamlet's famous soliloquy on suicide in the third act, where he imagines death as a sleep and expresses dread for the unknown afterlife.

Despite his rejection of Platonic idealism, Stephen is not a materialist either. He parodies the materialist view – which rejects the soul – by imagining all the molecules of his body being

[214] Joyce 180
[215] Joyce 178

replaced so that "I is other I now," thus, released from his obligation to pay his friend the pound he owes him. He then refutes this absurdity by reference to Aristotle: "But I, entelechy, form of forms, am I by memory because under everchanging forms."[216]

In his essay on the use of Aristotle's *De Anima* in *Ulysses*, David Ayers points out that Aristotle did not conceive of an "eternal" or immortal – much less a transmigratory – soul as imagined by Plato. Ayers also stresses the importance of the medieval commentary of Aristotle by Thomas Aquinas for Stephen, who he argues questions the Thomistic concept of the soul as immortal, incorruptible, and created directly by God (as well as the Aristotelian notion). Ayers quotes Heidegger's interpretation of the word "entelechy" which he uses to explain his theory of Being, defending the importance of teleology: Heidegger explains that "the basic characteristic of a being is its telos, which does not mean goal or purpose but end [… that is,] completion in the sense of coming to fulfilment," and that entelechy is "the highest term that Aristotle used for Being: entelecheia, something's holding-(or maintaining)-itself-in-its-completion-(or limit)."[217]

Ayers, following Aristotle's drier definition in *Metaphysics*, describes entelechy as "actualised potential" or "actualised entity." Entelechy therefore refers to the relationship between soul and body, which are not two separate or separable substances, as Plato imagined – rather, the soul is the governing *form* of the individual animal body. This definition is complicated by another assertion made by Aristotle that all perceived objects also have a form, and that these forms exist *in* the perceiving soul, and thus, the soul is the "form of forms" as well as "all existing things." Ayers connects Aristotle's more expanded definition of the soul with Joyce's aspiration to include "all things" in *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*:

> The assertion that the soul is "all things" gives the fullest meaning to the notion of "form of forms." Without investigating every alleyway or indeed freeway which this phrase seems to open, we can note at least how this notion of soul connects the individual animal to the whole world of the living and unliving and in principle allows the opening of all the areas of thought which the biologist's attention to the individual

[216] Joyce 182
[217] David Ayers, "De Anima: Or *Ulysses* and the Theological Turn in Modernist Studies," *Humanities* 6.57 (2017): 7, MDPI <dx.doi.org/10.3390/h603005> 09 Feb 2020

being had bracketed. This phrase too could stand as an epigraph to the encyclopaedism of Joyce's project in *Ulysses* and the *Wake*.[218]

Aristotle's materialism is not extreme, as in Stephen's parody reducing the body to molecules: instead of reducing reality to matter, Aristotle argues that "forms" can only be instantiated in matter. Thus, there is no such thing as an immortal or transmigratory soul. Stephen also prefers Aristotle to Plato because Aristotle defended poets while Plato "would have banished [him, and all poets] from his commonwealth".[219] However, Stephen is not entirely convinced by Aristotle's theory of the soul, particularly its blanket rejection of the soul's immortality – and thus, of the idea of the ghost. Plato stressed the importance of the soul over the body and the material world, which for him was only a shadow of the true ideal reality. The Platonist sees everything in the material world as pointing to some deeper spiritual significance; the Aristotelian denies the existence of spirits, of mystery, secrets, and the unknown all together. Rather than steering his ship away from the Platonic whirlpool to crash against the rock of Aristotelian materialism, Stephen tries to navigate in the narrow passage between the two.

With his mockery of the ghost story, Eglinton implies that the ghost is a "nothing," a trivial theme made up to frighten children, but even he recognises that this "nothing" also has the power to affect the body (to make the flesh creep). A belief in the afterlife of the soul may be shallow, but the ghost is not a mere nothing: it "exists" in the liminal space between non-existence and existence, between spirit and body, between life and death, and between absence and presence. With his theory emphasising the importance of Hamlet's father's ghost, as well as his defence of the reality of Anne Shakespeare's life and death, Stephen shows that ghosts can never be assumed to have been laid to rest, once and for all; they haunt us incessantly, demanding our recognition and response, especially when they are dismissed as unimportant or unreal.

The Ghost at the Day of Doom

Christian theology too is intensely concerned with the idea of the ghost. Stephen points out that Hamlet's father's ghost could not have known the manner of his death unless he was given that knowledge by God in the afterlife:

[218] Ayers 7
[219] Joyce 178

> The soul has been before stricken mortally, a poison poured in the porch of a sleeping ear. But those who are done to death in sleep cannot know the manner of their quell unless their Creator endow their souls with that knowledge in the life to come. […] This is why the speech (his lean unlovely English) is always turned elsewhere, backward […] He goes back, weary of the creation he has piled up to hide him from himself, an old dog licking an old sore. But, because loss is his gain, he passes on towards eternity in undiminished personality, untaught by wisdom he has written or by the laws he has revealed. His beaver is up. He is a ghost now, the wind by Elsinore's rocks or what you will, the sea's voice, a voice heard only in the heart of him who is the substance of his shadow, the son consubstantial with the father.[220]

For Stephen, Shakespeare's fictional son Hamlet is the "substance of a shadow" and "consubstantial with the father." A shadow is both a nothing and a thing, an insubstantial absence of light which points to the existence of another substantial thing which casts the shadow. When Lear loses his power, he can only turn to his shadow to understand his true self (which the fool tells him is "nothing" without power). Hamlet also considers the nature of a shadow in his repartee with his old school friends: Rosencrantz diagnoses his affliction as ambition; for him, "the very substance of the ambitious is a shadow of a dream." Hamlet points out that a dream *is* a shadow, and Rosencrantz calls ambition so insubstantial a thing that it is "a shadow's shadow." Hamlet responds that if those who aspire to power are shadows, it is the powerless who truly exist: "then are our beggars bodies, and our monarchs and outstretch'd heroes the beggars' shadows." At this point, he ends the exchange because he "cannot reason." (II, ii, 246-258) Here, Hamlet accidentally hits upon the lesson that Lear learned when he realises that "unaccommodated man" is "the thing itself." But this is a truth beyond reason, accessible only to Lear's sovereign madness; as long as Hamlet plays the game of power, he can never be divested of his illusions.

Stephen's reflection on the consubstantiality of Shakespeare's ghost and his spiritual/fictional son brings to his mind the Christian doctrine of consubstantiality of the trinity. An irreverent paraphrase of the Credo runs through Stephen's mind:

[220] Joyce 188-189

> He who Himself begot, middler the Holy Ghost, and Himself sent Himself, Agenbuyer, between Himself and others, Who, put upon by His friends, stripped and whipped, was nailed like bat to barndoor, starved on crosstree, Who let Him bury, stood up, harrowed hell, fared into heaven and there these nineteen hundred years sitteth on the right hand of His Own Self but yet shall come in the latter day to doom the quick and dead when all the quick and dead shall be dead already.[221]

As Stephen notes, the story of Christ is also the story of the history of the world as conceived by the Bible, ending with the coming apocalypse. The apocalypse itself is a ghost story, concerning the relation between body and spirit: it is not merely the promised resurrection of the *spirits* of the faithful, but also their material bodies, in perfect, immortal form. The mystery of the relationship between body and soul, and thus, the true nature of the ghost will only be revealed at the apocalypse. St Paul describes that moment as a change in the state of the body:

> Behold, I shewe you a secret thing, We shall not all sleepe, but we shall all be changed, In a moment, in the twinckling of an eye at the last trumpet: for the trumpet shall blow, and the dead shalbe raysed vp incorruptible, and we shalbe changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption: and this mortall must put on immortalitie. So when this corruptible hath put on incorruption, and this mortall hath put on immortalitie, then shalbe brought to passe the saying that is written, Death is swallowed vp into victorie. (1 Corinthians 15:51-55)

Christ was Logos *incarnated*, spirit given flesh, both God and man. And, as Stephen's parody of the Credo emphasises, Christ's birth, death, and resurrection attain their religious meaning through the paradox of the (holy) ghost. He also emphasises that nineteen hundred years later (in Joyce's day), God is still hidden, still secret, still absent. In Revelation, it is promised that "euen the mysterie of God shall be finished" after the sounding of the last trumpet. (Revelation 10:7) Along with the revelation of ultimate truth, the apocalypse also promises *justice* in the form of God's true judgement; this is the meaning of "doomsday." (Both "apocalypse" and "doom" have largely lost their original significance of "revelation" and "judgement" respectively. In the present day, both words have come to denote disaster, destruction, or annihilation *without* revelation or justice.)

[221] Joyce 189

Those who will be judged are “all the quick and the dead,” who, Stephen says, “shall be dead already.” This is a reference to the “second death” that befalls the enemies of God in Revelation in the form of tortures and ultimate annihilation; it is impossible to escape the first death, but through faith in Divine Providence and the free gift of grace, one may escape the second.

In his satire of the Credo, Stephen also plays on the absurdity of Christ being his own father as well as the “middler” who comes between the father and the son. Later in the chapter, he calls fatherhood a “mystical estate, an apostolic succession, from only begetter to only begotten. On that mystery […] the church is founded and founded irremovably because founded, like the world, on the void. […] Paternity may be a legal fiction.”[222] He emphasises the bodily connection that characterises motherhood, contrasting it with the seemingly immaterial and thus mystical (or at any rate, uncertain) nature of fatherhood. This follows on from his earlier reference to the Last Judgement, which he imagines conducted by a non-existent Father-God, while reflecting on the Jewish tradition of incestuous intermarriage: “Whether these be sins or virtues old Nobodaddy will tell us at doomsday leet.”[223]

Unlike Hamlet, who is in mourning for his father and blames his still living mother for her hasty remarriage, Stephen is in mourning for his recently deceased mother. His meditations on the ghost or spirit occur in this context – and this is perhaps the reason why it is so important for him to resurrect the ghost of Anne Shakespeare as well as William. His relationship with his disappointing father, Simon Dedalus, starkly contrasts with the relationship of Hamlet with his own father, whom he idealised to the point of worship. Unlike his parents, Stephen does not believe in God, and he refused to honour his mother's last wish to pray for her. This implies that Stephen does not believe in the soul, spirit, or ghost either. However, Stephen's reflections on the nature of the soul in the book are a response to the comment by Buck Mulligan, his materialist friend, that his mother is “beastly dead,” something that Stephen finds offensive. This also explains his reflections on the apocalypse. The mystery that shall be revealed at the apocalypse is not just the mystery of God, as Revelation promises, but one which exists in all human beings: what is this paradoxical thing (or nothing) called spirit that leaves when the body dies? What is the memory that remains, that endures through the work of mourning?

[222] Joyce 199
[223] Joyce 197

As I showed in Chapter 3, the question of representation was seen as linked to the mystery of the relationship between body and spirit: words were seen as the bodies or fleshly cases of the meaning or spirit of language. Early modern iconomachs trusted textual representation because of its apparent immaterial or spiritual quality: God Himself is Logos, the authority that fixes meaning to language, and the sacred book is the true representation of the Word of God. Images, on the other hand, were considered to be idols – false representations, simulacra, or bodies *without* spirit, which nevertheless contained a dangerously seductive power. According to Michael O'Connell, the iconomachs considered theatre to be particularly immoral since it relied on impersonation, the use of the human body, as a form of representation. To give context, O'Connell cites the important religious debate in the medieval and early modern period between sects that emphasised the material body of Christ and those who conceived of Christ as pure spirit. (The Theosophists of Joyce's day would fit into the latter category.)

These two debates – about representation and meaning, and the body and spirit – are not unconnected; they converge most evidently in the debates about the Eucharist. Following the implication of iconoclastic arguments, however, even textual representation eventually becomes a problem due to its double nature: its irreconcilable literal and spiritual dimensions. Written words too are shadows that point to other shadows, never reaching substance or presence. The spirit in the text is as elusive as the spirit in the body. In the next section, I will consider Derrida's reflections on the nature of the ghost, representation, and the apocalypse in his combined reading of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and the works of Karl Marx.

7.2 Spectres of Justice: Disjointed Time and Messianism (without Messianism)

Specters of Marx was born out of a speech that Derrida gave at a colloquium called “Whither Marxism?” in the early 1990s, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, when many Western liberals were pronouncing the death of Marxism. In *Specters*, Derrida responds to Francis Fukuyama's “neoevangelist” book *The End of History and the Last Man*, where Fukuyama alerts people to the “good news” that “the end of history” has arrived, in the form of US-style liberal democracy. Derrida points out that the declarations of Marx's death and triumphalist apocalyptic claims made by liberals “of the Fukuyama type” are unnecessary unless they feared the return of Marx's ghost. Attempting to begin to think the future of Marxist thought, Derrida draws attention to the

multivocality of Marx's works: there is never just *one* voice or spirit of Marx (or Marxism), but many. Derrida indicates that he wishes to honour and preserve "a certain spirit" of Marxism, characterised by two things: first, the radical critique that it invites of itself; second, the messianic promise (what Derrida describes as a paradoxical "messianism without messianism") inherent in its injunction to future generations, made on behalf of the ghosts of generations past, to deliver justice for the injustices of history. Derrida attempts to understand the nature of this spirit (or spectre) of Marxism and its messianic injunction by considering the ghost in *Hamlet*.

Derrida first identifies the difference between a "spirit" and a "spectre": a spectre, he says, is a spirit with a bodily form, a semblance of flesh which can be clothed or covered, like Hamlet's father dressed "from head to foot" in armour. Those haunted by the spectre are subject to what Derrida calls "the visor effect," which gives the ghost an "incomparable power, perhaps the supreme insignia of power: the power to see without being seen. The helmet effect is not suspended when the visor is raised. Its power, namely its possibility, is in that case recalled merely in a more intensely dramatic fashion."[224] A spectre is not yet a simulacrum, because it retains its identity, being the shade of one who had lived. It has a name, even its armour makes it impossible to identify with certainty. A spectre is both visible and invisible, a *spectral apparition* which shows itself only fleetingly and thus cannot be pinned down and objectively examined. Being visible, it also has a body: it is a "thing" that first "appears" to the guards, then to Horatio and Hamlet.

Derrida points out that this unsettled relationship between the body and the ghost is the very mark of kingship, applying just as well to the living Claudius. What makes Claudius a king is the fiction of royal succession, which entails a separation from his actual body. Therefore, the king, like a ghost, possesses more than one body, as Ernst Kantorowicz famously pointed out. Derrida cites Hamlet, apparently referring to the corpse of Polonius: "The body is with the King, but the King is not with the body. The King, is a thing – […] Of nothing." (IV, i, 25-27) Thus, the spectre complicates the facile opposition between body and spirit, absence and presence, death and life, being an (immaterial, invisible) spirit given a *material* form. For Derrida, the spectre escapes these philosophical distinctions altogether. He argues that the spectre comes from outside the binary oppositions of life and death, from a "life-death" that makes life possible.

[224] Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994) 8

The Figure of the Spectre in Marx

Marx inherited Hegel's dialectical method, but rejected Hegel's idealism, which asserted the priority of the spirit over matter. Instead, he proposed a method of "historical materialism," which recognises the dependence of ideas and concepts on conditions of production of material goods, that is, the dependence of the ideological superstructure on the material base. Marx mocked the absurdity of his contemporaries' belief in the idea of the "spirit" and other mystical concepts, dismissing them as ghosts in their heads. In spite of, or perhaps because of this materialism, Derrida shows, in *Specters*, that Marx was obsessed by ghosts – more specifically, the *idea* or *figure* of the ghost. As we saw from his reading of Plato's *Phaedrus*, the rhetorical figure is never "just" a figure of speech for Derrida: working against the intentions of the writer, it reveals the space where the writer's totalising vision of reality opens up into the unknown, coming from a reserve of unknowledge and non-meaning which makes knowledge and meaning possible. In Derrida's reading, Marx's "spectre" is a figure like Plato's *pharmakon*, a word that can take on many meanings, ambivalent in its power to heal and to harm. Derrida argues that Marx feared the spectre (like Plato feared the *pharmakon*) because of this dangerous power, but that the spectre too comes from the outside of the totalising system of Marxist dialectic. Moreover, it comes from an outside which, Derrida argues, is the very thing which enables historical materialism to exist: religion and theology.

According to Derrida, Marx tried to exorcise the spectre rather than speaking with it and reckoning with its paradoxical presence. Despite (or because of) this, the spectre kept coming back as a rhetorical figure in Marx's own work, most evidently as the first noun in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*: "A spectre is haunting Europe – the spectre of communism."[225] Derrida also points to Marx's mockery of his rival Max Stirner for admitting that he feared the spirits inside himself and others, as well as Marx's attempt to count the ghosts in Stirner's idealist philosophy. Marx names ten ghosts in all, including "God" and "Man," arguing that they are all "fixed ideas," ideologems, or phantasms existing only in the heads of his opponents. In particular, Marx names Christ or "Man-God" as the most spectral of spectres because he is spirit given flesh, a trait which, according to Marx, causes fear or pain in all those who contemplate him.

[225] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," trans. Samuel Moore and Friedrich Engels, *Marx/Engels Selected Works, Vol. One* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1969): 98-137 *Marx/Engels Internet Archive (marxists.org) 1987, 2000* <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/ch01.htm> 05 Dec 2019

Like Marx, Derrida locates Max Stirner's "exemplary fault" in his belief in his own self-created speculations, or representations: "Speculation always speculates on some specter, it speculates in the mirror of what it produces, on the spectacle that it gives itself and that it gives itself to see. It believes in what it believes it sees: in representations."[226] However, Derrida disagrees with Marx when he makes a distinction between ordinary theology, which "believes in ghosts of sensuous imagination," and speculative theology, which "believes in ghosts of non-sensuous abstraction;" Derrida points out that "theology *in general* is belief in ghosts."[227] He also traces the common fear of Marx and Stirner both to their Platonic heritage – particularly Plato's conflation of representations (idols and images) with ghosts (spectres, phantasms, or souls of the dead):

> In their common denunciation [of the spectre], in what is at once most critical and ontological about it, Marx and Saint Max are also heirs to the Platonic tradition, more precisely to the one that associates in a strict fashion image with specter, and idol with phantasm, with the *phantasma* in its phantomatic or errant dimension as living-dead. The "phantasma," which the *Phaedo* or the *Timaeus* do not separate from the *eidola*, are figures of dead souls, they are the souls of the dead: when they are not hanging around funeral monuments and sepulchers (*Phaedo*), they are haunting the souls of certain living persons, day and night (*Timaeus*). Strict and recurrent, this couple does not let itself be undone. It leads one to think that the survival and the return of the living dead belong to the essence of the idol. To its inessential essence, of course. To what gives body to the idea, but a body with a lower ontological content, a body that is less real than the idea itself.[228]

Here, he shows that the mysterious relationship between the signifier and the signified in representation is connected to the mysterious relationship between the body and the spirit, or the ghost. Both the idol and the ghost have a material "body" and an immaterial or spiritual "idea," but in Platonic philosophy, the idol-ghost, although a real, existent thing, is simultaneously *less* real than the Idea it points towards.

[226] Derrida, *Specters* 183
[227] Derrida, *Specters* 183
[228] Derrida, *Specters* 184

In *Specters*, Derrida shows that mysticism and religion reappear in Marx's explanation of commodity fetishism, where Marx describes a table transforming into a "sensuous non-sensuous" thing with a "bodiless body" that performs a theatrical act on stage. The commodity-table seems to be animated by a spectre, something both material and immaterial at once. Derrida implies that the question of representation (and of the ghost) is only taken seriously in religion, which deals with mysticism and the secret, as well as in literature – particularly literature which thinks about its own conditions of possibility. Philosophy, especially a logocentric and dialectical philosophy that aims to resolve all the contradictions unsettled by the spectre, can only try to exorcise the ghost. Ontology, which deals with the existent, cannot deal with the question of the spectre, representation, idols, and other things which are both existent and non-existent. In its place, Derrida proposes a "hauntology," a new philosophical discipline which could study spectral phenomena. Another spectre that this hauntology would deal with is the historical event, ghostly in that its occurrence would be both the first time and the last time, both utterly singular and repetitive, coming back from the past and the future to haunt the present. Derrida notes that the historical event attains its significance when viewed through the lens of another spectral event, or fiction: "the end of history," or the apocalypse.

Law vs. Justice

To understand the spectre of the apocalypse, Derrida turns again to the ghost in *Hamlet*, paying special attention to the figure of "the fretful porpentine" used by the ghost to avoid telling the forbidden secrets of the afterlife:

> But that I am forbid
> To tell the secrets of my prison house,
> I could a tale unfold whose lightest word
> Would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood,
> Make thy two eyes, like stars, start from their spheres,
> Thy knotted and combined locks to part,
> And each particular hair to stand on end
> Like quills upon the fretful porpentine.
> But this eternal blazon must not be
> To ears of flesh and blood. (I, v, 13-22)

Purgatory is outside time; thus, a description of this place would be an “eternal blazon”– a revelation of the mystery of God's judgement in the afterlife. The “fretful porpentine” (or porcupine) looks forward to the “eternal blazon” at the end of history, to the Last Judgement, facing the unknown and sensing the terror, but being unable to describe it. Margreta de Grazia draws attention to Derrida's contrast between the porcupine and the mole (an epithet that Hamlet gives the ghost when he hears it moving about in the cellar), the latter a figure favoured by Hegel to describe the teleological progress of history. De Grazia interprets Derrida's hauntological apocalypse as a severance of eschatology and teleology, a messianic promise to be glimpsed through a present rupture in time rather than at the end of history.

Disjointed Time and Messianism without Messianism

Derrida draws attention to the ghost's injunction and demand for an oath from Hamlet and the witnesses, commanding them to “swear” to keep the knowledge of the apparition secret. Both the injunction and the oath are performative speech acts: not representations of reality, but forms of speech which *act* when spoken. An injunction is a command by a legal authority, and an oath a binding promise made by those who “swear together” in a “conjuration” (Derrida plays on two senses of the word: an act of summoning spirits, as well as a secret political meeting). This oath is performed in blind obedience to the law and in response to the commanding voice of an invisible authority, so without full knowledge of the identity of the person who issues the injunction. But Derrida also identifies *another* kind of injunction: the political appeal for justice from victims of past injustices (the ghosts produced by sexist, imperialist, capitalist, and totalitarian annihilation), as well as another kind of oath: a promise or pledge made in response to this appeal. This second kind of oath and injunction involve an altogether different type of performativity, incommensurable with “normal” performative speech acts, but which, Derrida argues, forms the basis for those acts:

> […] the originary performativity that does not conform to preexisting conventions, unlike all the performatives analyzed by the theoreticians of speech acts, but whose force of *rupture* produces the institution or the constitution, the law itself, which is to say also the meaning that appears to, that ought to, or that appears to have to guarantee it

> in return. *Violence* of the law before the law and before meaning, violence that interrupts time, disarticulates it, dislodges it, displaces it out of its natural lodging: "out of joint."[229]

Derrida is speaking here of Marx's political injunction towards revolution, the Other which arrives to violently overthrow the unjust law and fulfil the pledge to render justice to past victims of capitalist exploitation and annihilation. A revolution would both overturn the existing law and found a new one – it is only from this space of historical rupture that justice can arrive, a justice irreducible to law. Law itself is unjust, working on the principle of revenge. As I showed in Chapter 2, the notion of justice is heavily dependent on an apocalyptic, or Messianic, consciousness of time and history. The apocalypse as described in the Book of Revelation abolishes the Mosaic law based on retaliation, revenge, and retributive justice ("[e]ye for eye, tooth for tooth"), replacing it with the free gift of God's grace – a movement from law towards justice.[230] The apocalypse promises true and final justice-to-come: the combination of God's judgement and destruction in the Book of Revelation is a violence that *destroys* and *founds* the law, as opposed to the neverending cycle of violence in earthly law.[231]

After hearing the ghost's injunction, Hamlet says, "The time is out of joint. O cursèd spite / That ever I was born to set it right!" (I, v, 189-190) Hamlet's "out of joint" imagines the present as a hinge between the past and the future, which, when jointed properly, permits the smooth flow of tradition, legal succession and historical continuity which enables human life and relationships. But acts of great injustice – a brother's murder in this case – produce "disjointed time," time that goes badly. In "disjointed time," Derrida says, the present is heterogeneous and anachronistic, not contemporaneous with itself. The present moment becomes spectral, the living moment haunted by the absent past or future. Hamlet also *curses* the injunction towards revenge, which has been set out to him as his destiny, teleologically pre-determined at the moment of his birth. Here, he shows his

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[229] Derrida, *Specters* 37

[230] God explains to Moses that His law demands an "[e]ye for eye, tooth for tooth, hande for hand, foote for foote, Burning for burning, wound for wounde, stripe for stripe." (Exodus 21:24-25) This law is replaced by the free gift of grace in Revelation for the faithful and annihilation for the sinner: "I wil giue to him that is a thirst, of the well of the water of life freely. He that ouercommeth, shall inherit all things, and I will be his God, and he shall be my sonne. But the fearful and vnbeleeuing, and the abominable and murtherers, and whoremogers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars shall haue their part in the lake, which burneth with fire and brimstone, which is the second death." (Revelation 21:6-8)

[231] See also Jacques Derrida, "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority'," trans. Mary Quaintance, ed. Gil Anidjar, *Acts of Religion* (London: Routledge, 2002) 228-300, and the related idea of the "state of exception" described in Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998)

awareness of being the hero of a revenge tragedy. But he also questions this destiny, finding ways to defer and postpone the act that would fulfil his oath. Hamlet's hesitation to act exists in the irreconcilable difference between revenge and justice, the former begetting cycles of unending violence and the latter a violence which would end the cycle permanently. Continuing from his passage on the "original performativity" of the oath, Derrida draws attention to the multiple meanings simultaneously expressed in his term *différance*:

> It is there that différance, if it remains irreducible, irreducibly required by the spacing of any promise and by the future-to-come that comes to open it, does not mean only […] deferral, lateness, delay, postponement. In the incoercible différance the here-now unfurls. Without lateness, without delay, but without presence, it is the precipitation of an absolute singularity, singular because differing, precisely [*justement*], and always other, binding itself necessarily to the form of the instant, in *imminence and in urgency*: even if it moves toward what remains to come, there is the *pledge* [gage] (promise, engagement, injunction and response to the injunction, and so forth). The pledge is given here and now, even before, perhaps, a decision confirms it. It thus responds without delay to the demand of justice. The latter by definition is impatient, uncompromising, and unconditional.[232]

One sense of Derrida's concept of *différance* is "deferral, lateness, delay, postponement," as he points out. However, the term also refers to the "difference" or space between the promise and the rupture in time that enables it, which comes from the future and moves towards it at once, a messianic singularity binding itself to a spectral present. Thus, the deferral implied by *différance* is a paradoxical one which also signifies its opposite: acting with imminence and urgency, responding instantaneously to the injunction. Thus, this term could describe Hamlet's paradoxical hesitation: he defers the act of revenge that would confirm his oath precisely, justly, to honour his pledge, with which he responded "without delay to the demand of justice."

Derrida invokes an apocalyptic view of time, which gives significance to the present by reference to the end of history, conceived as imminent. It is incommensurate with the modern view of history which imagines time as a series of present moments that follow each other in succession, with no

[232] Derrida, *Spectres* 37

meaningful (that is, providential) link between past, present, and future. In Chapter 2, I examined Walter Benjamin's essay in which he contrasts the Messianic view of time of historical materialism (or Marxism) with the "homogeneous, empty time" of modern historicism. Benjamin points out that the historicist conception of time leaves no room for redemption or justice-to-come in the future, unlike the historical materialist view, which looks forward to the imminent arrival of a Messianic power (in the form of revolution) to redeem the injustices of the past.

Derrida cites Benjamin's essay in *Specters*; his emphasis on the theological and messianic elements in Marx's thought builds on (and questions) Benjamin's assertion that historical materialism could "easily be a match for anyone if it enlisted the services of theology." Derrida's reading of the injunction of the ghosts of the past and messianic justice also follows Benjamin's insistence on significance of the link between the living and the dead: "The past carries with it a temporal index by which it is referred to redemption. There is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one. Our coming was expected on earth."[233] Benjamin identified the "weak Messianic power" of historical materialism as the source of its potential "to make the continuum of history explode." Such an explosion would produce the disjointed time identified by Hamlet, which would be the very thing that opens up the space for the arrival of justice.

Derrida hypothesises that the Abrahamic messianism of the Bible might be a "prefiguration" or "pre-name" of the atheological messianic promise of Marxism. He asks why the two should share a name, if in the latter "no figure of the *arrivant*, even as he or she is heralded, should be predetermined, prefigured, or even pre-named."[234] The latter would then be a paradoxical messianism *without* messianism, or messianism without content, which he defines with an emphasis on disjointed time: "a certain messianic destitution, in a spectral logic of inheritance and generations, but a logic turned toward the future no less than the past, in a heterogeneous and disjointed time."[235] Likening Marx to a refugee in the modern day, Derrida states further that this paradoxical messianism is the *experience* of the promise, characterised by a hospitality without reserve, the anticipation of the future event as the *arrivant* who brings justice, rather than a religious

[233] Benjamin 253-254
[234] Derrida, *Specters* 210
[235] Derrida, *Specters* 228

concept. It is not just Marxist revolution in which Derrida identifies this messianic hope or experience of the promise of justice-to-come, but also in the idea of the *democracy* to come.[236]

In the next section, I will consider the nature of the apocalypse in *Hamlet* – does it present a false image of apocalypse (without revelation) like *King Lear*, or the messianic hope that Derrida referred to in his reading of the ghost in *Hamlet* in order to communicate with the spirit of Marx, or something altogether other?

7.3 The Last Judgement, the Fictions of Death, and Special Providence

In the Book of Revelation, John has a vision of the Last Judgement, or doom, when the dead are resurrected to be individually judged for the last time by God. Although they are judged "according to their woorkes," the outcome is already predetermined: the names of those who will be saved have been "written in the booke of life at the foundation of ye world." (Revelation 17:8) John's vision of doom comes after his vision of the millennium of earthly peace and before he is shown the city of New Jerusalem, where the Elect will dwell with God for eternity:

> And I saw the dead, both great and small stand before God: and the bookes were opened, and another booke was opened, which is the booke of life, and the dead were iudged of those thinges, which were written in the bookes, according to their woorkes. And the sea gaue vp her dead, which were in her, and death and hell deliuered vp the dead, which were in them: and they were iudged euery man according to their woorkes. And death and hell were cast into the lake of fire: this is the second death. And whosoeuer was not found written in the booke of life, was cast into the lake of fire. (Revelation 20:12-15)

[236] Derrida's concept of atheological or universal messianism has been heavily criticised. Two important critiques are those of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who criticised Derrida's total neglect of women in an analysis of messianic thought which finds its roots in patriarchal religions in "Ghostwriting," *Diacritics* 5.2 (Summer 1995): 64-84, JSTOR <https://www.jstor.org/stable/465145> 13 Dec 2019; and Christopher Wise's critique of Derrida's conflation of Zionism and Judaism, reduction of the issue of "the Middle East" to a religious rather than political conflict, and disregarding of the differences in the messianism of the three Abrahamic religions in *Specters* in "Deconstruction and Zionism: Jacques Derrida's 'Specters of Marx'," *Diacritics* 1.1 (Spring 2001): 55-72, JSTOR <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1566315> 13 Dec 2019

Hamlet contains several significant references to doomsday. The first occurs at the beginning of the play, when Horatio takes the appearance of the ghost to be a portent announcing the advent of the apocalypse. Instead of finding this event prefigured in the Bible, however, he connects it with ancient Rome, describing similar omens which he says occurred before the assassination of Julius Caesar:

> In the most high and palmy state of Rome,
> A little ere the mightiest Julius fell,
> The graves stood tenantless, and the sheeted dead
> Did squeak and gibber in the Roman streets
> At stars with trains of fire, and dews of blood,
> Disasters in the sun; and the moist star,
> Upon whose influence Neptune's empire stands,
> Was sick almost to doomsday with eclipse.
> And even the like precurse of feared events,
> As harbingers preceding still the fates,
> And prologue to the omen coming on,
> Have heaven and earth together demonstrated
> Unto our climature and countrymen. (I, i, 106.5-18)

Here, Horatio identifies two types of omens which occurred in ancient Rome: the bodily resurrection of the dead (though not in the imperishable form described by St Paul) and astronomical portents such as eclipses and comets. Horatio's apocalyptic consciousness is evident not only in his invocation of doomsday, but also in the link he makes between two events in history on the basis of their resemblance and deeper meaning: for him, Caesar's death and the appearance of the ghost in Elsinore are not linked temporally or causally, but providentially.

The term occurs again when Hamlet greets his old school friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. He asks them what news they have brought from outside, and Rosencrantz replies that the world's grown honest. Hamlet responds: “Then is doomsday near. But your news is not true.” (II, ii, 234) For Hamlet, the apocalypse is signalled by the improbable idea of the growing *honesty* of the world, rather than by eclipses or the dead rising from their graves. His mother's remarriage and the “smiling villainy” of his uncle have proved to Hamlet that the world is inherently and irredeemably

deceitful. He worries too that the ghost is not an “honest ghost,” but a demonic entity who only has the *appearance* of his father.

Hamlet's next reference to “the doom” occurs in his confrontation with Gertrude in the third act, which I explored in the last chapter. For Hamlet, the enormity of his mother's crime of lust calls into question the truth of sacred representation (plucking the soul out of the body of the marriage contract and turning religion into a “rhapsody of words”). He tells Gertrude that Heaven blushes at her deed and that even “this solidity and compound mass / With tristful visage, as against the doom / Is thought-sick at the act.” (III, iv, 44-49) According to Hamlet, the solid earth is itself “thought-sick” at Gertrude's act, with the “tristful visage” it might wear when doomsday approaches (when the corrupt earth will be destroyed and replaced by the eternal, incorruptible heavenly city). With these references to doom, Hamlet shows that he longs for the “promised end” when truth will be revealed without being covered by representations; God's true judgement will sort the sinners from the saved; and the world will finally grow honest.

Earthly Law, Heavenly Law, and Justice

The next reference to doomsday occurs in the conversation between the two gravedigger Clowns in the fifth act. The First Clown defends his profession through two Biblical references, which are also riddles. The first is to Genesis: like him, he says, Adam was a digger and a gentleman (a gentleman has the right to bear arms, and Adam could not dig without his arms). When explaining this, he calls the Second Clown “a heathen” for not understanding the true meaning of Scripture. His second reference is to Revelation, in the answer to the second riddle: “What is he that builds stronger than either the mason, the shipwright, or the carpenter?” The Second Clown guesses that it must be the gallows-maker, whose constructions “outlive a thousand tenants.” The First Clown castigates him for implying that the gallows is built stronger than the church, but the real answer to the riddle is equally blasphemous: “'a grave-maker'; the houses he makes lasts till doomsday.” (V, i, 38-54)

The First Clown's confidence in his literal (mis)interpretation of Scripture is not only a device for comedy; it also draws attention to the problem of understanding the true meaning of the words of the sacred text, a problem that Revelation promises to end. The Clown's reference can be compared with the next reference to doomsday, which occurs later in the same scene by the priest conducting

Ophelia's funeral. To explain why he is not performing the full rites for Ophelia, the priest refers to "the last trumpet" that announces the Last Judgement in the Book of Revelation:

> Her death was doubtful;
> And, but that great command o'ersways the order,
> She should in ground unsanctified have lodg'd
> Till the last trumpet. For charitable prayers,
> Shards, flints, and pebbles should be thrown on her,
> Yet here she is allowed her virgin rites,
> Her maiden strewments, and the bringing home
> Of bell and burial. (V, i, 209-216)

According to the priest, the "doubtful" case of Ophelia's death renders her unfit to be buried in sanctified ground or even to be mourned with the proper ceremonies. The priest's reference to the trumpets of doomsday strongly implies his belief that she will be damned by God at the Last Judgement. Laertes is incensed by this implication, proclaiming that his sister will be a "minist'ring angel" while the priest "lies howling" in hell. (V, i, 224-225) The priest believes that he already knows what God's judgement will be. In his view, Ophelia is already damned due to her act of suicide. But the priest's interpretation of heavenly law resembles more the highly literal Mosaic law, with works on the principle of retribution or revenge, rather than the free gift of God's grace promised in the Book of Revelation, whereby Ophelia may still be saved. However, the free gift of grace can only be attained through faith rather than good works; the reason that suicide is considered such a grave sin is precisely because it denies God's providence, being an act of despair, a denial of faith. Thus, the *spirit* of God's law is ambiguous, and Ophelia's fate is unclear.

The gravedigger Clowns had also discussed Ophelia's "doubtful" death at the beginning of the scene. According to the First Clown, she should be denied a Christian burial since she "wilfully sought her own salvation," but the Second Clown disagrees: "The coroner hath sat on her, and finds it Christian burial." The First Clown then makes a parody of a legal argument to prove that Ophelia drowned herself willingly. The Second Clown asks, "But is this law?" and the First Clown informs him that it is "coroner's quest law." (V, i, 1-21) The priest referred to an ambiguous "order" overturned by the "great command" of the king, which probably refers to his literal interpretation of

the order of God, or heavenly law. The Clowns, by contrast, believe that the authority to decide the case rests with *earthly* law – the inquest of the coroner, appointed by the crown. The Clown states what the priest only implies: the reason the law has been overturned in this case is because Ophelia is a gentlewoman. The Clowns then complain of a hierarchy among Christians – an ironic complaint since Ophelia's privilege is of little value after her death. The gravediggers know better than anyone that Death is the great leveller, joining all social classes, kings and gentlemen and beggars in its *danse macabre*. The promise of revelation of God's truth is accompanied by the promise that "there shalbe no more death" after the Last Judgement. (Revelation 21:4) But through their parody of legal arguments and blasphemous, irreverent references to Scripture, the Clowns overturn *both* earthly and heavenly law, implying that the only real eschatology is the certain fact of death, a personal apocalypse *without* ultimate revelation or final judgement. With their gallows (or graveside) humour, the Clowns make a mockery of earthly law, social privilege, and apocalyptic promises of revelation and heavenly justice alike.

Fictions of Mourning and Purgatory

In *Hamlet in Purgatory*, Stephen Greenblatt analyses what Hamlet calls the "maimèd rites" of Ophelia's funeral in the context of Reformation debates between Catholics and Protestants. He draws attention to the priest's description of "maiden strewments and the bringing home / Of bell and burial," which resemble Catholic funeral rites:

> The proper funeral that is being invoked here (and partially denied to Ophelia) seems far closer to the full Catholic ritual of internment, with the ringing of bells and attendant ceremonies, than to the simple burial for which zealous Protestants were calling.

Greenblatt points out that rituals and fictions of the afterlife (including purgatory) play an important role in mourning, or "managing grief, allaying personal and collective anxiety, and restoring order," but what *Hamlet* portrays is the "disruption and poisoning" of the possibility of mourning itself.[237] Mourning can also be seen as a fiction: a process by which the living attempt to come to terms with the death of the other, transferring the real, unrepresentable event to a symbolic dimension, in order to assimilate the inassimilable. But unlike the rituals and other fictions by which the work of mourning is performed, mourning itself is "unthematizable," according to Nicholas Royle. Royle

[237] Greenblatt 246-247

identifies the characteristics of mourning in *Hamlet* as involving "memory, name and monumentalization," and compares this with the nuclear threat: unlike the death of the other, annihilation would leave no survivors to mourn the death of humanity. Royle quotes Derrida's assertion in "No Apocalypse, Not Now" to argue that they can still be compared: "there is no common measure adequate to persuade me that a personal mourning is less serious than a nuclear war."[238] For Derrida, the work of mourning is not only personal, but a necessary condition of our inheritance from the past, material and intellectual. To illustrate this, he references Paul Valéry's description of the modern Hamlet standing in a vast graveyard that corresponds to Europe and speculating about the identity of the skulls and spectres before him, guessing that they belong to various modern philosophers, including Kant (who begat Hegel, who begat Marx). Derrida then identifies two prerequisites for the work of mourning: the first is certain knowledge of the location of the remains, a knowledge that can only be gained through the rituals of internment whose importance Greenblatt emphasised. The second prerequisite of mourning that Derrida identifies is the condition of language, which enable the characteristics of "memory, name and monumentalization" that Royle identified: "one cannot speak of generations of skulls or spirits (*Kant qui genuit Hegel qui genuit Marx*) except on the condition of language – and the voice, in any case of that which *marks* the name or takes its place. (*Hamlet*: 'That Scull had a tongue in it, and could sing once.')"[239]

While Valéry's Hamlet speculates on the identities of the skulls in the graveyard of Europe, Shakespeare's Hamlet speculates on their professions, drawing attention to their use of speech or writing: the skull that "could sing once" perhaps belonged to a politician or a courtier (who used their tongues for political gain), and another skull may have been a lawyer or land-buyer who believed in laws, statutes, vouchers, assurances, inheritance, and property rights. Hamlet makes a dark joke about the worth (or lack thereof) of those assurances after death:

> HAMLET Is not parchment made of sheepskins?
>
> HORATIO Ay, my lord, and of calf-skins too.
>
> HAMLET They are sheep and calves which seek out assurance in that. (V, i, 104-106)

[238] Royle 41
[239] Derrida, *Specters* 9

He points out that inheritance, in particular, is dependent on the fiction of immortality: after death, there is no more inheritance; the only property one owns, ultimately, is the narrow grave. Political speech, legal texts, and other fictions are thus called into question by the annihilatory power of death. In contrast to Hamlet's earlier declaration that Gertrude's "deed" destroyed the value of *sacred* representation, however, here he sees the material reality of death as problematising more profane or worldly forms of representation.

The gravedigger clown passes Hamlet another skull and reveals its identity: it is the skull of Yorick, the old king's jester, who died when Hamlet was a child. Hamlet is nauseated by the contrast between the rotting skull and his memory of Yorick when he was alive. He asks "Yorick" the ultimate rhetorical question (again thinking of its tongue, its organ of speech and song): "Where be your gibes now, your gambols, your songs, your flashes of merriment that were wont to set the table on a roar?" Hamlet then reflects on the similar fate of great historical figures like Alexander and Julius Caesar, remarking on the way that social hierarchies are levelled by Death: all eventually return to the same state, the same appearance and same stench. (V, i, 175-199)

In the graveyard scene, Hamlet's idea of death has changed from the "[shallow] musings on the afterlife of his princely soul" described by Stephen Dedalus in *Ulysses* to the simple fact of decomposition of the material body. It is no longer the spirit which determines the identity of a person, but their material remains, food for worms that eventually turns to clay. For Hamlet in the graveyard scene, the material reality of death has also revealed the ultimate worthlessness of all the fictions which human beings create, express in speech, or set down in writing, and proceed to act as if they are true.

And yet this process takes place in Hamlet's imagination: he would not be able to draw upon his knowledge of history (of Caesar or Alexander) or his memory (of Yorick, who bore him on his back and whom he kissed) unless there was a link between the absent past and material present. History, surviving through time in written words and memory, can be seen as equally fictional as vouchers, assurances, and statutes of law. But it is also the very thing that allows Hamlet to reflect on the material reality of death. Thus, there are necessary fictions, ghostly fictions which are neither entirely absent nor entirely present, fictions which retain their value rather than being exposed as worthless in the face of death. These include history, mourning, and perhaps also the fiction of heavenly justice at the Last Judgement.

In the third act, Claudius contrasts heavenly judgement with corrupt earthly law that allows him to retain the fruits of his crime. Paradoxically, however, he can only use the language and procedures of earthly law to describe the difference between the two:

> In the corrupted currents of this world,
> Offence's gilded hand may shove by justice,
> And oft 'tis seen the wicked prize itself
> Buys out the law. But 'tis not so above.
> There is no shuffling, there the action lies
> In his true nature, and we ourselves compelled
> Even to the teeth and forehead of our faults
> To give in evidence. (III, iii, 57-64)

At the end of the prayer, Claudius realises that "[w]ords without thoughts never to heaven go." (III, iii, 98) While the dictates of earthly law are corrupt and unjust, the judgements of heavenly law are absolute, indisputable truth, delivering justice as opposed to revenge. In heaven, there are no lawyers to argue over interpretations of legal fictions written on parchment, only the final sovereign authority of God, who sees beyond appearance to the truth revealed in the soul of the sinner.

Hamlet's father's ghost is also facing God's judgement due to the way he died, without being able to perform the last sacraments, confess his sins, and repent for the last time: "Cut off even in the blossoms of my sin / Unhouseled, dis-appointed, unaneled, / No reck'ning made, but sent to my account / With all my imperfections on my head." (I, v, 76-79) Like Claudius, the ghost describes heavenly justice through the logic of earthly law, imagining heaven as numbering, reckoning, and calculating the severity of his sins to determine the appropriate punishment. His command to Hamlet to avenge his murder by killing his uncle is consonant with this same logic (a logic of the restricted economy that I explored in the last chapter) – a life for a life to balance the account books.

The ghost tells Hamlet that he is in purgatory, a "prison house" in which he has been "Doom'd for a certain term to walk the night, / And for the day confin'd to fast in fires, / Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature / Are burnt and purg'd away." (I, v, 10-13) Purgatory is a *provisional* judgement, in contrast to the *final* reckoning which can only occur at the apocalypse. It is also a specifically Roman Catholic doctrine, as Greenblatt points out; thus, it was subject to relentless

polemical attacks by Protestants during the Reformation, who considered it a dangerous fiction and superstition. Greenblatt argues that these traditions, which had fallen out of (at least official) belief by Shakespeare's time, became secularised and theatrically appropriated, partly to contain and redirect their subversive potential. In *Hamlet in Purgatory*, Greenblatt cites William Tyndale's description of purgatory as "a poet's fable," as well as other attacks on purgatory which used theatrical imagery, comparing the doctrine to a flimsy, unreal, painted stage set. He comments that "[a]t moments in the Protestant polemic, the emphasis falls almost entirely on the emptiness of the fictive imagination, as if 'imagined' were inevitably synonymous with 'untrue'."[240] These attacks revealed the Protestant polemicists' deep suspicion about theatre, fiction, and imagination itself – a suspicion that would turn to destruction in the case of the iconoclasts. Greenblatt concludes that Hamlet can be thought of as a Protestant hero struggling to come to terms with the ghostly return of suppressed Catholic rites and beliefs, emblematic of Elizabeth I's Protestant England haunted by its Catholic past.[241]

Special Providence and Irresponsibility

Another specifically Protestant notion in *Hamlet* is the idea of "special providence," which Hamlet refers to in the second scene of Act 5. In this scene, Hamlet relates to Horatio how he stole his death warrant and installed a forgery in its place, sending Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, the bearers of the warrant, to their deaths instead. Hamlet praises his rash action and rashness itself, declaring that "Our indiscretion sometime serves us well / When our dear plots do pall, and that should teach us / There's a divinity that shapes our ends, / rough-hew them how we will—" Horatio, who had earlier evinced the same providential mentality in the first scene, interrupts him to say, "That is most certain." (V, ii, 8-12)

[240] Greenblatt 35-37

[241] Other critics have explored different aspects of the Reformation context. John Freeman associates the experience of persecuted, exiled and fugitive Catholic recusants to the portrayal of the ghost and the feeling of imprisonment referred to in *Hamlet* in "This Side of Purgatory: Ghostly Fathers and the Recusant Legacy in *Hamlet*," *Shakespeare and the Culture of Christianity in Early Modern England*, eds. Dennis Taylor and David N. Beauregard (New York: Fordham University Press, 2003) 222-259. In the same collection, Jennifer Rust examines anxieties in the play that mirror various Reformers' anxieties about the distinction between the letter and the spirit of Scripture, as well as about the printed word in "Wittenberg and Melancholic Allegory: The Reformation and Its Discontents in Hamlet." What readings of the Reformation context in *Hamlet* have in common is that they are all related to the question of rhetoric, the paradoxical relationship between truth and fiction, and the problem of representing presence and spirit through writing.

The fortunate consequences of Hamlet's rashness seem to him divinely ordained. He no longer hesitates to act because he believes that God is directing the course of history, including his own actions. Indeed, he no longer questions anything. He has transformed from a man of thought, prone to doubt and hesitation, to a man of action, defined as rash and thoughtless violence. Later in the same scene, after Hamlet accepts the offer to duel with Laertes, he brushes off Horatio's concerns, believing he will win because he has been at continual practice. As well as his skill at fencing, Hamlet also cites God's providence:

> There's a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come. If it be not to come, it will be now. If it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all. Since no man has aught of what he leaves, what is't to leave betimes?[242] (V, ii, 157-161)

"Special providence" refers to God's plan for a specific event, as opposed to "general providence" which refers to God's plan for the entire course of history. Moreover, in the First (Bad) Quarto of Hamlet, the line reads "a predestinate providence," which evokes the Protestant notion of God's absolute power to minutely determine the course of history – a notion which ultimately denies free will.[243] In Chapter 2, I described the early modern debate about providence: one extreme was occupied by those who denied Divine Providence completely in favour of human freedom, the will to action, and moral responsibility, as some humanists did. At the other extreme were those who denied human freedom and responsibility for a rigid conception of providence in which God minutely directed all human activity. The leaders of the Reformation were closer to the second extreme, John Calvin in particular asserting the absolute primacy of divine predestination, even at the expense of free will and moral responsibility. This renders God's judgement somewhat farcical, since it implies that God Himself directs men and women to sin and then judges them for it. But for the Reformers, it was important to have faith in providence and not to question its logic, since the entire plan will be revealed at the apocalypse.

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[242] This passage is reminiscent of Edgar, another providential character, in *King Lear*, who reminds his blind father not to fall into despair shortly before Gloucester dies: "Men must endure / Their going hence, even as their coming hither; Ripeness is all." (*King Lear* V, ii, 9-11)

[243] See Note 6 in "The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark," *The Norton Shakespeare* 1779. The First (Bad) Quarto, *The Tragicall Historie of Hamlet, Prince of Denmarke*, was printed in 1603, is thought by many scholars to have been a pirated copy based on the memory of one of the actors due to its significant differences from the other two texts – the Second (Good) Quarto (1604) and the First Folio versions of the play (1623). The Second Quarto declares itself authoritative, announcing itself as "the true and perfect Coppie" on its title page. "Bad quarto of Hamlet, 1603, also known as the first quarto of *Hamlet*," *British Library* <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/badquarto-of-hamlet-1603> 29 Dec 2019

Hamlet's providential attitude also leads him to a position of moral irresponsibility. First, when Horatio points out that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern will die because of Hamlet's forged document, Hamlet shrugs off responsibility, laying it on them instead: "[T]hey did make love to this employment. / They are not near my conscience. Their defeat / Doth by their own insinuation grow." (V, ii, 58-60) Although Hamlet acknowledges the justness of Laertes' cause to avenge his father by describing it as a mirror image of his own ("by the image of my cause I see / the portraiture of his" (V, ii, 78-79)), he later disclaims responsibility for the death of Polonius and, with a tortured, repetitive argument, blames his madness instead. He even claims to be a victim of his own actions:

> What I have done […] I here proclaim was madness.
> Was't Hamlet wronged Laertes? Never Hamlet.
> If Hamlet from himself be ta'en away,
> And when he's not himself does wrong Laertes,
> Then Hamlet does it not. Hamlet denies it.
> Who does it then? His madness. If't be so,
> Hamlet is of the faction that is wronged.
> His madness is poor Hamlet's enemy. (V, ii, 167-176)

The end of *Hamlet* problematises Hamlet's providentialism, showing that God's ultimate plan (if such a thing exists) is a massacre that claims the lives of all the main characters save Horatio, after which the thoughtless, violent Fortinbras attains the throne. The play presents the dangers of the apocalyptic mentality, which ends in annihilation rather than redemption, justice, and revelation of truth. The events of the play ultimately show no difference between revenge and justice, and no hope for any kind of messianic justice to come – only the endlessly repeated cycle of violence.

Conclusion

In the last chapter, I showed how Hamlet felt himself trapped in the logic of the restricted economy, which drains everything of its sacred value. The ghost's command to revenge exists in the same logic – a life for a life to balance out the heavenly account. Despite Hamlet's pledge, instantly given without full knowledge of the ghost's identity, Hamlet defers the act that would confirm his oath

because he longs for justice, which exists in the general economy of the sacred. Hamlet believes that Fortinbras' rash act of sacrificing thousands of lives and wasting huge sums of money for "an eggshell" belongs to this sacred economy, spurring him on to emulate Fortinbras and embrace rash, thoughtless action himself.

Hamlet's attitude to death and the afterlife changes from act to act, scene to scene, and even sometimes from line to line – from a "sleep" with unknown dreams, to "the undiscovered country," to food for worms and clay to stop a bunghole. By showing Hamlet's confrontation with the material facts of decomposition, Shakespeare demystifies the apocalyptic view of the afterlife and ultimate spiritual and bodily resurrection. But rather than a radically materialist view of death that denies the mystery inherent in the relationship between body (a thing) and spirit (a nothing), *Hamlet* tries to honour and protect the mystery. The ghost personifies this mystery, existing in the liminal space between life and death, and body and spirit, indicating "more things in heaven and earth […] than are dreamt of in our philosophy." (I, v, 168-169)

As I showed in the last chapter, Hamlet's attitude to representation and violence also shifts over the course of the play. It is not just his madness-in-craft that makes Hamlet impossible to pin down, but even his soliloquies, which might be imagined as true representations of his inner self, fail to answer any questions about his character. The reason is partly Hamlet's intense probing of the nature of fiction, seeing all appearance and representations as deceitful lies, yet being unable to reveal his inner reality without them. Hamlet, far from being a traditional tragic hero, is more akin to a clown. His "mad" speech resembles the speech of the two gravedigger Clowns, who play with linguistic paradoxes (they "lie" in the grave), frustrating Hamlet the same way that he frustrated others throughout the play. The Clowns also echo Hamlet's earlier assertions and anticipate his realisations later in the graveyard scene.

Jan Kott argued that "[t]ragedy is the theatre of priests, grotesque is the theatre of clowns," pointing to the centrality of the fool as evidence of the grotesque in *King Lear*. Hamlet unsettles this framework: he is a clown who wants to be a priest, rendering tragedy itself grotesque. Obsessed with Christian doctrine and Scripture, Hamlet yearns for the final revelation of God's truth uncovered by representations, which he deeply distrusts. The Protestant Hamlet, student at Wittenberg, could have easily become an iconoclast. The conclusive justice that Hamlet longs for is the promise of the Last Judgement, or doom, in the Book of Revelation, when (he imagines) the

world will grow honest and even death shall be finished. Both the mystery of the ghost and the mystery of the text are intimately connected: the apocalypse promises to rejoin the bodies and spirits of human beings as well as the letter and spirit of Scripture in immortal, perfect form: the Word of God will be revealed in all its glory after the sounding of the last trumpet. But heavenly law – both Purgatory and the Last Judgement – can only be described in the language of earthly law in *Hamlet*. Earthly law depends upon a belief in the value and power of legal fictions written on parchment, ultimately exposed as worthless in the face of death. All texts, both profane and sacred, also need to be interpreted. While the priest who conducts Ophelia's funeral reads God's command literally, the Clowns parody literal interpretation of both earthly law and Scripture. It is, thus, the *spirit* of the text which matters.

As a deconstruction of a revenge tragedy, the play continually grapples with the irreducible gulf between revenge and justice. At the end, however, the play shows that there is *only* the cycle of revenge, never reaching true justice – only annihilation. Can this be described as Derrida's "messianism without messianism"? What *King Lear* shows is that there is never any ultimate revelation of truth; it is impossible. It is apocalyptic precisely for its lack of apocalypse. What *Hamlet* shows is that there is never any ultimate justice in the present, only the hope of justice-to-come. Derrida too recognises that messianism is inherently paradoxical, in that it ultimately depends on the Messiah (or the Second Coming of Christ) never arriving. His messianism without content is the experience of that waiting, of that hope. He points out that the fiction of messianic justice is ultimately impossible, but not any less necessary for that:

> It would be easy, too easy, to show that such a hospitality without reserve, which is nevertheless the condition of the event and thus of history (nothing and no one would arrive otherwise, a hypothesis that one can never exclude, of course), is the impossible itself, and that this *condition of possibility* of the event is also its *condition of impossibility*, like this strange concept of messianism without content, of the messianic without messianism, that guides us here like the blind. But it would be just as easy to show that without this experience of the impossible, one might as well give up on both justice and the event. That would be still more just or more honest.[244]

[244] Derrida, *Specters* 81-82

This impossible messianism, like the Last Judgement, like history and justice itself, is a fiction. But it is not a worthless fiction like the assurances and vouchers that Hamlet bitterly satirised, but a deeply important fiction, necessary for transmitting the inheritance of the past to future generations. What is at stake is no less than human life and human continuity itself. Mourning, which saturates the play as many critics have argued, is another fiction that allows us to come to respond to the voices of the spectres of the past. The fiction of nuclear devastation, ecological disaster, and other forms of annihilation in our day cannot be mourned, except by anticipation. Therefore, mourning involves speaking with the ghosts of the *future* as well.

The only hope in the play comes from Hamlet's deferral of action, which problematises rather than glorifies revenge in the style of the traditional revenge tragedy. What finally keeps the door open to the arrival of justice in the future, stressing the importance of the continued link between generations, is not the ghost's injunction to Hamlet but Hamlet's last injunction to Horatio. As Hamlet dies, he realises the true meaning of death, naming it silence, and asks Horatio to tell his story – to keep the past alive through speech, to transmit it to the future, where, with another rupture in time, another opening for justice may still appear.

Conclusion

The time I spent researching and writing this thesis has been an apocalyptic journey for me. Now that I have reached the promised end, I find that what I have attained is neither a final revelation of truth, nor a false, meaningless image of it, but a continuation of my journey to unknown destinations. In my research, I have learned a few things, and more importantly, learned – to my great excitement and pleasure – how much more there still is to learn. Here, I will attempt to summarise my key findings and identify the directions in which the journey might take me and other students of Shakespeare in the future.

In this thesis, I have shown the importance of the connections between the late modern discourses of annihilation, early modern apocalypticism, and certain paradoxes of representation. These paradoxes have to do with the mysterious relationship between the signifier and the signified, which gives representation a ghostly quality, troubling the conceptual oppositions of presence and absence, existence and non-existence, spirit and body, idea and matter, life and death, action and contemplation, and fiction and reality. The debates around representation from antiquity to the modern day involve hierarchies of different forms of representation (oral over textual, verbal over visual), as well as condemnations and defences of rhetoric. I argued that early modern iconoclastic arguments against images were underpinned by anxieties about representation that are equally applicable to verbal representation, and showed their continuing relevance in late modern arguments against "spectacle" and "simulation." Thus, the question of the relationship between the sign and the meaning (or letter and spirit, body and soul) of representation is an unresolved paradox, which apocalyptic ideology promises to resolve through a final revelation of truth at the end of history.

Both the discourse of annihilation and apocalypticism are intensely concerned with this problem of truth or meaning in representation. Events of annihilation problematise traditional mimesis, bringing to light the theoretical, methodological, and ethical limits of representation – despite this, both realists and anti-realists agree that is necessary, even *vital*, to find a way to respond to the multiple threats of annihilation we face today. Despite a shift away from an apocalyptic consciousness of time (linked to the "figural" view of history and typological interpretation of the Bible) in the early modern period, apocalyptic messianism continues today in diverse millennialist or utopian ideologies. Annihilation, rather than an entirely separate discourse, is *already* a central element in

apocalypticism, which gives modern-day millennialism an ambivalent quality, containing both a potential to lead to destruction as well as provide a necessary hope for justice.

Analysing four late-twentieth century "nuclear" film adaptations of *King Lear* with wildly differing attitudes to eschatology, I concluded that it was the ambiguity of Shakespeare's eschatological message in *King Lear* which rendered it so appropriable to present the threat of nuclear annihilation. Jean-Luc Godard's appropriation, in particular, makes a strong connection between nuclear annihilation and artistic (both literary and cinematic) representation. Godard's *King Lear* identifies the task of the artist in the nuclear age as conserving or resurrecting a dying culture, reinventing the art of literature and cinema both. Derrida named works by modernist writers like Joyce, Mallarmé and Kafka as exemplary texts of the nuclear age due to their awareness and questioning of their own conditions of possibility, their historicity (which is also their fragility and mortality), and their dependence on the archive. This description could easily be applied to Godard's film, which rejects realist mimesis for a more philosophical cinema which reflects on its own relationship to the archive of film, art, and literature – particularly Shakespeare.

In its intertextual quality, Godard's film is reminiscent of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, which appropriates *Hamlet* to talk about war and violence in Joyce's day, calling the massacre in the last act of the play a "forecast of the concentration camp" defended in imperialist propaganda in the twentieth century. Joyce also cites Mallarmé's interpretation of the play, which stresses the similarities between Fortinbras and Hamlet, who he points out are *both* men of violence. I contrasted Stephen Dedalus' and Hamlet's attitudes towards the paradoxes of rhetoric (in that it is both nothing and something, as well as action and contemplation). Stephen sees speech as action, thought, *and* a form of radical passivity, or "being acted on." But unlike Hamlet, who hates and fears passivity, Stephen considers this to be a positive thing – a way to avoid violence, communicate with others, and live in peace. I finally argued that Hamlet's ultimate transformation into a man of action (that is, violence) was caused by his hatred for the logic of the restricted economy of thrift and admiration for Fortinbras' sacrifice of his men for "an eggshell," which he interprets as a sovereign act that follows the logic of the general economy. Although Hamlet tries to use the weapon of rhetoric for his own political ends, his tragic mistake lies in his underestimation of the power of rhetoric to function as a weapon of mass destruction, or annihilation.

I analysed the images of writing and text in the Book of Revelation, arguing that apocalypse was characterised by its textuality, in particular, the idea of the world as a sealed book written by God. (Ironically, the Book of Revelation depends heavily on strategies of concealment.) Using Derrida's concept of apocalyptic *destinerrance*, I showed how *King Lear*'s missives went astray, acting like missiles and leading to the ultimate annihilation. I also shed light on the generative "nothing," sovereignty, Cordelia's speech of silence, Lear's speech of madness, and the fool's paradoxes in the play by reference to the general economy. Ultimately, *King Lear* mocks and parodies apocalyptic elements like eschatology and teleology, revelation of mystery, and prophecy. The deletion of several passages suggesting hope and redemption and the addition of the Fool's prophecy (which subverts apocalyptic prophecy and Messianic time) in the Folio could signal Shakespeare's intent to stress the anti-apocalyptic message of the play. The "apocalypse without apocalypse" of *King Lear* illustrates the contradictions inherent in the apocalypse itself: the Book of Revelation presents only an "image of […] horror," or annihilation of the corrupt world as a demonstration of the power of God, rather than a "promised end" with a revelation of truth. Rather than being radically opposed to nuclear annihilation (characterised by an apocalypse without revelation), the original apocalypse too is devoid of an ultimate revelation. *King Lear*, then, is apocalyptic precisely because it is *not* apocalyptic.

Hamlet too is an apocalyptic play, being woven through with references to doomsday, or the Last Judgement, its characters constantly meditating on the contrast between earthly law (which works on the principle of revenge) and true heavenly justice (which would liberate human beings from the cycle of revenge). However, making this contrast proves to be impossible: neither the ghost, nor Claudius, nor the priest, nor the Clown can describe heavenly justice *except* in the language of corrupt, earthly law. Hamlet longs for doomsday because of his distrust of all representation and appearance – identifying women in particular as deceitful, mere bodies or idols without spirit, whose sexuality calls into question the value of all sacred representation. Hamlet's (and other male characters') fear of the female body is connected to their fear of female speech (particularly, Ophelia's speech of madness): both are identified as "nothing," yet they are nothings with the uncontrollable power to generate everything.

Hamlet's meditations on the nature of the ghost and on death culminate in the graveyard scene, where he is confronted with the material reality of death, exposing the worthlessness of all legal fictions, problematising language itself. The mystery of representation is closely connected to the

mystery of the ghost, as Derrida and Joyce both stress in their readings of the ghost in *Hamlet*. Derrida uses the ghost's injunction and the disjointed time identified by *Hamlet* to propose a "messianism without messianism," an experience of the messianic hope which may open the door to the arrival of justice-to-come. What Hamlet finally presents through its final scene of annihilation is the *impossibility* of true justice, just like *King Lear* presented the impossibility of true revelation. But unlike the worthless vouchers and assurances that Hamlet bitterly mocked in the graveyard scene, both justice and mourning are *necessary* fictions which enable the continuity of human existence, without which there could be no link between past, present, and future. Ultimately, it is not the ghost's injunction to Hamlet, but Hamlet's injunction to Horatio to tell his story and keep alive his memory for future generations that approaches a messianic hope.

Future Directions for Nuclear Criticism of Shakespeare

In this thesis, I have argued that the threat of annihilation, in its multiple forms, is still a grave danger that faces us in the twenty-first century. I hope I have demonstrated the potential (and continuing relevance and significance) of the method of nuclear criticism, extending its principles to encompass representation of other events of annihilation, such as genocide and ecological destruction wrought by climate change – not simply the nuclear referent. I have tried to combine historical awareness with a present-focused approach and to use my sources in a critical way, often bringing in critiques from different political positions. By combining nuclear criticism with Marxist and materialist feminist critiques, I have also introduced a new perspective on the topic. I hope that my thesis opens up avenues for more diverse perspectives on Shakespeare, particularly from other Third World women.

Studying Shakespeare in the context of early modern apocalypticism is a rich topic for future research, which, though well-studied, can never finally be exhausted, in my view. Apocalypticism is not just a marginal religious belief, but part of the very structure of thought that underpins almost all major ideologies today. In *King Lear* and *Hamlet*, Shakespeare dramatised and subverted the apocalyptic mentality which looks forward to an ultimate revelation of truth and justice at the end of history. Shakespeare's response to early modern apocalypticism was both thoroughly apocalyptic and thoroughly modern, dramatising the contradictions (the lack of revelation or justice) within apocalyptic ideology itself.

The modernity of Shakespeare's attitude to apocalyptic eschatology also seems to call for appropriation by filmmakers and writers to respond to the challenges of the nuclear age. The self-reflexivity of his metatheatrical and metatextual paradoxes are the most interesting parts of Shakespeare's plays to me. As I have shown in this thesis, Shakespeare's *King Lear* and *Hamlet* can be considered “nuclear texts” as much as the modernist works identified by Derrida, illuminating the fascinating and paradoxical connections between apocalypse, annihilation, and representation. I hope that my research can energise the field of Shakespeare studies, spark new ideas for performers, and lead to a renewed interest in the elements of Shakespeare’s plays that I have explored in this thesis.

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