Superflux and Silence in Shakespeare's *King Lear*

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> We wish we could pass this play over, and say nothing about it. All that we can say must fall far short of the subject; or even of what we ourselves conceive of it. To attempt to give a description of the play itself or of its effect upon the mind, is mere impertinence: yet we must say something. It is then the best of all Shakespeare's plays, for it is the one in which he was most in earnest.[1]

It was not often that the voluble Romantic critic, William Hazlitt, felt chastened into silence, but in disqualifying his own critical commentary on *King Lear* as necessarily incommensurate he was only being typical of his period. It was the same for John Keats, who saw Shakespeare generally as the consummation of everything literature could attempt, everything he was himself struggling to achieve — and amongst the Shakespearean canon *King Lear* was *primus inter pares*, the consummate work of art:

> the excellence of every Art is in its intensity, capable of making all disagreeables evaporate, from their being in close relationship with Beauty & Truth — Examine King Lear & you will find this exemplified throughout.[2]

Beauty is truth, truth beauty, says Keats's oracular Grecian urn. Far from being incompatible, beauty and truth inhere in and enhance each other. 'Examine King Lear & you will find this exemplified throughout'. Keats was driven by the Shakespearean precedent, and the graduation from romance to Shakespeare which he identified as the 'coming of age' of English literature is often seen as a creative adumbration of the startling maturation of Keats's own career:

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[1] William Hazlitt, *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays* (1817), reprinted in *The Romantics on Shakespeare*, ed. Jonathan Bate (London: Penguin, 1992), p. 394.

[2] John Keats in a letter to his brothers George and Tom, December 1817, in *Letters of John Keats*, ed. Robert Gittings (Oxford: OUP, 1970), p. 42.

On Sitting Down to Read *King Lear* Once Again[3]

O golden-tongued Romance, with serene lute!
Fair plumed syren, queen of far-away!
Leave melodizing on this wintry day,
Shut up thine olden pages, and be mute.
Adieu! for, once again, the fierce dispute
Betwixt damnation and impassion'd clay
Must I burn through; once more humbly assay
The bitter-sweet of this Shaksperean fruit.
Chief Poet! and ye clouds of Albion,
Begetters of our deep eternal theme!
When through the old oak forest I am gone,
Let me not wander in a barren dream:
But, when I am consumed in the fire,
Give me new phœnix wings to fly at my desire.

But if Shakespeare was Keats's constant beacon he was also a constant burden, and like many poets, before and since, Keats on occasion would suggest that Shakespeare 'is enough for us'.[4] Why do we bother? What can you say — how can you say it — after *King Lear*?

Hazlitt and Keats were writing in the early years of the nineteenth century, over two hundred years after *King Lear* was first performed on Boxing Day 1607. Nor were they alone amongst writers of the Romantic period, all of whom paid their tribute to Shakespeare in either open critical affirmation or obsessive quotation. Indeed, a deference to Shakespeare (and Milton) is arguably the one thing all writers of the period had in common. By then the cultural phenomenon of 'bardolatry' — the often indiscriminate exaltation of Shakespeare and his plays — was well under

[3] Text from *The Poems of John Keats*, ed. Jack Stillinger (London: Heinemann, 1978), p. 225.

[4] 'I am very near Agreeing with Hazlit[t] that Shakespeare is enough for us', in a letter to Benjamin Robert Haydon, 11 May 1817, *Letters of John Keats*, ed. Gittings, p. 14.

way, its high point sometimes taken to have been the actor-manager David Garrick's 'marketing masterpiece', the Shakespeare Jubilee of 1769.[5]

The Romantic exaltation of *King Lear*, however, had a special charge, being less a recognition than a recuperation of the play's greatness. For a hundred and forty odd years since the performance and publication of Nahum Tate's 'refinement' of *King Lear* for the Restoration stage in 1680, no audience had witnessed a version that resembled the original (nor would they until Charles Macready restored it in 1839). In a gesture that gave a bizarre literalism to Thomas Rhymer's concept of 'poetic justice', Tate's notorious 'adaptation' goes out of its way to ensure that the deserving remain alive and well (Gloucester and Lear go into peaceful retirement at the end). Cordelia, too, survives the turmoil and, far from being the victim of evil and of cruel accident, is rewarded with Edgar and the kingdom. The part of the Fool disappears altogether. There had been brave attempts throughout the latter half of the eighteenth century to restore aspects of Shakespeare's play, not least its poetry, but even well meaning ones (like Garrick's) had retained the happy ending.

Not surprisingly, then, the Romantics had a proprietorial attitude to *King Lear*. A growing recognition of what Charles Lamb called Shakespeare's 'absolute mastery over the heart and soul of man' — knowing 'the *when* and the *why* and the *how far* they should be moved; to what pitch a passion is becoming'[6] — had by the Romantic period already generated book length psychological studies of individual characters. However, none of the characters from *King Lear* exerted the individual fascination of a Falstaff or a Hamlet (though after Coleridge's brilliant analysis of the opening scene of the play we *still* argue about whether or not Edmond's behaviour is understandable in the light of his treatment at his father's hands). But still, even without the obvious fascination of a major character, *King Lear* became the centrepiece of the Romantic canon, the consummate work of art.

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[5] See Gary Taylor, *Reinventing Shakespeare: A Cultural History from the Restoration to the Present* (London: Hogarth Press, 1990), pp. 119ff.

[6] Charles Lamb, 'On the Tragedies of Shakespeare, considered with reference to their fitness for stage presentation' (1811), reprinted in *The Romantics on Shakespeare*, ed. Bate, p. 112.

In fact, so great was the play and so intense the Romantic experience of reading it, that for commentators like Charles Lamb it should never be performed:

> But the Lear of Shakespeare cannot be acted. The contemptible machinery by which they mimic the storm which he goes out in, is not more inadequate to represent the horrors of the real elements, than any actor can be to represent Lear: they might more easily propose to personate the Satan of Milton, or one of Michael Angelo's terrible figures. The greatness of Lear is not in corporal dimension, but in intellectual: the explosions of his passion are terrible as a volcano: they are storms turning up and disclosing to the bottom of that sea, his mind, with all its vast riches. It is his mind which is laid bare.[7]

Shakespeare's mastery of humanity was so extreme as paradoxically to make the play's enactment an anti-climax. Only the regenerate, *private* imagination was in any way commensurate with *King Lear*. Performance mocked the character's and the play's 'intellectual' (that is, mental or ideal) distinction. Shakespeare and his creation transcended the stage as a physical space and a sensational, communal event.

Why? Why was *King Lear* so significant for the Romantics? The Romantics recognized that our reading — our confrontation with a work of art — is an experience, no less than falling in love or falling down the stairs. And for Romantics like Keats and Hazlitt and Coleridge and Lamb there was no greater experience than *King Lear*, which offered, more intensely and immediately than any other work of art, the paradox of tragic pleasure ('capable of making all disagreeables evaporate').

Why?

Central to the play itself and to the Romantics' conception of *King Lear* the play and King Lear the character is the uncanny orchestration of Act 3, scene 4, which finds the self-banished Lear taking refuge in a hovel with the Fool (now a central character, as he remains to this day), poor Tom and Kent in tow — as unlikely a quartet as it is possible to imagine:

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[7] Charles Lamb, 'On the Tragedies of Shakespeare' (1811), *The Romantics on Shakespeare*, ed. Bate, p. 123.

> O, what a world's convention of agonies is here! All external nature in a storm, all moral nature convulsed, — the real madness of Lear, the feigned madness of Edgar, the babbling of the Fool, the desperate fidelity of Kent — surely such a scene was never conceived before or since! Take it but as a picture for the eye only, it is more terrific than any which a Michel Angelo, inspired by a Dante, could have conceived, and which none but a Michel Angelo could have executed. Or let it have been uttered to the blind, the howlings of nature would seem converted into the voice of conscious humanity.[8]

It is in this last comment, it seems to me — 'the howlings of nature would seem converted into the voice of conscious humanity' — that we identify the first and primary reason for the importance of *King Lear* for the Romantics: its sublimity or metaphysical reach; its attempt to take the measure of the human within the context of a nature and a universe of which we humans are a part, yet seem not to be a part.

This brings us to the second reason for its importance: its unflinching honesty in keeping faith with human experience. It is what Keats meant when he said that, unlike the golden-tongued romance, *King Lear* risked unpalatable truths to which only its honesty and its poetry could reconcile us.

To do this, Shakespeare had to speak in tongues, which brings us to a final reason for the greatness of *King Lear*, the one on which this article will focus: the sheer variety and virtuosity of its language. We know that Shakespeare commanded a vocabulary far in excess of anything most of us can muster, but in no play do we find an utterance so various and so extreme.

These three reasons for the Romantic elevation of *King Lear* — its sublimity, its honesty, and its linguistic virtuosity — were and are inseparable. In *King Lear*, as Hazlitt says, Shakespeare was most 'in earnest' — took life, death, and being human most seriously, and asked more powerfully than in any other play the question of what it means to

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[8] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, from his notes on the tragedies, reprinted in *The Romantics on Shakespeare*, ed. Bate, p. 393.

be human. *Hamlet* might be more interesting, more intelligent, even, and more uncannily proleptic; Othello might be more pathetic; Macbeth might offer more concentrated horror — but *King Lear* was consummate art. The attitude of hushed exaltation with which Romantics like Hazlitt approached *King Lear* was, we would have to say, unmistakably religious, because the play itself offered the two things traditionally offered by religion: it offered truth and it offered consolation.

I

My first experience of *King Lear* was at the age of eleven or twelve when my visiting English aunt took us to see Sir John Gielgud performing, solo, edited excerpts from Shakespeare's plays at the Theatre Royal in Sydney. The excerpt from *Lear* he chose was from Act 5, scene 3, where a devastated Lear enters with the dead Cordelia in his arms. (To this day I can see the non-existent Cordelia in the empty space above Gielgud's tensed and cradling arms.) This is the point at which the play becomes so uncompromising, when the collective yearning of the audience for Cordelia's survival is repaid with the accentuated horror of a death that might so easily have been averted:

> LEAR
>
> 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. She's gone for ever.
> I know when one is dead, and when one lives.
> She's dead as earth.
>
> (5.3.231-5)[9]

And again, not long after:

> LEAR

[9] Unless otherwise indicated, I am quoting throughout from the New Cambridge edition of *The Tragedy of King Lear*, ed. Jay L. Halio (Cambridge: CUP, 1992). There is no time here to discuss the relative authority or merit of the Quarto *True Chronicle History of King Lear* and the Folio *Tragedy of King Lear*, nor is the existence of the two versions more than occasionally (and then only parenthetically) relevant to my discussion.

> And my poor fool is hanged. No, no, no life!
> Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life,
> And thou no breath at all? Thou'lt come no more.
> Never, never, never, never, never.
> (5.3.282-5)

The boldness of Gielgud's gesture was to introduce the most wordy play in the language with a scene in which one of the wordiest of all Shakespeare's heroes runs out of all words but one. That last line is, as Stephen Greenblatt has said, 'the bleakest pentameter line Shakespeare ever wrote'.[10] Utter emptiness is reinforced by a repetition from which we wait for release, but never, never, never, never, never receive it. And this from a character, as I said, otherwise marked by 'conspicuous prodigalities of speech';[11] to quote Harold Bloom, 'Shakespeare allows [Lear] a diction more preternaturally eloquent than is spoken by anyone else in this or any other drama, and that evidently will never be matched again'.[12]

Variety and virtuosity of language — or of languages (plural) — can be found, not in King Lear alone, but also in *King Lear* the play. As well as Lear's regal eloquence and extreme, expressive violence, there is, for example, Edmond's cynical intellectualizing and political scheming; Edgar's sententious generalizing; Kent's real and affected brusqueness; the willfully fractured, histrionic ravings of Edgar as Poor Tom; the Fool's pregnant nonsense, in which meaning escapes into song, nursery rhyme and nonsense verse; and so on. Indeed, more than just variety and virtuosity, there is a superflux of language in this preternaturally eloquent play — and the word 'superflux', defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as '1. A superfluity, superabundance, or surplus', is Shakespeare's own. OED cites *King Lear* itself:

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[10] Stephen Greenblatt, in his introduction to *King Lear*, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Greenblatt *et al* (New York: Norton, 1997), p. 2311.

[11] The phrase 'conspicuous prodigalities of speech', so apt for Lear the character and *King Lear* the play, is used by George Steiner to characterize the 'illicit' utterance of women within the patriarchal speech economy, in his 'The Distribution of Discourse', *On Difficulty and Other Essays* (Oxford and New York: OUP, 1978), pp. 61-94 (p. 71).

[12] In the introduction to his edition of *Modern Critical Interpretations: William Shakespeare's King Lear* (New York, New Haven, Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 1987), p. 3.

LEAR

Take physic, pomp,
Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
That thou mayst shake the superflux to them
And show the heavens more just
(3.4.33-6)

And yet, for all that, Lear's *own* eloquence, more often than not, has so little, substantively, *to say* — beyond expressing a more intense, often grotesque passion than is possessed by anyone else in this or any other drama. Compare him with Edmond, for example. Edmond is largely as passionless as he is calculating and his language and self-knowledge is always to the point. After the bitter resentment of Edmond's first soliloquy, in which he invokes Nature and a hierarchy of natural cunning and power, there is a terrible precision or economy and a calculating intelligence in Edmond's words.

EDMOND

To both these sisters have I sworn my love,
Each jealous of the other as the stung
Are of the adder. Which of them shall I take?
Both? One? or neither? Neither can be enjoyed
If both remain alive. To take the widow
Exasperates, makes mad her sister Gonerill.
And hardly shall I carry out my side,
Her husband being alive. Now then, we'll use
His countenance for the battle, which being done,
Let her who would be rid of him devise
His speedy taking off. As for the mercy
Which he intends to Lear and to Cordelia,
The battle done, and they within our power,
Shall never see his pardon; for my state
Stands on me to defend, not to debate.
(5.1.44-58)

Lear's speech, on the other hand, is largely *e*-motive, *ex*-pressive: wailing, gnashing and cursing; relieving his own feelings. It is passionate and performative, not communicative. 'The passion' in Lear, said Hazlitt, is 'like a sea, swelling, chafing, raging, without bound, without hope, without beacon or anchor. Torn from the hold of his affections and fixed

purposes, he floats a mighty wreck in the wide world of sorrows'[13] — and, we can add, floats a mighty wreck in an ocean of language. What could be more gratuitous than Lear's childish attempt to outshout the elements?

LEAR

Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! Rage, blow,
You cataracts and hurricanoes, spout
Till you have drenched our steeples, drowned the cocks!
You sulph'rous and thought-executing fires,
Vaunt-couriers to oak-cleaving thunderbolts,
Singe my white head; And thou all-shaking thunder,
Strike flat the thick rotundity o'th'world,
Crack nature's moulds, all germens spill at once
That makes ingrateful man!
(3.2.1-9)

This excess of language is in part a measure of Lear's executive impotence, having carved up and allocated his lands before the play begins. It is an impotence that is only accentuated by the verbal violence and the imperative voice. In one of those moments of clarity in the play that secure for the labile, ageing patriarch the audience's ultimate sympathy, Lear himself recognises this:

I tax not you, you elements, with unkindness.
I never gave you kingdom, called you children.
You owe me no subscription. Then let fall
Your horrible pleasure. Here I stand your slave,
A poor, infirm, weak, and despised old man.
(3.2.15-19)

This tense, paradoxical compound of vociferous command and executive impotence — which becomes the object of the Fool's incessant mocking and needling — is immediately apparent in the king's opening speech:

LEAR

Meantime we shall express our darker purpose.
Give me the map there. Know, that we have divided

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[13] William Hazlitt, 'Mr Kean's Lear', in *The Romantics on Shakespeare*, ed. Bate, p. 400.

> In three our kingdom, and 'tis our fast intent
> To shake all cares and business from our age,
> Conferring them on younger strengths while we
> Unburdened crawl toward death. Our son of Cornwall,
> And you, our no less loving son of Albany,
> We have this hour a constant will to publish
> Our daughters' several dowers, that future strife
> May be prevented now. The princes, France and Burgundy,
> Great rivals in our youngest daughter's love,
> Long in our court have made their amorous sojourn,
> And here are to be answered. Tell me, my daughters
> (Since now we will divest us both of rule,
> Interest of territory, cares of state),
> Which of you shall we say doth love us most,
> That we our largest bounty may extend
> Where nature doth with merit challenge? Gonerill,
> Our eldest born, speak first.
>
> (1.1.31-49)

In a ceremonious language heavy with its own foregone conclusions, Lear demands of his three daughters an empty profession of love — demands an excess of language, in other words, which has nothing to say.

Also from the opening, however, the excess of language — in this case, the verbose formality which is all Lear has left of his kingship — is challenged by a recalcitrant reality. At the very moment when Lear is attempting to compose and to direct the drama of his own retirement, his rhetorical superfluity is met with refusal and silence:

> LEAR
> Now, our joy,
> Although our last and least, to whose young love
> The vines of France and milk of Burgundy
> Strive to be interessed. What can you say to draw
> A third more opulent than your sisters? Speak.
>
> CORDELIA
> Nothing, my lord.
>
> LEAR
> Nothing?

CORDELIA
Nothing

LEAR
Nothing will come of nothing; speak again.

CORDELIA
Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave
My heart into my mouth: I love your majesty
According to my bond, no more nor less.
(1.1.77-88)

Nothing; no; never — the negatives echo throughout the play as obsessively yet inevitably as an equally extensive pattern of verbal and shockingly visual images on the theme of seeing and blindness:

GLOUCESTER
... Edmond, how now? What news?

EDMOND
So please your lordship, none. [*Putting up the letter*]

GLOUCESTER
Why so earnestly seek you to put up that letter?

EDMOND
I know no news, my lord.

GLOUCESTER
What paper were you reading?

EDMOND
Nothing, my lord.

GLOUCESTER
No? What needed then that terrible dispatch of it into your pocket? The quality of nothing hath not such need to hide itself. Let's see. Come, if it be nothing, I shall not need spectacles.
(1.2.26-36)

'If it be nothing, I shall not need spectacles'. Repeated words and images throughout the play relentlessly attack issues of human value and human meaning, like a dog worrying a bone.

Long before Gloucester's pun on vision and visibility here in the second scene of the play, for example, the motifs of blindness and (in)sight have begun to sound. 'Out of my sight!' screams Lear at Kent when Kent intervenes in the first scene. In an effort to obscure or silence what he does not want to hear, Lear banishes the speaker. Kent responds in kind:

KENT
See better, Lear, and let me still remain
The true blank of thine eye.
(1.1.151-3)

Like so many of the images in this recurrent pattern, 'blank' — as both the sure-sighted centre of the target and a nullity or absence — captures the ambiguity and vulnerability of our seeing. 'Spectacles' are things we see, as well as being what we need in order to see. In the Quarto text, the impetuous blast of the storm tears at the king's white hair with an 'eyeless rage', part of a string of suggestive, often ironic images culminating in the shattering visual image of Gloucester's blinding (3.7.27ff.) and the truism that he stumbled when he saw (4.1.19).

But the significance of Gloucester's 'Come, if it be nothing, I shall not need spectacles' does not end there. What we also pick up in this line, besides nothingness and sight, is an echo of another vital word or concept: *need*. What is it, exactly, that we *need*? The question itself can never be answered, but we are all answerable to Shakespeare's persistent questioning. How many spectacles does Gloucester *need* to be able to see? How many knights does a superannuated king *need*?

GONERIL
Hear me, my lord:
What need you five-and-twenty? ten? or five?
To follow in a house where twice so many
Have a command to tend you?

REGAN

What need one?

LEAR

O reason not the need! Our basest beggars
Are in the poorest thing superfluous.
Allow not nature more than nature needs,
Man's life is cheap as beast's. Thou art a lady;
If only to go warm were gorgeous,
Why nature needs not what thou gorgeous wear'st,
Which scarcely keeps thee warm. But for true need —
You heavens, give me that patience, patience I need!
(2.4.253-64)

'Cheap as beast's'. So much of what we do and value is, strictly speaking, unnecessary — unnecessary to our lives as animals, certainly. The question of our 'bestiality' sounds again and again throughout *King Lear* as a reproof, so to speak, and as a challenge. There are more images of animals in *King Lear* — especially though not exclusively in the third act — than are to be found in a zoo: Lear is banished 'To be a comrade to the wolf and owl' (2.4.203); 'the cub-drawn bear', 'The lion and the belly-pinched wolf' keep their 'fur dry' as Lear runs 'unbonneted' (Quarto); Edgar describes himself as a 'hog in sloth, fox in stealth, wolf in greediness, dog in madness, lion in prey' (3.4.84-5); 'he's mad that trusts in the tameness of a wolf, a horse's health', says the Fool (Quarto); 'The little dogs and all, / Tray, Blanch, and Sweet-heart, see they bark at me', says Lear, to which Edgar as Poor Tom responds:

Tom will throw his head at them. — Avaunt, you curs!
Be thy mouth or black or white,
Tooth that poisons if it bite,
Mastiff, greyhound, mongrel grim,
Hound or spaniel, brach or him.
Bobtail tyke or trundle-tail,
Tom will make him weep and wail;
For the throwing thus my head,
Dog leap the hatch, and all are fled.
(3.6.56-7)

Here are serpents, silkworms, cats, sheep, nightingales, pelicans, herrings, flies, tigers, crows, jackdaws, beetles, mice, wrens, fitchews, and the vast *etcetera* of the animal kingdom.

LEAR

> Thou wert better in a grave than to answer with thy uncovered body this extremity of the skies. Is man no more than this? Consider him well. Thou ow'st the worm no silk, the beast no hide, the sheep no wool, the cat no perfume. Ha! here's three on's are sophisticated; thou art the thing itself. Unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art. Off, off, you lendings! Come, unbutton here.
>
> (3.4.91-7)

How can we 'accommodate' a human being according to his or her *needs*? 'The art of our necessities is strange', says Lear, 'And can make vile things precious' (3.2.68-9). When Lear asks to retain 'the name and all th'addition to a king' (1.1.130) without the responsibility, we recognize it as *superflux*: as excessive or superfluous. Lear's knights are as gratuitous or unnecessary as clothing, as gratuitous as old age itself:

LEAR

> Ask her [Goneril] forgiveness?
> Do you but mark how this becomes the house?
> [*Kneels*] 'Dear daughter, I confess that I am old;
> Age is unnecessary: on my knees I beg
> That you'll vouchsafe me raiment, bed, and food.'
>
> (2.4.143-7)

'I have often thought what a melancholy world this would be without children', Coleridge once commented, 'and what an inhuman world without the aged'.[14] Age — the aged — are superfluous, *unnecessary* to the utilitarian social economy. Yet just as it is precisely our living beyond our immediate physical (animal) needs that defines our humanity, so it is precisely in managing what is unnecessary or gratuitous that we establish our humanity.

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[14] In a lecture on Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* discussing the character of the Nurse; see Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Shakespearean Criticism*, ed. Thomas Middleton Raysor, in 2 vols (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1960), II, 99.

Here the etymological relationship between *gratuitous* ('not required or warranted', 'unjustifiable', but also 'freely bestowed' [OED]) and *grace* ('favour or goodwill, in contradistinction to right or obligation' [OED]) is a vital one. Cognates, deriving from the Latin *gratia*, 'a favour', and *gratuitus*, 'free, spontaneous, voluntary', both *gratuitous* and *grace* suggest activity beyond cause or physical constraint. Beyond what is required, or necessary, in other words, there is grace — which is why for the Romantics and the Victorians Cordelia's freely given forgiveness of her father carried such symbolic, more often than not Christian, significance:

CORDELIA [*Kneels*]
O look upon me, sir,
And hold your hands in benediction o'er me.
You must not kneel.

LEAR
Pray, do not mock me:
I am a very foolish, fond old man,
Fourscore and upward,
Not an hour more nor less; and, to deal plainly,
I fear I am not in my perfect mind.
Methinks, I should know you and know this man;
Yet I am doubtful: for I am mainly ignorant
What place this is, and all the skill I have
Remembers not these garments, nor I know not
Where I did lodge last night. Do not laugh at me,
For, as I am a man, I think this lady
To be my child Cordelia.

CORDELIA
And so I am, I am.

LEAR
Be your tears wet? Yes, faith. I pray, weep not.
If you have poison for me, I will drink it.
I know you do not love me; for your sisters
Have, as I do remember, done me wrong.
You have some cause; they have not.

CORDELIA

No cause, no cause.

(4.6.54-74)

What is special about Cordelia's forgiveness for the Christian redemptionist critics is that, like God's grace, it is offered from outside the constraints of obligation — beyond just cause or legal contract (earlier Cordelia had spoken of loving 'according to my bond, no more nor less' [1.1.88]). Christian or not, it is worth noting here, not just the gesture itself, but also the reticent but expressive concision of Cordelia's language. What she is saying to Lear is what Gloucester said to the babbling (Babel-ing) Tom as he ushered him into the hovel: 'No words, no words. Hush' (3.4.166).

II

To go back to Lear's use and abuse of language, then: frequently disproportionate to its occasion and empty of content, it is full of passion and at times of the cruellest invective. In a superflux of performative cursing and hurting, Lear tries unsuccessfully to recover the power he has lost in handing over his kingdom. Lear's language is often superogatory, marking his folly and his humanity. Both. It is, however, only at those moments in the play at which language breaks down or disappears that we glimpse the full significance of the complex and often chaotic variety of languages in the play. In the passage of howling with which John Gielgud began his performance at the Theatre Royal, Lear's speech — as so often with speech in the play — approaches the point of ab/surdity; 'the point', to quote James Calderwood, 'at which words are shorn of meaning and become again merely savage cries, the wild phonic stuff of which we suppose speech to have been originally formed'.[15]

Here another etymological relationship is vital, this time between *surd* (deaf, silent, mute, insensate) and *absurd* (inharmonious, irrational). At one extreme in *King Lear* we witness a verbosity and rhetorical elaboration that is characteristically Elizabethan, and a clotted, careless

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15 James L. Calderwood, 'Creative Uncreation in *King Lear*', in Harold Bloom (ed.), *Modern Critical Interpretations: William Shakespeare's King Lear*, NY, New Haven, Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 1987, pp. 121-37 (p. 123).

density of metaphor that is characteristically Shakespearean. At the other extreme we move to language as gesture, and then on to silence: Edmond (awaiting Edgar) sings

> EDMOND
> Fa, sol, la, mi.
> (1.2.119)

Poor Tom, not content with a flurry of nonsense, complains:

> EDGAR [AS TOM]
> Bless thy five wits, Tom's a-cold! O do, de, do, de, do, de.
> (3.4.55)

Or sings:

> EDGAR [AS TOM]
> Pillicock sat on Pillicock hill; alow, alow, loo, loo.
> (3.4.71)

Lear in his madness tries to spit out the taste of lust that poisons him:

> LEAR
> Fie, fie, fie! Pah, pah!
> (4.5.125)

In frustration:

> LEAR
> Now, now, now, now.
> Pull off my boots; harder, harder, so.
> (4.5.164-5)

In aggression:

> LEAR
> kill, kill, kill, kill, kill, kill!
> (4.5.179)

And regressing to childhood and running away:

LEAR
Sa, sa, sa, sa, sa!
(4.5.194)

Excess, superflux, as I said, marks Lear's folly *and* his humanity. Everything in *King Lear* is vexed by the kinds of contradiction we recognize as characteristically, *perversely* human: Keats's 'fierce dispute / Betwixt damnation and impassioned clay'. (Edmond's viciousness is no less unnecessary — freely given, unconstrained — than Cordelia's forgiveness.) And nothing is more paradoxical than language itself — and (one hastens to add) art, for art, too, is, strictly speaking, unnecessary; gratuitous. Edgar, beholding for the first time his father, Gloucester, with his eyes torn out, meditates on the limits of language and of art:

EDGAR [*Aside*]
O gods! Who is't can say 'I am at the worst'?
I am worse than e'er I was. . . .
And worse I may be yet. The worst is not
So long as we can say 'This is the worst'.
(5.1.25-8)

The worst then — the suffering that is *beyond* utterance — is silent (surd), and beyond the cognizance and consolation of art. By pushing language to its extremes of sense and nonsense, of calculation and passion; by inflating language beyond its referential or communicative function and alternately paring it down to phonetic grunts, *King Lear* can only hint at the obscure and the absurd that are the negation of all language and art. 'Is this the promised end?' asks Kent in the Quarto version when in the final scene Lear appears, howling, with Cordelia dead in his arms:

KENT
Is this the promised end?

EDGAR
Or image of that horror?

ALBANY
Fall, and cease

King Lear is, of course, only an image of that horror. It is, in the end, only art, and can only say 'This is the worst'. For the Romantics, however, it had never been more eloquently said, or more honestly meant.

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