

Coherence and Incoherence in *King Lear*

MICHAEL ORANGE

King Lear offers so many meanings that at times it may appear to overwhelm audiences and readers, as well as its own characters, with an exhausted sense of meaninglessness. At times it takes on the status of an agonized religio-moral seminar conducted by refugees during a bombing-raid. Indeed, utter lack of meaning in life and hence in art is one of the possibilities that the play dramatizes. Nonetheless, a competition between meanings is not the same thing as meaninglessness and it is perhaps the abundance of potential meanings on offer, the number of possible interpretations which the play puts forward about itself, that leads at times to a sense of incoherence.

A prominent example of varieties of meaning is the play's expression of irreconcilably opposed views, put forward by different characters at different points in the play, regarding humanity's relationship with the gods. In a famous passage Gloucester laments the casual expendability of human life: "as flies to wanton boys are we to th' gods,/They kill us for their sport."¹ But ironically, it is Gloucester's son Edgar who will later affirm the doctrine of accountability, albeit in rather Old Testament fashion, and use Gloucester as his instance: "the gods are just, and of our pleasant vices/Make instruments to plague us" (V.iii.172-3). By another irony, this tribute to divine justice in the last act of the play aligns itself with the cruel moralizing of the unnatural daughter Regan in the second: "O sir, to wilful men/The injuries that they themselves procure/Must be their schoolmasters" (II.iv.303-4).

It is not the dialectical interpretative clash that is so remarkable in these examples but the realization that these particular verbal instances are epitomes of violently opposed orders of experience within the play. And the oppositions extend to everyone. In the next act, Gloucester cries out "But I shall see/The winged vengeance overtake such children" (III.vii.68-9) and calls for assistance just before his eyes are put out: "He that will think to live till he be old,/Give me some help!" (III.vii.72-3). But the

1 *The Tragedy of King Lear*, ed. E. A. M. Colman, The Challis Shakespeare (Sydney, 1982), IV.i.36-7. Subsequent references are to this edition.

servant who responds to the appeal survives only momentarily after challenging and defeating Cornwall, as Regan runs him through from behind. Gloucester's invocation of divine justice is neatly reversed, as though the servant is punished instantly for his virtuous intercession. But there is a coda to the scene. After Regan escorts the wounded Cornwall offstage the Second Servant remarks "I'll never care what wickedness I do,/If this man comes to good" and the Third Servant takes him up with "If she live long,/And in the end meet the old course of death,/Women will all turn monsters" (III.vii.102-5). In the next act we learn that Cornwall's wound was mortal, leading Albany to exclaim "This shows you are above,/You justicers, that these our nether crimes/ So speedily can venge" (IV.ii.78-80), while in the final act Regan, failing to "meet the old course of death", is poisoned by her sister.

Woven into *King Lear's* fabric, therefore, are contrasting patterns of justice and injustice, human and divine. The dialectic continues right to the play's ending. Does Lear himself die deluded, believing Cordelia is still alive? "Do you see this? Look on her! Look, her lips—/Look there, look there! (V.iii.312-13). Or is he drawing attention to the cold, unbearable fact of her death? Both possibilities have been argued, and Shakespeare was quite capable of less ambiguous language had clarity been his intention. Nahum Tate's 1681 version, in which Lear and Cordelia ultimately triumph, shows how far it is possible to go in that direction. In Shakespeare's *King Lear*, though, the transition from Lear's death to the play's ending is abrupt. There is none of the self-conscious artistry of the ending of *Hamlet*, whose defeated hero looks to art to sustain what experience has overcome. Hamlet's instruction to Horatio, "draw thy breath in pain/To tell my story",² brings us full circle to the point at which Hamlet's "story", the play *Hamlet*, begins. Lear's last "Look there, look there", is abrupt by comparison, and the responses of Kent and Edgar hardly smooth things over:

Kent Vex not his ghost. Oh let him pass. He hates him
That would upon the rack of this tough world
Stretch him out longer.

Edgar He is gone indeed.

Kent The wonder is he hath endur'd so long.
He but usurp'd his life. (V.iii.315-19)

2 *Hamlet*, ed. Harold Jenkins, the Arden Shakespeare (London, 1982), V.ii.353-4.

In conjunction with Edgar's final words, "We that are young/ Shall never see so much, nor live so long" (V.iii.327-8), the note struck seems to be a wondering kind of exhaustion, and we do not know how temporary or permanent it will prove to be in the sequel because this is where Shakespeare halts proceedings.

What is clear, though, is that the sudden nature of Lear's passing is very much of a piece with the rest of this paradoxical, parodying, inverting, punning and at times apparently incoherent play. Not all these qualities operate on the verbal level, like those conflicts of opinion about divine justice quoted earlier. Inversion is also conveyed by the order of staging so that verbal paradox is underlined by stage sequence. An example is Shakespeare's manipulation of entries and exits in Act One scene two. The scene opens with Edmund entering to deliver a soliloquy devoted to a "Nature" which opposes traditional social customs and beliefs. His service to this goddess or concept begins at once, with the practice against his legitimate brother, on Gloucester's entry. The latter's reaction to Edgar's supposed treachery, once its personal implications have been voiced, articulates a quite different view of Nature from Edmund's:

Gloucester These late eclipses in the sun and moon portend no good to us. Though the wisdom of nature can reason it thus and thus, yet nature finds itself 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. (I.ii.107-13)

The speech concludes with Gloucester's instructions to Edmund to track down the supposedly villainous Edgar and an exclamation at the strangeness of Kent's banishment, whereupon Edmund, alone on stage once more, makes his own exhilarating exclamation against Gloucester's foolish superstition: "An admirable evasion of whoremaster man, to lay his goatish disposition on the charge of a star!" (I.ii.131-3). But he is cut off, once the parody and rejection of his father's views are well launched, by the arrival of Edgar himself. Shakespeare uses this moment to draw explicit attention to the sequence of the staging. "Pat! he comes," Edmund confides to the audience, "like the catastrophe of the old comedy" (I.ii.140). It is splendidly self-aware theatre from Shakespeare. He undercuts Edgar by increasing our awareness of the fictional or dramatic image and divorcing it from any simple forms of realism. It perhaps reinforces the theatrical nature of the opening scene, only recently completed—self-consciously theatrical by comparison with the opening of *Othello*,

for example, in the high ceremony of the relinquishment of the throne, division of the kingdom and banishment of Cordelia. A sense of dissolving levels of reality and fictitiousness is then increased by Edgar's response to Edmund's continued parody of Gloucester's outlook which dwells on the effects of the recent eclipses, the "unnaturalness between the child and the parent; death, dearth, dissolutions of ancient amities" (I.ii.150-2) and so on. Edmund appears to Edgar to be quite serious, although the audience has been alerted by his confiding in them just before Edgar approaches: "My cue is villainous melancholy, with a sigh like Tom o' Bedlam. Oh, these eclipses do portend these divisions. (*Sings*) Fa, sol, la, mi" (I.ii.141-3). But Edgar's response to Edmund's heavy forecasts is to parody them. The legitimate brother is no more superstitious, it seems, than the brother who has exclaimed in mockery at Gloucester's credulousness: "how long," Edgar responds to Edmund's parody of their father, "have you been a sectary astronomical?" (I.ii.156). Edgar clearly is not impressed by such soothsaying. Perhaps in a moment he will ask whether Edmund is serious. So Edmund, who will not want to risk any such discussion just at this point in his practice, changes his tone at once: "Come, come, when saw you my father last?" (I.ii.157). He sets the trap and Edgar leaves to go into hiding with his treacherous brother.

The effect of these parodies and the underlining of the theatrical nature of the experiences being presented is to cut reader and audience loose from a received understanding of reality. Both villain, Edmund, and the foolishly honest (I.ii.187) Edgar are loftily sceptical of their father's old-fashioned philosophy. The shape of the play itself, however, appears to confirm the old man, rather than justify his modern-sounding sons. When Lear enters in the play's final scene with Cordelia dead in his arms, Kent queries "Is this the promis'd end?". Edgar by now is in a position to respond more thoughtfully to apocalyptic intimations. He confirms Kent's drift: "Or image of that horror?" (V.iii.265-6). A connection is made with Gloucester's doom-laden presentiment in the first act, and it seems that his presentation needs to be reassessed. Perhaps he didn't invariably stumble when he saw? The play's continual revisions of its own estimations persist to the end.

This process is of a piece with Shakespeare's handling of Gloucester's role throughout. The mock-suicide is an almost notorious piece of staging, with a pronounced and cruel practical-joke element—a bit like helping the old man only halfway across

Lear altogether (I.iv.45), reportedly defies him (I.iv.51-4) and on his return to the stage is insolent. When Lear strikes him Oswald responds with defiance, "I'll not be stricken, my lord" (I.iv.87), whereupon the disguised Kent first trips him, then threatens him further and finally persuades him offstage. This represents Kent's first service to his master since his defiance of banishment. His new presence is marked by the same bluntness, honesty and loyalty to the king as had characterized the old and it should be emphasized how cheering a figure he represents among the undifferentiated knights and the pining Fool (who appears shortly), who make up Lear's following at this point. Kent appears as an invaluable commonsensical ally, perhaps the more potently useful in disguise than in his former rank because less likely to attract notice as a serious threat to those now invested with power.

It is, therefore, a telling stage effect when Kent appears to forfeit all the advantage of this position by being so easily vanquished by the king's enemies. His initially refreshing verbal flourishes and mastery of Oswald lead straight to the stocks. Worse, he appears almost to have lost his wits, intensifying (instead of alleviating) the situation of Lear's own impending madness: "[*Striking his head*] O Lear, Lear, Lear!/Beat at this gate that let thy folly in/And thy dear judgement out!" (I.iv.275-7). After this outburst, Lear has left Gonerill, threatening her with a violence which he assumes Regan will unleash on hearing how her sister has behaved, and the scene closes with the news of Gonerill's letter to Regan, arguing against Lear's retention of his full retinue. The next scene opens almost immediately with Lear entrusting Kent with his own letters to Regan, dramatizing the impending conflict for Regan's support and underlining therefore the importance and by implication perhaps the diplomatic nicety required of Kent in his mission.

Two scenes later, however, it appears that everything has been forfeited because Kent has completely lost control of himself. The scene is set in the vicinity of Gloucester's castle, where Kent and Oswald encounter.³ Kent's provocative insults seem radically in excess of what the situation demands. The two men appear on

3 There is an inconsistency about location which editors smooth over. Gonerill sends Oswald to Regan without specifying where her sister is to be found, but Lear sends Kent directly to Gloucester. The Challis edition notes "Apparently the town or a castle rather than the Earl, since the letters are for Regan" (I.v.1n). However, in the next act Kent explains to Lear that he has taken the letters to Cornwall and Regan "at their home" (II.iv.27-8), before they depart for Gloucester's castle.

stage "severally" (II.ii), so that there is no suggestion of an antecedent conversation which might account for Kent's outburst, while memories of Oswald's earlier disrespect for the king might more reasonably lead now to cool contempt in Kent rather than fighting words. The sequence of events confirms how disturbing is his loss of equanimity because the preceding scene has shown how eminently self-controlled and clear-headed are the enemies of authority: Edmund has even been able to mutilate himself in cold blood (perhaps a contrast to Lear's passionate beating of his head) in order to deceive his father more completely with his bloodied arm, while creating and dissolving an uproar entirely on his own in a manner to arouse Iago's admiration. Now the scene switches to one of the king's men apparently quite out of control:

Kent Fellow, I know thee.

Oswald What dost thou know me for?

Kent A knave, a rascal, an eater of broken meats, a base, proud, shallow, beggarly, three-suited, hundred-pound, filthy worsted-stocking knave, a lily-liver'd, action-taking, whoreson glass-gazing super-serviceable finical rogue, one-trunk-inheriting slave; one that wouldst be a bawd in way of good service, and art nothing but the composition of a knave, beggar, coward, pander, and the son and heir of a mongrel bitch: one whom I will beat into clamour's whining if thou deni'st the least syllable of thy addition.

(II.ii.11-23)

In a recent Royal Shakespeare Company production the actor playing Kent paused heavily between each insult, building to a climax of vituperation. The sheer length of the exchange compares with the duel of insults at the Boar's Head in Act Two, Scene four of *I Henry IV*, that quasi-operatic duet between the Prince and Falstaff which ends only when they run out of breath, partly from exertion, partly from laughter. Where Kent is concerned, though, it is grimmer humour. The audience is dismayed as he draws on Oswald, ostensibly because the latter has forgotten Kent's tripping of him two days earlier (II.ii.24-32). Only when Oswald refuses to draw is a brief hint given of Kent's good reason for outrage: "you come with letters against the King, and take Vanity the puppet's part against the royalty of her father" (II.ii.34-6). Yet Shakespeare will not develop the hint at all at this stage and it is easily forgotten in what follows. The intervention of Cornwall, Regan and Gloucester is not allowed to throw any further light on Kent's passion. He explains that he detests flatterers of Oswald's brand (II.ii.72-84) and that he refuses to mince words himself (II.ii.105-113), while Oswald's own ex-

planation understandably echoes Kent's own reasons to him previously, which concern the earlier interchange before the king (II.ii.115-24). Thus Kent is stocked. Shakespeare has manipulated the audience into a sense of dismay that the disguised counsellor, far from exploiting the opportunities offered by disguise to check his master's opponents, has been unable to contain his passion even momentarily. Kent fails the elementary test of disguise, that of concealing feeling. To an audience it must appear from Kent's violence that he has almost gone mad: he has gone so far as threatening to repay discourtesy with death, when the original occasion only prompted him to remove Oswald from the king's presence.

It is not until the king's reappearance that a sufficient reason for Kent's unruly behaviour is elicited, well after the sense of incoherence attending his actions has had time to make its effect. To Lear Kent makes out a perfectly rational case for his incitement to anger, which arises from Oswald's intervention during Kent's mission to Cornwall and Regan:

<i>Kent</i>	My lord, when at their home I did commend your highness' letters to them, Ere I was risen from the place that show'd My duty kneeling, came there a reeking post, Stew'd in his haste, half breathless, panting forth From Gonerill his mistress salutations; Deliver'd letters, spite of intermission, Which presently they read. On those contents They summon'd up their meiny, straight took horse; Commanded me to follow and attend The leisure of their answer, gave me cold looks: And meeting here the other messenger, Whose welcome, I perceiv'd, had poison'd mine (Being the very fellow which of late Display'd so saucily against your highness), Having more man than wit about me, drew. He rais'd the house with loud and coward cries. Your son and daughter found this trespass worth The shame which here it suffers. (II.iv.27-45)
-------------	--

It is a lengthy, satisfactory explanation. The reasonableness of Kent's tone is evident, as is the quieter mood of self-recrimination after the night in the stocks: "having more man than wit about me." Yet Kent's impetuosity is only part of the story. The rest is Shakespeare's manipulation of comprehensible outrage into incomprehensible near-madness, of coherent dramatic development into a paradigm of incoherence. Inserted between the scene of

Kent's stocking and Lear's arrival is the brief soliloquy from the hunted Edgar who decides "To take the basest and most poorest shape/That ever penury, in contempt of man,/Brought near to beast" (II.iii.7-9). Unlike Edmund's imposture earlier (I.ii.142), Edgar's adoption of the mad beggar's disguise springs from necessity, as does the accompanying mutilation: "The country gives me proof and precedent/Of Bedlam beggars who, with roaring voices,/Strike in their numb'd and mortified arms/Pins, wooden pricks, nails, sprigs of rosemary" (II.iii.13-16). The parallels and contrasts with Kent's position in the stocks, which appears like a kind of wilful self-scourging, imply the dethronement of reason and order. With Edgar it is enforced. With Kent it is made to seem like weak capitulation—if not a mad ritual of drawing down upon himself what suffering he can in magical protection of his master.

The presentation of the Fool focuses the intimations of disorder and unreason in the opening acts and dramatizes another kind of incoherence. The role itself traditionally depends on a kind of inversion, persistent in *King Lear*, in which folly and wisdom change places. The congruence of the role with the dominating impression that order has been turned upside down in the play explains why the Fool seems such a naturalized figure in the world of *King Lear*. In Act Three scene six during the storm, when Lear stages the mock-trial, the Fool makes an appropriate third to Lear's own near-mad inquisitor and Edgar's persuasively mad Tom. The effects created in this scene, particularly the pathos of this dislocated parody of the law and its enactment of humanity's search for glimmerings of justice in a cruelly unjust world, are prepared for from the Fool's first entrance, which is carefully delayed. In the scene before his entrance Shakespeare integrates the Fool into the action from the beginning by Gonerill's question to Oswald: "Did my father strike my gentleman for chiding of his Fool?" (I.iii.1-2). Lear's demands in the next scene have a "make 'em wait" flavour of creating anticipation: "Where's my knave, my Fool? Go you and call my Fool hither" (I.iv.42-3), "Where's my Fool? ho? I think the world's asleep" (I.iv.48). The question "But where's my Fool? I have not seen him this two days", prompts the Second Knight to reply significantly "Since my young lady's going to France, sir, the Fool hath much pin'd away". Lear responds: "No more of that. I have noted it well", before reiterating his demand: "Go you, call hither my Fool" (I.iv.71-8). The last exchanges show even more clearly

to what extent the Fool is identified with leading themes of the play before he so much as makes an appearance on stage, by being invested with a sort of proxy-Cordelia status, a guardian of her values while she is absent.

The opening exchanges with Kent and Lear about coxcombs confirm that this is a wise Fool. Having concisely indicated Kent's folly in attaching himself to one out of favour, he next plays with Lear's folly: "Why, this fellow has banisht two on's daughters, and did the third a blessing against his will" (I.iv.107-8). Lear, having made Gonerill and Regan independent, lost their love and obedience, and the word "banisht" glances at Lear's treatment of Cordelia. However, the Fool's use of language is also proleptic here. By a simple inversion of blessing and banishment he looks forward to the impending actual inversion whereby Lear is banished by the two favoured daughters. He may even have sensed it already, judging by the conflict that has been shown in the previous scene (I.iii) to be developing between Gonerill and her father over Lear's retinue, the "great abatement of kindness" noticed by the Second Knight in the present scene moments before (I.iv.59).

The sort of ingenuity that needs to be expended on a word like "banisht" to yield its literal and figurative meaning in full is scarcely possible in the theatre. There, a fleeting sense both of paradox and appropriateness is possibly all that time permits. For the audience the Fool's words may conceal as much as they reveal because of their inversions. The exchange between Lear and the Fool which follows the play on banishment and blessing confirms this:

Fool How now, Nuncle! Would I had two coxcombs and two daughters!

Lear Why, my boy?

Fool If I gave them all my living, I'd keep my coxcombs myself. There's mine. Beg another, of thy daughters.

Lear Take heed, sirrah—the whip!

(I.iv.110-16)

The question-and-answer form doesn't yield a mechanical answer. Instead, there is a shift into an afterthought, from "I'd keep my coxcombs myself" to the Fool's sudden stab at Lear: "There's mine. Beg another, of thy daughters". Two daughters, two coxcombs. An audience may not follow the precise logical development so much as the sense that the Fool has exposed Lear and then cheekily crowned him as a double coxcomb. The very nature of riddles is the clue to the effect made. In the famous

riddle of *King Oedipus* the correct answer has enormous practical significance and unexpected consequences, but the answer to the question is in itself (as it were) pedestrian. Both Sphinx's and Fool's riddles are powerful as signifiers of much denser riddles relating to fate, the enigma of reality, cruelty—the mystery of things.

The continuation of this scene of the Fool's introduction plays consistently on the idea of truth disguised, plain speech superseded by gnomes, riddles and songs. The play on truth and lies becomes extreme in the climax before Gonerill's entrance. The conflation of physical cruelty and truth-telling has been constant:

Fool Prithee, Nuncle, keep a schoolmaster that can teach thy Fool to lie. I would fain learn to lie.

Lear And you lie, sirrah, we'll have you whipt.

Fool I marvel what kin thou and thy daughters are. They'll have me whipt for speaking true, thou'lt have me whipt for lying, and sometimes I am whipt for holding my peace. I had rather be any kind o' thing than a fool. (Liv.181-8)

The amused hint of exhausted language here, of a situation in which truth, lies and silence are equivalent, useless and productive of pain, is expanded as the play proceeds, but not by the Fool. His rich verbal performance is suggestively occluded. Perhaps he has light enough only to illuminate areas of the darkness, which finally swallows him. Perhaps it is not so much that Lear begins to understand the Fool's wisdom, and thus there is no dramatic need of him after Act Three. Rather, his fading unexplained from the play suggests that he may have begun the journey into the dark which precedes Lear's and Kent's.

In Act Three, part of his role is transferred to Edgar. The Fool's teasing riddles, that exploit surface incoherence in order to evoke deeper coherence, or the reverse, give place to a stricter demarcation between nonsense and sense which Edgar's asides highlight: "My tears begin to take his part so much,/They mar my counterfeiting" (III.vi.58-9). The contrast with his exclamations a few moments earlier is pronounced: "The foul Fiend haunts Poor Tom in the voice of a nightingale. Hoppedance cries in Tom's belly for two white herring. Croak not, black angel, I have no food for thee" (III.vi.29-32). It is as though sanity is driven to erect barriers against the tide of insanity that threatens to engulf it. Later, though, Edgar develops the Fool's linguistic resources in a different, gnomic direction. His response to the sight of his blind father led by an old man is an example which

inversions on the cliff-top. Gloucester's language is devalued: "O you mighty gods!/This world I do renounce, and in your sights/Shake patiently my great affliction off" (IV.vi.34-6). His self-renunciation is mocked by Edgar's trick, his language cut loose from its intended solemnity. It now seems that only a kind of gnomic utterance is flexible enough to embrace both meaning and non-meaning: "Thy life's a miracle" (IV.vi.55); and later, "Ripeness is all" (V.ii.11). Both statements are full of implication, but difficult to assimilate into a coherent discourse within the play: the nature of Lear's and Cordelia's deaths and the frantic but unavailing attempt to avert Edmund's sentence on them ensure that. Shakespeare hints at his purposes just before Gloucester's suicide attempt when the latter detects a change in Edgar:

Gloucester Methinks thy voice is alter'd and thou speak'st
 In better phrase and matter than thou didst.
Edgar Y' are much deceiv'd. In nothing am I chang'd
 But in my garments.
Gloucester Methinks y' are better spoken. (IV.vi.7-10)

Edgar's response implies, and it has been true in his own case, that language is a kind of clothing. The poor forked animal like Tom is naked and incoherent, everything else is perhaps superfluous, coherent language included.

Shakespeare develops this perception in the play's final scene. Lear's last speech is a reflexive exclamation, a cry of grief: "Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life,/And thou no breath at all?" The play makes no answer. Lear's shift into negation has more force: "Thou'lt come no more,/Never, never, never, never, never". The reiteration seems to resonate with ghostly implications from his former life, when words were capable of meanings. Then a final effort is made to relate language to reality. A commonplace object begins to establish the relationship: "Pray you, undo this button. Thank you, sir". But in his attempting to reach any further, that relationship is shown remorselessly to be delusive: "Do you see this? Look on her! Look, her lips—/Look there, look there!" (V.iii.308-13). There's nothing incoherent or gnomic or riddling in the words themselves: this time, Shakespeare merely shows them to be hopelessly at odds with reality. We are a long way even from Edgar's response to the re-encounter between Lear and blind Gloucester towards the end of Act Four: "I would not take this from report; it is,/And my heart breaks at it" (IV.vi.139-40). But at the end of the play,

there is a further twist. We witness the "it is", the reality of Cordelia's death, Lear's breaking heart—and then delusion. A sense of tragic incoherence is sustained to the end.

These varieties of incoherence, deliberate fraying at the edges of Shakespeare's presentation of Kent, Edgar and the Fool, inform the play's treatment of Lear throughout. His coherent ceremony of renunciation turns out to be madness as Kent, apparently so sane and level-headed, indicates from the beginning: "Be Kent unmannerly/When Lear is mad" (I.i.146-7). Yet Lear's privations inspire in him the series of great recognitions—of the nature of love, justice and compassion. Their emergence from shrouds of deceit, parody, mental torture and emotional tumult does not compromise their dramatic value as recognitions. And Cordelia, in contrast to the Fool, Edgar and Lear, makes the journey from the gnomic pregnancy of her early "Nothings" to the magnificent, confident eloquence of the speech which begins "O my dear father! Restoration hang/Thy medicine on my lips" (IV.vii.26-42). Further, her eloquence is actualized, her lips become a restorative medicine to her father. Nevertheless, the sense of loose ends and incoherence makes it difficult to see the play as redemptive in any simple sense. Her death and Lear's delusion ensure that. Equally, however, to stress such qualities is not to endorse the Absurdist version of *King Lear* popular some twenty-five years ago, with its refusal to enact meaning in *Waiting for Godot* fashion—"They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams for an instant, then it's night once more"⁴—however many parallels the later play makes. The play's own coherence masters the varieties of incoherence it makes use of. It transcends existential concepts of competing meanings and the necessity of choice by its dramatization of just how meanings and language flicker on and off, attempting to define and control reality and then becoming inert. *King Lear* continually criss-crosses the void with paradigms of meaning. Reality, as the self-confessing inadequacy of those gnomes and riddles indicates, is elusive, volatile, always beyond art.

4 Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot: A Tragicomedy in Two Acts* (London, 1959), p. 89.