

# A Silent Fool

## Cordelia's Subversive Silence in King Lear<sup>1</sup>

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1 This essay is an abridged and amended version of a chapter from my current book project on tragedy and imagination, tentatively titled, *The Tragic Imagination in Shakespeare, Emerson, Nietzsche, and Deleuze*.

2 Simone Weil, "Introduction," in *Simone Weil: An Anthology*, ed. Sian Miles (New York: Grove Press, 2000), 1.

3 *Ibid.*, 2.

4 We might compare the use of "fool" here to the *eiron* (εἰρων), a stock character in classical Greek comedy, known for buffoonery, mock modesty, and for besting his braggadocious opponent, the *alazon* (ἀλαζών). Xanthias, the servant to Dionysus in Aristophanes' *Frogs*, is a prime example. In addition to comic theater, some consider the *eiron* to have inspired Plato's depiction of Socrates and his many encounters with sophists, as well as the Gospel writers' portrait of Jesus, particularly in his confrontations with learned religious figures. In this sense, the "fool"—servant, slave, clown, madman—has a long history of exposing ignorance, challenging convention, and of speaking truth to power. Shakespeare continues the tradition with his fools. Our word "irony" derives from this theatrical term.

5 Simone Weil, "The *Iliad* or the Poem of Force," 163.

**N**ot long before her death at the age of thirty-four, Simone Weil, in one of her last letters, reflected on a production of *King Lear* she had recently attended:

There is a class of people in this world who have fallen into the lowest degree of humiliation, far below beggary, and who are deprived not only of all social consideration, but also, in everybody's opinion, of the specific human dignity, reason itself—and these are the only people who, in fact, are able to tell the truth: All the others lie.<sup>2</sup>

She tells us that this class of people are "fools."<sup>3</sup> No one listens to them because they have "no academic titles or episcopal dignities." In drama we often relegate the spoken truth of fools to the satirical and ironic, their silent truth to the regrettable and naïve.<sup>4</sup> Not simply *truth*. The truth about the way things really are—a truth silently lived or publicly spoken—loses its irresistible and essential qualities when received through the register of foolishness, when foolishness remains antonymic to wisdom (or at least what passes for wisdom). History and the wide field of arts and letters give us many fools of fate subjected to the world in and of force—*force* being that which "turns anybody who is subjected to it into a *thing*"<sup>5</sup>—a world represented not only by institutions and systems of power, but by prevailing values and ideological undercurrents. This is the iron bar comprised of conformity, practicality, and good sense, under which the citizens of all late capitalistic and over-developed nations must pass, precluding dangerously foolish lives, foolish pronouncements of truth, and foolish silence before all manifestations of power. This bar ever lowers in inverse proportion to the need for fools to walk upright. Their relegation to the category of "fool," which attempts to rob them

of the truth of their witness, especially by silencing them, nevertheless still contains liberating possibilities: power can be drawn out and exposed. In silence things must be what they really are. This foolish quietude—*elected* or *forced*—indicts power and disrupts the world of force.

But what do we do with such indictments and disruptions?

We should see them as tools for subversion.<sup>6</sup> In those very encounters with persons behaving or speaking in a manner that power judges as subversive (or even simply non-conforming) to its desires, it must, as the force driving it demands, victimize those unruly subjects through identification within the particular domain of that power, whereby those named (or classified) become contained within that system of intellectual or political enclosure allowing power to display, conceal, sentence, and pardon as suits its self-perceived purposes. In those encounters, concurrent with power's prerogatives, that truth—in adopted silence or forced silence, by foolish affect or consignment to foolishness—testifies against power's judgments. Time will, of course, make fools of us all before the end. Still, in the moment of being named criminal, rebel, subversive, deviant—*fool whatsoever*—the genuine subversion that might shake the social world reveals its efficacy. Shakespeare makes this terribly clear in *Lear*.

**T**he king has grown old. He tires of the affairs of state, but not of kingship's privileges. His *destiny* rests in his hands, his *fate* in the hands of his daughters. Here we find the formula of theatrical tragedy: the force of fate rises up against destiny's desires.<sup>7</sup> Events and conditions set the stage for truth to reveal itself and to be roundly denied. Except by madmen and poets who affirm "nothing" or "weakness" and who see the truth of the situation. Except by lovers, now and again, who have grown foolish by their love. Except, in *Lear*, by a few faithful servants and children hooped together with their lord by unbreakable bonds of duty. Shakespeare gives us Cordelia as such a fool, as well as the Fool,<sup>8</sup> and later, in a most interesting way, Edgar as Tom o' Bedlam. Here we will only consider Cordelia's foolishness.

In abrogation of his monarchical responsibilities, Lear decides to divest himself of the worries burdening his great privileges in order to face his end in merry revels and repose.

To shake all cares and business from our age,  
Conferring them on younger strengths, while we  
Unburthened crawl toward death.<sup>9</sup>

To live out his life as a king without responsibilities, Lear intends to divide his kingdom among his three daughters and their husbands (including whomever Cordelia will wed). Three daughters who, once invested with his political power, become for him, like those

6 Cf. Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), 65; Alan Sinfield, "Shakespeare and Education," in *Political Shakespeare: Essays in Cultural Materialism*, 2nd edition., eds. Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 178.

7 Cf. Max Scheler, "Ordo Amoris" in *Selected Philosophical Essays*, ed. and trans. David R. Lachterman (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 106-8.

8 Richard Abrams, "The Double Casting of Cordelia and Lear's Fool: A Theatrical View," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (Winter 1985), pp. 354-368.

9 William Shakespeare, "King Lear" (conflated text), *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1997), 1.1.37-39. *The Norton Shakespeare* will be used throughout. I will list the title of the play, followed by the act, scene, and line numbers.

ancient daughters of necessity, the triune forces of fate. In *Macbeth* these forces appear supernatural and outside of the family dynamic, though not entirely outside of a recognized, if still ambiguous, role within society. While substantive differences mark out Lear's daughters from Macbeth's witches, the two groups play a structurally similar role within the social dimension and life-world of the eponymous characters: neither of whom will in fact turn out to be the true tragic hero. Even in the age of Shakespeare, even now, it is, whatever shape it takes, always a god who plays that role (*both* the ultimate symbol of irresistible force and drives *and* simultaneously their atoning redress). All the famed figures of the tragic stage are "...mere masks of this original hero, Dionysus."<sup>10</sup> Through the illusion of a free decision (and the delusion of a wise decision) Lear "creates" the circumstances by which he will have no authority to exercise his will or power to indulge his wants. Like Oedipus, he ironically enacts his own curse.<sup>11</sup> Though it is possible that Lear thinks himself to be acting beyond his own interests with a politically shrewd move that would see the old kingdoms of England, Wales, and Scotland restored to something of their former independent status, he is yet driven by the fate of force, which works through all mechanisms of power and self-will.<sup>12</sup> Though the wisdom of age or even a hint of sanity might advise him against this course of action, as well as the game excusing it, he sees no danger.

Again, as the original author and judge of the game—but only as ironic enactor—Lear believes that all will, quite naturally, go well. And why not? His division of the kingdom will arguably please more citizens with territorial identities than it will displease, and his investiture of rank and rule converts his beloved children into his patrons. They will become the powers of the realm(s), surely only adding additional gratitude to their love? Undoubtedly, they and their husbands will make fine regents and will fulfill their filial duties to their father and former king? And even *if* Lear were none too sure about Goneril and Regan, he could always count on his youngest and most beloved daughter, Cordelia, with whom he originally planned to live: "I loved her most, and thought to set my rest / On her kind nursery."<sup>13</sup> But, strangely, as we well know, she refuses his game. Why? And why does Lear react with such incredible rancor anyway? The shadowed corners of the mind hide all manner of monsters.

The game:

Tell me, my daughters—  
Since now we will divest us, both of rule,  
Interest of territory, cares of state—  
Which of you shall say doth love us most?  
That we our largest bounty may extend  
Where nature doth with merit challenge.<sup>14</sup>

*A love test.* At first blush, Lear's game seems innocent enough. Each daughter giving a small speech proclaiming her love for him. A little

<sup>10</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 73. Some classicists and scholars of the Athenian theater, whether following Aristotle or not, would disagree with Nietzsche's reading. The assertion, however, besides having textual evidence, phenomenologically sees tragedy as an ontological state of affairs *and* a performative response venerating the god symbolizing that state of affairs. Tragedy, in this way, is more about the nature of being and the trials of existence than it is about the localized and individuated virtues and vices of a particular mortal character.

<sup>11</sup> John Kerrigan, *Shakespeare's Originality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 74.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>13</sup> *King Lear*, 1.1.123–24.

<sup>14</sup> *King Lear*, 1.1.46–51.

whimsical, sentimental fun dressed in formality. He is, after all, about to give them his kingdom; the least they could do is say a few fine words. The older daughters, whatever their aspirations, take to the game and play it to maximum effect.

**GONERIL**

Sir, I love you more than words can wield the matter;  
Dearer than eye-sight, space, and liberty;  
Beyond what can be valued, rich or rare;  
No less than life, with grace, health, beauty, honor;  
As much as child e'er loved, or father found;  
A love that makes breath poor, and speech unable;  
Beyond all manner of so much I love you.<sup>15</sup>

Regan follows and concurs with her older sister, notably adding:

Only she comes too short, that I profess  
Myself an enemy to all other joys,  
Which the most precious square of sense possesses,  
And find I am alone felicitate  
In your dear highness' love.<sup>16</sup>

Eloquent exaggerations which, as long as no one draws attention to their substance and scrutinizes them, no doubt please Lear. Accordingly, after Regan and Goneril's love pronouncements the king gives them their share of the kingdom. All proceeds swimmingly for everyone. Except for Cordelia, who, between the two speeches, quietly reflects:

What shall Cordelia speak? Love, and be silent.<sup>17</sup>

and after Regan's speech adds:

Then poor Cordelia!  
And yet not; since, I am sure, my love's  
More ponderous than my tongue.<sup>18</sup>

Her love and silence presages that which is to come, the preliminary drawing out of the unnoticed and unconscious forces at work in the game. Her depersonalized response creates space wherein the drives at work in and through each of the participants can uncomfortably show themselves. In but a few moments, the silence—not Cordelia herself—will bear testimony against all the players. That is, it creates the conditions by which they must bear testimony against themselves. What will this testimony tell us? Lear's actions and demands: riddled with taboo energies and want of self-possession. Her sisters' professions of love: filial impiety masked in adoration. Those who speak the truth or for truth's sake refuse to speak: love's vulnerability and duty's foolishness.<sup>19</sup>

Finally, her father turns to her—"Now, our joy" and "Speak"—and the engine begins its rumblings. She gives him his due.

15 *King Lear*, 1.1.53–59.

16 *King Lear*, 1.1.71–74.

17 *King Lear*, 1.1.60.

18 *King Lear*, 1.1.75–77.

19 Cf. Christina Luckyj, "A Moving Rhetoricke: Women's Silences and Renaissance Texts," *Renaissance Drama*, Vol. 24 (1993), pp. 33–56.

**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; nor more nor less.  
**LEAR** How, how, Cordelia! mend your speech a little,  
Lest it may mar your fortunes  
**CORDELIA** Good my lord,  
You have begot me, bred me, loved me; I  
Return those duties back as are right fit,  
Obey you, love you, and most honor you.  
Why have my sisters husbands, if they say  
They love you all? Haply, when I shall wed,  
That lord whose hand must take my plight shall carry  
Half my love with him, half my care and duty  
Sure, I shall never marry like my sisters,  
To love my father all.<sup>20</sup>

Cordelia offers a succinct explanation of her refusal to participate, for to have remained absolutely silent about her silence would seem too ungrateful. Her refusal indicates an affirmation, not a renunciation: she loves her father.<sup>21</sup> She has and will happily give him everything due him. Everything and only what is due him. A hyperbolic expression of filial love makes a mockery of her genuine love and appreciation for him. Her sisters do not mind at all. Lear's game, which invites—demands—such exaggeration, subsequently inverts reality, albeit not in a revolutionary or liberatory way. Those who would lie to accomplish their ambitions receive the rewards rightly reserved for those who would, in an ideal world, speak the truth, while those who would speak the truth receive the judgments usually reserved for those who lie. All because silence exposes the lies concealing the secret truths of the players and of reality. What are these most unknown, guarded matters?

First, Lear, whatever his other merits, comes to us unfree for his own end—hence his unwise abdication in order to die “unburthened” and free of care—indicating an approach to truth from marked deficiency. He possesses no clear disclosure of his innermost fears or understanding of his darkest desires; thus, he has no way of attaining anything resembling authentic resolution in the face of old age and death. He cannot act as whole person. He might indeed have many fine and kingly qualities, but, like all other captive players correctly called “protagonist” (principal mortal sufferer) or wrongly named hero (of divine parentage) caught up in the tragic engine, his faults facilitate his susceptibility to the hidden energies steering all unreflective life. “As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods; / They kill us for their sport.”<sup>22</sup> The most apparent consequence of Lear's self-disclosive limitations: truth remains for him something subject to his impaired—or overly

20 *King Lear*, 1.1.86–103.

21 Albert Camus, *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt*, trans. Anthony Bower (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 13.

22 *King Lear*, 4.1.37–38.

*personalized*—understanding of those drives that constitute him, precluding any full—or adequately *depersonalized*—account of the way things really are. The way people, places, and things are driven to be, which in turn reveals the proper and improper objects of acceptance and refusal. The naked soul alone can see the world of force and bear silent witness against it.

[Aside. There is, of course, no metaphysically “objectivated” state or emanation of being. There is no pure, universal Truth as Plato and others have contended. Even if or when we concede something like “transcendence”—going beyond the usual limits of experience—every desire for and account of “the truth” signals an expression, contains a signature, bears the stamp of time and place. Nevertheless, we can still acquiesce or aspire to the quiet possibility we each possess of simply letting things be what they really are and of demonstrably giving a pious, critical, living account of the way things really are. The unenviable and treacherous task then lies in giving an account of truth that does not leave us with an empty metaphysical notion or merely another perspective among an ocean of perspectives. Rather, something in accord with both nature and ourselves; something extraordinarily capable of helping us to make sense of the world and of convicting us, luring us, placing provocative demands upon us. This is why truth is of a higher quality than facts. For truth received in silence and conceived in testimony exposes everything for what it really is and for what it should be. Especially quiet testimony. And we are always either free or unfree to be claimed by these proclamations of truth. We are never neutral before them. In those encounters truth reveals how subordinated we are to force and power, how caught up in the spell of illusions, how trapped by the habits of belief. It reveals a profound sense of proportionality between all things. We become de-centered. Our lives and world must then be reconstructed in accord with truth.]

Bereft of sufficient introspection, caught up in invisible inner wars, Lear’s failure to achieve self-mastery—as existential acceptance of what is necessary, political liberation from what is not necessary, and the creation of new ethical imperatives for what is possible—necessarily relegates his response to Cordelia to the overly personal and profane. He finds no home in trust and possibility. He cannot abide silence. He is unable to “hear” the truth of silent testimony about the way things are. In the world of power and force, someone must always be doing or saying something. Never nothing. The Fool: “Sometimes I am whipped for holding my peace.”<sup>23</sup> As a consequence, he cannot slow the fate of force or mitigate against the world of power. “Nothing’s” ultimate authority hovers at the edges of his kingdom. For now, all remains pre-reflective force incapable of genuine compassion. Goneril and Regan capitalize upon this predicament and artfully

23 *King Lear*, 1.4.161.

though gracelessly handle truth as a “moveable host of metaphors.”<sup>24</sup> Indeed, lies of a lesser order become the truth, a necessary illusion lasting as long as its persuasive force and explanatory strength allow? It would seem so. Until the untimely inconvenience and disruptive nature of “nothing” and silent witness—presented by beings’ tragic fools—shatter such illusions. Often at the expense of their lives.

To consider the second matter brought to light in this scene, we must recall Lear’s disproportionate response to Cordelia’s appeal to “nothing” and silent refusal to participate—at least in the way his deficiency expects—in his love contest.

**LEAR** But goes thy heart with this?

**CORDELIA** Ay, my good lord.

**LEAR** So young, and so untender?

**CORDELIA** So young, my lord, and true.

**LEAR** Let it be so! Thy truth, then, be they dower!

For, by the sacred radiance of the sun,

The mysteries of Hecate, and the night;

By all the operations of the orbs

From whom we do exist and cease to be;

Here I disclaim all my paternal care,

Propinquity and property of blood,

And as a stranger to my heart and me

Hold thee, from this, for ever. The barbarous Scythian,

Or he that makes his generation messes

To gorge his appetite, shall to my bosom

Be as well neighbored, pitied, and relieved,

As thou my sometime daughter.

**KENT**

Good my liege—

**LEAR** Peace, Kent!

Come not between the dragon and his wrath.<sup>25</sup>

Like Polixenes’ turn in *The Winter’s Tale*, wherein his wife, Hermione, quite suddenly and unexpectedly, becomes the focus of his jealousy and mania, Cordelia, also seemingly inexplicably, finds herself fallen from most beloved daughter to despised object. Lear, pre-Christian pagan that he is, calls on the sun, the night, the goddess of magic and witches, upon all heavenly bodies which might bear witness: Cordelia is no longer his daughter. He belittles her appeal to the truth in the process: “Thy truth, then, be they dower!” She will be to him as a parent-devouring barbarian. Her honest and plain account of her love for him—and refusal to exaggerate her love for him—produces such a powerful and disruptive reaction that we are left wondering: What has caused this wrathful dragon to emerge? From cherished and endowed to despised and disowned in but a few lines. We do not need to speculate too wildly to discover an adequate subtext contextualizing Lear’s erratic behavior.

The rage Lear shows towards Cordelia’s reverent silence—probably present in longstanding patterns of behavior—evinces a response to an unresolved fear of abandonment and a dangerous level

<sup>24</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lies in a Non-Moral Sense” in *The Nietzsche Reader*, eds. Keith Ansell Pearson and Duncan Large (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 117.

<sup>25</sup> *King Lear*, 1.1.304–122.

of insecurity surrounding rejection, more than likely the result of some deep trauma regarding his wife's absence, as well as, perhaps, his own mother's. The missing mother (or mothers) in the play, the demand not only to be loved but admired to excess by his daughters, and the uncontrollable animus displayed toward Cordelia after her apparent failure to fulfill this confused demand, makes a compelling case for Lear's unconscious desire that Cordelia (primarily) and her sisters (secondarily) play the role of wife and mother.<sup>26</sup> This is not the only instance in Shakespeare where we find daughters cast in the role of forbidden love objects. Or of love objects becoming curse objects. These flirtations with incest taboos steer the action onward into ever more destructive territory. As Mark Taylor describes such behaviors and the desires driving them:

Consciously or unconsciously, sometimes both, Shakespearean fathers dread no circumstance more than the loss, to other men and to maturity, of the daughters whom they desire for themselves; and this desire, both impermissible and inadmissible, expresses itself in very strange behavior—in acts that are arbitrary, selfish, irrational, violent, cruel. The combination of dread and desire that occasions these acts designate incestuous feelings; hardly ever overt, these incestuous feelings manifest themselves through sublimations, compensations, and displacements.<sup>27</sup>

The “incestuous feelings” compelling Lear and other Shakespearean fathers do not often show themselves directly, providing room for ambiguity and doubt. These figures have been socialized to compensate for these strange desires by undertaking less overtly catastrophic activities. Yet, flashes of irrational cruelty—unjustified doubts, unprovoked rebukes, inappropriate games—indicate the perniciousness effects of unaddressed underlying forbidden desires. Here, Lear's mercenary reaction to Cordelia so clearly breaks from the usual defense mechanisms redirecting those taboo energies that we are left with little doubt as to the catalyst for his disavowal of her.<sup>28</sup> A course of action ultimately stripping him of everything valuable and leading to a perfected ruination.

The last aspect brought to light by these speeches tells us something both about Lear and the structure of tragic drama: the enginery and its parts requires winding up. The stage and pieces must be set, even if we enter *in medias res*. The conditions for restoration in the play—which includes elected divestment of some essential aspect of identity, order, or place and the possibility of repossession—must first be laid out, slowly come near again, flirt with success, and inevitably fail in the end. The people, places, institutions, cultural practices, and values constituting the particular world of the play find themselves narratively compelled to reveal their hidden dynamic structures and spiritual characteristics in order for the tragic

26 Coppelia Kahn, “The Absent Mother in King Lear,” in *Rewriting the Renaissance: The Discourses of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe*, eds. Margaret W. Ferguson, Maureen Quilligan, Nancy J. Vickers (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 248.

27 Mark Taylor, *Shakespeare's Darker Purpose: A Question of Incest* (New York: AMS Press, 1982), x.

28 Diane Elizabeth Dreher, *Domination and Defiance: Fathers and Daughters in Shakespeare* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1986), 64.

29 Cf. William Rosen, *Shakespeare and the Craft of Tragedy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964), 1-51.

30 Compare these passages from the opening scene of *Othello* with his notorious lines at the end: "I know my price, I am worth no worse a place" (1.1.11); "In following him I follow but myself. / Heaven is my judge, not I for love and duty, / But seeming so for my peculiar end" (1.1.58-60); "Even now, now, very now, an old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe" (1.1.88-89); and at the end, "Demand me nothing. What you know, you know. / From this time forth I never will speak word" (5.2.309-310). Iago has already told and shown us everything we need to make accurate determinations about his motivations.

31 *King Lear*, 3.2.68-69.

32 David Margolies, *Monsters of the Deep: Social Dissolution in Shakespeare's Tragedies* (New York: Manchester University Press, 1992), 6.

33 Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 160-1. The full passage might be helpful here: "Persons for whom funeral rites are not performed are condemned to a pitiable existence, since they are never able to enter the world of the dead or to become incorporated in the society established there. These are the most dangerous dead. They would like to be reincorporated into the world of the living, and since they cannot be, they behave like hostile strangers to it. They lack the means of subsistence which the other dead find in their own world and consequently must obtain them at the expense of the living. Furthermore, the dead without hearth or home sometimes have an intense desire for vengeance."

god—symbol of unconscious force, its many drives and the atoning counter-movements—to explicitly and publicly strip them of their illusions of reality, most importantly the illusion that their elective divestment of what is necessary was ever truly elective or that it ever really happened.<sup>29</sup> What are our choices before the powers prompting them? Before biological imperatives and societally compelled behaviors? Most decisions arrive as *ex post facto* rationalizations for our participations in the formula of force. The nature or use of reason notwithstanding, the reliable dreams and historical aspirations upon which human reality bases itself will end, all hidden motives known or knowable within the drama will come to light. Even Iago, famous for his refusal to explain his motivations in the end, still tells us of his jealousy and reveals his racism in the opening scene of *Othello*.<sup>30</sup> The tragic engine does not simply address itself to the superficial, it strips all and lays bare what is most personal. We too find ourselves stripped of our secrets in time. In this denuded world the old illusions will no longer suffice, and new or revised ones become necessary. "The art of our necessities is strange, / That can make vile things precious."<sup>31</sup> And precious things vile. The world must drip with *pathos* and bleed with loss while hope unsettlingly lingers. Through this process the particular and discrete become general and universal. Something essential about reality must now arrive so that we might accept and venerate it or reject and condemn it. And do so in order that possibilities and impossibilities might be affirmed.

Here, *Lear's* game shatters the previously functional illusion of healthy love existing between father and daughters to reveal what the nature and destiny of the actual relations dictate: good and evil will become unfixed and words unreliable. The community of values—whatever they are—will always disintegrate in time.<sup>32</sup> Love detaches from life and affixes itself to death. Only "nothing" remains trustworthy. Epic or intimate, it simply and sadly takes an exaggerated instance to remind us. In this way, *Lear's* contest of love speeches functions as ironically foreboding funeral orations. Not encomiums inflated and false (Goneril and Regan) or even honest and true (Cordelia), rather revelatory eulogies. His children curse him and themselves with their speeches, adumbrating the ruin to come. Though *Lear* is the subject of these fine false words—as if composing elegies—he has not yet received a "proper burial." He will become something like a specter or revenant: until the end of the play he will have no real life, no real death, no home, no tomb, no means by which to actualize his projects or possess the objects he desires. He will become a towering figure of rage and dark poetry, simultaneously a phantasmal figure incapable of living or dying, one ultimately "condemned to a pitiable existence."<sup>33</sup> Until, through its tools of love and time—*suffering*—the tragic engine fits him for his end. It makes him, as it makes all of us, in an ultimate sense, *chrisimos*: useful, serviceable, good.

The tragic world, especially as Shakespeare presents it in *Lear*, might lead us to believe that some violation of what lies at the center of any world structure, behind all attraction and repulsion—the order of love (*ordo amoris*)—has fallen into a state of disunity. While tragic drama highlights those moments wherein fate and destiny drive characters to become caught in seemingly unresolvable conflict, it is also true, in a more fundamental sense, that tragedy venerates an underlying unity in all things. That is to say, an actual ontological disunity is impossible. In a Heraclitean sense, the cosmos certainly presents itself to us in a state of disunity, as if constituted of rifting forces, as if the universe constantly dissents. But to believe that this conflictual state signals something “wrong” or “unjust” is largely a Christian idea, in which tragic “disunity” or “dissolution”—the violation of the *ordo amoris*—is the very thing to be repaired. In this view, fate (as force) and destiny (as will) ought to be aligned, the order of love (as right willing) and the order of the world (as right understanding) must achieve harmony. The humanistic sciences, in their own way, share this aspiration, replacing spiritual depravity with primitive ignorance. Yet tragedy outlines and particularizes the way things truly are. The order of love quietly remains an undergirding possibility, a hidden power within the mindless world of force, unless cultivated and allowed expression through different modalities or relations.<sup>34</sup> An important aspect of the tragic engine lies in pitting the mindless *and* mindful modes of love against one another as part of time’s perfecting mechanisms, making the players ready for their end.

Why is love so important to tragedy? It appears near the heart of almost every tragic drama. Its powers are primal and revolutionary. It touches everything that matters. Or, more accurately, love gives all things meaning. We cannot improve upon Emerson’s sentences here:

The introduction to this felicity [love] is in a private and tender relation of one to one, which is *the enchantment of human life*; which, like a certain divine rage and enthusiasm, seizes on man at one period and works a revolution in his mind and body; unites him to his race, pledges him to the domestic and civic relations, carries him with new sympathy into nature, enhances the power of the senses, opens the imagination, adds to his character heroic and sacred attributes, establishes marriage, and gives permanence to human society.<sup>35</sup>

At critical moments love is always personal. But its role in the structure of relations comes before and after us, it transcends us. We can, of course, always locate its subjective genesis in particular instances and relations, but then, once we have entered into the “enchantment of human life,” we find ourselves “revolutionized.” We are carried away and brought into a new (and very old) reality. Seized in the center of our being by love, we become united with others, drawn

34 Scheler, 119-120; Weil, 94.

35 Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Love” in *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Brooks Atkinson (New York: The Modern Library, 2000), 190, *emphasis added*.

36 Ibid, "Circles," 257.

37 Ibid, "Self-Reliance," 145.

38 Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, trans. Janet Lloyd (New York: Zone Books, 1988), 43.

39 Cf. Stanley Cavell, "The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of King Lear" in *Disowning Knowledge In Seven Plays of Shakespeare*, Updated Edition (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 39-123.

into new ethical possibilities; our senses gain aesthetic enhancement, imaginations expand, we receive divine qualities, true partnerships emerge, and the human world gains the semblance of permanency. It does all of this, however, precisely by transcending the particular (going beyond the merely personal or subjective) and transporting us into the universal (apprehending something depersonalized or metaphysical). We succumb to love at first in a very personal way only to have it take us, however momentarily—for world-destructive and reconstructive purposes—far away from ourselves. In order that we, by way of abstraction or idealization, can find a sense of proportion and measure outside of our own experience (however imaginary the whole thing is). Whether we understand it as terminating in objectless contemplations or meditations upon "the nothing," love contains the potential to take us out of ourselves, temporarily freeing us from force's otherwise irresistible formula, so that something else can be discovered or encountered. An idea. To accomplish this liberation, we need silence.

"Good as is discourse," Emerson writes, "silence is better, and shames it."<sup>36</sup> And earlier, in *Self-Reliance*, he tells us, "I like the silent church before any service begins, better than any preaching."<sup>37</sup> Discoursing, conversing, teaching, preaching, protesting, debating, all manner of human speech and conveyance of ideas and problems present us with useful and potentially productive encounters, but silence born of love or prudence in the face of certain impossibilities or uncertain ambiguities—"zones of opacity and incommunicability"<sup>38</sup>—asks of us something more difficult than the articulation or defense of our beliefs. The truth of (our) love and the power of (our) testimony against injustice and madness serves the "imagined" structure of the world that convicts us and—through our quietude—helps to create the conditions of shame by which the "real" structure of the world can be brought into the starkest of contrasts with the world we desire.<sup>39</sup>

Not merely an idiosyncratically wished-for world, but rather a distinct, if unprepossessing, world of full and free participation that is “always to come,” for which the dialectical drama—fictionalized as tragedy or concretized as history—sets the stage beyond the limitations of the purely personal and communal contemplative realms. We might easily dismiss the radicality of silence to meaningfully strive towards these ends, yet we would only do so if we have already conceded the measure of meaningful work to quantifiable criteria that inevitably reduces all ideas and projects to a material conditionality unfit to evaluate trans-historical projects and commitments. Peace advocates, witnesses bearing silent testimony against oppression and violence, intentional communalists, ordinary folks in ordinary times invisibly participating in the subversion of reality: “Fools.”

Cordelia is such a *fool*. With her silence in *Lear*, as in any fictional or historical account, we find no guarantees, only more danger. Her father becomes unhinged, her sisters opportunistic. Silence compels force and power—in whatever particular form they express themselves—out into the open. In the open we find them stripped of illusion and pretense. Force and power cannot just be, they cannot simply linger. All those caught and subordinated by them must always be busy. Yet, now, though it may take a few acts and scenes and a few more devastating turns, their chief agents can no longer hide among the banalities of life and within the usual administrative movements that so often occlude their insensitivity to the order of love and the freely imagined world to come.<sup>40</sup> They will be seen for what they are. They will perish under their own weight and by their own designs. They will disquietedly and gracelessly enact their own curse. Though they have no choice but to become fit for their end—which is the very reason for the tragic engine—they will never attain the satisfaction or peace of a joyous tragedy.<sup>41</sup> A

40 Provisionally, “the world to come” here suggests what awaits those who discover a liberated subjectivity and an authentic sense of community in the tragic world. They free themselves from the “formula of force,” refusing to be subordinated to all powers that restrict or deny an active inner life, that dictate the terms of a meaningful material existence, and that atomize and alienate all manner of social life. And these free subjects discover a way of accomplishing this without succumbing to violence or revenge.

41 Cf. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 120.