Avoidance as Love: Evading Cavell on Dover Cliff

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This essay raises a ghostly counterpoint to Stanley Cavell's influential reading of *King Lear* (ca. 1605) in the form of the discontinuous, fragmentary, at times almost inhuman character of Edgar.[1] Cavell's achievement in "The Avoidance of Love" is to show how cruelty in the play is bound up with a shame-filled desire "to *avoid being recognized*."[2] What Lear avoids is not just the "other" in all its inherent uncertainty—its eyes, its desire, its love—but also himself, or at least the vulnerable, open self that is capable of love. Cavell sees Edgar as an inveterate avoider. He quotes Gloucester's speech:

> O dear son Edgar,
> The food of thy abuséd father's wrath!
> Might I but live to see thee in my touch,
> I'd say I had eyes again!
>
> (4.1.22–25)[3]

Cavell then memorably writes, "So Edgar's avoidance of Gloucester's recognition precisely deprives Gloucester of his eyes again" (55). When Gloucester utters these words, however, "Edgar" hardly exists. Building on a number of recent studies of Edgar,[4] this essay questions what terms like "avoidance"

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or "recognition" really mean when it comes to such a spasmodic and opaque theatrical entity. Is there anything already there to recognize or be recognized?

For Cavell, avoidance is a symptom of the wider "crisis of knowledge" that emerged with "the unfolding New Science" (xiii). In Cavell's brilliant thought experiment, Shakespeare's theatrical characters are treated as individual minds: as patients or test cases of proto-Cartesian skeptical subjectivity. Moreover, the relationship between Shakespeare's "words" and these "characters" is said to raise "identical problems" to "the phenomenon of ordinary language philosophy" (41). The task of ordinary language philosophy involves "placing the words and experiences with which philosophers have always begun in alignment with human beings in particular circumstances who can be imagined to be having those experiences and saying and meaning those words" (42). Much depends, then, on how one understands this placement. What are the "particular circumstances" of *King Lear* and the "human beings" that speak its words? The character of Edgar, I argue, shows how Shakespeare blurs both place and self, so that it is often hard to tell who speaks, to whom, and to what purpose. We come to a mode of theatrical creativity that works through seemingly negative movements of avoidance and evasion, thereby throwing the parameters of ordinary language philosophy into confusion.

Of course, Cavell is quite aware that he is talking about theater. He offers a long, sensitive discussion of what it means for us, the audience, to acknowledge the dramatic "presence" of onstage characters, including recognizing our separateness and powerlessness (see esp. 88–110). A fundamental question here arises, however. What presence are we acknowledging? For Cavell, characters "are, in a word, men and women; and our liabilities in responding to them are nothing other than our liabilities in responding to any person" (89). Cavell is acutely aware of our being in a theater, but he seems less attentive to the theatrical nature, or constructedness, of these "men and women." In particular, I suggest that they are not always "present," waiting to be acknowledged.[5] As Julián Heffernan notes, the "human life" of Shakespeare's characters is inconstant: it "is something that occurs sometimes, that may die out but flare up again in the course of one and the same individual's long or short existence."[6] Edgar embodies this flaring intermittence. If he becomes a "man" he does so by first becoming less than a man, sinking into nothing, and then by playing the roles of other men. Edgar comes to his intermittent life only through an estranging avoidance of "himself" and others.

5. I argue that Shakespeare's major tragic figures only become "themselves" through rupturing dramatic events and that this "arrival" is never stable or final. See Nicholas Luke, *Shakespearean Arrivals: The Birth of Character* (Cambridge University Press, 2018).

6. Heffernan, *Extremes*, 48.

That avoidance is reflective of theater's own evasion of what is already there (the bare stage, the actors) to generate a different type of presence. In *Lear*, this creative power is tied to modes of evasion and psychic dismemberment (madness, possession, and role-playing) that strip away the ground of the "ordinary." Cavell himself gets at this when he writes of how the "sight" of "poor naked Tom" tips Lear "from world-destroying rage into world-creating madness" (77), a creation that releases love from the deadly grip of instrumental logic. By tracing this creativity, I provide a counterweight to the prevalent critical view that the play expresses "a bleak vision of negation" (as R. A. Foakes sums up *Lear's* post-1960 reception).[7] Jeffrey Kahan noted in 2008 that "as of this writing, it is safe to say that in the public's mind the story of Lear's physical and spiritual suffering, and, above all, his heartbreaking end, aptly sum up the human condition: 'When we are born, we cry that we are come / To this great stage of fools.'"[8] By drawing on negative theology and work concerned with the phenomenology of theater, I qualify this understanding and make a case for the creative possibilities of avoidance in theater and in love. Negation in this play—"Nothing"—is the very (non) place of creation.

I. A PUPPET TO POOR TOM

Let us begin with a story. There is a man who has missed the seminal scene. He was not there when the king raged and the kingdom split but was somewhere else, we don't know where. Or perhaps he was nowhere. His brother was there, however. Younger, vital, electric in his desire, he rails against the quirks of culture and circumstance that render him illegitimate Edmund to "Legitimate Edgar" (1.2.16). His brother names Edgar, mocks him, plots to take his land. And so Edgar begins to exist as a "character" in this play. We may start to imagine a man, though he is yet to appear on stage, so still not a man. His brother is a man, "O [such a] man!" (4.2.26), he arranges the pieces so that when Edgar enters, he enters into Edmund's hands: "pat he comes like the catastrophe of the old comedy" (1.2.123). Edgar arrives, but he is a puppet, a dupe, onstage but barely real. Shakespeare does not "give" us Edgar in his first scene. He either asks short questions that prompt Edmund's deceptions or provides short answers to Edmund's deceiving questions. His only insight, "Some villain hath done me wrong" (1.2.150), hammers him with dramatic irony and aligns us with the villain.

This not-yet-man, Edgar, only returns as Kent prays in the stocks for a miracle that will "give / Losses their remedies" (2.2.161–62). (Edgar, of

7. R. A. Foakes, "*Hamlet* versus *Lear*: Cultural Politics and Shakespeare's Art," in *William Shakespeare's "King Lear": A Sourcebook*, ed. Grace Ioppolo (London: Routledge, 2003), 59.

8. Jeffrey Kahan, *"King Lear": New Critical Essays* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 1.

course, will later attempt to stage just such a "miracle.") Kent's prayer to "Fortune" (2.2.165) cues Edgar's emergence from his hidden chrysalis: "I heard myself proclaimed; / And by the happy hollow of a tree / Escaped the hunt" (2.3.1–3). Here Edgar begins to speak as an active, self-regarding character: "[I] am bethought / To take the basest and most poorest shape" (2.3.6–7). As Ewan Fernie writes, "Edgar really speaks for the first time when he speaks of this transition into Poor Tom; I mean speaks in a personal voice."[9] He begins to plot, to stage a theater, rather than being staged by his brother. This is no simple arrival, however, for what arrives is not a "self" but a process of metamorphosis. Most immediately, Edgar's emergence entails his immediate disappearance into his disguise (if it is a disguise) of "Poor Tom," who will "Enforce their charity. Poor Turlygod! poor Tom! / That's something yet! Edgar I nothing am" (2.3.20–21). Far from a real "presence," Edgar's is a disappearing act. Here and not here, Edgar and Tom, he pops and vanishes as if from "nothing."

We do not see Edgar again until act 3, scene 4, where, seemingly in response to Lear's prayer for the "Poor naked wretches" (3.4.29), he emerges from the depths of God knows where—"Fathom and half, fathom and half! / Poor Tom!" (3.4.38–39). He emerges, but not as Edgar at all. "Here's a spirit," the Fool cries, "Help me, help me!" (3.4.40–41). He returns as a diver from deep seas. He has been deep in the "lake of darkness" (3.6.7) and emerged as a "spirit." The very loss of identity in these passages results in a gain of (obscure) metaphysical and spiritual import. Indeed, one might be reminded of the fearful response to Jesus's signature miracle: "And when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were troubled, saying, It is a spirit; and they cried out for fear" (Matt. 14:26 [KJV]). Or, again, after Christ returns from death: "But they were terrified and affrighted, and supposed that they had seen a spirit" (Luke 24:37).

It is illuminating to think of Edgar's transformation in light of another of Shakespeare's favorite sources, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (8 CE). In Ovid, when a person (or mythological figure) undergoes a change there is a recognizable and recognized continuity. Even as people become other species, vegetables, or stellar formations, there is constancy either of an essential nature (Lycon is savage, the wolf is savage) or will (the foolish wish of Sibyl). In act 3, scene 4, however, it's hard to say he is Edgar at all. Shakespeare disconnects the two states, the before and after. Edgar wasn't really "there" before, and now he speaks only as "Poor Tom." There are no reassuring asides that tell us that the "real" Edgar is there below the surface, directing the show. Of course, there is some continuity: Edgar's body, the role, the actor. Perhaps, at a stretch, we could discern something of Ovid's foolish wish mechanism. Edgar wishes to take on the "basest and most poorest shape," and

9. Fernie, *Demonic*, 224.

Shakespeare gives it to him—brutally. Yet Edgar's disguise seems less the wish of a sovereign self than a flight reflex, a flight reflex from his father but also from the social world, its economies of exchange, and its functional language.

If anything connects Edgar and Poor Tom it is a sort of "nothingness." Edgar is empty, a plaything of his fiendish brother, and Poor Tom too is without self-possession, a plaything of the "fiend" (3.4.46) (or at least of Shakespeare). Both blanks, then, fit for devilish manipulation and penetration, pulsating with unseen possibility.[10] In and as Tom, Edgar flies from language in torrents of language, from self in multiple selves, from nothing into nothing self-multiplying in the "lake of darkness." Selves flash in and out of existence with the lightning flashes of the storm. There is a blurring of the single perspective that gives the self its unity—the fact that I see through my eyes and that my senses and experiences are my own. Edgar is, in the modern parlance, schizophrenic. "What has thou been?" (3.4.79), Lear asks him, and the answer is someone other, "A serving-man, proud in heart and mind; that . . . served the lust of my mistress' heart, and did the act of darkness with her" (3.4.80–82).

Edgar-Tom in this scene is thus multitudinous. We are lost in a devilish matryoshka doll of possession in which Edgar plays Tom, and Tom Edgar, and Tom, pursued by the fiend, in turn plays servingman, and then spills into a timeless nightmare world of sin and suffering. Indeed, Edgar is made "poor" less by filth than by language itself, possessed by it, flooded by it, lost in it. Simon Palfrey writes that Tom "epitomize[s] the sleepless dependence of Shakespeare's foundational existential contract: an actor with a part, one that isn't him, perhaps isn't even his, but which cannot be off-loaded."[11] Heffernan adds that "what has been loaded is no doubt a gallery of possible parts . . . but also language as an agent of evacuation."[12] The torrent of cryptic language washes away both any "Edgar" voice and the "definable social illocutions" that underpin "conventional speech act theory."[13]

And yet, the line of flight is not unproductive, for it is a flight into poetry, and, in some strange sense, into blessing and charity. Charity, as we shall see, is not something that is already there in nature or body but is shocked into life by the storm and the electricity of Poor Tom's forking possessions. Tom both demands ("Do poor Tom some charity") and is demanded by

10. Fernie speaks of Edgar's "wild receptivity" (ibid., 234) and "radical susceptibility" (236), while Palfrey argues that Edgar's initial "emptiness" indicates his "open[ness] to experiment" (*Poor Tom*, 26–27). "The idea is something like this: look once, and see nothing. . . . And then the nothing moves. . . . It mutates. The nothing becomes radically open to possibility" (25).

11. Palfrey, *Poor Tom*, 10.

12. Heffernan, *Extremes*, 52.

13. Palfrey, *Poor Tom*, 19.

charity: Lear's prayer for the "Poor naked wretches" (3.4.29) cues his entrance. And Tom in turn enforces a more extreme charity of Lear: his stripping down in the storm, his madness, his loss of self. Charity, it seems, is enforced in theatrical flight, in poetic self-annihilation.

II. "THE THING ITSELF"

Is man no more than this? Consider him well.
(3.4.102–3)

Lear's line opens up a world of doubt for Cavell's avoidance/acknowledgment dichotomy. On the one hand, this is a moment in which Lear famously acknowledges the material suffering of his kingdom's poor. On the other hand, we know Edgar-Tom is "more than this." Not only is his speech, which bubbles with anachronistic biblical and liturgical references, very far from "bare"; at one level he is clearly a fake. He is, as David Kastan notes, "an actor playing an aristocrat playing a Bedlam beggar."[14]

Still, the fact that Shakespeare does not give "Edgar" any asides that break the spell of Poor Tom, permits, even licenses, Lear's acknowledgment of "the thing itself; unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art" (3.4.98–99). So what, in these circumstances, would be acknowledgment and what would be avoidance? Doesn't Lear see something important here, even something "true," as Edgar fakes it? And doesn't Edgar-Tom's failure to "reveal" himself allow this sight? And how would Edgar, who barely exists, and certainly does not exist for Lear, reveal himself anyway? Isn't Tom, in the storm, more real than the Edgar we have seen? And doesn't losing himself in Tom, ultimately allow Edgar to emerge as something new, to become "Edgar" when he was previously nothing?

Sarah Beckwith has recently adopted Cavell's terms to accuse Edgar of avoidance "on the cliffs of Dover": "His decision to maintain his disguise, to remain unknown to his father, is . . . a conscious theatricalization of himself which deprives his father of the possibility of response."[15] Yet perhaps Edgar's interactions with Lear suggest other possibilities. Indeed, we might think of Poor Tom in terms of what Beckwith writes of masks in "medieval Corpus Christi theater." "Masks are specifically used with the supernatural characters for the purposes not of hiding, but of revelation. The mask enables the wearer to act on behalf of another for whom the mask is a sign."[16]

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14. David Scott Kastan, *Shakespeare after Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 148.
15. Sarah Beckwith, *Shakespeare and the Grammar of Forgiveness* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011), 88.
16. Sarah Beckwith, *Signifying God: Social Relation and Symbolic Act in the York Corpus Christi Plays* (University of Chicago Press, 2001), 154.

Edgar, a supernaturally inflected character who hovers spectrally between various realities and personalities, puts on (or is possessed by) the mask of Tom, and this becomes a sign to Lear that reveals what he has overlooked: "unaccommodated man." "Tom's a-cold" (3.4.135).

Edgar's self-loss releases something new into the situation. Indeed, Edgar-Tom brings a fundamental aspect of theater into the play world: that theater makes us see the "thing itself" by avoiding the immediate thing. Bert O. States writes that a character like Macbeth is at once "*here* before us yet absent," at once "unreal but imprisoned 'positionally' in real time and space."[17] This blurring of present and absent, real and unreal, suggests why ordinary language approaches are insufficient. The blurring of avoidance and acknowledgment is a condition of theater's creativity, which "rests upon a double pretense: the play pretends that we don't exist . . . and we pretend that the play does."[18] Of course, both pretenses are often broken. We shuttle between belief and disbelief in complex and productive ways that create "a different kind of *here* than we 'usually tend to be' in."[19] "Vision" in the theater thus involves a certain "lostness in the world of the play" as the "actor takes us *into* a world within the world itself." The result of this "engagement" is "an enhancement of being."[20] An enhancement through lostness.

Edgar, lost in Tom, becomes more than he was. His is an enrichment through abjection. He sinks into the mud like some starving, slime-covered swamp creature that "eats the swimming frog, the toad, the / tadpole" (3.4.115–16). He is the fearful bottom-feeder that "eats cowdung for salads," the penitent "whipped from tithing to tithing" (3.4.117–19). One might think of him as the undelivered scapegoat of the 1559 Litany: "From lightninges and tempestes, from plague, pestilence and famine, from battayle and murther, and from soudeine deathe . . . *Good Lorde delyver us.*"[21] The picture he paints in his grotesque, diabolic scene of eating rehearses—in some sense lives—the self's dispersal in death. Edgar's imagery of demons and digestion connects to a long medieval tradition in which "damnation is eternal swallowing and digestion, eternal partition; the mouth of hell is a real mouth; second, final, definitive death is mastication."[22] Although Edgar may not be literally eaten, what he experiences is a sort of harrowing in hell. He is

17. Bert O. States, *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms: On the Phenomenology of Theater* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 27.

18. Ibid., 206.

19. Ibid., 4.

20. Ibid., 46–47.

21. Brian Cummings, ed., *The Book of Common Prayer: The Texts of 1549, 1559, and 1662* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 117.

22. Caroline Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200–1336* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 186.

bodily stripped down, forced into the most disgusting acts of consumption, and this is accompanied by a psychic disintegration whereby he becomes other things and people. The paradox is that, theatrically, he is delivered through dismemberment.

We might link this strange birth to the very nature of role-playing, which works through "a contest for possession" between actor and character.[23] States describes the ghostly "hovering self of the actor as the character passes through [her]."[24] Not only does the spectral, even possessive, quality of theatrical role-playing sit uneasily with notions of acknowledgment, but it births a new presence. There is an obscure gain of spirit in the seemingly shameful waste of avoidance and counterfeiting. Playing the role of Poor Tom raises the specter of a more "real" Edgar. More accurately, perhaps, the avoidance of Edgar by Edgar-Tom (or their "contest for possession") births something—a capacity to feel and express and become another—that enhances his character beyond what was already there. In sum, Edgar's dismemberment leads to a radical broadening of the possibilities of recognition beyond those between character and character. Poor Tom seems to recognize or preempt things that Edgar could not possibly know. What he gains through "lostness" is a responsiveness to others—Kent's prayer, Lear's prayer, soon, perhaps, even our prayers for Lear—that goes beyond individual psychology or intention.

III. ASIDE EDGAR

Throughout act 3, scene 4, Edgar speaks only as Poor Tom. In his next scene, however, we finally glimpse something that we might call "Edgar" as the king's mental collapse elicits a compassionate aside, "My tears begin to take his part so much / They mar my counterfeiting" (3.6.17–18). Here is Edgar we may say—at last. However, his (always incomplete) emergence as a compassionate self-reflexive individual is less an evolution than a Job-like process of breakdown and resurrection. Edgar-as-Tom can certainly be seen as a debased Job figure—"My flesh is clothed with worms and clods of dust; my skin is broken, and become loathsome" (Job 7:4–5)—who is likewise stripped down to nothing: "thine eyes are upon me, and I am not" (Job 7:8); "Edgar I nothing am."[25] For early modern theologians such as John Donne, Job's violent excortication becomes a type of Christian resurrection. It is only after the body is "destroyed" by worms that we gain "a new *faculty*" that allows us to "see *God*."[26] Of course, the world of *Lear* is not Christian, Edgar is hardly "saved," and nothing is revealed to him. Where

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23. States, *Great Reckonings*, 121.
24. Ibid., 125.
25. See Hannibal Hamlin, *The Bible in Shakespeare* (Oxford University Press, 2013), 306–30.
26. John Donne, *The Sermons of John Donne*, ed. George Potter and Evelyn Simpson, 10 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953–62), 3:92.

Shakespeare's art links to these religious notions is not the content but the form: the sense, in *Lear*, that the purging of "self" brings us to the point both of abjection and radical possibility, the complex, even perverse, dialectic between suffering and salvation, mortification and new creation. From the slime, a new life rises.

That the negative—the voiding of one's immediate self—is the path to a higher plane of consciousness is central to Meister Eckhart's mystical version of negative theology. To be "ready" for God, the heart "must be emptied out to nothingness, the condition of its maximum capacity" or "maximum sensitivity."[27] A peculiar physics, a process of osmosis, thus underpins Eckhart's extreme procedure of "annihilation or diminution of self": "Pour out, that you may be filled."[28] Poorness, nothingness, is the ultimate state of receptivity. "To be poor in spirit is to be sensitive to other spirits,"[29] a formulation that is surely suggestive of Edgar's strange possessions.

Echkart's process of purgation is translated into less overtly Christian terms by both Hegel and Kierkegaard. According to Hegel's idea of "tarrying with the negative," we must be torn out of our selves and our immediacy if we are to become self-conscious: "the life of Spirit . . . wins its truth only when, in utter dismemberment, it finds itself."[30] Whereas for Hegel the negative reveals a Spirit that is always already within us, what Edgar finds in dismemberment is hardly "himself." Rather, he is opened to play—the play of others, the play of Shakespeare, the play itself—in strange ways that expand him beyond what he was. Here Kierkegaard's dialectic is more apposite than Hegel's as it "constantly keeps the wound of the negative open."[31] Although his terms remain Christian, the process Kierkegaard speaks to is not one of rediscovering a lost eternal selfhood but becoming what one never was: "The exister must have lost continuity with himself, must have become another . . . and then, by receiving the condition from the Deity, he must have become a new creature. The contradiction is that this thing of becoming a Christian begins with the miracle of creation, and that this occurs to one who already is created, in spite of which Christianity is preached to all men, implying that they are non-existent."[32] Edgar is perhaps the extreme test case of the theatrical "Deity" Shakespeare's experiments with the (re)creation of character that is already created. (Re)creation occurs to a character that already exists—Edgar—but that is also

27. Meister Eckhart, *Meister Eckhart: A Modern Translation*, trans. Raymond Bernard Blakney (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1941), 88.

28. Ibid., 37, 53.

29. Ibid., 53.

30. G. W. F. Hegel, *The Hegel Reader*, ed. Stephen Houlgate (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), 56.

31. Søren Kierkegaard, *Kierkegaard's Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie (Princeton University Press, 1941), 78.

32. Ibid., 510.

nothing, a blank, that must die to be reborn. The "fearful" point is that the self is not constant but "may be there, and then again not be there."[33] The "thing itself" is not; it must rise on the fearful cliffs of the imagination.

The fact that Edgar, in becoming Poor Tom, at once begins to live and is shattered, even annihilated, makes it hard to speak in Cavell's terms, which presume the existence of a self to acknowledge and be acknowledged. Kierkegaardian self-shattering, in contrast, opens a "yawning chasm" between before and after: "The individual becomes infinite only by virtue of making the absolute venture. . . . Before he has made the venture he cannot understand it as anything else than madness. . . . And after the individual has made the venture he is no longer the same individual."[34] The question of agency is left radically uncertain. Edgar is a nothing turning into a something through a series of imaginative, psychotic digressions into devils and victims past, present, and future. We cannot tell whether Edgar chooses Tom, is afflicted by him, or is lost in him. He puts on the role of Poor Tom, is seemingly possessed by it, and this somehow allows Edgar's subsequent emergence. However, the emergence is itself an avoidance, for he emerges in asides that are not heard by those present onstage, and he then performs his empathetic self through further theatrical role-playing. It is easy to see why Beckwith writes that he has "withheld himself and thereby theatricalized his relations" with others.[35]

Two points can be made. First, some things (Kierkegaard argues "the highest principles" like love) "can be demonstrated only indirectly (negatively)."[36] In other words, we need avoidance. "In connection with such negative principles, an elusive form of communication is the only adequate one; because a direct form of communication is based upon the security of social continuity."[37] Positivity is for those who would "make a business transaction on the basis of a calculation . . . instead of an absolute venture."[38] Kierkegaard's existential leap, in contrast, rests upon a "doctrine of hope," which, as Adorno notes, "protests against a world which is determined by barter."[39] Social continuity must be ruptured—"Off, off, you lendings!" (3.4.97)—because it is sustained by instrumentality. Hope, on the other hand, relies on a "sense for possibility," on an unknown that cannot be traded for "an equivalent."[40]

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33. Ibid., 364.
34. Ibid., 379.
35. Beckwith, *Grammar of Forgiveness*, 86.
36. Kierkegaard, *Unscientific Postscript*, 197.
37. Ibid., 76.
38. Ibid., 378–79.
39. Daniel W. Conway with K. E. Gover, eds., *Soren Kierkegaard: Critical Assessments of Leading Philosophers*, 4 vols. (London: Routledge, 2002), 2:19.
40. Ibid., 2:18.

In the love test, Lear wants to settle all doubts and accounts, to "exchang[e] his fortune for his love at one swap" (61). For Kierkegaard, however, "to ask for certainty is . . . an excuse to evade the venture and its strenuosity, and to transfer the problem into the realm of knowledge and of prattle."[41] The prattle of Regan and Goneril gives Lear what he wants: a quantifiable, publicly attested (and hence "known") expression of love exchanged for a third of the kingdom. There is in *Lear* a link between the instrumentality of language (and love), the directness of recognition that is desired (or demanded), and economic bartering for one's dues. Kierkegaard's alternative, as George Steiner notes, is to engage in a complex play of avoidance and indirection: his "pseudonyms, the division of the self into contradictory voices (the 'dialectic'), the brusque pendulum swing between prayer and sophistry, gravity and play, keep open (in Kierkegaard's memorable phrase) 'the wound of negativity.' . . . Like no other major thinker, perhaps, Kierkegaard is polyphonic."[42] We might think of myriad-minded Shakespeare. And we might think, more specifically, of the polyphony of Edgar-Tom-servingman. If we do, we might perhaps focus less on the immediate "results," as Beckwith and Cavell tend to (on whether *X* acknowledges *Y* within the play world), and more on the "sense for possibility" that avoidance opens.

The second point is that there is a direct, contextual sense in which Edgar's self-annihilation—his self "theatricaliz[ing]"—is love. His first words as "Edgar"—his empathetic asides—give a specific, compassionate purpose to his theatrical disguise. In response to Lear's fear of the dogs that "bark at [him]" (3.6.19), Edgar-as-Tom turns himself into Lear's guard dog, declaring, "Tom will throw his head at them.—Avaunt, you curs!" (3.6.20). Edgar-Tom is theatricalizing both himself and Lear, playing a pitiful game, pretending to be a dog to ward off imaginary dogs. Yet the pity here is charity. Here he is a product of—and a force for—empathetic feeling. He enforces charity and protects the weak by refusing to reveal himself, by playing a "part" in Lear's theater of the mind, warding off the hounds of hell. He thereby becomes nothing himself. He demands no dues, no recognition; he merely acts to ease Lear's suffering. He fulfills Jesus's command that charity be done "in secret," without recognition: "Take heed that ye do not your alms before men, to be seen of them" (Matt. 6:1–4).

If Edgar undergoes a process of purgation, it hardly follows Eckhart's model. It is a pathway neither to ecstatic oneness with God nor to disinterestedness from fellow creatures. If anything, the process moves in the opposite direction. There is a sense of detachment to the familial relationships in the opening scenes. Lear attempts to disengage himself

41. Kierkegaard, *Unscientific Postscript*, 381.
42. Conway and Gover, *Kierkegaard*, 2:285.

from the ongoing yoke of love and "unburthened crawl toward death" (1.1.39). Gloucester does not mention Edgar and seems ambivalent about Edmund. Goneril, Regan, and Edmund treat relationships in instrumental terms. Edgar is given nothing much to say, and Cordelia famously says "Nothing." The subsequent experiences of extreme privation, of emptying, do not ultimately separate Lear, Gloucester, and Edgar from fellow creatures but lead to painful, incomplete, all-but-too-late reattachments—a new receptivity not to God but to others.

Why, then, does Edgar not just reveal himself? The reason is surely that no direct recognition is possible. If he said, "I am Edgar," it would mean nothing to Lear. To mean and to shepherd he must accept Lear's theatrical language. In doing so, we might say that he joins Lear's linguistic community, which is a form of acknowledgment, but it is a linguistic community based on theater and avoidance, not the recognition of any preexisting reality or underlying self. Love is made, or performed, as and through a lurking thing, out of the direct light. Indeed, the scene ends with the short line, "Lurk, lurk" (3.6.108), which cuts off Edgar's neat rhyming couplets and retreats, like a mollusk into its shell, into the haunting space of Tom. Regina Schwartz writes, "For Calvin, a sacrament is an *act* of God that 'makes . . . divine mysteries lurk under things that are in themselves quite abject.'"[43] Tom, this most abject thing of Shakespeare's theater, creates a form of life that is not directly recognized but lurks mysteriously beneath the surface and in the cracks. Edgar therefore becomes, as well as a character, a sort of conduit to the metaphysical and existential. By avoiding "himself," Edgar brings into play "the thing itself" of theater: the elaborate processes of abjection, dismembering, role-playing, possession, avoidance, and recognition that are required to construct this supposedly base, creaturely thing.

Two things should be in our mind, then, when we come to Dover Cliff. First, we are dealing with a precariously emergent rather than a preexisting Edgar. And second, avoidance may be a form of both love and theatrical creation.

IV. PLAYING ON THE CLIFF

It is in act 4 that Edgar meets his blinded father and upsets the critical champions of acknowledgment. Gloucester has recognized his metaphoric blindness—"I stumbled when I saw" (4.1.19)—and longs to hold his abused son: "Might I but live to see thee in my touch / I'd say I had eyes again" (4.1.23–24). Shakespeare thus establishes the parameters for Gloucester's

43. Regina Mara Schwartz, *Sacramental Poetics at the Dawn of Secularism: When God Left the World* (Stanford University Press, 2008), 122.

redemption.[44] Edgar and Shakespeare do not give it to him. Rather, Edgar speaks in detached asides that offer philosophical generalizations about the "worst" (4.1.26). It is again easy to see why Cavell and Beckwith speak of avoidance. "Just reveal yourself!" cry the critics of openness and recognition.

But what if revelation would be death, or at least kill off the messy process of Edgar's birth? What if direct recognition can sometimes abort (true) recognition and avoidance nurture it to life? In the end, of course, Edgar's self-revelation bursts his father's heart. Whether Edgar "himself" intuits this may be doubtful, but we can be sure that Shakespeare knows. As he will show in the romances, such basic human reunions, the clasping of lost child to parent, are crowning moments of theater that end its play of absence and presence. I will now point to three deeper reasons for Edgar's ongoing avoidance. First, in the specific theatrical context, direct acknowledgment would be less meaningful than Cavell suggests. Second, this is theater, and the means of sight are theatrical, which is to say indirect, based on role-playing and masks, staged and evasive. Third, the dark logic of the play—its "negative dramaturgy" so to speak—is that we have to lose our sight, to become nothing, if we are to truly see.

1. Impossible Recognitions

In act 4, Edgar begins to struggle. He is now putting on Poor Tom, rather than possessed by him, yet he seems unable to shake him off: "I cannot daub it further . . . And yet I must" (4.1.52–53).[45] As with Cordelia's silence, something is gained through avoidance, a sense of a suffering interiority that feels his father's pain and presence but cannot directly express or act that feeling. We look inside Edgar because he doesn't do what he is "supposed" to: "Bad is the trade that must play fool to sorrow, / Ang'ring itself and others" (4.1.39–40). He knows he angers us; he angers himself. He wants to strip off the disguise and offer the emotional release of recognition, but he cannot.

What Cavell demands of Edgar here is that he speak as Edgar. If we understand his character in terms of a painful birth, however, "Edgar" is not yet "present." He has only just begun to emerge—furtively in his asides—from Tom's stormy torrents. A new creature is being born, but it is not yet free of its chrysalis. Hence, perhaps, the strange possessiveness of the Tom role. Edgar still needs another self to approach himself, indeed, to become a self. And this creation is not free. Edgar's next speech is wholeheartedly in the Tom voice, and it is one of demonic possession: "Five fiends have

44. As Strier, "Judgment of the Critics," 222–23, notes, it is not certain that Edgar hears this.

45. See Palfrey, *Poor Tom*, 154–55.

been in Poor Tom at once . . . who since possess . . . chambermaids and waiting-women" (4.1.59–63). Edgar is in a strange, coercive, but also creative, dialectical dance with the devil, and he cannot step away. No doubt this costs him dearly, and costs Gloucester too, but it also allows something: it brings father and son together in a touching embrace filled with theatrical poignancy. They are holding each other, arm in arm, without recognition. Edgar offers secret alms. "Give me thy arm. Poor Tom shall lead thee" (4.1.78–79). As Poor Tom, Edgar can take his father's arm and lead him. He leads him to deception:

> GLOUCESTER.   Methinks the ground is even.
> EDGAR.   Horrible steep.
> (4.6.3)

The grotesque, even absurd, quality of this deception has long been noted. Cavell remarks, more brutally, that Edgar "deprives Gloucester of his eyes again" (55). It is an astute line, yet it ignores the fact that there is precious little there to be seen. If we have by now gained some (not entirely flattering) sense of Gloucester's personality and history, it suggests that Gloucester and Edgar have scarcely met.

My point is not simply that the evidence is against a prior loving relationship (clearly this is open to interpretation) but that their relationship doesn't exist theatrically. We haven't seen it. What seems to happen, however, to critics who judge Edgar harshly for his "avoidance," is that they imagine such a relationship. This is natural enough if we treat characters as "men and women," for men and women have histories, and they have parents, and they tend to have relationships with these parents, good, bad, or middling. Outside the existential whirlpool of the storm, critics seem to novelistically construct a backstory for Edgar and presume an extant familial love.[46] Cavell writes, "He failed to confront his father, to trust his love, exactly as his father had failed him" (56). But who said there was love? Shakespeare pointedly withholds Edgar's prehistory, leaving us in a contourless realm of speculation. Shakespeare's withholding perhaps has a point. Perhaps part of the point, as with Edgar's initial emptiness, is to stress how theatrical illusion is creative of both individuals and relationships. The "thing"—Edgar but also the father-son relationship—is not already there. It must be delivered theatrically, performatively, here on the cliffs of the imagination. The relationship must appear in the play world; it must be played, and not merely stated or recognized in nominal terms.

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46. Cavell's psychologically realist reading of Edgar is evident in his comparisons: "Edgar is Ahab, trying to harpoon the meaning of his life into something external to it. . . . He is Hedda Gabler . . . he is Tom Sawyer" (56).

None of this is to deny the intense difficulty—or discomfort—that Edgar creates as he foregoes so many chances to reveal himself. I do not seek to dismiss psychological explanations of his reticence, only to put them aside for a time and think about what avoidance allows: a duration in which father and son can walk together. The clear window of "recognition" kills Gloucester. His heart bursts. The dark mirror of theater, with its duplicitous energy, gives him an interim in which he joins arms with Edgar:

> "If Edgar live, O, bless him!"
> "Away, and let me die."
> "Thy life's a miracle."
> "Alack, I have no eyes."
> "Give me your arm."
> (4.6.40–64)

The old man wants to die. Unsure if he has fallen, unable to die, he gives a stranger his arm and is raised up by his son—a touching if grotesque human connection. Is this a failure of recognition? In one sense, certainly. Theatrically speaking, however, Edgar's diabolic drama is also what delivers the relationship to the audience. It does so by making the father abject before the son and thus avoiding the names father and son and their ingrained power relations. Abashed and ashamed, blind and ignorant, speaking through masks, the father and son begin to speak truth and speak love for the first time. In another sense, then, Edgar's theatrical avoidance births love: a crude, absurd, teeth–clenchingly humiliating sort of love— the eyeless father at the feet of his son. Yet isn't this closer to expressing something "real" than Edgar saying, "Father, it is Edgar"?

Cavell stresses that avoiding others, avoiding one's own humanity, is the most human thing (206–7).[47] But Edgar has scarcely been human. Perhaps the evasive grasping of his father's arm is Edgar's process of finally becoming human. As Palfrey puts it, "Edgar is never more the son than in not being truly seen, in not being able to express anything of his love—or in being able to express it to anyone in the world except his father."[48] Shakespeare creates Edgar—this reticent, manipulative, loving son who wants to make the worst life a miracle—through his avoidance of others. Of course, Edgar's "clifftop" performance is not mutual. We flinch due to this lack of mutuality, this imposition of a theater on a broken old man. Edgar flinches too. Perhaps we also flinch because it is the son that subjects the father to this humiliating love. On Dover Cliff, Edgar cradles his father, as Cordelia cradles Lear before he cradles her lifeless body. Edgar tells him lies, what we parents call fairy tales, and for a moment he makes him calm. It is an avoidance, but it

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47. See also Beckwith, *Grammar of Forgiveness*, 167.
48. Palfrey, *Poor Tom*, 189.

is an avoidance filled with love. If we are charitable to Edgar, if we think as parents, we might say that Gloucester does not have the strength for more.[49] As spectators, we simply don't know.

2. Theatrical Sight

Edgar emerges as a dramatist as he stages his vertiginous theater:

> Come on, sir, here's the place. Stand still. How fearful
> And dizzy 'tis to cast one's eyes so low!
>
> (4.5.11–12)

Like Shakespeare, Edgar uses "rhetorical scenery" to "radically . . . shift the ground and conditions for our perception of the world."[50] Indeed, States suggests that this moment audaciously goes beyond plot function to create a "physical thrill of being in a high place."[51] In other words, there are two dramas unfolding. In one, Edgar tries to convince Gloucester that he is at the cliff's edge. In the other, Shakespeare tries to "make us, his audience (we *know* the ground is even), blind to what we see by making us dizzy with what we hear."[52] "Edgar conjures for us . . . the prospect of falling," the "semi-actuality [of falling] that passes through us when we look down from a high place."[53] Under his spell, we fall into a space that does not exist.

There are a number of important points in this. First, the conjured fall has a certain actuality. The theatrical illusion is not just an avoidance of our world but also the creation of another. Second, this works because there are two audiences to Edgar's words (which further complicates questions of recognition). Edgar may be avoiding Gloucester (in one sense), yet he is also causing us to recognize something about theater. To treat Gloucester as Edgar's only real and proper addressee, as Cavell and Beckwith do, is to miss this other, exhilarating layer of relation. Third, both for us and for Gloucester, the conjured fall into the negative, into a nonexistent void, produces a positive result (or is meant to). For us, most immediately, a feeling of the miracle of theater. For Gloucester, infamously, a feeling that life is a miracle. Ultimately, perhaps, there is also something of that meaning for us too: that *Lear* makes us dizzy with humanity's fall into terrifying (unreal) depths; that we walk away thinking our lives and loves are miraculous.

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49. Strier suggests that Edgar attempts to "spare" Gloucester from the "shame" of his abuse of Edgar ("Judgment of the Critics," 223).

50. States, *Great Reckonings*, 54, 48.

51. Bert O. States, "Standing on the Extreme Verge in *King Lear* and Other High Places," *Georgia Review* 36, no. 2 (Summer 1982): 418.

52. Ibid., 419.

53. Ibid., 425.

Edgar's rise began with his fall into the seeming gulf of Poor Tom, and his staged miracle mirrors this voiding. It uses language to make a cut in the ordinary, an imaginary wound in the solid wood of the stage floor. It opens a void in which theater, not God, comes to play. A void that is filled by dark theatrical materials: Edgar's use of multiple characters (the beggar, the fisherman, the fiend) to perform a perspectival shift on his father. A void that delivers a new scene and, Edgar hopes, a new mode of seeing. That new mode of seeing is not just Gloucester's but also ours. Edgar forces us to see the bare boards of theatrical illusion and then raises us to precipitous heights. He transforms what is nothing in itself—the flat stage, open to almost any signification—into something dizzying. Edgar thereby performs what Derrida, in his essay on Artaud, describes as the "creative act" of theater, "the irruptive force fissuring the space of the stage."[54] The bare stage becomes "an open presence," a "source of something *not yet here*."[55] Edgar-Shakespeare calls on us to participate in this birthing, this avoidance of what we already "know," and we consent. Centuries later, we discuss Dover Cliff as if there were a cliff. Edgar unleashes theater's "irruptive" power to sweep away the preconceived and conjure new worlds: that the blank stage, the strangely empty son, the seemingly absent father, and the nonexistent father-son relationship, may undergo a metamorphosis from their very vacuity.

Life's "miracle" is revealed, as in Shakespeare's romances, through an artful perspectival shift. "Away, and let me die" (4.6.48), Gloucester tells the next character in Edgar's drama. The new character—the fisherman watching from below as Gloucester falls—radically shifts Gloucester's perspective. For Gloucester it is a shift of height: you were so high, and now you are so low, you should have "shivered like an egg" (51), but you are alive. That's the miracle, life: "Thou dost breathe; Hast heavy substance" (51–52). The turn, the shift, is what makes us see the object—the "heavy substance"—for the first time and thus, in a sense, miraculously (re)creates it. Gloucester sees life's miracle "feelingly" (4.5.141), if transiently. Edgar's drama resembles Shakespeare's in that its "characters" (standing at different viewpoints) enact the perspectival shift. The emergence of the fisherman turns the first character in Edgar's theater—the "poor unfortunate beggar' 4.6.68) who brought Gloucester to precipice—into a horned "fiend" (72). He thus makes Gloucester's own desire for self-end fiendish. Edgar completes the shift by overwriting his own authorial (or directorial) hand with that of the gods: "the clearest gods . . . have preserved thee" (4.6.73–74).

Beckwith contends that Edgar's disguise "deprives his father of the possibility of response," but surely Gloucester's capacity to respond is the very

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54. States, *Great Reckonings*, 113.
55. Ibid.

point of Edgar's play: "I do remember now" (4.5.75). Beckwith here draws on Cavell's call for us to "stop theatricalizing." "When we keep ourselves in the dark, the consequence is that we convert the other into a character and make the world a stage for him" (104). What Edgar's theater shows, however, is that theatricalizing can be a generative action designed to prompt an active response from its audience. Designed, in other words, to spark a change, albeit one that is profoundly not assured: an absurd theater of hope that, like Kierkegaard's leap, rests on a "sense for possibility." Whereas Edmund's theater was instrumental, Edgar's theater is an affective "dramaturgy of wonder" that aims to reanimate life for its audience.[56] Tom Bishop suggests that Shakespeare's theater of wonder pursues "a consistent seeking of the world."[57] Edgar's "clearest gods" seek to reorient Gloucester's focus on the "miracle" of "thy life." Edgar, like Shakespeare, attempts to create "a therapeutic magic *against* the freezing of the world": "Wonder in such terms . . . 'delivers' us into the world (the term is a favourite of Shakespeare's)—at once like a message, a captive, and a child."[58]

But this world is getting cold. Dover is so fascinating, and so troubling, because it reveals the human miracles we work in art, and love, are so close to shams. With Edgar, as with Prospero, Shakespeare puts the fraudulent machinery of theatrical redemption on full display. Sometimes these recognition scenes may seem so right, so beautifully orchestrated, that we momentarily forget the sham, yet they nonetheless remain highly scripted and intensely theatrical fictions: a spectacular set piece where an actor holds perfectly still and then moves; a character we know is alive, returning from the dead. An element of coercion, evasiveness, and absurdity haunts all the "miraculous" acknowledgments of the late plays. And part of what I suggest is that this is no bad thing, that in these plays manipulative spectacles are required to perform love, creation, and renewed life. Fictions, then, but necessary fictions. While Beckwith condemns any "theatricalization" that "makes my face or yours a mask,"[59] Shakespeare's drama consistently suggests other, more creative possibilities. Rosalind, for instance, might say that the mask is what creates space for truth to emerge; that we have to play a little with avoidance to create the self, the relationship, which is to be recognized. Put simply, simple recognition may simply recognize what is already there. But there may be nothing—an empty stage. So avoidance is required if we are to create something worth recognizing.

56. T. G. Bishop, *Shakespeare and the Theatre of Wonder* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), 15.
57. Ibid.
58. Ibid., 16.
59. Beckwith, *Grammar of Forgiveness*, 170.

3. Extirpation

Cavell writes that "Gloucester's character is not purified by" Edgar's staged miracle "but extirpated" (56). What would make us think, however, that purification would be possible in this play of psychic dismemberment if not through extirpation? The creative power of purgation, even self-annihilation, in the tradition of negative theology suggests a very different way of framing the play's sense of abjection than as a "bleak vision of negation." In *Lear* the good (including love) is created in and through failure. As France declares:

> Fairest Cordelia, that art most rich, being poor;
> Most choice, forsaken; and most loved, despised:
> Thee and thy virtues here I seize upon.
> Be it lawful, I take up what's cast away.
>
> <div align="right">(1.1.251–54)</div>

Cordelia's immeasurable value becomes manifest in and through Lear's crushing rejection, and it results in a burst of ecstatic poetic release that is one of the play's few heartwarming moments. Cordelia's "No cause, no cause" (4.7.76) is another. Beckwith describes *Lear* as showing us "a grace-less world,"[60] and this speaks to one form of truth. It might be equally true, however, to say that *Lear* shows us grace negatively—as "forsaken," "Nothing," "No cause"—and leaves it to us to "take up what's cast away."[61] One might be reminded of Christianity's characteristic paradoxes: that, to quote Donne, humiliation "be an Advent"; that "there is no such exaltation as humiliation"; and that "in the way to heaven, the lower you go, the nearer the highest best end you are."[62] Cavell writes that Gloucester's blinding "literalizes evil's ancient love of darkness" (47). What this misses, however, is that love also loves the dark. "Come, gentle night; come, loving, black-browed night" (*Romeo and Juliet* 3.2.20). And, moreover, that theater loves the dark. It avoids being recognized for what it "is" and thereby creates something that, before the curtain rises, was not.

France's speech suggests that to truly see the other is to see its nothingness. Acknowledgment is less a face-to-face than a potentially humiliating loss of face, a tearing oneself and one's love from the economies of exchange and the calculations of ordinary language games. It is an avoidance of what immediately presents itself: robe, role, identity, and pleasantries. Not so much to find the "real self" buried under the detritus but to create—in the vertiginous movement from the world's everything to the cliff's nothing—a self that never existed. And this suggests, again, why a loving

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60. Ibid., 88.
61. I offer a more detailed reading of France in Luke, *Shakespearean Arrivals*, 184–89.
62. Donne, *Sermons*, 1:253, 315.

relationship is precisely what could not be recognized directly between father and son, for "father" and "son," "Gloucester" and "Edgar," are lendings that must be stripped away.

The willful characters of *Lear* demand direct "recognition," but love, in the tradition I am pointing to, wants something else. It "*gives* without return and without recognition,"[63] in part, at least, because the "who" to be recognized is only created through the gift of love. Anne Barton suggests that "disguise," in *King Lear*, is viewed "as a state of negation and symbolic death, an image of nothingness."[64] And yet, it is this state of negation that is able to preserve something valuable, something self-effacing, from the brutally direct recognition of power that the evil characters demand. The negative, the oblique, becomes the only place for charity to arise. Recognition within this play is certainly marked humiliatingly by negation:

> EDGAR.   'Tis noble Kent, your friend.
> LEAR.   A plague upon you, murderers, traitors all.
>   (5.3.242–43)

Although Kent is seen shortly after, his loyal service as Caius is not. "I'll see that straight" (5.3.262), Lear tells Kent, but of course he doesn't. Lear has ceased to see straight, and all recognition is extinguished: "He knows not what he says; and vain it is / That we present us to him" (5.3.268–69). What Lear points us to, perhaps, is the alternate romance reality of the late plays, in which fathers and daughters will be reunited and the lifeless rise: "Look on her. Look, her lips. / Look there, look there" (5.3.285–86). He sees it through an avoidance of the matter that is directly before him, an avoidance that paradoxically gives a heightened reality, import, and life to that "heavy substance" that brings it so crushingly down upon us: that she is really gone, and it could have been otherwise. And also that she—her life and the life in Lear that is reborn through her—was so excruciatingly valuable, worth more than rats and dogs and Albanys. We see it all in his avoidance of her death: "look there" to what is not. But also, I think, look to what you have treated as nothing and cherish it as everything.

For Edgar, too, love's full force hits him in its failure. Edgar poignantly recounts how his father's death was the result of an offstage recognition scene: "Never—O fault!—revealed myself unto him / Until some half hour past, when I was armed" (5.3.191–92). The passage describes a heart-bursting conflict between "joy and grief" (5.3.197), a beauty that primes us for the play's own sublime sorrows. And its evocative, if unexplained, sense of guilt—"O fault!"—hints that Edgar is aware of his own failings, his avoidances, for

63. Jacques Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins (London: Verso, 1997), 220.

64. Anne Barton [Anne Righter], *Shakespeare and the Idea of the Play* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1962), 176.

which critics have taken him to task. He arrives, as ever, "'Twixt two extreme[s]" (5.3.197), through a complex play of avoidance and recognition. And the result, in *Lear*, is that sorrowful penance—"O fault!"—leads to both extirpation, the grief of the body breaking, and an obscure joy of heart-bursting transfiguration.

V. FROM DOVER WITH ROMANCE

Beckwith understands Shakespeare's late plays as a sacramental drama that stages redemptive scenes of penance, acknowledgment, and forgiveness that lead to renewed communities. For instance, through the elaborate (eucharistic) church ceremony in which Hermione's body becomes human, "Leontes is transformed in his understanding of himself. . . . And so a new present and a new presence is made possible."[65] Yet Beckwith's understanding of Edgar is not so generous. Whereas in romance she sees theater as a creative performative enterprise that creates a "new form of intersubjectivity,"[66] in *Lear* she treats Edgar as already there, as a person capable of acknowledgment rather than as a multiply located theatrical process. She, like Cavell, looks at theatrical acknowledgment through the lens of "ordinary language philosophy," which focuses on "what words do" in a particular "situation."[67] The result, it appears, is that she celebrates those "miracles" that seem simple, immediate, and mutual—Hermione and Leontes, Pericles and Marina—but rules against those that seem too theatrical, manipulative, or authoritarian.

Beckwith's preference for direct communication underplays the shattering violence, obscurity, and estrangement endured by individuals and communities in both *Lear* and the late plays. It severely limits what words can "do" and "who" can speak them. The case of Edgar helps reveal what ordinary language approaches miss: the way Shakespeare's theater conjures, dissolves, and conjures again what we might call a virtual personhood; the way it operates outside our commonsense parameters of "the self"; the way it operates through indirection, disguise, sleight of hand, and negativity; the way a theatrical individual that withholds himself from onstage communities (Edgar but also Cordelia) may thereby form strange and deep communities with the audience.

There has long been a tendency in criticism to deflate metaphysical concepts and instead celebrate the everyday, the material, the social, the immanent. We might ascribe this to many sources: Nietzschean genealogy, Marxist critique, Bergsonian or Deleuzian vitalism, the linguistic turn, or, ultimately,

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65. Beckwith, *Grammar of Forgiveness*, 142.
66. Ibid., 138.
67. Ibid., 8.

"securalization." The result is a widespread critical suspicion of anything "beyond," anything outside of "ordinary language." Acknowledgment is seen as simple, earthy, ordinary, material, and immanent. Avoidance is seen as complex, obscure, transcendent, and theatrical. The redemptions of the late plays, however, are, like Edgar's "miracle," both direct and opaque, real and sham, immanent and transcendent, avoidance and acknowledgement. In conclusion, then, I will outline the obscure but profound creative possibilities of avoidance in theater and in love.

First, theater's basic technology—role-playing—is one of avoidance. Actors take on other lives and avoid their own, while we suspend both our own lives and our knowledge of the actors' avoidance. Cavell's dichotomies are too stark to deal with the doubts, doubleness, and magic of this theatrical life. If we, as the audience, recognize something it is in a mirror darkly. Theater refuses the face-to-face, and is instead a face-to-mask, where the faces operate in different worlds. If the actor-as-Lear looks at me, he does not recognize me nor I him. A watery pane separates us even as I see his muscles clench with sweat and he sees the tear in my eye. And yet, there is some sort of recognition or there would be no tear and no reason to sweat it. But we do. And this dark, analogical mirror has a strange power that allows things— reflections, refractions, and layerings—that clear windows do not. Edgar only comes to life, becomes "real," as Poor Tom. And we reach a paradox that Shakespeare plays with throughout his late plays: that "true" recognition requires a theatrical avoidance; that miracles must be shammed; and that we need these avoidances and shams if we are to live. Posthumus comes to truly know Imogen when she is "dead" and disguised as Fidele. Leontes truly recognizes Hermione when she is a statue and he recognizes his own fault. Moreover, the discontinuous, flaring nature of theatrical personhood makes it metaphysically and artistically valuable. It is something created in moments, not something always there. It thus raises the stakes of these dramatic moments. It is literally a matter of life and death, of becoming something, somebody, becoming a (momentary) human subject.

There are doubtless many ways of framing avoidance: as the creative textual play that avoids the absent center, the Hegelian self-alienation that avoids stifling immediacy, the Kierkegaardian wound of the negative, the poetic play that avoids the prosaic meanings of ordinary language, or the narrative play that defers revelation until the final act. Whatever the frame, avoidance is key to play and playing, and playing is key to life. The erotic movements of negative theology point in a similar direction. The only way to truly recognize God, in his unthinkable otherness, is to not recognize him. Our lack of direct knowledge, Eckhart stresses, inflames our searching: "As long as it is concealed, man will always be after it."[68] According to

68. Eckhart, *Meister Eckhart*, 100.

the polyphonic Kierkegaard—the modern master of these playful twists and turns of avoidance—God is "[everywhere] in the creation . . . but directly He is not there."[69] The divine is that which avoids recognition and thereby creates space for the leap of human creation.

The late plays also rely on an elaborate play of indirection and dissonance to orchestrate their harmonious redemptions. If *Pericles* (ca. 1607–8), for instance, "seems to have been written for its recognition scene alone,"[70] it is because this is the culmination of a long creative process of avoidance. If it comes too quickly and too easily, recognition will be unsatisfying—mere self-pleasure. It must come after friction, dissonance, and otherness if it is to result in that moment of bliss in which we hear "the music of the spheres" (*Pericles* 21.214). Although the celebrated relationship may be basic and conventional—father and daughter—the incarnation of it is anything but: it is a masterpiece of art. Shakespeare, in his scripting of love and reunion, avoids the direct route and takes a detour into the celestial spheres. And he thereby brings the spheres down here, to the ears of a disheveled, despairing father. And perhaps what we can say, if we are lucky, is that art makes us avoid life and love for a moment so we do not have to avoid (or void) our own. We need not wander the oceans in grief to experience the awe of love's resurrection. We need not carry our dead daughter in our arms to speak what we feel. We emerge from the theater's afterglow and know it is our turn to speak, to love and not be silent, "the crossroads again beneath our feet" (113).

Secondly, in human love, the people and relationships that become meaningful in our lives do so through a theatrical elevation beyond everyday reality. What is our ongoing love of marriage, with its ceremony and spectacle, if not a love of the rituals that artfully elevate our loves and our selves? More generally, the rituals of love create a theater of elevated nights and occasions—"remember that night"—that sustains us through the periods of stress or busyness where we struggle for elevation. We remember those theatrical moments in which all seemed heightened and we can in some sense feed off our memory. If this is an avoidance of the everyday—of our material realities—it is an avoidance that helps us recognize the love that the everyday sometimes voids. It helps us to remember and in that memory to return to the everyday with fresh eyes and find love there too. So it is not so much a detached fictional world as a spiritual-theatrical resource that reinvigorates us in the material. We may be tired and short of time, but this art of love, this ongoing theatricalization of our lives, both points us to something beyond time—those timeless scenes we

69. Kierkegaard, *Unscientific Postscript*, 218.
70. Beckwith, *Grammar of Forgiveness*, 89.

return to in our minds—and brings that "beyond" into time, as something quickening and elevating (to those in the loving community).

There is another name for this creative play of avoidance and recognition: transfiguration. It infuses our ordinary existence and relationships with something alien, unseen, or even "sacred." And, paradoxically, it thereby makes us truly see the ordinary, the "heavy substance," for the first time as something aesthetically beautiful and existentially meaningful. We do this communally. The lovers act as the smallest aesthetic and existential community, building a new world through their sharing of difference.[71] Theater expands community beyond the couple. The audience gasps together, joined in a complex community of witnesses to the play of avoidance and recognition. Such communal practices do more than recognize existing people, relationships, and realities—they (re)create them. "Recognition scene" is thus something of a misnomer. They might better be called "(re)creation scenes." Life is artistically sanctified, created anew, infused with beauty and value. We walk away from the loving or theatrical encounter as new men or women. At least for a time, we feel as if we see the world in a different, more intense light. A smile comes to our lips on the busy street as we think about the night before. Could this be happening to me? Is this real? I never knew! And we did not know because, before it happened, there was nothing to be known. The "thing itself" is not but is created by the play, the ceremony and ritual, the lovers' dance, the rhythm of the verse.

If we accept that such transfigurations are part of the world-creating power of Shakespeare's theater, "it follows that one can only with some restriction speak of the Shakespearean project as a 'secularization.' One could just as easily call it a radical resacralization of the world."[72] The afterglow of such aesthetic experiences will no doubt fade, but the glory of art, as much as love and ritual, is that it can be repeated. We can put ourselves before another performance, we can give ourselves to another poem, we can return to that "medicated atmosphere,"[73] and again hear for an instant that spherical music, just as we can return to our lover after the long day. If this is an "escapism" or avoidance, it seems to me a necessary one, at the heart of what it means to live. And it also may inspire recognitions that are not escapist, that we need to treat a loved one or community better: "O, I have ta'en / Too little care of this!" (3.4.33–34). Or, as Posthumus tells Giacomo, "Kneel not to me . . . Live, / And deal with others better" (*Cymbeline* 5.6.418–21). Above all, for us educators, the task is to give others

71. See Luke, *Shakespearean Arrivals*, chap. 2.

72. Bishop, *Theatre of Wonder*, 88.

73. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. John Shawcross, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1907), 2:51.

the tools and opportunities to experience these blessed moments, so they are not merely an escape but a central part of life and education. If this sounds rarefied, so be it. The solution, as Shakespeare's public theater shows, is not to dispense with the elevated but to bring it to the ground and thereby lift others up, and ensure that this art is not elite but everyday.