Lear and the New Materialism: Reading King Lear without Ostranenie

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“What were the oracles of those wise old Sages but proverbs? They were so deeply respected in the old time that they seemed to have fallen from heaven rather than to come from men… they were everywhere to be carved on columns and marble tablets as worth of immortal memory. There is in these proverbs some native authentic power of truth. Otherwise how could it happen that we should frequently find the same thought spread abroad among a hundred peoples, transposed into a hundred languages, a thought which has not perished or grown old even with the passing of so many centuries, which pyramids themselves have not withstood?”
---Erasmus, Adagiorum (1518).

William Shakespeare’s King Lear interrogates the idea of social decay from the position of nostalgia: it sutures its audience to the residual ideologies of domestic duty and courtly service by showing a world bereft of their stabilizing effects. As characters in Lear reflect on this social breakdown, they employ the uncanny third person and speak in stoic maxims in a haunting emotionless tone. Shakespeare’s King Lear thus stages two forms of speaking in script: while its villains practice deceit through rhetorical dissembling, those who are the targets of this deceit speak to themselves in a no-less rehearsed proverbial language to make sense of their plight. The artifice of rhetorical speech is pharmakon of the play, both the poison and medicine to its alienated characters. Lear’s progress from king to beggar on the heath can be read as a

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1 Background: This paper comes out of a longer work on the use of proverbial speech in King Lear, linking an eco-materialist concern for survival with the Renaissance use of proverbs and mnemonic modes of learning as scripts for affective responses. My first chapter is on Erasmus’ Adages (1518) which is not just about collecting proverbs, but models how writers and speakers can coin proverbs for future consumption. I argue that the adage is a transferring tool, one that sets the “the physical to the mental,” and figures experiential knowledge for future use.
cautionary story about trusting one mode of rote speech over another. When characters recoil from violence and speak the blank voice of aphorism and adage, Shakespeare is weighing the limits of humanist rhetorical imagination. How to read this move to the proverbial, then, and what are the deeper critical implications today if we abandon the idea that the play is not distancing us from mediated forms of consciousness but pointing to them in positive terms? Or, how do we move from ironic critique to sympathetic description?

In his essay “Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam,” Bruno Latour famously describes the ironic contradictions at the heart of critique as that of reproducing a blind idealism in the “real” that the critic accuses others of having. Latour’s graph is one that visualizes this “loop of displacement” critics enact when accusing others of being influenced by ideology, “fetishizing their objects” only to be blinded themselves by an equally unworked out faith in their own real. He writes: “Antifetishists debunk objects they don’t believe in by showing the productive and projective forces of people; then, without ever making the connection, they use objects they do believe in to resort to the causalist or mechanist explanation and debunk conscious capacities of people whose behavior they don’t approve of.” In terms of what I study and teach, Latour’s idea of “critique” could be aimed at the theory of ostranenie – or defamiliarization, at least as its applied to theater. Many definitive cultural materialist interpretations of King Lear use the modernist frame to read moments of proverbial speech as moments of defamiliarization (and its various forms, ideological estrangement, internal distantiation, etc.). One notorious read of the jarring simplicity of this proverbial speech is Jonathan Dollimore’s Radical Tragedy, where he argues that Edgar’s famous lines about divine justice become paradigmatic of the self-distance the play must surely have:

The gods are just, and of our pleasant vices
“Edgar is meant to wince,” Dollimore explains, “as he says [such lines] since the problem of course is that he is making his society supernaturally intelligible at the cost of rendering the concept of divine justice so punitive and ‘poetic’ as to be, humanly speaking, almost unintelligible” (203). The critical frame presupposes that these moments in the text work as meta-commentary about ideology, on the effect of ideology to “mask” reality from the subject. Dollimore’s reading is paradigmatic of a materialist approach that aligns Shakespeare’s skepticism with the modernist aesthetic operation of triggering rational self-awareness.²

But what if the process of uttering the words—the physical process of speaking in the proverbial voice—works on another level? An affective level that heals the wounds of traumatic experience? In the lines above, Edgar is speaking in the proverbial key. He articulates his dread with the world through a citational proverb--“Pleasant vices / Make instruments to plague us.” Who is speaking? Not a single subjectivity, but a shared one. These lines are “haunted” by the citational quality of expression, an objectivism that bars Edgar entrance to a defeating anguish. What would it mean to see this speech as a retreat into rote memory? Within the materialist frame, art is meant to estrange life, to shock us out of this habituated life. At first glance, Shakespeare’s *King Lear* seems to reverse the terms of this process: as the “normal” world is so violent, characters seem to cling to habituated forms of speech to survive. “When we

² We have inherited this critical frame from modernism, I would argue, and with it, an implicit view of textual dissonance and concomitant Enlightenment ethics of literary pedagogy. I can list in an aside other famous readings that use *King Lear* as a kind of allegory of demystification—Stephen Greenblatt’s “Lear and the Exorcists,” of the play’s staging of reformation demystification of papist ritual, Richard Halpern’s magisterial interpretation in *Poetics of Primitive Accumulation* of the tragedy’s “distancing” of feudal relations, Hugh Grady’s work, *Shakespeare, Machiavelli and Montaigne*, (though not specifically just on Lear) is unsurpassed on Shakespeare’s use of Machiavelli and Montaigne to represent false consciousness. Dollimore’s approach is representative of a “cultural materialist” approach employs an Althusserian model to read’s art’s demystification of systems of representations.”
our betters see bearing our woes, / We scarcely think our miseries our foes…” (3.6.95). “Our means secure us, and our mere defects / Prove our commodities” (4.1.22). Aphorism that seems carved out of the proverbial terrain of the narrative.³ Consider Edgar’s famous final lines: “speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.” Edgar is taking us back to the beginning, looking for that point in the past that triggered the tragic unfolding: Lear’s question, “Which of you…doth love us most?” His adage is also serving as a signpost to the notion of desis, tragedy’s depiction of the protagonist’s life caught in the web of past actions. If we remember, we can avoid past mistakes and move on. Set this down. Remember it, and then, when asked, perform the prescript out of habit. Isn’t a scripted answer to Lear’s question… unethical? Isn’t this the “glib and oily art” of artificial speech that got us into the trouble in the first place?⁴ If we remember to speak what we feel, the form of remembering to do this undermines the authenticity of the act of responding free from a rehearsed, mediated form.

How can we read the mechanical aspect of proverbial speech following the various

³ The prevalence of proverbial speech in the play has been noted before by other literary scholars who see the adage as a thematic framing device and less a reflection of older literacy practices or posthuman pathology. Richard Harp’s analysis describes the quantity of proverbs: “Lear utters more proverbs than anyone else in the play—forty-eight by my count—followed by the Fool with thirty-five (making him relatively the most proverbial of all the characters) and Edgar with nineteen.” “Proverbs and Philosophy in The Merchant of Venice and King Lear,” Ben Jonson Journal, 16 (1995), 197-215. 198. R.W. Dent counts 176 proverbs total in the play (Shakespeare’s Proverbial Language, Berkeley: U California Press, 1981). How many proverbs are used is probably not the point, but when and why certainly does matter. On this, Harp avers: “These proverbs are often spoken in times of stress: Lear on the heath, the Fool being the Fool, Edgar disguised s Poor Tom, and Kent, also in disguise and making use of maxims in his contentious exchanges with Oswald and Cornwall” (211). Harp does not count the coining of proverbial speech, but he does notice what he calls “compressed speech” and “pointed phrasing sum[ming] up sharply an important part of the play’s overall wisdom” working in scenes throughout (Ibid). The tragic arc of the play means that most of what I am calling citational proverbs, aphoristic phrasing, or a coined proverb, occur near the end, as characters face violence and destruction. See also Wilson, F.P. “The Proverbial Wisdom of Shakespeare.” In Shakespearean and Other Studies (Oxford: Clarendon, 1969); Tilley, Morris. Dictionary of Proverbs in England in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century. U Michigan Press, 1950.

⁴ This is Shakespeare’s version of the philosophical liar’s paradox-- “this sentence is false” -- but in this instance it is hard not to feel like a crude joke is being played on us.
figurations of this theoretical turn to “embodied” subjectivity. Uttered almost as incantation, proverbs seem to speak a world of “first naming,” a kind of return to what Melissa Orlie identifies as an “impersonal materialist understanding of creativity” arising from an “open receptivity to unconscious and primary processes.” Orlie describes this form of creativity as making sense of “the repetition of human helplessness” in the face of impersonal energies not controlled by us…. “a repetition of something without content… [that] inheres in our attempts at infusing this breakthrough of energy and disruption into ordinary life with meaning” (132). Orlie’s description of “naming” that occurs in this “regressive” phase awareness of the world prior to sublimation (she uses Freud’s description of the libido’s acceptance of undifferentiated matter before its entrance into the symbolic) is analogous to Erasmus idea of proverbial “speech” which preexists its user’s experience with the world yet comes with cognates of differentiation that “place” things in a recognizable form. Frederic Jameson’s study of Brecht’s own use of proverbs is useful in this context. Jameson begins by positing that the proverb grounds experience in absolute categories, “For the definite article names a particular action event of experience: it lends it a familiarity in advance, avant la letter; we may even say that the process for naming which is at one with the very category of the definite article as such constructs its object and creates the first familiarities…” Jameson fathoms that the proverb positions text and reader alike in a static world of origins: the use of “the definite article opens up some Ur-perspective of a linguistic past of the verbally archaic,” he explains, “the beginnings of time, the organization of the world into names and familiar categories. And it also seems to project those categories initially, and against all ideologies of contemporary linguistics, in the form of

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5 Eco-materialism is dedicated to promoting new categories to rethink matter—where the human body is not configured as immanent within a dualist model as opposite/outside or above the material object world it describes, but indistinguishable with the elements at “flux” in conjunction with the world.
Jameson’s definition is nearly coterminous with early modern humanism’s view of the proverb as a portal to an ancient wisdom, an “Ur language” that reproduces the sense of intuited truth free from the process of immediate experience, making actions substantive “things” of a recognizable world.

King Lear suggests itself for this method because it tells the story of the king’s epiphany of human-material dependence on the heath --the awareness of the bare life that feels “necessity’s sharp pinch” among the sheepfolds in the storm. This narrative with its deep roots in Christian attitudes toward caritas and suffering can be appropriated to reflect on the human placement of the body in an unstable flux of nature’s “determinants,” as the play intimates a world radically rent from within, an early modern equivalent to a post-sustainable world whose characters reflect on an undifferentiated spectrum of existence in relation to others, and who in the face of dearth repeat cautionary proverbs. The human penchant for mnemonic language promises a different “reversion” in terms of human evolutionary history, taking us back not to Anglo-Saxon lore but to survival attributes—Orlie’s “impersonal matter” or Jameson’s “first habits of language,” staging moments where characters return to an imagined collective experience of ritualized speech. A new materialist approach to the play should attend to Shakespeare’s use of this “blank speech,” not to estrange the dominant, but to reconfigure language as a somatic process of memory, where the subject is acting to relive a collective history through the shared voice. Shakespeare is depicting the memory work involved in trying to render trauma intelligible. On the heath, Edgar speaks:

Who alone suffers suffers most i’ the mind,

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7 The tragedy’s deeper anatomy of predatorial and self-destructive human will, it’s preoccupation with beastial appetites and carnivorous intents—the false discourse of imagined “centaurs,” “gilded serpents,” “wolflike” bastards, “detested kites” (man as “worm”) typically read as an allegory of Reformation eschatology——
Leaving free things and happy shows behind:
But then the mind much sufferance doth o'er skip,
When grief hath mates, and bearing fellowship.
How light and portable my pain seems now,
When that which makes me bend makes the king bow (3.6.95-108)

Talking to himself, Edgar reiterates the time honored proverb “misery loves company,” buts these couplets instantiate the citational turn in the play, where characters practice humanist literacy not as dissembling or rhetorical deceit, but as aphoristic reflection. Edgar is alone on the heath with language. The sentiment expressed in these lines foreground the communal salve of the proverbial voice, the palliative effects of uttering phrases as incantations where “the mind much sufferance doth o’er skip.” When characters stop a scene to insert such common saws, they are not alone but share a collective experience that assuages the annihilating power of their solitary grief. “How light and portable my pain seems now.” There are many moments when this hollow mechanical voice signifies an oddly vacant self buried in the adage. Listen to Gloucester’s proverbial inscription on the heath in the next scene: “Our means secure us, and our mere defects / Prove our commodities. (4.1.21-22).

Proverbs can work to manage inter-subjective trauma, providing a range of affective “scripts” for coping with different material realities: stress to social bonds, privation, physical violence, “necessity’s sharp pinch.” Gloucester’s assertion—“our means secure us”—is meant

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8 In his “Literature as Equipment for Literature,” Kenneth Burke described the value of proverbs from a similar sociological perspective: “Proverbs are designed for consolation or vengeance, for admonition or exhortation, for foretelling.” “Social structures give rise to ‘type’ situations,” he continues, “subtle subdivisions of the relationships involved in competitive and cooperative acts. Many proverbs seek to chart, in more or less homely and picturesque ways, these ‘type’ situations. I submit that such naming is done, not for the sheer glory of the thing, but because of its bearing upon human welfare” (255). It was Burke’s dream, in this embryonic essay, to imagine literature as “proverbs writ large,” that see different genres working to respond to social encounters: if “proverbs are strategies for dealing with situations,” then why cannot we see different types of literary texts doing the same, to “take literature out of its separate bin and give it a place in a general ‘sociological’ picture” (256).
to rationalize his fate, but it appears unmotivated in this instance, as if visited by a fading thought. The proverbial voice functions to turn distress into a delayed awareness, it’s magic is to turn lack and privation into a lesson about finding strength in one’s “defects.” But the quality of the perfunctory “scripted” tone is tinged with the sense of an involuntary incantation. Edgar assumes this tone at the end of act 3, scene 6 when he muses, alone on stage, watching Kent, the Fool and the blind Gloucester lead Lear to Dover: “When we our betters see bearing our woes, / We scarcely think our miseries our foes…” (3.6.95-96). These lines are less a spontaneous reflection on one’s plight, and more like a mechanical recitation. Edgar is thinking about how he cannot share the misery of watching his father’s plight without giving himself away, but the line could stand as a marker for the move the play makes generally in its uneasy evaluation of scripted speech: weighing the razor’s edge difference between flattery and mnemonic speech, blindness and insight, or ethical impairment and linguistic subsistence. The affective function of articulating this experience helps Edgar understand his own condition by framing it in a common-adage.

Shakespeare intuits what modern psychology terms “perseveration,” where individuals respond to trauma by repeating words or phrases that lack an appropriate stimulus. The current medical description of this disorder -- a “form of involuntary recall resulting from uncontrolled postactivation of normally inhibited memory traces”--could be used to explain Lear’s seemingly unprovoked thought insertions and regression to primal scenes of betrayal.9 If the play begins by

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9 Patrick McNamara and Martin Albert writes: “perseveration is essentially a failure of inhibition of normally inhibited memory traces or a failure to resist interference from activation of these normally inhibited memory traces. It is possible that unsuccessful attempts to access a target from the lexicon may trigger the activation of previous targets that have been strongly primed and have escaped suppression because of inhibition.” In “Neuropharmacology of Verbal Perseveration.” Seminars in Speech and Language. (2004) 25.4: 309-321. http://www.bu.edu/lab/files/2011/03/McNamara_Albert_2004.pdf
staging the problem of rehearsed speech as dissembling, it ends with scenes of characters speaking through recollected language to survive the day. The new materialism often rehearses its own proverbial assertions about phenomenology and hence language as mediation. Language is oddly “left out of the equation,” as it were, in our new turn to embodied subjectivity. But language need not always be a question of a Cartesian, thus centered, rationalism.\textsuperscript{10} Can we find a way to see the practice of proverbial speech –inherited collective speech—as a human equivalent of “filial imprinting,” a physio-somatic shaping of human experience. The ritual of uttering a proverb shapes behavior; a normalizing process that through habituation patterns interactions by making “ready to hand” the unfamiliar.\textsuperscript{11} As a psychology—where by definition imprinting is a “wired in” reaction triggered less by individual experience but by a fixed set of conditions prefigured in our development—this recollection of past experience “caught” in the proverb’s wisdom is very much like the imprinting of hatchlings on the shore who receive the magical prescription “to follow.” Psychologists who study the use of proverbs speak of it as a “dissonance reducing mechanism,” but since the early modern period the proverb’s value to equip the mind for different unexpected demands and environments shaped an entire literacy

\textsuperscript{10} If we follow the correlationist dictum to the letter, we are incapable of seeing language as part of the everyday tool world of our existence. But consider Abraham Maslow’s description of the hammer, “If you only have a hammer, you tend to see every problem as a nail” is an instructive proverb for the problem of new materialist approaches to enmeshed existence. The proverb helps us naturalize the hammer as a singular tool, but it is the proverbial form of the awareness that we take for granted in the formulation. That is, the proverb is the tool Maslow needs to get on with understanding the hammer in the first place.

\textsuperscript{11} I know that I am reversing priority of Heidegger’s terms “ready to hand / present at hand” as its own “critique” of a blindness to the thing world, a philosophical model predicated on a “symptomatic reading” of alienated existence. As much as I am cautious to admit proficiency in his philosophy, I do think Martin Heidegger’s attitude toward “the they” (Das Man) might serve as an interesting analogy (the “they” that speak through the proverb, say). According to Graham Harman, Heidegger’s project—the definition of Dasein—centered on removing oneself from the controlling forces of modern “fallen” existence, a deeply modernist sentiment over the homogenizing forms of industrial life that conforms to norms of a mass culture, accommodating to standards of habituated life. Heidegger’s various triadic solutions reinforce the complex we’ve been considering, a “return” to the Volk wisdom offered in his analogies of ur-tools--hammers, built huts in the Black Forest, and advice to “choose a hero” and repeat the patterns of behavior to free oneself from somnambulant “ready to hand” proverbial tool world. To free oneself from the automatic life by –ironically—adapting to and performing the repetition of deeply-rooted emblematic acts.
around preparing for the future by “collecting” the past. In this case, the articulation of the familiar –the rehearsed—is triggered by outside threat, and the affective response of framing an unknown within a reifying language of the familiar allows the subject to sense placement “in” the world rather than as rational recognition “over” or above it.

In conclusion, the materialist reading of the last lines “speak what we feel, not what we ought to say” can figure as a test case for “critique,” as critics see tragedy’s power akin to the Brechtian affect of demystifying conventional thought. I wonder if the modernist idea of the ironic reading—prefiguring a text “distanced internally” from itself-- isn’t something of a dream, a fantasy of escaping the gravity of the play’s pessimism by revising it as social critique or philosophical musing. The move to contextualize the ending as ironic is itself a kind of analgesic retreat, a way of turning our back on the severe nihilism of the play. A way to follow Kent, not to death (I see his “journey” to “follow” his master as suicide), but perhaps off the stage. What might it mean to see the expressions of providentialism or faith as moments of animatronic speech? Such an accounting might mean following Edgar’s lead, instead, accounting for the “sad time” in a way that measures the weight of the pronouncement, to move forward in a way that preserves knowledge of the powerful loss, to remember the past as if chiseled in stone.

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Works Cited


