King Lear: The Lost Leader; Group Disintegration, Transformation and Suspended Reconsolidation

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King Lear (1605–6) is the primary enactment of psychic breakdown in English literary history. It constitutes, also, the most spectacular instance of a controlled explosion of the formal ‘container’ in Western drama—such that it not only violated whatever Aristotle or Boileau might have to offer on the proper structure of tragedy but provoked, too, the very different sensibilities of Dr Johnson and Count Tolstoy. Set in its raw pre-Christian world, the play remains the major Shakespearean rebuttal of Sophoclean fearful symmetry (Oedipus Rex)—corrosive in its existential negativity, yet paradoxically fruitful in spawning such twentieth-century ‘countertransferential’ progeny as George Bernard Shaw’s Heartbreak House, Samuel Beckett’s Endgame or Edward Bond’s Lear. Kcats, on rereading it wrote about the ‘bitter-sweet’ of being ‘consumèd in the fire’, with all the intensity of one closely associated with ‘Consumption’. From a postmodern standpoint, there are moments when absurdist irony threatens to undermine the play’s basic contingency and solidity:

GENTLEMAN: Help, help! O, help!  
EDGAR: What kind of help? (V, 3, 220–1).1

Yet King Lear remains a cultural constant both in performance and in the reading of it: a psychic ‘transitional area’2 wherein succeeding generations have encountered terribilità itself, suffered imaginatively, reacted, phantasised, and sought meanings which might amount to an interpretation. Yet the experience has always

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exceeded the meaning: ‘Enter Lear with Cordelia in his arms . . . ’ (V, 3).

The play commences in near-fairytale narcissism, where the ageing king wishes to retain all the trappings of his sovereignty yet relinquish all its responsibilities. In this, he recklessly throws into confusion (shortly into armed conflict) the focal site where the personal is the political in a hierarchical society – kingship. Kent, in horror, hastens to underline what that role has been for Lear’s loyal subjects:

Whom I have ever honoured as my king,
Loved as my father, as my master followed,
As my great patron thought on in my prayers – (I, 1, 140–2).

In terms of contemporary group-theory, Lear has been undisputed leader of the core ‘feudal’ group – the court: the matrix as S H Foulkes terms it, or W R Bion’s group–‘culture’. Lear’s kingship is, in short, central – even more central than England or Englishness in this play, since when France invades, challenging the malign coalition between Gonerill and Regan, the audience’s sympathy is likely to be with Lear’s foreign champion. Overall, the play remains predominantly concerned with the wanton self-destruction and partial reconstitution of the lost leader – psychoanalytically the embodiment of Freud’s ‘His Majesty, the Ego’. Hence it is more than usually tempting, here, to extrapolate all the other dramatic characters as split-off parts of the one representative personality. However, in fidelity to the text’s overt construction (and to stress its major contribution to an awareness of group-dynamics), the point to emphasise is that as Lear’s fortunes deteriorate and ‘madness’ takes hold, the forces of ‘Goodness’ – of fellowship, sustenance and therapy – are staged as a residual ‘small group’ who operate in terms of recognisable group strategies.

The seeds of this development are sown in the crucial first scene. The opening words between Kent and Gloucester constitute typical group gossip as to whom the leader most favours in terms of eventual succession. Gloucester suggests that the honours are even in the ‘division of the kingdom’ – but it is not clear then, or in the
Edmund interlude, how imminent they feel the division to be: certainly they appear quite relaxed about it. Such equanimity is almost immediately shattered once the king enters and begins to reveal his ‘darker purpose’. Old King Lear, doubtless a merry old soul, demonstrates his senile ‘folly’ in tying the divided succession (itself a disastrous plan) to the most childish form of game-playing: ‘Which of you shall we say doth love us most...?’ (51–4). His last act of leadership is a descent into a leader’s narcissism, forcing the rivals Gonerill and Regan into fulsome flattery, the more honest and perceptive Cordelia into the rhetorical equivalent of silent withdrawal – ‘nothing’. This brings down on Cordelia’s head the full intensity of Lear’s psychotic ‘othering’:

The barbarous Scythian,
Or he that makes his generation messes
To gorge his appetite, shall to my bosom
Be as well neighboured... /
As thou my sometime daughter’ (115–9).

At this outrage, Kent is moved to outright challenge: ‘Reserve thy state,/ And in thy best consideration check/ This hideous rashness’ (149–51). But the king is beyond all ‘consideration’ – possibly in the grip of some disease of ageing. Kent is banished and Cordelia handed over to the honourable King of France, and by the end of the scene the counter-group of the elder sisters is left plotting to take advantage of the vacuum of leadership: ‘We must do something, and i’ th’ heat’ (306). The best that can be said of Gonerill and Regan, here, is that perhaps they, too, are in a state of shock at the rapid turn of events. At any rate, they act in terms of group dynamics: if the leader renounces the role, leadership challenge will follow. Meantime, the ‘scapegoat’ Kent, and the rejected golden child Cordelia, hold out the only hope of a resuscitated ‘good’ group.

The increasingly sinister counter-group, for all that in the following scenes it is able quickly to cut the old king down to size and gather its forces, is doomed from the outset by its flawed double-leadership. As long as the duumvirate have a credible opposition against which to mobilise ‘fight’ assumptions, it can force the
remnants of the king’s party into ‘Flight’. But the dual rule cannot last, even though it is able to attract willing group members and exercise an increasingly demonic cruelty in the deployment of Will-to-Power. The rise of Oswald and Edmund, and the rapid coarsening of Cornwall, have their psychic parallels not only in the black phantasies of clinical psychotics but also in the more chilling activities of such tyrannical super-groups as those which have recently supported the like of Stalin, Hitler, Franco, Mao, Pinochet, Pol Pot, Saddam Hussein or Slobodan Milosevic. However, the concern here will not be with some anatomy of human destructiveness but with the lost leader and attempts to reassemble the recuperative potentialities of a royal group.

‘Storm still. Enter Lear and the Fool’ (III, 2) – it is the king now who is the rejected scapegoat; and he is currently down to just one follower, an ‘all-licensed’ quip-artist so far. However, as critical commentators have often observed, it is precisely the Fool’s capacity to ‘out-jest’ his master’s mounting craziness which provides a kind of homeopathic, psychic safety-net for Lear before Cordelia reappears on the scene. The role of humour in psychotherapeutic treatment has not been muchfavoured until quite recently – and perhaps it is not the most efficacious method of therapy, certainly where it is merely evasive. Yet while Lear’s Fool can be merely an echoic Surrealist (‘Cry to it, nuncle, as the cockney did to the eels’, II, 4, 117), he is frequently the ‘wise counsellor’ almost in spite of himself, whose commentary may resonate a healing sanity:

He that has and a little tiny wit,
With heigh-ho, the wind and the rain,
Must make content with his fortunes fit,
Though the rain it raineth every day. (III, 2, 74–7)

In Shakespeare, as in the holistic practice of psychotherapy, body and mind are conjoined in trauma: the Fool’s song, here, may do little to mitigate the king’s ‘hysterica passio’ but it is sound advice on a stormy night. Or, as he puts it elsewhere – ‘court holy-water in a dry house is better than this rain-water out o’ door’ (III, 2, 10–11). The Fool’s responses in this scene may constitute merely a holding
action; but this will be a vital role before Kent returns and the royal
group eventually expands to include Edgar (as ‘Poor Tom’) and
Gloucester.

At the heart of *King Lear*, I am going to argue, is less the spec-
tacle of the king’s madness (tempting though it is to play it this way
in an individualistic society) than the communitarian enactment of
group ‘holding’ or ‘containment’ of that madness. Shakespeare’s
*Lear*, in short, is about group dynamics *in extremis* – gathering the
limbs of Osiris, or putting Humpty Dumpty together again. But the
group members can only do this by partially sharing the darkness
into which their erstwhile leader has been plunged:

KENT: Importune him once more to go, my lord.
His wits begin to unsettle.
GLOUCESTER: Canst thou blame him? –
(storm still)
His daughters seek his death . . .
Thou sayest the King grows mad; I’ll tell thee, friend,
I am almost mad myself. (III, 4, 154–60)

Kent is disguised (so that Gloucester must address him as someone
else) and Gloucester – yet to suffer blinding – confesses to being
half-mad on account of his rejected son Edgar (now also in dis-
guise). Disguise and madness, and a Fool terrified out of his
conscious wit – so do the ‘good’ group re-form themselves around
the lost leader, awaiting not only reconstitution but for some kind
of redemption.¹¹

Act III, Scenes 4 and 6 constitute the hinge of the play – and two
of the most psychically profound passages in world literature.
Because of their profundity, and the speed with which each passes,
no production however thought out and no performance of the key
role, however brilliant, can really do them justice.¹² Their scenario
is primarily a ‘scene of reading’ (which is where all modern pro-
ductions start from). And it effectively commences a run of
harrowing scenes, in both main action and sub-plot, where the
‘good’ group slowly consolidates, in Flight, to protect and heal the
lost leader, attempting to annul the consequences of his original
 rashness. It begins with Kent’s endeavour to provide shelter and
some normality: ‘Here is the place, my lord; good my lord, enter’ (III, 4, 1). For some time yet, Lear’s response will be a (still) narcissistic obstinacy: ‘Let me alone’. However, after his ‘filial ingratitude’ speech (6–22) and his realisation ‘that way madness lies’, he answers Kent ‘Prithee go in thyself’ and then coaxes the Fool: ‘In, boy, go first’. This indicates, if not an onset of ‘selflessness’, at least a re-awakened sense of group mutuality. And this helps provoke his prayer for ‘poor naked wretches’ in general. The emergence of Edgar as ‘Poor Tom’ shortly breaks up Lear’s self-preoccupation, yet essentially in terms of a ‘projective identification’ which appears here almost as solipsism: ‘Didst thou give all to thy daughters?; ‘Now all the plagues that in the pendulous air/ Hang fated o’er men’s faults light on thy daughters!’ Kent’s gentle correction on the matter merely leads to Lear’s further insistence – and an extraordinarily ‘valent’ response from the empathetic Edgar, in turn ‘interpreted’ by the canny Fool:

LEAR: Death, traitor! Nothing could have subdued nature
To such a lowness but his unkind daughters.
Is it the fashion that discarded fathers
Should have thus little mercy on their flesh?
Judicious punishment! ‘Twas this flesh begot
Those pelican daughters.
EDGAR:
Pillicock sat on Pillicock Hill.
Alow, alow, loo, loo!
FOOL: This cold night will turn us all to fools and madmen. (III, 4, 67–74)

When Lear queries Edgar’s past, ‘Poor Tom’ creates an acutely countertransferential phantasy of depravity, calculated to outbid both Lear’s sense of being wronged and his underlying guilt: ‘false of heart, light of ear, bloody of hand; hog in sloth, fox in stealth, wolf in greediness, dog in madness, lion in prey . . .’ (89–91). Edgar, like the Fool at times, tends to speak in prose – and out of a primarily ‘oral’ stock of folk sayings and mythology. It is a token of Lear’s ‘proto-mental’ awareness that he discards the majesty of blank verse to answer Tom on the same level: ‘Ha! Here’s three
on's are sophisticated. Thou art the thing itself! Unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare forked animal as thou art' (102–4). In sympathy, he begins to strip off his clothing. The entry of Gloucester (frightening to his rejected son Edgar) interrupts the intense 'Pairing'\textsuperscript{16} which has sprung up between king and beggar. Slowly, the group is gathering around the leader in a transformed, defensive role. Kent combines with Gloucester and the Fool to form a smaller 'work group'\textsuperscript{17} intent on providing protection and sustenance for the larger ('basic assumption') collective. However, Lear has become peculiarly bonded to Tom o' Bedlam: 'First let me talk with this philosopher' (147); 'I'll talk a word with this same learnèd Theban' (150); 'I will keep still with my philosopher' (170). One might interpret this dualism, in Bion's terms, as a Pairing whose phantasy project is to keep alive 'Messianic' hope as the discovery of a philosophical truth which will save the group. At any rate, the 'work group' are prepared to collude with this strange partnership provided it is compatible with the aim of securing shelter and consolidation:

\begin{verbatim}
KENT: Good my lord, soothe him: let him take the fellow.
GLOUCESTER: Take him you on.
KENT: Sirrah, come on. Go along with us.
LEAR: Come, good Athenian. (171–4)
\end{verbatim}

After the dark interlude of Scene 5, where Cornwall promotes Edmund within the 'bad' party, Scene 6 continues the main group dynamic of the king's reconstituted faction within the temporary refuge of the hovel. Gloucester leaves to make further arrangements while Kent, Edgar and the Fool remain to support the increasingly psychotic Lear. Edgar gives preliminary expression to this 'present emotional tone'.\textsuperscript{18}

\begin{verbatim}
Fraterretto calls me and tells me Nero is an angler in the lake of darkness. Pray, innocent, and beware the foul fiend. (III, 6, 6–8)
\end{verbatim}

The demonic dimensions here bring together folk superstition and the psychic forbidden. Nero, in historical legend, was credited with 'acting out' the primitive phantasies identified, in modern times, by
Melanie Klein in particular – he ripped up his mother’s womb to see where he had been born.\textsuperscript{19} Klein’s account of infantile sadism is as luridly horrendous as anything that ‘Poor Tom’ could ‘daub’:\textsuperscript{20}

Every other vehicle of sadistic attack that the child employs, such as anal sadism and muscular sadism is, in the first instance, levelled against its mother’s frustrating breast, but it is soon directed to the inside of her body, which thus becomes at once the target of every highly intensified and effective instrument of sadism. . . . These anal-sadistic, destructive desires of the small child constantly alternate with desires to destroy its mother’s body by devouring and wetting it. . . .

Hanna Segal explains further:

His mother’s body stirs in the child powerful desires to explore it and possess himself of its riches. It stirs libidinal desires but also envy and hatred. In phantasy, the infant subjects the mother’s body to greedy attacks in which he phantasies [sic] robbing her of these riches and to envious destructive attacks motivated more by hatred than by desire.\textsuperscript{21}

Lear himself will revert to this level of regressive psychosis when he phantasises women beneath ‘the girdle’ – ‘There’s hell, there’s darkness, there is the sulphurous pit’ etc (IV, 6, 128–9). In Bion’s analysis, group assumptions precisely partake of regression to Klein’s primitive anxieties and hatreds. In short, Edgar here intuitively sounds out the depth at which the dynamics of the king’s party must operate.

The essentially collective nature of these scenes has often been noticed, despite the critical tradition since A C Bradley of discussing the ‘motives’ of individual ‘characters’. Thus Graham Holderness notes:

The characters collectively operate as what Roger Warren calls ‘an ensemble of madness’, with Lear, the Fool and Edgar each developing his own particular line in perverse or insane fantasy. . . . Out of this collaborative lunacy Lear constructs the fantasy of a formal judicial process in which the absent Gonerill and Regan are arraigned for trial.\textsuperscript{22}

However, Holderness goes on to point out that: ‘It is precisely the
collective, ‘ensemble’ character of the mock-trial that seems to Warren to present problems”; he might be considered typical in favouring ‘a reviser’s preference for the more individual and psychological focus’. What this seems to suggest is that Warren is ignorant of the now-massive ‘psychological’ documentation of group dynamics. On stage, the scene works powerfully in just these terms. In phantasy, Lear is spectacularly reviving his lost leadership-role – presiding over a court that he has summoned to judgment. And both Edgar and (with savvy asides) the Fool collude with the king in this. As Edgar later says about the part he plays with his father: ‘Why I do trifle thus with his despair/ Is done to cure it’ (IV, 6, 34–5). The small group take up appropriate roles in circulating ‘proto-mental’ phenomena and also grounding ‘emotional oscillation’ within a site of temporary containment:

LEAR: . . . Thou sapient sir, sit here. No, you she-foxes –
EDGAR: Look where he stands and glares! Want’st thou eyes at trial, madam?
(sings)
    Come o’er the burn, Bessy, to me.
FOOL: (sings)
    Her boat hath a leak
    And she must not speak
    Why she dares not come over to thee.
EDGAR: The foul fiend haunts Poor Tom in the voice of a nightingale,
Hoppedance cries in Tom’s belly for two white herring. Croak not, black angel! I have no food for thee.
KENT: How do you, Sir? Stand not so amazed.
Will you lie down and rest upon the cushionings? (III, 6, 22–33)

Lear’s phantasy of justice, with all its arbitrarily assigned roles, is wildly narcissistic – yet the efforts of the other group members contrive to make it a therapeutically guided phantasy. It leads to the king being able to rest (‘draw the curtains’, [81]), before Gloucester re-enters to move the whole group out of imminent danger. Edgar lingers, briefly, to sum up and, as it were, psychologically ‘interpret’. Beyond the somewhat Christianised moralism, his remarks have specific pertinence to group-work: ‘the
mind much sufferance doth o’erskip/ When grief hath mates, and bearing fellowship’ (104–5).

Lear’s entry in Act IV, 6, ‘fantastically dressed with wild flowers’, inaugurates a largely focused and coherent dramatic passage until the king’s exit near the end of Scene 7 (the Quarto, of course, does not legislate for Acts and Scenes). The earlier part of Scene 6 has established Edgar (in whichever role) as, by now, de facto leader of the ‘good’ group. He has ‘directed’ his father Gloucester’s transformation from depressive despair to suffering acceptance (the extraordinary Dover Cliff coup de théâtre) and is now on hand to act as both facilitator and commenting ‘Chorus’ while Lear’s phantasy rings the changes on the motif of leadership, which oscillates from scenarios of the inner and outer meanings of justice (the ‘adult’ tribal code) to infantile imaginings of omnipotence, where the maternal ‘Other’ is radically spilt between ‘Bad Breast’ (Gonerill and Regan) and ‘Good Breast’ (Cordelia – revealed in Scene 7 as an idealised ‘soul in bliss’ [6]). Edgar’s asides (‘O thou side-piercing sight!’ [IV, 6, 85]) and responses (‘Sweet marjoram’ [93]) create both the ‘container’ for Lear’s wildness and Gloucester’s reaction to it, and operate as a kind of counselling ‘interpretation’ for the audience: ‘O matter and impertinency mixed’ (175). When, later, Oswald persists in carrying out his malign orders, Edgar fights and kills him, thus preventing his father’s murder. The letter from Gonerill, which he finds on Oswald, then leads him to a plan of action to discredit her and attract the Duke of Albany into an expanding ‘good’ party. Edgar, in fact, now embodies a new and subtler form of group leadership, which employs intelligence (‘I know thee well’, 252) and changeable role-play to achieve what bluster or brute force cannot. In his own way, the reconstituted Edgar may be a more authentic ‘Machiavel’, than Edmund, the crude over-reacher. It is fitting that Edgar will eventually overcome his brother in mortal combat – for he can out-maneuvre Edmund’s opportunistic violence.

Meanwhile, Lear continues to ‘act out’ his lost leadership, abetted by group members who maintain allegiance despite the king’s broken authority: GLOUCESTER: ‘O, let me kiss that hand!’ (IV, 6, 132); GENTLEMAN: ‘You are a royal one, and we obey you’
(201); 'All fall to their knees' (7, 22); CORDELIA: 'How does my royal lord?' (7, 44). Yet the 'coronet of flowers' emblematizes the phantasy nature of Lear's enduring leadership – even while he seeks to deploy it: '... they cannot touch me for coining. I am the King himself' (IV, 6, 83); 'Ay, every inch a king' (108). His imagination abounds in the full appurtenances of royalty – the King's mint ('coining'), armed mobilisation ('press money'), weapons of warfare ('a clothier's yard'), knightly combat ('There's my gauntlet'), defensive challenge ('Give the word'). At one and the same time he knows he is not 'ague-proof' and yet indulges fancies of ultimate power ('I pardon that man's life' [109]). Again and again his wayward mind rehearses scenarios of the arbitrary function of authority ('a dog's obeyed in office' (160) – hence the hollowness of practical justice – and of an overwhelming libidoinous urge which defies all means of control – 'Let copulation thrive...'. (115); 'Thou hotly lusts to use her in that kind...'. (163). At the same time, his prurient imaginings come closely bound up with primal phantasies of omnipotent revenge: 'Then kill, kill, kill, kill, kill, kill!' (188). Lear, as lost leader, dissolves in short into the maelstrom of infantile frenzies to which Melanie Klein, playing the scientist, has attached such outlandish labels as 'The Paranoid-Schizoid Position'.

However, good 'parenting' is on hand – for in this play the child is mother of the man. Or, to use Bion's group-terms, the king’s party, after alternating between Dependency and Fight/Flight assumptions, now colludes in the ('incestuous') Pairing of Lear and Cordelia to produce a Messianic hope beyond the experience of leadership failure and group disintegration. But first Lear must feel himself to be acceptable despite his previous cruelty to Cordelia and his present impotence:

Be your tears wet? Yes, faith! I pray,  
If you have poison for me I will drink it.  
I know you do not love me, for your sisters  
Have, as I do remember, done me wrong.  
You have some cause; they have not. (IV, 7, 72–6)

'No cause, no cause', replies Cordelia: real human love is reparative
not vengeful, and the ‘Good Breast’ nurtures rather than bears poison. Lear asks for mere acceptance: ‘Pray you now, forget and forgive. I am old and foolish’ (83–4). But events are about to overtake this condoned new ‘family romance’. By Act V, Scene 3 Lear and Cordelia are in Edmund’s ruthless hands and Pairing will consist, at best, in fond companionship: ‘so we’ll live,/ And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh/ At gilded butterflies’ (11–13). But even this is a mere dream – ‘Thou’lt come no more:/ Never, never, never, never, never’ (V, 3, 305–6). Cordelia, the last hope of the lost leader, has been hanged, and Lear will shortly die of a broken heart.

Yet might the group itself survive this tragic denouement by transferring its allegiance to the (now) undeceived Albany (the leader by Lear’s succession) or to the astute Edgar (who has honed his leadership qualities in adversity, and avoided all contamination with the ‘bad’ party)? Critical opinion is divided about the ending of this play – its moral and political meaning, the future of the kingship, even who speaks the last eulogistic lines.24 In terms of group dynamics, this is scarcely an issue: groups can survive a change in leadership; they are less interested in a leader’s ‘character’ than an ability to hold them together; they can terminate group-functioning for a variety of reasons. However, a tragic drama is generically characterised by the sacrifice of the hero to ensure group continuance, thus providing a therapeutic ‘catharsis’ for the audience. The open-endedness (at the least) of Shakespeare’s play precisely calls into question our traditional sense of what tragedy is – and hence probes the group dimensions involved in play-going and critical discussion themselves. Briefly, Lear being now dead (as are the contenders Gonerill, Regan and Cornwall), Albany seems to be the constitutional heir (Edgar only just having come into his dukedom) – preferably to be confirmed after some equitable arrangement with France. However, perhaps well aware of his past hesitations, Albany suggests the kingdom be divided between the ever-loyal Kent and the ‘apprenticed’ new leader Edgar: ‘Friends of my soul, you twain,/ Rule in this realm, and the gored state sustain’ (V, 3, 317–8). Kent declines, intimating his imminent demise. There then follows the last speech – ‘... The oldest hath
borne most; we that are young/ Shall never see so much nor live so long' (323–4) — attributed to Albany in the Quarto, Edgar in the ‘canonical’ edition. Whatever our preference, no one has explicitly offered to take up the leadership of the court and kingdom. Shakespeare the tragedian has singularly failed to lead us to a satisfactory tragic resolution — much as W R Bion the ‘expert’ on organised groups, notoriously failed to ‘lead’ them. Just as Bion’s technique threw into relief the dynamics of group expectation, so does Shakespeare’s play expose the inherent ‘groupography’ of critical response — some of the finest scholarly minds bending the most basic conventions of reading to persuade us that Shakespeare has, in fact, delivered what (so patently) he has not.

Of course, a more ‘modernist’ perception of the proximal nature of generic form can make it easier to incorporate King Lear within the ‘harvest of tragedy’. However, the aim here is rather to coopt the play into the discourse of psychoanalysis (a move in consonance with Freud’s own reliance on Greek and Shakespearean drama). More particularly, Lear may be seen as a proto-documentation of precisely those group dynamics which only began to receive sustained attention in the Second World War by such as Bion and Foulkes. As has been shown, the core action of the play concerns Lear’s renunciation of group leadership and the attempt of a surviving ‘good’ group to ward off total disintegration and ‘heal’ the lost group leader. In this, the dramatic spectacle could be summed up by the words of Foulkes and Anthony on group-work in general: ‘a common theme . . . expressing itself in different ways through various mouths’. And what this quotation further suggests is that, for an understanding of groups, what happens from time to time (‘plot development’), may be less interesting than the enduring manifestation of corporate communication — in the case of King Lear, Shakespeare the poet of dialogism rather than the dramaturge of the well-made play. Certainly, there are current signs that psychotherapeutic practice conceives of the ‘Talking Cure’ as very much, too, a listening cure — that mutual exchange (whether between client and therapist or in group-work) is a matter of verbal interchange, accompanied inevitably by all the complexity of transference-countertransference complicity. King Lear, also, is centrally focused
on primal communication – with the sharing of verbal suggestions at both conscious and ‘unconscious’ levels.

Paul Gordon has recently written on psychotherapeutic communication with a modest eloquence:

Language, in other words, is constitutive of human beings, of who we are. ‘I become a person and remain one only as an interlocutor’, Charles Taylor concludes from his discussion of what it is to be a person. It creates what Taylor calls ‘a public space’, a common vantage point from which we survey the world together. A crucial feature of language for Taylor is that ‘it creates the peculiarly human kind of rapport, of being together, that we are in conversation together. To express something, to formulate it can be not only to get in articulate focus, but also to place it in public space, and thus to bring us together qua participants in a common act of focussing. . . .’

While it is true that I do not ‘own’ meaning, as some theorists would have it, it is also not true that no one owns it. Rather we, that is the human collectivity, own meaning or, at least, we can rent it or share in it, with one voice taking its place with that of others, one, few or many.28

This describes what goes on at the heart of King Lear – a play that tends to remain in the mind as an echo-chamber of exchanges, drawn from a handful of somewhat random and static yet intensely vivid scenes, long after we have ceased trying to wrench the plot-ending into some recognisable shape. In drawing upon the ideas of Emmanuel Levinas and Mikhail Bakhtin, Gordon’s description of ‘language, listening and dialogue’ is a useful way to approach the enduring meaning of Shakespeare’s play.

A typical passage from the ‘mad’ scenes of Lear may serve to demonstrate why it has haunted major poets – especially from the time of Keats to that of Yeats:

LEAR: I’ll see their trial first; bring in their evidence.
(To Edgar)
Thou robed man of justice, take thy place.
(To the Fool)
And thou, his yokefellow of equity,
Bench by his side. (To Kent) You are o’ the commission;
EDGAR: Let us deal justly. 
Sleepest or wakest thou, jolly shepherd?
Thy sheep be in the corn,
And for one blast of thy minikin mouth
Thy sheep shall take no harm.
Pur, the cat is grey.
LEAR: Arraign her first. ’Tis Gonerill! I here take my oath before this honourable assembly she kicked the poor King her father.
FOOL: Come hither, mistress. Is your name Gonerill?
LEAR: She cannot deny it.
FOOL: Cry you mercy, I took you for a joint-stool.
LEAR:
And here’s another whose warped looks proclaim
What store her heart is made on. Stop her there!
Arms, arms, sword, fire! Corruption in the place!
False justicer, why hast thou let her ‘scape?
EDGAR: Bless thy live wits!
KENT:
O pity! Sir, where is the patience now
That you so oft have boasted to retain?
EDGAR (aside)
My tears begin to take his part so much
They mar my counterfeit.
LEAR:
The little dogs and all –
Trey, Blanche, and Sweetheart – see, they bark at me.
EDGAR: Tom will throw his head at them. Avaunt, you curs!
Be thy mouth or black or white,
Tooth that poisons if it bite,
Mastiff, greyhound, mongrel grim,
Hound or spaniel, brach or lym,
Or bobtail tike, or trundle-tail,
Tom will make him weep and wail. . . . (III, 6, 34–70)

There would be little profit in adding here to the great mass of commentary that such a passage has already attracted. The point is that – as dramatic action – it is going nowhere. We are in Lear’s phantasy-world where the drive toward some ultimate justice has frozen into repetition-compulsion. The other group members, sometimes projecting their own feelings into asides, join the king in this. The main aim of speaking here (whatever is said) is to keep
communal solidarity alive – to ‘return the ball . . . once in a way’, as Vladimir says in the master-play of Samuel Beckett (who, coincidentally or not, was psychoanalysed in the 1930s by W R Bion). Like Jan Kott, we tend now to read King Lear through Beckett: but Beckett has far more in him than dour ‘existentialism’. Waiting for Godot and Endgame, like Lear, are studies in the games people play – and the centrality of language-exchange in those smaller groups which go to make up the ‘social sphere’. As Gordon again writes:

Language, dialogue, conversation – these are matters far more complex than we normally take them to be. It is through them that we are constituted as human beings, as part of the human community, and through them that we come not just to know each other and ourselves, but to be with each other, although this being with is always a process, never a complete state, and may also be only a possibility (85).

King Lear’s great central scenes, then, dramatise the highly complex ways in which human communication takes place within specific groups. And, in this, it would be a grave error to marginalise what they manifest as just ‘mad talk’. For although the stuff of lunacy, real or feigned, is everywhere, this merely serves to heighten the general ‘groupography’ of linguistic interchange, from the mental hospital, via the House of Commons, into the Senior Common Room. Here, for instance, is part of the transcript of ‘A Discussion between Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion’ at Villanova University in September 1997:

DERRIDA: Then would you dissociate what you call phenomenology from the authority of the as such? If you do that, it would be the first heresy in phenomenology. Phenomenology without as such!
MARION: Not my first, no! I said to Levinas some years ago that in fact the last step for a real phenomenology would be to give up the concept of horizon. Levinas answered me immediately. ‘Without horizon there is no phenomenology’. And I boldly assume he was wrong.
DERRIDA: I am also for the suspension of the horizon, but, for that very reason, by saying so, I am not a phenomenologist anymore . . .
KEARNEY: I would like to say a few words of thanks. One of the nice things about the gift is that it gives you the opportunity to express
gratitude for the gift, even if you betray the gift in doing so.
DERRIDA: No one knows who is thanking whom for what.
JOHN D CAPUTO: . . . How do we know that the source of the confusion is God, not khora?
MARION: I shall answer you at the next conference.
CAPUTO: Jacques Derrida, Richard Kearney, Jean-Luc Marion, thank you all so much.

Doubtless there is much of philosophical substance to learnt about ‘God, the Gift, and Postmodernism’ from the discussion overall. But the point is that, like the Lear exchanges, the selected quotations manifest the group dynamics of dialogue from a psychoanalytic viewpoint. In the book as a whole, Jacques Derrida is the acknowledged group leader of the heirs (or heretics) of Phenomenology. Jean-Luc Marion’s elaborate opening contribution appears as a leadership challenge by an erstwhile disciple. But, in the overall debate, it constitutes more of a Pairing between Marion and Derrida, where at issue is whether the Messiah has already come (but must come again), the ‘Christian’ view, or in fact can never come – the ‘Jewish’ view. The group has its acknowledged Bible (Bion’s word) – Husserl, Levinas, the Torah and New Testament. Yet, above all, the group must continue, the issues discussed are of prime importance, the conversation must not stop. As Marion tellingly comments at the end, ‘I shall answer you at the next conference’.

The same is true, of course, concerning critical debates about King Lear. For the group dynamics within the play are also, ultimately for others – for the notional ‘large group’ of audiences, readers and commentators interested in Lear. And the overall response to Shakespeare’s text demonstrates, over and over again, how even the most specialised criticism (or editing) is informed by psychoanalytic features such as immediate feelings, countertransferential associations and varieties of ‘interpretation’. For King Lear exemplifies how literature, in general, implicitly and explicitly works with interpersonal transactions of the kind our counselling culture normally assigns to psychological discourse. For which reason, contemporary commentators on Lear (in particular) require less, perhaps, the (new) historical and (over)
political awareness they already deploy than a crash course in post-modern group psychotherapy. However, by the same token, practising psychoanalysts need to be more aware that their discipline was founded as much in Poetics as some (contentious) ‘Science’. The need for such mutual reciprocity is grounded not only in the family likeness between literature and psychoanalysis but also in the desirability of healing an unnecessary division in the kingdom of understanding. At present, both disciplines resemble large groups, composed of a myriad smaller groups. The danger here is in a possible ‘splitting’ whereby one group becomes ‘good’, the other ‘bad’ – and vice versa. In King Lear such splitting has resulted from a willed political act; but there is a cross-over point, notably in the figure of Albany. At the same time, Edgar, also still standing at the end of the action, has demonstrated how intelligent and beneficent group-participation requires not only subtle role-play but also a purposive self-distancing from powerful group feelings. In short, whatever King Lear may have to say about power, justice and love, it clearly demonstrates how humans are less integral subjects than (basically) group-creatures:

The weight of this sad time we must obey;
Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say. (V, 3, 321–2, emphasis mine).

Notes

1. For convenience, all references will be to the popular New Penguin edition, William Shakespeare, King Lear, ed G K Hunter (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972). My commentary concerns only the canonical version of the play, since this is the version which historically constitutes the relevant ‘scene of reading’. However, I believe the thrust of my reading will also apply to the lesser known ‘Bad Quarto’ version. See M. William Shak-speare: HIS True Chronicle Historie of the Life and Death of King LEAR and his three Daughters, ed and introduced by Graham Holderness (Hemel Hempstead: Prentice Hall/Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1995).

2. D W Winnicott’s phrase. Quoted and discussed in Mary Jacobus, Psychoanalysis and the Scene of Reading, (Oxford; OUP, 1999) p 3, n 4 etc.


5. Cf ‘Mr X . . . has taken charge of the group, and is already taking steps to repair the deplorable situation created by myself.’ *Experiences*, 32; ‘it seems to me we are determined to have a leader, and that the leader we want seems to possess certain characteristics against which we match the characteristics of the different individuals we try out’, *Experiences*, 38.


7. Cordelia becomes a focus in the play for those ‘Messianic’ ambitions Bion sees implied in Pairing phantasies. *Experiences*, 151–2 etc.

8. ‘Fight/Flight’ is one of Bion’s three basic assumptions. See *Experiences*, 63–4 etc. This constitutes no merely ‘clinical’ deduction. As Bion himself states: ‘I have experienced panic with troops in action on two occasions, and have on several other occasions in small civilian groups had reason to think that the emotional experience bore a sufficiently close resemblance to my military experience to deserve the name panic’, 179. For an ironically gravid account of his ‘military experience’ in the Great War see Wilfred R Bion, *The Long Week-End 1897–1919: Part of a Life*, ed Francesca Bion (London: Free Association Books, 1986). He was the sole survivor of an early tank attack, and should have been awarded a Victoria Cross.


10. See, for instance, Paul Gordon, *Face to Face: Therapy as Ethics* (London: Constable, 1999), 22–3. ‘If we were to break through in this “revolutionary matter of being amused in the sacred process” of psychotherapy, Bion went on, we could see where this more joyous state took us.’ (23)
11. The ‘Messianic’ phantasy again. See note 7 above.

12. I have myself seen Paul Rogers, Paul Scofield, Laurence Olivier, Michael Horden and Anthony Hopkins in the role.

13. A key term in British ‘object relations’ psychoanalysis. See, for instance, Hanna Segal, Klein (Glasgow: Fontana, 1979), passim.

14. I mean this in the full sense explored throughout Walter J Ong’s Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word (London: Methuen, 1982). ‘Written’ orality has a primal force within grammatology in general – and is a major component in what we call ‘Literature’, whether in rhythm and rhyme, dialogue or organised sonority.

15. ‘I propose to postulate the existence of “proto-mental phenomena” ... to consider that the emotional state precedes the basic assumption and follows a certain proto-mental phenomenon of which it is an expression.’ W R Bion, Experiences, 100.

16. One of Bion’s ‘basic assumptions’. ‘Whenever two people begin to have this kind of relationship in the group – whether these two are man and woman, man and man, or woman and woman – it seems to be a basic assumption, held both by the group and the pair concerned, that the relationship is a sexual one’. Experiences, 62. As Bion sees the Church as social custodian of Dependence, the Army of Fight/Flight, so Pairing is assigned to the Aristocracy – of key relevance to issues of monarchy.

17. The ‘work group’ rises above basic assumptions and is prepared to develop (‘time’ and ‘development’ are held to have no meaning at the basic assumption level). The ‘work group’, then, has to mediate between basic assumptions and the work in hand. See Bion, Experiences, 98–113, 122–3, 143–6, 156–8.

18. Bion’s phrase, Experiences, 166.

19. This legend, of course, mythologises ultimate transgression at a pre-Oedipal stage of development.

20. Melanie Klein quoted by Hanna Segal, in Klein, 51.

21. Ibid. See also Melanie Klein, Envy and Gratitude and Other Works (London: Hogarth Press, 1980), 8 etc.


24. For a recent discussion of these issues see, again, Holderness, His True Chronicle Histories, 52–6. For the last lines cf: ‘Ending seems to lead to reflections on the futility of life and the inevitability of death’. S H Foulkes and E J Anthony, Group Psychotherapy, 132.


27. S H Foulkes and E J Anthony, Group Psychotherapy, 238.


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