Jan Kott, “King Lear or Endgame”

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King Lear. Dost thou call me fool, boy?
Fool. All thy other titles thou hast given away;
that thou wast born with. (King Lear, I, 4)

We are all born mad. Some remain so. (Waiting for Godot) II)

The attitude of modern criticism to King Lear is ambiguous and somehow embarrassed. Doubtless King Lear is still recognized as a masterpiece, beside which even Macbeth and Hamlet seem tame and pedestrian. King Lear is compared to Bach's Mass in B Minor, to Beethoven's Fifth and Ninth Symphonies, to Wagner's Parsifal, Michelangelo’s Last Judgment, or Dante's Purgatory and Inferno. But at the same time King Lear gives one the impression of a high mountain that everyone admires, yet no one particularly wishes to climb. It is as if the play had lost its power to excite on the stage and in reading; as if it were out of place in our time, or, at any rate, had no place in the modern theatre. But the question is: what is modern theatre?

The apogee of King Lear's theatrical history was reached no doubt in the romantic era. To the romantic theatre King Lear fitted perfectly; but only conceived as a melodrama, full of horrors, and dealing with a tragic king, deprived of his crown, conspired against by heaven and earth, nature and men. Charles Lamb might well laugh at early nineteenth-century performances in which a miserable old man wandered about the stage bare-headed, stick in hand, in an artificial storm and rain. But the theatre was soon to attain the full power of illusion. Diorama, scene changes effected by means of new stage machinery, without bringing the curtain down, made it possible suddenly, almost miraculously, to transform a Gothic castle into a mountainous region, or a blood-red sunset into a stormy night. Lightning and thunder, rain and wind, seemed like the real thing. It was easy for the romantic imagination to find its favourite landscape: gloomy castles, hovels, deserted spots, mysterious and awe-inspiring places, towering rock gleaming white in the moonlight. King Lear was also in keeping with the romantic style of acting, since it offered scope for sweeping gestures, terrifying scenes, and violent soliloquies, loudly delivered, so popular with Kean and his school. The actor's task was to demonstrate the blackest depths of the human soul. Lear's and Gloster's unhappy fate was to arouse pity and terror, to shock the audience. And so it did. Suffering purified Lear and restored his tragic greatness. Shakespeare's King Lear was the 'black theatre' of romanticism.
Then came the turn of the historical, antiquarian and realistic Shakespeare. Stage designers were sent to Rome to copy features of the Forum for sets to Julius Caesar. Crowds of extras were dressed in period costume. Copies were made of medieval dress, renaissance jewelry, Elizabethan furniture. Sets became more and more solid and imposing. The stage was turned into a large exhibition of historical props. A balcony had to be a real balcony, a palace - a real palace, a street - a real street. Real trees were substituted for the old painted landscape.

At that time attempts were also made to set King Lear in a definite historical period. With the help of archaeologists, Celtic burial places were reconstructed on the stage. Lear became an old druid. Theatrical machinery was more and more perfect, so that storm, wind and rain could drown the actors' voices more and more effectively. As a result of the odd marriage between new and perfected theatre techniques with the archaeological reconstruction of a Celtic tomb, only the plot remained of Shakespeare's play. In such a theatre Shakespeare was indeed out of place: he was untheatrical.

The turn of the century brought a revolution in Shakespearian studies. For the first time his plays began to be interpreted through the theatre of his time. A generation of scholars were busy on patiently recreating the Elizabethan stage, style of acting and theatrical traditions. Granville-Barker in his famous Prefaces to Shakespeare showed, or at least tried to show, how Lear must have been played at the Globe. The return to the so-called 'authentic' Shakespeare began. From now on the storm was to rage in Lear's and Gloster's breast rather than on the stage. The trouble was, however, that the demented old man, tearing his long white beard, suddenly became ridiculous. He should have been tragic, but he no longer was.

Nearly all Shakespeare's expositions have an amazing speed and directness in the way conflicts are shown and put into action, and the whole tone of the play is set. The exposition of King Lear seems preposterous if one is to look in it for psychological verisimilitude. A great and powerful king holds a competition of rhetoric among his daughters as to which one of them will best express her love for him, and makes the division of his kingdom depend on its outcome. He does not see or understand anything: Regan's and Goneril's hypocrisy is all too evident. Regarded as a person, a character, Lear is ridiculous, naive and stupid. When he goes mad, he can only arouse compassion, never pity and terror.

Gloster, too, is naive and ridiculous. In the early scenes he seems a stock character from a comedy of manners. Robert Speaight compares him to a gentleman of somewhat old-fashioned views who strolls on a Sunday along St James's Street complete with bowler hat and umbrella.ii[2] 1 Nothing about him hints at the tragic old man whose eyes will be gouged out. It is true that Polonius in Hamlet is also a comic figure, who later is stabbed to death. But his death is grotesque, too, while Lear and Gloster are to go through immense suffering.
Producers have found it virtually impossible to cope with the plot of King Lear. When realistically treated, Lear and Gloster were too ridiculous to appear tragic heroes. If the exposition was treated as a fairy tale or legend, the cruelty of Shakespeare's world, too, became unreal. Yet the cruelty of Lear was to the Elizabethans a contemporary reality, and has remained real since. But it is a philosophical cruelty. Neither the romantic, nor the naturalistic theatre was able to show that sort of cruelty; only the new theatre can. In this new theatre there are no characters, and the tragic element has been superseded by the grotesque. The grotesque is more cruel than tragedy.

The exposition of King Lear is as absurd, and as necessary, as in Durrenmatt's Visit is the arrival at Giillen of multi-millionaires Claire Zachanassian and her entourage, including a new husband, a couple of eunuchs, a large coffin, and a panther in a cage. The exposition of King Lear shows a world that is to be destroyed.

Since the end of the eighteenth century no other dramatist has had a greater impact on European drama than Shakespeare. But theatres in which Shakespeare's plays have been produced, were in turn influenced by contemporary plays. Shakespeare has been a living influence in so far as contemporary plays, through which his dramas were interpreted, were a living force themselves. When Shakespeare is dull and dead on the stage, it means that not only the theatre but also plays written in that particular period are dead. This is one of the reasons why Shakespeare's universality has never dated.

The book devoted to 'Shakespeare and the new drama' has not yet been written. Perhaps it is too early for such a book to appear. But it is odd how often the word 'Shakespearian' is uttered when one speaks about Brecht, Durrenmatt, or Beckett. These three names stand, of course, for three different kinds of theatrical vision, and the word 'Shakespearian' means something different in relation to each of them. It may be invoked to compare with Durrenmatt’s full-bloodedness, sharpness, lack of cohesion, and stylistic confusion; with Brecht's epic quality; or with Beckett's new Theatrum mundi. But everyone of these three kinds of drama and theatre has more similarities to Shakespeare and medieval morality plays than to nineteenth-century drama, whether romantic or naturalistic. Only in this sense can the new theatre be called anti-theatre.

A striking feature of the new theatre is its grotesque quality. Despite appearances to the contrary, this new grotesque has not replaced the old drama and comedy of manners. It deals with problems, conflicts and themes of tragedy, such as: human fate, the meaning of existence, freedom and inevitability, the discrepancy between the absolute and the fragile human order. Grotesque means tragedy rewritten in different terms. Maurice Regnault's statement: 'the absence of tragedy in a tragic world gives birth to comedy' is only seemingly paradoxical. The grotesque exists in a tragic world. Both the tragic and the grotesque visions of the world are composed as it were of same elements. In a tragic and grotesque world, situations are imposed, compulsory and inescapable. Freedom of
choice and decision are part of this compulsory situation, in which both the tragic hero and the grotesque actor must always lose their struggle against the absolute. The downfall of the tragic hero is a confirmation and recognition of the absolute; whereas the downfall of the grotesque actor means mockery of the absolute and its desecration. The absolute is transformed into a blind mechanism, a kind of automatons. Mockery is directed not only at the tormentor, but also at the victim, who believed in the tormentor's justice, raising him to the level of the absolute. The victim has consecrated his tormentor by recognizing himself as victim.

In the final instance tragedy is an appraisal of human fate, a measure of the absolute. The grotesque is a criticism of the absolute in the name of frail human experience. That is why tragedy brings catharsis, while grotesque offers no consolation whatsoever. 'Tragedy,' wrote Gorgias of Leöntium, 'is a swindle in which the swindler is more just than the swindled, and the swindled wiser than the swindler.' One may travesty this aphorism by saying that grotesque is a swindle in which the swindled is more just than the swindler, and the swindler wiser than the swindled. Claire Zachanassian in Durrenmatt's Visit is wiser than Ill, but III is more just than she is. Ill's death, like Polonius's death in Hamlet, is grotesque. Neither III, nor the inhabitants of Gullen, are tragic heroes. The old lady, with her artificial breasts, teeth and limbs, is not a goddess, she hardly even exists, she might almost have been invented. III and the people of Gullen find themselves in a situation in which there is no room for tragedy, but only for grotesque. 'Comedy' - writes Ionesco in his Experience du theatre - 'is a feeling of absurdity, and seems more hopeless than tragedy; comedy allows no way out of a given situation.'iii[3]

The tragic and the grotesque worlds are closed, and there is no escape from them. In the tragic world this compulsory situation has been imposed in turn by the Gods, Fate, the Christian God, Nature, and History that has been endowed with reason and inevitability.

On the other side, opposed to this arrangement, there was always man. If Nature was the absolute, man was unnatural. If man was natural, the absolute was represented by Grace, without which there was no salvation. In the world of the grotesque, downfall cannot be justified by, or blamed on, the absolute. The absolute is not endowed with any ultimate reasons; it is stronger, and that is all. The absolute is absurd. Maybe that is why the grotesque often makes use of the concept of a mechanism which has been put in motion and cannot be stopped. Various kinds of impersonal and hostile mechanisms have taken the place of God, Nature and History, found in the old tragedy. The notion of an absurd mechanism is probably the last metaphysical concept remaining in modern grotesque. But this absurd mechanism is not transcendental any more in relation to man, or at any rate to mankind. It is a trap set by man himself into which he has fallen.

The scene of tragedy has mostly been a natural landscape. Raging nature witnessed man's downfall, or.-c- as in King Lear played an active part in the action. Modern grotesque
usually takes place in the midst of civilization. Nature has evaporated from it almost completely. Man is confined to a room and surrounded by inanimate objects. But objects have now been raised to the status of symbols of human fate, or situation, and perform a similar function to that played in Shakespeare by forest, storm, or eclipse of the sun. Even Sartre's hell is just a vast hotel consisting of rooms and corridors, beyond which there are more rooms and more corridors. This hell 'behind closed doors' does not need any metaphysical aids.

Ionesco's hell is arranged on similar lines. A new tenant moves into an empty flat. Furniture is brought in. There is more and more furniture. Furniture surrounds the tenant on all sides. He is surrounded already by four wardrobes but more are brought in. He has been closed in by furniture. He can no longer be seen. He has been brought down to the level of inanimate objects, and has become an object himself.

In Beckett's Endgame there is a room with a wheel-chair and two dustbins. A picture hangs face to the wall. There is also a staircase, a telescope and a whistle. All that remains of nature is sand in the dustbins, a flea, and the part of man that belongs to nature: his body.

Hamm. Nature has forgotten us.
Clov. There's no more nature.
Hamm. No more nature! You exaggerate.
Clov. In the vicinity.
Hamm. But we breathe, , we change! We lose our hair, our teeth! Our bloom! Our ideals!
Clov. Then she hasn't forgotten us. (p. 16)iv[4]

It can easily be shown how, in the new theatre, tragic situations become grotesque. Such a classic situation of tragedy is the necessity of making a choice between opposing values. Antigone is doomed to choose between human and divine order; between Creon's demands, and those of the absolute. The tragedy lies in the very principle of choice by which one of the values must be annihilated. The cruelty of the absolute lies in demanding such a choice and in imposing a situation which excludes the possibility of a compromise, and where one of the alternatives is death. The absolute is greedy and demands everything; the hero's death is its confirmation.

The tragic situation becomes grotesque when both alternatives of the choice imposed are absurd, irrelevant or compromising. The hero has to play, even if there is no game. Every move is bad, but he cannot throw down his cards. To throw down the cards would also be a bad move.

It is this situation that Durrenmatt's Romulus finds himself in. He is the last emperor of a crumbling empire. He will not alter the course of history. History has made a fool of him. He can either die in a spectacular fashion, or lie on his bed and wait to be butchered. He
can surrender, compose speeches, or commit suicide. In his position as the last Roman emperor, every one of these solutions is compromising and ridiculous. History has turned Romulus into a clown, and yet demands him to treat her seriously. Romulus has only one good move to make: consciously to accept the part of a clown and play it to the end. He can breed chickens. In this way the historical inevitability will have been made a fool of. The absolute will have been flouted ... 

Antigone is a tragedy of choice, Oedipus a tragedy of 'unmerited guilt' and destiny. The gods loyally warn the protagonist that fate has destined him to be a patricide and his own mother's husband. The hero has full freedom of decision and action. The gods do not interfere; they just watch and wait until he makes a mistake. Then they punish him. The gods are just, and punish the hero for a crime he has indeed committed, and only after he has committed it. But the protagonist had to commit a crime. Oedipus wanted to cheat fate, but did not an~ could not escape it. He fell into a trap, made his mistake, killed his father and married his mother. What is to happen will happen.

The tragedy of Oedipus may, perhaps, be posed as a problem belonging to the game theory. The game is just, i.e. at the outset both partners must have the same chances of losing or winning, and both must play according to the same rules. In its game with Oedipus Fate does not invoke the help of the gods, does not change the laws of nature. Fate wins its game without recourse to miracles.

The game must be just, but at the same time must be so arranged that the same party always wins; so that Oedipus always loses.

Let us imagine an electronic computer which plays chess and calculates any number of moves in advance. A man must play chess with an electronic computer, cannot leave or break the game, and has to lose the game. His defeat is just, because it is effected according to the rules of the game; he loses because he has made a mistake. But he could not have won.

A man losing the chess-game with an electronic computer, whom he himself has fed with combinatorial analysis and rules, whom he himself has 'taught' to play, is not a tragic hero any more. If he plays that chess-game from the moment he was born until he dies, and if he has to lose, he will at most be the hero of a tragi-grotesque. All that is left of tragedy is the concept of 'unmerited guilt', the inevitable defeat and unavoidable mistake. But the absolute has ceased to exist. It has been replaced by the absurdity of the human situation.

The absurdity does not consist in the fact that man-made mechanisms are under certain conditions stronger, and even wider, than he. The absurdity consists in that they create a compulsory situation by forcing him into a game in which the probability of his total defeat constantly increases. The Christian view of the end of the world, with the Last Judgement and its segregation of the just and the unjust, is pathetic. The end of the world
caused by the atomic bomb is spectacular, but grotesque just the same. Such an end of the world is intellectually unacceptable, either to Christians or to Marxists. It would be a silly ending.

The comparison between fate's game with Oedipus, and a game of chess with an electronic computer, is not precise enough. An automatic device to play chess, even if it could compute any number of moves, need not win all the time. It would simply more often win than lose. But among automatic devices that really exist one could find a much better example. There is a machine for a game similar to tossing coins for 'heads or tails'. I put a coin on the table the way I like, with 'heads' or 'tails' on top. The machine does not see the coin, but it has to predict how I have put it. If it gives the right answer, it wins. I inform the machine whether it has given the right answer. I put down the coin again, and so on. After a time the machine begins to win by giving the right answers more and more often. It has memorized and learned my system; it has deciphered me, as it were. It foresees that after three 'heads' I will put down two 'tails'. I change the system, and play using a different method. The blind machine learns this one too, and begins to win again. I am endowed with free will and have the freedom of choice. I can put down 'heads' or 'tails'. But in the end, like Oedipus, I must lose the game.

There is a move by which I do not lose. I do not put the coin on the table, I do not choose. I simply toss it. I have given up the system, and left matters to chance. Now the machine and I have even chances. The possibility of win and lose, of 'heads' or 'tails' is the same. It amounts to fifty-fifty. The machine wanted me to treat it seriously, to play rationally with it, using a system, a method. But I do not want to. It is I who have now seen through the machine's method.

The machine stands for fate, which acts on the principle of the law of averages. In order to have even chances with fate I must become fate myself; I must chance my luck; act with a fifty-fifty chance. A man who, when playing with the machine, gives up his free will and freedom of choice, adopts an attitude to fate similar to that which Durrenmatt's Romulus adopted with regard to historical necessity. Instead of putting the coin with 'heads' on top a hundred times in succession, or 'heads' and 'tails' in turn, or two 'tails' after ten 'heads', he would just toss the coin. That kind of man most certainly is not a tragic hero. He has adopted a clownish attitude to fate. Romulus is such a man.

In modern tragedy, fate, gods and nature have been replaced by history. History is the only framework of reference, the final authority to accept or reject the validity of human actions. It is unavoidable and realizes its ultimate aims; it is objective 'reason', as well as objective 'progress'. In this scheme of things history is a theatre with actors, but without an audience. No one watches the performance, for everybody is taking part. The script of this grand spectacle has been composed in advance and includes a necessary epilogue, which will explain everything. But, as in the commedia dell' arte, the text has not been written down. The actors improvise and only some of them foresee correctly what will
happen in the following acts. In this particular theatre the scene changes with the actors; they are constantly setting it up and pulling it down again.

Actors are often wrong, but their mistakes have been foreseen by the scenario. One might even say that mistakes are the basis of the script, and that it is thanks to them that the action unfolds. History contains both the past and the future. Actors from previous scenes keep coming back, repeating old conflicts, and want to play parts that are long since over. They needlessly prolong the performance and have to be removed from the stage. They arrived too late. Other actors have arrived too early and start performing a scene from the next act, without noticing that the stage is not yet ready for them. They want to speed up the performance, but this cannot be done: every act has to be performed in its proper order. Those who arrive too early are also removed from the stage.

It is these parts that nineteenth-century philosophy and literature considered tragic. For Hegel the tragic heroes of history were those who came too late. Their reasons were noble but one-sided. They had been correct in the previous era, in the preceding act. If they continue to insist on them, they must be crushed by history. The Vendee was for Hegel an example of historical tragedy. Count Henry in Krasinski’s Undivine Comedy is a Hegelian tragic hero.

Those who came too early, striving in vain to speed up the course of history, are also history’s tragic heroes. Their reasons, too, are one-sided; they will become valid only at the next historical phase, in the succeeding act. They failed to understand that freedom is only the conscious recognition of necessity. Consequently they were annihilated by historical necessity, which solves only those problems that are capable of solution. The Paris Commune is an example of this kind of historical tragedy. Pancrase in the Undivine Comedy is a tragic hero of history thus conceived.

The grotesque mocks the historical absolute, as it has mocked the absolutes of gods, nature and destiny. It does so by means of the so-called 'barrel of laughs', a popular feature of any funfair: a score of people or more try to keep their balance while the upturned barrel revolves round its axis. One can only keep one's balance by moving on the bottom in the opposite direction to, and with the same speed as, the barrel's movement. This is not at all easy. Those who move too fast or too slow in relation to the barrel's movement are bound to fall. The barrel brings them up, then they roll downwards trying desperately to cling to the moving floor. The more violent their gestures and their grip on the walls, the more difficult it is for them to get up, and the more funny they look.

The barrel is put in motion by a motor, which is transcendental in relation to it. However, one may easily imagine a barrel that is set in motion by the people inside it: by those who manage to preserve their balance and by those who fall over. A barrel like this would be
immanent. Its movements would, of course, be variable: sometimes it would revolve in one direction, sometimes in the other. It would be even more difficult to preserve one's balance in a barrel like this: one would have to change step all the time, move forwards and backwards, faster or slower. In such an immanent barrel many more people would fall over. But neither those who fall because they move too fast, nor those who fall because they move too slow, are tragic heroes. They are just grotesque. They will be grotesque even if there is no way out of this immanent barrel. The social mechanism shown in most of Adamov's plays is very much like the barrel of laughs.

The world of tragedy and the world of grotesque have a similar structure. Grotesque takes over the themes of tragedy and poses the same fundamental questions. Only its answers are different. This dispute about the tragic and grotesque interpretation of human fate reflects the everlasting conflict of two philosophies and two ways of thinking; of two opposing attitudes defined by the Polish philosopher Leszek Kolakowski as the irreconcilable antagonism between the priest and the clown. Between tragedy and grotesque there is the same conflict for or against such notions as eschatology, belief in the absolute, hope for the ultimate solution of the contradiction between moral order and everyday practice. Tragedy is the theatre of priests, grotesque is the theatre of clowns.

This conflict between two philosophies and two types of theatre becomes particularly acute in times of great upheaval. When established values have been overthrown, and there is no appeal to God, Nature, or History from the tortures inflicted by the cruel world, the clown becomes the central figure in the theatre. He accompanies the exiled trio - the King, the nobleman and his son - on their cruel wanderings through the cold endless night which has fallen on the world; through the 'cold night' which, as in Shakespeare's King Lear, 'will turn us all to fools and madmen'.

II

After his eyes have been gouged out, Gloster wants to throw himself over the cliffs of Dover into the sea. He is led by his own son, who feigns madness. Both have reached the depths of human suffering; the top of 'the pyramid of suffering', as Juliusz Slowacki has described King Lear. But on the stage there are just two actors, one playing a blind man, the other playing a man who plays a madman. They walk together.

Gloster. When shall I come to the top of that same hill?
Edgar. You do climb up it now: look, how we labour.
Gloster. Methinks the ground is even.
Edgar. Horrible steep.
Hark, do you hear the sea?
Gloster. No, truly. (IV, 6)
It is easy to imagine this scene. The text itself provides stage directions. Edgar is supporting Gloster; he lifts his feet high pretending to walk uphill. Gloster, too, lifts his feet, as if expecting the ground to rise, but underneath his foot there is only air. This entire scene is written for a very definite type of theatre, namely pantomime.

This pantomime only makes sense if enacted on a flat and level stage.

Edgar feigns madness, but in doing so he must adopt the right gestures. In its theatrical expression this is a scene in which a madman leads a blind man and talks him into believing in a non-existing cliff. In another moment a landscape will be sketched in. Shakespeare often creates a landscape on an empty stage. A few words, and the diffused, soft afternoon light at the Globe changes into night, evening, or morning. But no other Shakespearian landscape is so exact, precise and clear, as this one. It is like a Brueghel painting: thick with people, objects and events. A little human figure hanging half-way down the cliff is gathering samphire. Fishermen walking on the beach are like mice. A ship seems a little boat, a boat is floating like a buoy.

It is this abyss of Shakespeare's imagination that Slowacki makes the hero of his Kordian look into:

Come! Here, on the top stand still. Your head will whirl,
When you cast your eyes on the abyss below your feet.
Crows flying there half-way no bigger are than beetles.
And there, too, someone is toiling, gathering weed.
He looks no bigger than a human head.
And there on the beach the fishermen seem like ants ...

This accurate landscape created on an empty stage is not meant to serve as part of the decor, or to replace the non-existent settings. Slowacki understood perfectly the dramatic purpose of this scene:

Oh, Shakespeare! Spirit! You have built a mountain
Higher than that created by God.
For you have talked of an abyss to a man blind ...

The landscape is now just a score for the pantomime. Gloster and Edgar have reached the top of the cliff. The landscape is now below them.

Give me your hand: - you are now within a foot
Of the extreme verge: for all beneath the moon
Would I not leap upright. (King Lear, IV, 6)
In Shakespeare's time the actors probably put their feet forward through a small balustrade above the apron-stage, immediately over the heads of the 'groundlings'. But we are not concerned here with an historical reconstruction of the Elizabethan stage. It is the presence and importance of the mime that is significant. Shakespeare is stubborn. Gloster has already jumped over the precipice. Both actors are at the foot of a non-existent cliff. The same landscape is now above them. The mime continues.

Gloster. But have I fall'n, or no?
Edgar. From the dread summit of this chalky bourn.
Look up a-height; - the shrill-gorg'd lark so far
Cannot be seen or heard: do but look up. (IV, 6)

The mime creates a scenic area: the top and bottom of the cliff, the precipice. Shakespeare makes use of all the means of ant illusionist theatre in order to create a most realistic and concrete landscape. A landscape which is only a "blind man's illusion. There is perspective in it, light, men and things, even sounds. From the height of the cliff the sea cannot be heard, but there is mention of its roar. From the foot of the cliff the lark cannot be heard, but there is mention of its song. In this landscape sounds are present by their very absence: the silence is filled with them, just as the empty stage is filled with the cliff.

The scene of the suicidal leap is also a mime. Gloster kneels in a last prayer and then, in accordance with the tradition of the play's English performances, falls over. He is now at the bottom of the cliff. But there was no height; it was an illusion. Gloster knelt down on an empty stage, fell over and got up. At this point disillusion follows.

The non-existent cliff is not meant just to deceive the blind man. For a short while we, too, believed in this landscape and in the mime. The meaning of this parable is not easy to define. But one thing is clear: this type of parable is not to be thought of outside the theatre, or rather outside a certain kind of theatre. In narrative prose Edgar could, of course, lead the blind Gloster to the cliffs of Dover, let him jump down from a stone and make him believe that he was jumping from the top of a cliff. But he might just as well lead him a day's journey away from the castle and make him jump from a stone on any heap of sand. In film and in prose there is only the choice between a real stone lying in the sand and an equally real jump from the top of a chalk cliff into the sea. One cannot transpose Gloster's suicide attempt to the screen, unless one were to film a stage performance. But in the naturalistic, or even stylized theatre, with the precipice painted or projected on to a screen, Shakespeare's parable would be completely obliterated.

The stage must be empty. On it a suicide, or rather its symbol, has been performed. Mime is the performance of symbols. In Ionesco's Le Tueur sans Gages the Architect, who is at the same time the commissioner of police, shows Berenger round the Cite Radieuse,. On an empty stage Berenger sniffs at non-existent flowers and taps non-existent walls. The
Radiant City exists and does not exist, or rather it has existed always and everywhere. And that is why it is so terrifying. Similarly, the Shakespearian precipice at Dover exists and does not exist. It is the abyss, waiting all the time. The abyss, into which one can jump, is everywhere.

By a few words of dialogue Shakespeare often turned the platform stage, the inner stage, or the gallery into a London street, a forest, a palace, a ship, or a castle battlement. But these were always real places of action. Townspeople gathered outside the Tower, lovers wandered through the forest, Brutus murdered Caesar in the Forum. The white precipice at Dover performs a different function. Gloster does not jump from the top of the cliff, or from a stone. For once, in King Lear, Shakespeare shows the paradox of pure theatre. It is the same theatrical paradox that Ionesco uses in his Le Tueur sans Gages.

In the naturalistic theatre one can perform a murder scene, or a scene of terror. The shot may be fired from a revolver or a toy pistol. But in mime there is no difference between a revolver and a toy pistol: in fact neither exist. Like death, the shot is only a performance, a parable, a symbol.

Gloster, falling over on flat, even boards, plays a scene from a great morality play. He is no longer a court dignitary whose eyes have been gouged out because he showed mercy to the banished king. The action is no longer confined to Elizabethan or Celtic England. Gloster is Everyman, and the stage becomes the medieval Theatrum Mundi. A biblical parable is now enacted: the one about the rich man who became a beggar, and the blind man who recovered his inner sight when he lost his eyes. Everyman begins his wanderings through the world. In medieval mystery plays the stage was also empty, but in the background there were four mansions, four gates representing Earth, Purgatory, Heaven and Hell. In King Lear the stage is empty throughout: there is nothing, except the cruel earth, where man goes on his journey from the cradle to the grave. The theme of King Lear is an inquiry into the meaning of this journey, into the existence or non-existence of Heaven and Hell.

From the middle of the second act to the end of the fourth act, Shakespeare takes up a biblical theme. But this new Book of Job, or new Dantesque Inferno, was written towards the close of the Renaissance. In Shakespeare's play there is neither Christian heaven, nor the heaven predicted and believed in by humanists. King Lear makes a tragic mockery of all eschatologies: of the heaven promised on earth, and the heaven promised after death; in fact - of both Christian and secular theodicies; of cosmogony and of the rational view of history; of the gods and natural goodness, of man made in the 'image and likeness'. In King Lear, both the medieval and the renaissance orders of established values disintegrate. All that remains at the end of this gigantic pantomime is the earth - empty and bleeding. On this earth, through which a tempest has passed leaving only stones, the King, the Fool, the Blind Man and the Madman carry on their distracted dialogue.
The blind Gloster falls over on the empty stage. His suicidal leap is tragic. Gloster has reached the depths of human misery; so has Edgar, who pretends to be Mad Tom in order to save his father. But the pantomime performed by actors on the stage is grotesque, and has something of a circus about it. The blind Gloster who has climbed a non-existent height and fallen over on flat boards, is a clown. A philosophical buffoonery has been performed, of the sort found in modern theatre.

Whistle from left wing.
He (the man) does not move.
He looks at his hands, looks round for scissors, sees them, goes and picks them up, starts to trim his nails, stops, runs his finger along blade of scissors, goes and lays them on small cube, turns aside, opens his collar, frees his neck and fingers it.
The small cube is pulled up and disappear in flies, carrying away rope and scissors.
He turns to take scissors, sees what has happened.
He turns aside, reflects.
He goes and sits down on big cube.
The big cube is pulled from under him. He falls. The big cube is pulled up and disappears in flies.
He remains lying on his side, his face towards auditorium, staring before him. (Act Without Words, pp. 59-60)

The Act Without Words closes Beckett's Endgame, providing as it were its final interpretation. Remaining vestiges of characters, action and situation have been further reduced here. All that remains is a situation which is a parable of universal human fate. A total situation. Man has been thrown on to the empty stage. He tries to escape into the wings, but is kicked back. From above a tree with some leaves, a jug of water, tailoring scissors, and some cubes are pulled down on ropes. The man tries to hide in the shade of the leaves, but the tree is pulled up. He tries to catch hold of the jug, but it rises into the air. He attempts suicide, but this, too, proves impossible. 'The bough folds down against trunk' (p. 59) The man sits down and thinks. The jug and the tree appear again. The man does not move.

In this ending to. Endgame the farces external to. man - Gods, fate, the world - are not indifferent, but sneering and malicious. They tempt him all the time. These farces are stronger than he. Man must be defeated and cannot escape from the situation that has been imposed on him. All he can do. is to give up; refuse to. play blindman's buff. Only by the possibility of refusal can he surmount the external forces.

It is easy to. see haw close to. the Bible this parable is, even in its metaphors: a palm, its shadow, water. The farce above and beyond man is strongly reminiscent of the Old Testament God. This is also. a Book of Job, but without an optimistic ending.
This new Book of Job is shown in buffo, as a circus pantomime. Act Without Words is performed by a clown. The philosophical parable may be interpreted as tragedy or grotesque, but its artistic expression is grates que only. Gloster's suicide attempt, too, is merely a circus somersault on an empty stage. Gloster's and Edgar's situation is tragic, but it has been shown in pantomime, the classic expression of buffoonery. In Shakespeare clowns often ape the gestures of kings and heroes, but only in King Lear are great tragic scenes shown through clowning.

It is not only the suicide mime that is grotesque. The accompanying dial ague is also cruel and mocking. The blind Gloster kneels and prays:

O you mighty gods!
This world I do renounce, and, in your sights,
Shake patiently my great affliction off:
If I could bear it longer, and not fall
To quarrel with your great opposeless wills,
My snuff and loathed part of nature should
Burn itself out. If Edgar live, 0, bless him! (IV, 6)

Gloster's suicide has a meaning only if the Gods exist. It is a protest against undeserved suffering and the world's injustice. This protest is made in a definite direction. It refers to eschatology. Even if the Gods are cruel, they must take this suicide into consideration. It will count in the final reckoning between Gods and man. Its sale value lies in its reference to the absolute.

But if the Gods, and their moral order in the world, do not exist, Gloster's suicide does not salve or alter anything. It is only a somersault on an empty stage. It is deceptive and unsuccessful on the factual as well as on the metaphysical plane. Not only the pantomime, but the whale situation is then grotesque. From the beginning to the end. It is waiting for a Godot who does not came.

Estragon. Why don't we hang ourselves? Vladimir. With what?
Estragon. Then we can't. Vladimir. Let's go.
Estragon. You could hang on to my legs. Vladimir. And who'd hang on to mine?
Estragon. True.
Vladimir. Show all the same. (Estragon loosens the cord that holds up his trousers which, much too big for him, fall about his ankles. They look at the cord.) That might do at a pinch. But is it strong enough?
Estragon. We'll soon see. Here. (They each take an end of the cord and pull. It breaks. They almost fall.)
Vladimir. Not worth a curse. (Waiting for Godot, II)
Gloster did fall, and he gat up again. He has made his suicide attempt, but he failed to. shake the world. Nothing has changed. Edgar's comment is ironical:

... had he been where he thought,
By this had thought been past. (IV, 6)

If there are no gods, suicide makes no sense. Death exists in any case. Suicide cannot alter human fate, but only accelerate it. It ceases to be a protest. It is a surrender. It becomes the acceptance of the world's greatest cruelty - death. Gloster has finally realized:

... henceforth I'll bear Affliction till it do cry out itself
'Enough, enough', and die. (IV, 6)

And once again in the last act:

No further, sir; a man may rot even here. (V, 2)

After his grotesque suicide the blind Gloster talks to the deranged Lear. Estragon and Vladimir carryon a very similar conversation, interrupted by the despairing cries of the blind Pozzo, who has fallen down and cannot get up. Pozzo would find it easiest to understand Gloster:

... one day I went blind, one day we'll go deaf, one day we were born, one day we shall die .•. They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more. (Waiting for Godot, II)

Shakespeare had said as much, in fewer words:

Men must endure
Their going hence, even as their coming hither. Ripeness is all. (V, 2)

But it was Ionesco who put it most briefly of all, in his Tueur sans Gages: 'We shall all die, this is the only serious alienation.'

III

The theme of King Lear is the decay and fall of the world. The play opens like the Histories, with the division of the realm and the King's abdication. It also ends like the Histories, with the proclamation of a new king. Between the prologue and the epilogue there is a civil war. But unlike in the Histories and Tragedies, the world is not healed again. In King Lear there is no young and resolute Fortinbras to ascend the throne of
Denmark; no cool-headed Octavius to become Augustus Caesar; no noble Malcolm to 'give to our tables meat, sleep to our nights'. In the epilogues to the Histories and Tragedies the new monarch invites those present to his coronation. In King Lear there will be no coronation. There is no one whom Edgar can invite to it. Everybody has died or been murdered. Gloster was right when he said: 'This great world shall so wear out to nought.' Those who have survived - Edgar, Albany and Kent - are, as Lear has been, just 'ruin'd pieces of nature'.

Of the twelve major characters one half are just and good, the other - unjust and bad. It is a division just as consistent and abstract as in a morality play. But this is a morality play in which everyone will be destroyed: noble characters along with the base ones, the persecutors with the persecuted, the torturers with the tortured. Vivisection will go on until the stage is empty. The decay and fall of the world will be shown on two levels, on two different kinds of stage, as it were. One of these may be called Macbeth's stage, the other - Job's stage.

Macbeth's stage is the scene of crime. At the beginning there is a nursery tale of two bad daughters and one good daughter. The good daughter will die hanged in prison. The bad daughters will also die, but not until they have become adulteresses, and one of them also a poisoner and murderess of her husband. All bonds, all laws, whether divine, natural or human, are broken. Social order, from the kingdom to the family, will crumble into dust. There are no longer kings and subjects, fathers and children, husbands and wives. There are only huge renaissance monsters, devouring one another like beasts of prey. Everything has been condensed, drawn in broad outlines, and the characters are hardly marked. The history of the world can do without psychology and without rhetoric. It is just action. These violent sequences are merely an illustration and an example, and perform the function of a black, realistic counterpart to 'Job's stage'.

For it is Job's stage that constitutes the main scene. On it the ironic, clownish morality play on human fate will be performed. But before that happens, all the characters must be uprooted from their social positions and pulled down, to final degradation. They must reach rock-bottom. The downfall is not merely a philosophical parable, as Gloster's leap over the supposed precipice is. The theme of downfall is carried through by Shakespeare stubbornly, consistently, and is repeated at least four times. The fall is at the same time physical and spiritual, bodily and social.

At the beginning there was a king with his court and ministers. Later, there are just four beggars wandering about in a wilderness, exposed to raging winds and rain. The fall may be slaw, or sudden. Lear has at first a retinue of a hundred men, then fifty, then only one. Kent is banished by one angry gesture of the King. But the process of degradation is always the same. Everything that distinguishes a man - his titles, social position, even name - is lost. Names are not needed any more. Everyone is just a shadow of himself; just a man.
King Lear. Doth any here know me? - Why, this is not Lear:
Doth Lear walk thus? speak thus? ...

Who is it that can tell me who I am?
Fool. Lear's shadow. (1.4)

And once more the same question, and the same answer. The banished Kent returns in
disguise to. his King.

King Lear. How now! what art thou?
Kent. A man, sir. (I, 4)

A naked man has no name. Before the morality commences, everyone must be naked.
Naked like a warm.

Then Job arose, and rent his mantle, and shaved his head, and fell down upon the
ground, and worshipped.
And said, Naked came lout of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither.
(Book of Job, 1, 20-21)

Biblical imagery in this new Book of Job is no. mere chance. Edgar says that he will with
his 'nakedness out-face the winds and persecutions of the sky' (II, 3). This theme returns
obstinately, and with an equal consistency:

'I' the last night's storm I such a fellow saw; Which made me think a man a worm. (IV, I)

A downfall means suffering and torment. It may be a physical or spiritual torment, or
both. Lear will lose his wits; Kent will be put in the stacks; Gloster will have his eyes
gauged out and will attempt suicide. Par a man to. became naked, or rather to. become
nothing but man, it is not enough to. deprive him of his name, social position and
character. One must also. maim and massacre him bath morally and physically. Turn him
-like King Lear - into. a 'ruin'd piece of nature', and only then ask him who. he is. For it is
the new renaissance Job who. is to. judge the events an 'Macbeth's stage'.

A Polish critic, Andrzej Palkiewicz, has observed this process of maiming and mutilating
man, not in Shakespeare, but in modern literature and drama. He compares it to. the
peeling of an onion. One takes off the skin, and then peels off the layers of onion one by
one. Where does an onion end and what is in its care? The blind man is a man. the
madman is a man, the doting old man is a man. Man and nothing but man. A nobody,
who. suffers, tries to. give his suffering a meaning or nobility, who. revolts or accepts his
suffering, and who. must die.
O gods! Who is't can say, 'I am at the worst'?
I am worse than e'er I was.

And worse I maybe yet: the worst is not
So long as we can say 'This is the worst.'
(IV, I)

Vladimir and Estragon talk to each other in a very similar fashion. They gibber, but in that gibber there are remnants of the same eschatology:

Vladimir. We're in no. danger of ever thinking any more.
Estragon. Then what are we complaining about?
Vladimir. Thinking is not the worst.
Estragon. Perhaps not. But at least there's that.
Vladimir. That what?
Estragon. That's the idea, let's ask other questions.
Vladimir. What do you mean, at least there's that?
Estragon. That much less misery.
Vladimir. True.
Estragon. Well? If we gave thanks for our mercies?
Vladimir. What is terrible is to have thought.
(Waiting for Godot, II)

Pozzo is proud and pompous when in the first part of Waiting for Godot he leads an a rope the starving Lucky. Their relation is still that of master and servant, the exploiter and the exploited. When they appear for the second time Pozzo is blind and Lucky is dumb. They are still joined by the same rope. But now they are just two men.

'Tis the times' plague, when madmen lead the blind. (IV, I)

Almost as in Brueghel's famous picture, Edgar is leading the blind Gloster to the precipice at Dover. This is just the theme of Endgame; Beckett was the first to see it in King Lear; he eliminated all action, everything external, and repeated it in its skeleton form.

Clov cannot sit down, the blind Hamm cannot get up, moves only in his wheel-chair, and passes water only by means of a catheter. Nell and Nagg have 'last their shanks' and are almost breathing their last in dustbins. But Hamm continues to be the master, and his wheel-chair brings to mind a throne. In the London production he was dressed in a faded purple gown and wiped his face with a blood-red handkerchief. He was, like King Lear, a degraded and powerless tyrant, a 'ruin'd piece of nature'. He was a King Lear, the scene in Act Four, where Lear meets the blind Gloster and after a great frantic monologue gives
the order that one of his shoes be taken off, as it pinches him. It is the same pinching shoe that one of the dawns in Waiting for Godot will take off at the beginning of the scene.

This is the cruel and mocking 'peeling of an onion', Shakespearian and modern alike. The onion is peeled to the very last, to the suffering 'nothing'. This is the theme of the fall. The concept of man has been reduced and all situations have shrunk to. the one ultimate, total and concentrated human fate. To. Vladimir's question 'What is in this bag?' the blind Pozzo replies: 'Sand.' Clov in Endgame lifts the lid of the dustbin in order to. find out what is happening to Nagg. 'He's crying,' he reports. To this Hamm replies: 'Then he's living.'

He's crying, then he's living. English critics have regarded it as Beckett's reply to. the Cartesian formula of man, which was in itself a reduction of the theological formula. But in fact Beckett simply repeats after Shakespeare:

... we came crying hither.
When we are born, we cry that we are come
To this great stage of fools. (IV, 6)

The world is real, and the shoe really pinches. Suffering is also. real. But the gesture with which the ruin of a man demands that his pinching shoe be taken off is ridiculous. Just as ridiculous as blind Gloster's somersault an the flat empty stage.

The biblical Job, too., is the ruin of a man. But this ruin constantly talks to. God. He curses, imprecates, blasphemes. Ultimately he admits that God is right. He has justified his sufferings and ennobled them. He included them in the metaphysical and absolute order. The Book of Job is a theatre of the priests. Whereas in bath the Shakespearian and Beckettion Endgames the Book of Job is performed by clowns. But here, too., the Gods are invoked throughout by all the characters; by Lear, Gloster, Kent, even Albany:

King Lear. By Jupiter, I swear, no.
Kent. By Juno, I swear, ay. (II,4)

At first Gods have Greek names. Then they are only Gods, great and terrifying judges high above, who. are supposed to. intervene sooner or later. But the Gods do. not intervene. They are silent. Gradually the tone becomes more and more ironical. The ruin of a man invoking God is ever more ridiculous. The action becomes more and more cruel, but at the same time assumes a more and more clownish character:

By the kind gods, 'tis most ignorbly done
To pluck me by the beard.
Defeat, suffering, cruelty have a meaning even when the Gods are cruel. Even then. It is the last theological chance to justify suffering. The biblical Job knew about it well when he called an God:

If the scourge slay suddenly, he will laugh at the trial of the innocent. (Book of Job, IX, 23)

From the just God, one can still appeal to the unjust God. Says Gloster after his eyes have been gauged out:

As flies to wanton boys, are we to the gods, They kill us for their sport. (IV, I)

But as long as Gods exist, all can yet be saved:

Hearken unto this, 0 Job: stand still, and consider the wondrous works of God. (Book of Job, XXXVII, 14)

The Bible is Beckett's favourite reading. After all, the passage sounds like the dialogue in Endgame.

Clov. They said to me, Here's the place, raise your head and look at all that beauty. That order! They said to me, Come now you're not a brute beast, think upon these things and you'll see how all becomes clear. And simple! They said to me,

What skilled attention they get, all these dying of their wounds.

Hamm. Enough!
Clov. I say to myself - sometimes, Clov, you must learn to suffer better than that if you want them to weary of punishing you. I say to myself - sometimes, Clov, you must be there better than if you want them to let you go. - one day. (pp. 50-5 I)

Clov is a clown, but he is more unhappy than Hamm. Clov's gabble is still eschatological, just as Lucky's is in Waiting for Godot. In this dialogue of 'human ruins' Hamm alone has realized the folly of all suffering. He has one reply to make to eschatology: 'Take it easy ... Peace to. our ... arses.' Bath couples: Pozzo who. has been made blind, and Lucky who. has been made dumb, an the one hand, Hamm who. cannot get up, and Clov who. cannot sit dawn, an the other, have been taken from the Endgame of King Lear:

King Lear. Read.
Gloster. What, with the case of eyes?
King Lear. What, art mad? A man may see how this world goes with no eyes. Look with thine ears. (IV, 6)
These are biblical parables. The blind see clearly, madmen tell the truth. After all, they are all mad. 'There are four of them,' writes Camus, 'one by profession, one by choice, two by the suffering they have been through. They are four tarn bodies, four unfathomable faces of the same fate. vii The Fool accompanies Lear an the cold night of madness; Edgar takes the blind Gloster through a grotesque suicide. Lear's invocations' of the Gods are countered by the Fool's scatological jakes; Gloster's prayers by Edgar's clownish demonology:

Frateretto calls me, and tells me Nero is an angler in the lake of darkness. - Pray, innocent, and beware of the foul fiend. ( ... ) The foul fiend bites my back. ( ... ) Pur! the cat is gray. (III, 6)

But Edgar's demonology is no more than a parody, a travesty of contemporary Egyptian dream books and books an witchcraft; a great and brutal gibe, in fact. He gibes at himself, at Job, conversing with God. Par above 'Job's stage', there is in King Lear only 'Macbeth's stage'. On it people murder, butcher and torture one another, commit adultery and fornication, divide kingdoms. Prom the paint of view of a Job who. has ceased to. talk to. God, they are clowns. Clowns who. do. not yet know they are clowns.

King Lear .... come, come; I am a king!
My masters, know you that.
Gentleman. You are a royal one, and we obey you.
King Lear. Then there's life in't. Nay, an you get it, you shall get it by running. So, so, so, so. (IV, 6)

The zero hour has came. Lear has come to. understand it at last. Just as blind Hamm came to. understand everything, although he was bound to. his wheel-throne. And Pozzo, when he turned blind and fell aver his sand-filled bags:

Pozzo. I woke up one fine day as blind as Fortune ...
Vladimir. And when was that?
Pozzo. I don't know ... Don't question me! The blind have no notion of time. The things of time are hidden from them too. (Waiting for Godot, II)

And this is how King Lear ends his final frantic tirade:

No rescue? What, a prisoner? I am even The natural fool of fortune.
(IV, 6)

In a moment he will run off the stage. Before that happens he will ask for his pinching shoe to be taken off. He is a clown now, so he can afford to do this. O~ 'Job's stage' four clowns have performed the old medieval so tie about the decay and fall of the world. But
in both Shakespearian and Beckettian Endgames it is the modern world that fell; the
renaissance world, and ours. Accounts have been settled in a very similar way.

IV

The original clown was Harlequin. There is something in him of an animal, a faun and a
devil. That is why he wears a black mask. He rushes about and seems to transform
himself into different shapes. The laws of space and time do not seem to apply to him. He
changes his guises in a flash and can be in several places at once. He is a demon of
movement. In Goldoni's play The Servant of Two Masters, as produced by the Piccolo
Teatro of Milan, Harlequin, sitting on the edge of a wooden platform, plucked a hair from
his head, lengthened or shortened it, pulled it through his ears, or put it on his nose and
kept it rigid in the air. Harlequin is a prestidigitator. He is a servant who really does not
serve anybody and jockeys everybody away. He sneers at merchants and lovers, at
marquesses and soldiers. He makes fun of love and ambition, of power and money. He is
wiser than his masters, although he seems only to be more clever. He is independent,
because he has realized that the world is simply folly.

Puck in A Midsummer Night's Dream is a popular goblin of English folklore, a Robin
Goodfellow. But he is also the Harlequin of the renaissance commedia dell' arte. He, too,
is a quick-change artist, a prestidigitator and producer of the comedy of errors. He
confuses the couples of lovers and causes Titania to caress an ass's head. In fact, he
makes them all ridiculous, Titania and Oberon no less than Hermia and Lysander, Helena
and Demetrius. He exposes the folly of love. He is accident, fate, chance. Chance
happens to be ironical, though it does not know about it itself. Puck plays practical jokes.
He does not know what he has done. That is why he can turn somersaults on the stage,
just as Harlequin does.

Buffoonery is a philosophy and a profession at the same time.

Touchstone and Feste are professional clowns. They wear jesters' attire, and are in the
service of the prince. They have not ceased to be Harlequins and are not above
pantomime. But they do not produce the performance any more; they do not even take
part in it, but just comment on it. That is why they are jeering and bitter. The position of a
jester is ambiguous and abounds in internal contradictions, arising out of the discrepancy
between profession and philosophy. The profession of a jester, like that of an intellectual,
consists in providing entertainment. His philosophy demands of him that he tell the truth
and abolish myths. The Fool in King Lear does not even have a name, he is just a Fool,
pure Fool. But he is the first fool to be aware of the fool's position:

Fool. Prithee, nuncle, keep a schoolmaster that can teach thy fool to lie: I would fain
learn to lie.
King Lear. An you lie, sirrah, we'll have you whipp'd.
Fool. I marvel what kin thou and thy daughters are: they'll have me whipp'd for speaking true, thou'll have me whipp'd for lying; and sometimes I am whipp'd for holding my peace. I had rather be any kind o'thing than a fool: and yet I would not be thee, nuncle; thou hast pared thy wit o'both sides, and left nothing i'th'middle. (I, 4)

A fool who has recognized himself for a fool, who has accepted the fact that he is only a jester in the service of the prince, ceases to be a clown. But the clown's philosophy is based on the assumption that every one is a fool; and the greatest fool is he who does not know he is a fool: the prince himself. That is why the clown has to make fools of others; otherwise he would not be a clown. The clown is subject to alienations because he is a clown, but at the same time he cannot accept the alienation; he rejects it when he becomes aware of it. The clown has the social position of the bastard, as described many times by Sartre. The bastard is a bastard far as long as he accepts his bastard's position and regards it as inevitable. The bastard ceases to be a bastard when he does not consider himself a bastard any more. But at this point the bastard must abolish the division into bastards and legitimate offspring. He then enters into opposition against the foundations of social order, or at least exposes them. Social pressures want to limit the Clown to his part of a clown, to pin the label 'clown' on him. But he does not accept this part. On the contrary: he constantly pins that label an others:

King Lear. Dost thou call me fool, boy?
Fool. All thy other titles thou hast given away; that thou wast born with.
Kent. This is not altogether fool, my lord.
Fool. No, faith, lords and great men will not let me; if I had a monopoly out, they would have part on't: and ladies too, they will not let me have all fool to myself; they'll be snatching.
(1,4)

This is the opening of the 'clowns' play', performed an 'Job's stage'. In his very first scene, the Pool offers Lear his fool's cap. Par buffoonery is not only a philosophy, it is also a kind of theatre. To us it is the mast contemporary aspect of King Lear. Only it has to be seen and interpreted properly. Par this reason one must reject all the romantic and naturalistic accessories; the appear and melodrama about the old man who, driven out by his daughters, wanders about bareheaded in a storm and goes mad as a result of his misfortunes. But, as in the case of Hamlet, there is method in this madness. Madness is in King Lear a philosophy, a conscious crossing over to the position of the Clown. Leszek Kalakowski writes:

The Clown is he who, although moving in high society, is not part of it, and tells unpleasant things to everybody in it; he, who disputes everything regarded as evident. He would not be able to do all this, if he were part of that society himself; then he could at most be a drawing-room scandal-monger. The Clown must stand aside and observe good society from outside, in order to discover the non-evidence of evidence, the non-finality
of its finality. At the same time he must move in good society in order to get to know its sacred cows, and have occasion to tell the unpleasant things ( ... ) The philosophy of Clowns is the philosophy that in every epoch shows up as doubtful what has been regarded as most certain; it reveals contradictions inherent in what seems to have been proved by visual experience; it holds up to ridicule what seems obvious common sense, and discovers truth in the absurd.

Let us now turn to King Lear:

Fool. Give me an egg, nuncle, and I'll give thee two crowns.
King Lear. What two crowns shall they be?
Fool. Why, after I have cut the egg i'th'middle, and eat up the meat, the two crowns of the egg. When thou clovest thy crown i'th'middle, and gavest away both parts, thou borest thine ass on thy back o'er the dirt. ( ... ) now thou art an 0 without a figure: I am better than thou art now; I am a fool, thou art nothing. (I, 4)

After the crown had been taken off his head, Richard II asked far a mirror. He cast a look at it, and brake the mirror. He saw in the mirror his awwn unchanged face; the same that had belonged to, a king. This amazed him. In King Lear the degradation occurs gradually, step by step. Lear divided his kingdom and gave away his power, but wanted to remain a king. He believed that a king could not cease to be a king, just as the sun could not cease to shine. He believed in pure majesty, in the pure idea of kingship. In historical dramas royal majesty is deprived of its sacred character by a stab of the dagger, or by a brutal tearing off of the crown from a living king's head. In King Lear it is the Pool who deprives majesty of its sacredness.

Lear and Gloster are adherents of eschatology; they desperately believe in the existence of absolutes. They invoke the gods, believe in justice, appeal to laws of nature. They have fallen off 'Macbeth's stage', but remain its prisoners. Only the Fool stands outside 'Macbeth's stage', just as he has stood outside 'Job's stage'. He is looking on apart and does not follow any ideology. He rejects all appearances, of law, justice, moral order. He sees brute force, cruelty and lust. He has no illusions and does not seek consolation in the existence of natural or supernatural order, which provides for the punishment of evil and the reward of good. Lear, insisting on his fictitious majesty, seems ridiculous to him. All the more ridiculous because he does not see how ridiculous he is. But the Fool does not desert his ridiculous, degraded king, and accompanies him on his way to madness. The Fool knows that the only true madness is to recognize this world as rational. The feudal order is absurd and can be described only in terms of the absurd. The world stands upside down:

When usurers tell their gold i'the field;
And bawds and whores do churches build;
Then shall the realm of Albion
Come to great confusion:
Then comes the time, who lives to see't,
That going shall be us'd with feet. (III, 2)

Hamlet escaped into madness not only to confuse informers and deceive Claudius. Madness to him was also a philosophy, a criticism of pure reason, a great, ironic clearing of accounts with the world, which has left its orbit. The Fool adopts the language Hamlet used in the scenes in which he feigned madness. There is nothing left in it now of Greek and Roman rhetoric, so popular in the Renaissance; nothing left of the cold and noble Senecan indifference to inevitable destiny. Lear, Gloster, Kent, Albany, even Edmund, still use rhetoric. Fool's language is different. It abounds in biblical travesties and inverted medieval parables. One can find in it splendid baroque surrealist expressions, sudden leaps of imagination, condensations and epitomes, brutal, vulgar and scatological comparisons. His rhymes are like limericks. The Fool uses dialectics, paradox and an absurd kind of humour. His language is that of our modern grotesque. The same grotesque that exposes the absurdity of apparent reality and of the absolute by means of a great and universal reductio ad absurdum.

King Lear. 0 me, my heart, my rising heart! - but, down.
Fool. Cry to it, nuncle, as the cockney did to the eels when she put'em in the paste alive; she knapp'd 'em o'the coxcombs with a stick, and cried, 'Down, wantons, down!' 'Twas her brother that, in pure kindness to his horse, butter'd his hay. (II, 4)

The Fool appears on the stage when Lear's fall is only beginning. He disappears by the end of Act III. His last words are: 'And I'll go to bed at noon.' He will not be seen or heard again. A clown is not needed any more. King Lear has gone through the school of clown's philosophy. When he meets Gloster for the last time, he will speak the Fool's language and look at 'Macbeth's stage' the way the Fool has looked at it: 'They told me I was everything; 'tis a lie, - I am not ague-proof.' (IV, 6.)