UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,
IRVINE

London, 1988:
Premillennial Theater and the Limits of Utopia

DISSERTATION

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in English

by

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2025

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements iv
Vita v
Abstract of the Dissertation vi

INTRODUCTION 1

PROLOGUE

1976 I. The Failure of the Public Sphere 15
1977 II. Conflagrations 27

LONDON, 1988

January 16 Resources for a Journey of Hope 35
April 10 I. UTOPIA 38
July 1 "Postmodernism" 94
September 10 II. REPUBLIC 98
October 4 III. LANZAROTE 144
October 19 Whether in Paraphrase or Verbatim 169

BIBLIOGRAPHY 177

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I try not to be an apocalyptic thinker. This dissertation is, in some measure, a way of grappling with my own inclination to catastrophize. I will confess that I feel the odds to be against me: to write in the shadows of pandemic, of climate change, of housing crisis, of the razing of Gaza is to see apocalypse around every corner.

But in cataloging and scrutinizing apocalypticisms that existed before I was born, I have had cause to remember that every age has its prophets who cry the end of history. I owe thanks to many people who have tried by turns to deflect my premonition of calamity.

First, to the family and friends who give the lie to any fundamental cynicism: Jean Little, Tim Olsen, Ann Bramble, Elizabeth Burdett, Christiane Staninger, Kristen Radcliff, Lexi Radcliff, Heidi Eisert, Will Yook, a number of Ritzmans (Ray, Marilyn, John, Catherine, Nancy Weidner, Heather Hansen, Sara Sullivan, and Steven Sullivan), and, of course, a bevy of Reads (Helen, Matt, Kay, Karen, Leanna, Kristen, Chris, Vanesa, Elise, Ashleigh Allan, Johanna, Karen Tran, McKenna, Colby, and my siblings, Savannah, Joshua, Korby (Reed), Benjamin, Collin, Maren, and Elijah)—not all have understood what I am doing here (my failing much more than theirs), but they have been content to know that it is what I wanted to do, and to be happy that I get to do it;

To the School of Humanities and the English Department at UC Irvine, where those in charge have been skeptical enough of an oncoming cataclysm that they still bothered to invest in graduate education, to the tune of four quarters of dissertation support;

To Sharece Boghozian, Mo Brouwer, Martin Harries, Vincent Hiscock, Bridget O'Reilly, and Olivia Rall, the writing group whose friendship has been dear to me and whose thoughtful responses have touched many pages of this project—the persistence of this group for nearly five years is a reassuring gesture at permanence in the headwinds of the 2020s;

To Keith Topper and Ian Munro, who have done the generous work of careful readers, and whose book recommendations I still intend to get to before the apocalypse;

Especially to Martin Harries, advisor and friend, who indulged me when I moaned that the world was a catastrophe but never when I moaned that I was a catastrophe;

Most of all, though, to my parents, Kim and Allen Read, who when I was thirteen bought four dozen 50-pound buckets of hard white wheat and a countertop grain mill as a bulwark against the end of times. If I am an apocalyptic thinker, I come by it honestly.

VITA

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

London, 1988: Premillennial Theater and the Limits of Utopia

by

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This dissertation argues that the British political and theatrical imagination of the late twentieth century depended on a troubled dialectic between the utopic and the tragic. At the end of a decade of congealing conservative rule, London's left flank struggled to articulate a persuasive alternative to the dismantling of public life. It foresaw catastrophe in the Thatcherite world of corporate consolidation and global capital, in the glare of the oncoming millennium and its promised end of history; it wanted to reclaim the orientation toward an ideal politics—predicated on freedom and plurality, publicness and selfhood—that had been one rosy legacy of the now-defunct Enlightenment. London theaters in 1988 staged challenging, often contradictory works that struggled against the aporias of stagnating political thought. These works try, and sometimes fail, to imagine what kinds of action might be possible against emerging orthodoxies that declare action obsolete. What utopias can be thought, they seem to ask, in a resolutely anti-utopian age? And, approaching a millennium that threatens catastrophe, is thinking utopia of any use?

The no-places that take shape in these premillennial plays—always stalled or unstable or fantastical—are part of the search for a politics adequate to the late twentieth century. My project begins in the late postwar period, with the disappointed revolutionaries of Caryl Churchill's 1976 *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire*, and explores what Raymond Williams called the "widespread loss of the future" that emerged in Britain out of the retrenchment and stagnation of the seventies. Then my three core chapters take

up a handful of plays produced in 1988. Howard Brenton's "utopia trilogy," which runs at the Royal Court from April to June, is the first: beginning, but not ending, with the realist conventions that were the *mode du jour*, it conjures scenes of grim violence next to scenes out of fanciful comedies. It both mourns the loss of events figured by "the end of history," and, simultaneously, wonders if that same loss might be utopian. Timberlake Wertenbaker's *Our Country's Good*, also at the Royal Court in September, evinces the will to believe in a renewed leftist politics and in its aspirational utopias, but its optimism is belied by anxieties about the looming specter of the state of exception and by the collapse of the categories of thought that girded leftist humanism. Its ambivalence points toward a fundamental shift in the premillennial imagination, a reevaluation of the political functions of art in a world with a newly awakened sense of catastrophe. Finally, David Hare's *The Secret Rapture* premieres at the National in October. Legible as a dour response to the other plays, Hare's modern tragedy lays bare the pervasive horizon the Thatcherite world imposes on the imagination, dramatizes the flattening force of its rhetoric and the rapture it promises but never delivers. It imagines its own present to be the limit of utopia.

INTRODUCTION

Imaginaries of the Ends

> The embrace of catastrophic language serves primarily to turn nightmare into crisis management, to assure that the situation is serious but not catastrophic. Unless you are from the cynical Left—"don't panic now, we told you that crisis would come"—or from the doomsday preachers who revel in the perverse pleasures offered by the announcement of the end—the nurturing of fear, which is invariably followed by a set of techno-managerial fixes, serves precisely to de-politicize. Nurturing fear also serves to leave the action to those who promise salvation, to insist that the Big Other does exist, and to follow the leader who admits that the situation is grave, but insists that homeland security (ecological, economic, or otherwise) is in good hands. We can safely continue shopping!
>
> *Erik Swyngedouw*
> "Apocalypse Now! Fear and Doomsday Pleasures," 2012

Everyone expected the Tory win in the general election of 1987. A reading of reportage in *The Times* of that year suggests that when she announced the contest in mid-May, Margaret Thatcher was not so much rolling the dice on her premiership as securing the long-term fortunes of her party: the outcome of a required election the next year would be deeply uncertain, whereas the outcome of a voluntary election now, with Conservatives riding high on a wave of privatizations and Labour looking vulnerable on defense and taxes, was well-assured.[1] Surprising poll results in the lead-up to June 11 seemed to roil the field, though: while there was never any question of an outright Labour victory, a *Newsnight* survey on June 2 suggested the possibility of a hung parliament, which might mean a bitter and protracted fight for the cooperation of the centrist SDP/Liberal Alliance. (The *Times* front-page story the next day was not particularly interested in this consequential political question: its headline read "Poll rumors spark nervous selling in City."[2]) But this specter was short-lived. Labour continued to inch upward in the polls, but the Tories were miles ahead, and the prediction issued on polling day—a Conservative majority of just over a hundred seats—came to fruition. Conservatives: 376; Labour: 229. Thatcher became the first twentieth-century prime minister to win three consecutive elections, and her party would stay in power until the start of the Blair premiership in 1997.

Everyone expected the fall of communism in 1989, too, or at least that's how Francis Fukuyama made it sound. His famous "End of History?" essay was delivered as a talk at the University of Chicago in February and published in *The National Interest* during the summer of that year. Fukuyama is dismissive of commentators who do not apprehend the structural changes behind the end of the Cold War and the era of peace they are proclaiming, but even they, he says,

[1] See, for example, Robin Oakley, "Tories Offer Radicalism and Tax Cuts," *The Times*, May 20, 1987.
[2] Robin Oakley, "Poll Rumors Spark Nervous Selling in City," *The Times*, June 3, 1987.

> sense dimly that there is some larger process at work, a process that gives coherence and order to the daily headlines. […] The century that began full of self-confidence in the ultimate triumph of the Western liberal democracy seems at its close to be returning full circle to where it started: not to an 'end of ideology' or a convergence between capitalism and socialism, as earlier predicted, but to an unabashed victory of economic and political liberalism. (3)[3]

Even the most historically obtuse analysts, that is, must here experience the shape of history. They might not be wise enough to recognize it—"if Mr. Gorbachev were ousted from the Kremlin […]," Fukuyama says witheringly, "these same commentators would scramble to announce the rebirth of a new era of conflict" (3)—but they can feel it, even amid the seemingly random chaos of daily events. Fukuyama acknowledges his debts. Like Hegel and Kojève before him, he does not think it accidental or arbitrary that communism should fall and liberalism prevail; this outcome was ordained from the beginning. The revolutions of 1989, and the little-anticipated collapse of the Soviet Union two years later, would be only the latest convulsions in history's slow march toward their same prophesied end. Nothing in the world could be more foreseeable.

Heaping scorn on Francis Fukuyama is a favorite pastime of the Left. I am not immune to its appeal. His sanguine vision of a coming post-conflict world, unified by a homogenous consumer culture and "the spectacular abundance of advanced liberal economies" (8), looks, to those of us in the know, like anything from ivory-tower naivete to apologia for an extractive neocolonial world order. Rightly so. And yet while we should continue to be skeptical of the historical structures in which he situates his own present, his apprehension of that present itself is worth pausing over. Hegel was essentially right, Fukuyama argues, that the historical form of "the universal homogenous state" would be the end of history. He was only wrong about the timing: it would take longer, centuries longer, than he thought for it to come into being.[4] This final phase of history is possible now because—well, because of VCRs:

---

[3] Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?," *The National Interest* 16 (1989): 3–18.

[4] Fukuyama does not imagine the success of the universal homogenous state to mean that there will be no states that are not liberal democracies; it means that liberal democracy will have proven itself to be the winning form. "At the end of history," he writes, "it is not necessary that all societies become successful liberal societies, merely that they end their ideological pretensions of representing different and higher forms of human society" (13).

> [The] state of consciousness that permits the growth of liberalism seems to stabilize in the way one would expect at the end of history if it is underwritten by the abundance of a modern free market economy. We might summarize the content of the universal homogenous state as liberal democracy in the political sphere combined with easy access to VCRs and stereos in the economic. (8)

Fukuyama is being a bit glib, of course, as am I. It is not VCRs and stereos but what they represent, the increasingly unimpeded global exchange of goods and services, that makes the universal homogenous state possible. But there is a techno-utopianism here that is easy to overlook, and though no such utopia has come to pass in our present, Fukuyama is not wholly wrong about its role in his. This is an age of technologies. They are not merely electronic (VCRs and stereos) but political: free market economies and liberal democracies, capital controls, trade agreements, currency stabilizing mechanisms, IMF loans. That communism could fall was not entirely inconceivable—certainly it was one imagined end of everything in the West from minor intelligence operations to large-scale proxy wars—but that it should actually happen, peacefully, quickly, uncatastrophically, and *now*, in 1989, hardly seemed in the cards. By tying this vast political shift to technologies of progress and abundance, by framing those tools as consumer goods, Fukuyama articulates something like a structure of feeling of the 1980s. Regardless of where history *was* headed in 1989—and it seems clear now that it wasn't toward global post-historical liberal democracy—it matters that this was what some of us, anyway, imagined its new heading to *be*.

It is odd, perhaps, that this era of supposedly predictable outcomes, peaceful transitions of power, and emergent technocratic global harmony should be striated with messianisms. Sandwiched between the year of the landslide general election and the year of the fall of communism, 1988 looks like a year when nothing happened, at least not in London. Yet it is bursting with apocalyptic hope and despair befitting the coming millennium. If one structure of feeling that grew out of the eighties is captured at the decade's close by Francis Fukuyama fantasizing about the end of history, another is captured at its open by The Clash singing about a different kind of end:

> The ice age is coming, the sun's zooming in
> Meltdown expected, the wheat is growing thin
> Engines stop running, but I have no fear
> 'Cause London is drowning and I live by the river.[5]

This is the chorus of "London Calling," the lead single from The Clash's December 1979 album of the same name. The title evokes the familiar wartime broadcasts by the BBC Overseas Service, which announced themselves with their station identifier, "This is London calling"; they would be picked up on dark nights, heard in secret, in war-ravaged cities across Europe, part of the Allied effort to undermine and oppose German aggression. But rather than reassuring news and solidarity and courage from outside the occupied territories, this new broadcast—"London calling, now don't look to us," says one verse—speaks of terror in the homeland. A collapse is looming. Violence, alienation, phoniness, zombies: these are the new British exports. The ice age is coming, the sun's zooming in. London is drowning and we all, don't we, live by the river.

Each of these imaginaries of the end, homogenous post-history or ruptural apocalypse, feeds and is fed upon by the other. The Conservative vision of gradually expanding trade, growth, and capital takes coming cataclysm as its alien Other, as the bogeyman future only it can prevent. (In the lead-up to the election, Thatcher warned that a Labour victory would mean "surrender abroad" and "anarchy at home." A common enough rhetorical strategy, but telling in its specifics: Labour's platform, which was in fact a milquetoast retreat from some of the more truly leftist propositions of its 1983 manifesto, is figured as some forlorn "socialist Jeremiah" that nonetheless threatens to "reverse [Conservatives'] success and turn it into economic disaster."[6]) Both the 1987 election and the 1989 prophecy about the end of history are surprising emblems of continuity. Despite being dressed for drama by the *Times,* the election inevitably brings not change or rupture but rather five more years of the Tories and a mandate for their privatizing agenda; even what we call "revolutions" across the Eastern Bloc are, in Fukuyama's telling, no such thing, merely inexorable steps along the preordained path toward a post-

[5] The Clash, "London's Calling," Track 1 on *London's Calling* (CBS Records, 1979).
[6] Philip Webster, "Thatcher Foresees Labour 'Anarchy and Surrender,'" *The Times*, June 6, 1987.

historical consumer utopia. The catastrophism of "London Calling," which echoes and repeats in art throughout the coming decade, is a combustive backlash against just this kind of political and cultural emptiness: against "the imitation zone" (occupied by an increasingly derivative and commercialized body of punk artists), against the vapidity of "nodding out" (as an addict, sure, but also, perhaps, as a mindless corporate drone or a properly sedate post-political subject), against "phony Beatlemania" (which has bitten the dust).

This dissertation makes an argument about what it will call "premillennial theater." Built into this label already is a claim: that the millennium, more than just an arbitrary marker of chronological time, exerted a structuring force on London's stages in the years preceding it. The playwrights I consider here are uniformly secular, occupying a range of positions on the British Left and writing plays that they considered, to varying degrees, political. Yet the millennium, with its inherent religious charge and its entanglement in Christian eschatology, becomes a surprising tool of rupture to counter the Fukuyamish reckoning of the homogenous end of history. This is not always literal. Most of these plays do not mention the millennium, not in so many words; some are set in historical pasts (or distant futures) far removed from the twentieth century. But all are shaped by that sense of an ending which lends urgency and augury to art, and all are part of the search for a politics adequate to their present.

In this project, I contend that the British political and theatrical imagination of the late twentieth century depended on a troubled dialectic between the utopic and the tragic. At the end of a decade of congealing conservative rule, the Left struggled to articulate a persuasive alternative to the dismantling of public life. It foresaw catastrophe in the Thatcherite world of corporate consolidation and global capital, in the glare of the oncoming millennium and the promised end of history; it wanted to reclaim the orientation toward an ideal politics—predicated on freedom and plurality, publicness and selfhood—that had been one rosy legacy of the now-defunct Enlightenment. But with a new areligious creed snowballing on the Right, whose sacred icons were demand curves and whose prophets the Chicago economists, the Left

found itself unable to summon a form of action that might somehow intervene. Enlarging on (and occasionally resisting) contemporary discourses on emergency politics, crises of action, and the tragedy of political theory, this dissertation explores a single year in British drama. London theaters in 1988 staged challenging, often contradictory works that struggled against the aporias of stagnating political thought. These works try, and sometimes fail, to imagine what kinds of action might be possible against emerging orthodoxies that declare action obsolete. What utopias can be thought, they seem to ask, in a resolutely anti-utopian age? And, approaching a millennium that threatens catastrophe, is thinking utopia of any use?

This project is not a history of London politics or theater in 1988, though such a work would undoubtedly be rich and surprising. Instead, it is an inquiry into the political conditions of the aesthetic imagination. The tragic-utopic plays I write about here appear at a moment when the conventions of tragedy, with its political stakes and public-sphere metonymies, feel hollowed out, and the conventions of utopia, with its early commonwealth roots and colonialist tropes, feel deeply outmoded. How these hobbled old genres could be turned to contemporary political ends was a task theatermakers labored over during that year. What emerges is a fragmented and haphazard landscape of political theater that explores the limits of the political-theatrical, at times challenging, at times taking for granted, the age-old claim that drama is a fundamentally political form. Hovering behind many of these works is a messianic assumption about the redemptive purpose of art and its power to rescue truth from history. Leo Bersani has traced this assumption through modernist thinkers like Benjamin and Proust, but its reemergence in the premillennial era suggests an echo of earlier historical conditions, an eternal return of the loss of the future and its inevitable twin, a messianic reckoning of time.[7]

The year 1988 is not exceptional. The choice to use it as an organizing principle began organically: I wanted to write about Timberlake Wertenbaker's *Our Country's Good*, Howard

[7] Leo Bersani, *The Culture of Redemption* (Harvard UP, 1990).

Brenton's utopia trilogy, and Rodney Ackland's *Absolute Hell*, all of which premiered that year.[8] One could complete a similar project about 1986 or 1987, or presumably a more historically eventful one about 1989. But part of the function of 1988 here is precisely that it *isn't* 1989. If 1989 is a watershed—whether because it is a transformation, as we imply when we call the topplings of communist governments in the Eastern Bloc "revolutions," or because it fulfills history and cements the new global order of free-market capital, as the Fukuyama narrative goes—I am interested in the before-times, in the pre-turbulence, in the moment when the river doesn't know it's about to split. Playwrights in 1988 imagined futures from a present that seemed to be in stasis. The revolutions of 1989 and the accompanying shift in global leftisms (encompassing everything from the rightward drift of mainstream left parties to the explosion of academic interest in the postcolonial and the intersectional) would produce their own changes in London's theater scene, which deserve (and in some cases have received) their own thorough and perceptive treatments.[9] But that is not my project. I hope the narrowness of my scope will function something like a camera obscura, casting an image into an otherwise dark room, illuminating the shapes taken by imaginaries of the end in a moment when ends—of communism, of Thatcherism, of consumerism, of capital, of inaction, of alienation—seem altogether unlikely.

This dissertation has two main parts. Having committed myself to writing about 1988, I immediately contrived a way to wriggle out of it: a prologue, in the form of two short essays,

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[8] This claim fudges a little for the sake of brevity, so let me be clear: of Brenton's utopia trilogy, only the last play (*Greenland*) premiered in 1988, though all three were performed in series by the Royal Court between April and June of that year. *Absolute Hell* originally premiered as *The Pink Room* in 1951 but at the time was panned and quickly shut down. The 1988 version is, according to a 1990 introduction by Nicholas Dromgoole, a significant rewrite of the 1951 version; whether significant enough to consider *Absolute Hell* a "premiere" is impossible for me to say, as the text of *The Pink Room* has proven hard to come by. Astute readers will note that there is no chapter in this dissertation about *Absolute Hell*; this, primarily, is why. David Hare's *The Secret Rapture*, the only play I chose because I was, by then, writing about 1988, fell into place after *Absolute Hell* fell out. See Rodney Ackland, *Absolute Hell* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017).

[9] See, for example, Christopher B. Balme, *Decolonizing the Stage* (Clarendon Press, 1999); Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins, *Post-Colonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics* (Routledge, 2002); Nicola Abram, *Black British Women's Theatre: Intersectionality, Archives, Aesthetics* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2020); Arnab Ray and Sibendu Chakraborty, *Theatre, Margins and Politics: An Introduction* (Routledge, 2022). It is also worth noting that among other eventful events of 1989 was the first publication of Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back:* (Routledge, 1989).

considers the disappointed revolutionaries of Caryl Churchill's 1976 play *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire* and the conflagration conjured in "London's Burning," a 1979 song by The Clash (or a seventeenth-century song about the Great Fire of London, or a sixteenth-century song about the sacking of Edinburgh—take your pick). In the first essay, I argue that *Buckinghamshire* offers an important commentary on what a young Jürgen Habermas would call "the public sphere," the heterogenous discourse produced by individual citizens who emerge out of their private lives to debate issues relating to the common good. The play stages the public sphere's heteroglossia, but it also stages how the implacable, ever-advancing force of the state (and more fundamentally, the state's economic engine, capital) inevitably tries to suppress or erase the public sphere. That texts proliferate onstage but ultimately fail to change the status quo hints at the failure of free and public discourse to effect meaningful change, spelling defeat for the ideologies of both the communitarians who are characters in the play and, more proximately, for the radical promise of utopia glimpsed in moments like 1968. In the second essay of the prologue, I read variations of "London's Burning" and its accompanying narratives to suggest that tragedy and utopia are, if not quite the same thing, at least predicated on the same impulse. They are both troubled by an apocalyptic yearning for conflagration, an event at the limits of either mode or at the membrane between them.

The second part of the dissertation "takes place," you might say, entirely in 1988. It consists of three core chapters, which consider Howard Brenton's utopia trilogy (*Sore Throats*, *Bloody Poetry*, and *Greenland*), Timberlake Wertenbaker's *Our Country's Good*, and David Hare's *The Secret Rapture*.

Chapter 1, "Utopia," argues that Brenton's utopia plays, especially as performed at the Royal Court in 1988, strike out against prevailing anti-utopian currents with real implications for the genre's form and function. These plays are not uncomplicated: in some moments they seem to offer a fatalistic and dour response to the flattening effects of Thatcherite politics, to mourn the loss of events, the end of history, cheerily promised by the dogma that would come to

be called neoliberalism. In this register, they are characterized by homogenous, empty time, by characters who cannot seem to escape the privatizing impulse of modern economy, by the failures of imagined revolutions and the ossification of any meaningful visions of a different future. But this is not their only register. In halting and contradictory ways, these plays also figure the loss of events and the end of history as utopian, as part of a long tradition of what Raymond Williams calls "a classical form of invigoration and hopeful protest" (218); they challenge the primacy of tragedy, with its dependence on action, as the most meaningful dramatic-political form and suggest that utopia, too, with its dependence on place, can have serious political weight and moment.[10] Taken together, they are the story of ruptures that never happen, of history's unevents; they respond, ambivalently and uncertainly, to what might be construed as a longing for conflagration in the blinding glare of an oncoming millennium. They advance a kind of dialectic between tragedy and utopia. Their vision is always incomplete, a utopia that cannot escape its own ghosts, that gets caught continually in the melancholic looping of time without progress—but its failure is almost the point. By rejecting the demands of the realist mode that characterized much leftist theater in the eighties, and by refusing the constraints that ideology places on art, Brenton's utopia plays represent a kind of artistic labor that, in London in 1988, had atrophied almost to the point of disappearing: they perform, or at least try to perform, the important political work of reinvigorating imaginaries of the future in the face of the abrading force of the antirevolutionary present.

Chapter 2, "Republic," takes up a 1988 play about a 1789 production: *Our Country's Good* reimagines the performance in Britain's first Australian penal colony of George Farquhar's restoration comedy *The Recruiting Officer*. *Our Country's Good* was received with adulation when it premiered, with critics calling it "the very stuff of the theatre," an "affirming tribute to

[10] Raymond Williams, "Afterword, 1979," in *Modern Tragedy* (Verso, 1979).

the transforming power of drama."[11] The play recreates a penal colony whose horizons are bleak indeed but whose inhabitants find a kind of redemption through the civilizing, humanizing power of art as they come together to stage a play. Wertenbaker herself imagined it in this light, as a spirited defense of an Enlightenment-style humanism indebted to Locke, Rousseau, and Plato. It evinces the will to believe in a renewed leftist politics and in its aspirational utopias. In some respects, in 1988, this was the only conceivable response to the flattening tendencies of a growing neoliberal order, to the decay of the post-1945 consensus and the creeping logic of a kind of *homo economicus*. But its optimistic thesis is belied by anxieties it cannot escape. Deeply troubled by the looming specter of the state of exception, by the collapse of the categories of thought that girded leftist humanism, and by a sense that the very Enlightenment project it throws its weight behind has been irreparably compromised by the calamities of the twentieth century, *Our Country's Good* is a deeply ambivalent play that points toward a fundamental shift in the pre-millennial imagination, a reevaluation of the political functions of art in a world with a newly-awakened sense of the possibility of catastrophe.

Chapter 3, "Lanzarote," reads *The Secret Rapture* as a response to a new financialism that had taken the UK by storm in the eighties, and as an elegy for the vanishing world it was replacing. In one register it is a kind of realist work that puts Isobel, the owner of a graphic design firm, in conflict with members of her family whose intention to acquire and grow the firm is both economic and spiritual. More than this, though, it is an experiment in genre, in the function of tragedy at a moment when all publicness, both the mode and setting of conventional tragedy, seems foreclosed. Isobel makes a quiet kind of vow to take care of her young stepmother, Katherine. This vow is not entirely rational: she was bound to Katherine via her father, who is now dead. But Isobel will honor it to the end of the play, despite the way it

[11] "the very stuff" is from Michael Leech, "Royal Court: Our Country's Good." *The Stage*, October 6, 1988; "affirming tribute" from Michael Billington, "The Play's the Thing." *The Guardian*, September 12, 1988.

provokes increasing hostility and, ultimately, murderous violence from those around her. The tragedy that unfolds as she pursues her lucid purpose suggests a fundamental incompatibility between her world and the world of magical growth she has been thrown into, and the play is not optimistic about the outcome. But it does stage another possible response to the growing neoliberal order: *dépense*, or destructive expenditure, embodied by Katherine and her wild and ruinous rebellions against the system. This might be the play's only utopian horizon.

These three chapters about London theater are interspersed with short reflections on other moments from 1988. These are more provisional, postulative; they do not claim to make arguments but rather to ask how the structures of feeling motivating the theater might have also motivated other cultural forms or political currents. They address the death of Raymond Williams on January 26, the art exhibition *Freeze* carried out in the London Docklands in July, and the government's October 19 ban on broadcasting Irish Republican voices on television and radio. Raymond Williams especially has come to be a defining force in this project; it is apropos that it should take up the year when his remarkable voice spoke its last.

The result is a collection of essays as much about the present as it is about the past. There is something arbitrary to both London and 1988—but there is always something arbitrary to the present, too. It becomes our object because we happen to live in it, and how it might be illuminated by any moment in the past is more a matter of excavation than of luck. Many of my objects may feel untimely today, belonging to a moment whose uniqueness seems to us to have been superseded by our own. But to echo Nietzsche, I do not know what meaning they could have for our time if they were *not* untimely, "that is to say, acting counter to our time and thereby acting on our time and, let us hope, for the benefit of a time to come."[12]

[12] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations* (Cambridge UP, 1983): 60.

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PROLOGUE

1976 • 1977

I. THE FAILURE OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE

I begin in 1976, with an early example of what I am calling premillennial theater. In Caryl Churchill's *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire*, a seventeenth-century corn merchant named Star stands in the town square and calls for revolution:

> Babylon must be destroyed. In Babylon you are slaves. Babylon is the kingdom of Antichrist. The kingdom of popery. The kingdom of the king. That is why you will join as soldiers. To destroy Antichrist. To fight with Parliament for Jerusalem. To fight with Christ's saints for Christ's kingdom. Because when Parliament has defeated Antichrist then Christ will come. (6)[1]

Star continues to recruit for the rest of the scene, but soon after these lines the play adds two other characters, Briggs and his friend, whose own conversation overlaps with the remainder of Star's speech. Thus this declaration about the political cause of parliamentarism and the revolutionary promise of the second coming has to contend for the audience's attention with Briggs as he contemplates the pragmatics of joining up. "Parliament's for us," he assures his friend. "And they give you a musket" (7).

The conflicting dramatic centers of this scene emblematize the polyvocality of the town square, a place that has become a synecdoche for what Jürgen Habermas would call "the public sphere."[2] The town square, presumably, is where citizens gather to speak their part, to engage in debate, to submit schemes of public welfare to the scrutiny of public reason. Habermas's account of the public sphere is grounded in the circulation of texts, a distinction worth attending to—but its function is analogous to the town square: "the public sphere" describes the heterogenous discourse produced by individual citizens who emerge out of their public lives to debate issues relating to the common good. *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire* both represents and forms part of public spheres of its own. Its proliferation of documents, its restaging of the

[1] Caryl Churchill, *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire* (Bloomsbury, 2013).
[2] Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence (MIT Press, 1991). Though not translated into English until 1989, the German was written long before, in 1962. This essay primarily considers Habermas's work on the public sphere as it appeared in this early book, rather than engaging with later works like *Between Facts and Norms* (in German 1992, in English 1996).

Putney debates, and its emphasis on the tension between the various political agendas all echo a kind of public sphere emerging in England in the years leading up to the Interregnum.

I think this function is important. But despite the publicness at the heart of the play, a more careful reading reveals an implicit skepticism of this sort of Habermasian optimism. *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire* offers another lens through which to probe the assumptions and its limitations of the public sphere. The play does, indeed, stage its heteroglossia, but it also stages how the implacable, ever-advancing force of the state (and more fundamentally, the state's economic engine, capital) inevitably tries to suppress or erase it. "A text? a text is it?" cries Hoskins, an itinerant preacher. "Do you want a text?" (14). That texts proliferate onstage but ultimately fail to change the status quo hints at the failure of free and public discourse to effect meaningful change, spelling defeat—both for the ideologies of the communitarians who are characters in the play and, more proximately, for the radical promise of utopia born out of the social movements of Churchill's own historical moment.

The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere is one of those powerful cultural-critical sociohistorical accounts of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that became a kind of genre in the twentieth and twenty-first: it belongs on a shelf with Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* and Silvia Federici's *Caliban and the Witch* and Raymond Williams' *The Country and the City*. Habermas's story goes more or less like this: in the feudal era, the public sphere was a place for a king to represent his power before his subjects in pageants and processions and executions. The rise of a developing market economy created spaces and means for this to shift, for conversations *about* politics and the state that were in fact separate *from* politics and the state: reading societies, coffee houses, salons, political journalism, indeed the novel. The growing bourgeois class brought with it a loose liberal structure for reasoned discourse, for public discussion on matters of public interest. This new public sphere was one pillar of the bourgeois democracies that emerged in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

It's quite a nice story. Habermas is not obtuse about the bourgeois public sphere's shortcomings: he notes the hypocrisy of a culture saturated by language about the "rights of man" that nonetheless excludes most men and women. Indeed his account of the collapse of the bourgeois public sphere is a story of its own contradictions: because it was unwilling or unable to admit those "systematically disadvantaged by the free market" (xii), democratic rights of access had to be (gradually and incompletely) secured by state interventions.[3] The public sphere became less and less independent, more and more swallowed by the managerial mechanisms of bureaucracy and the administrative state. Habermas's thesis is not that these state-secured rights of access were somehow bad because they eroded the non-governmental nature of the public sphere. But that erosion was, nonetheless, the effect, and there is some nostalgia here. Habermas is more optimistic than Marxists are about Enlightenment categories like reason and liberty, and he is certainly more cheerful about the power of public discourse than seems justified today, in an age where the public circulation of texts happens not in reading societies or salons but mostly on Twitter/X. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* is a bit of a romance, in the medieval style: the public sphere gets to put on the trappings of a hero and go about its fantastical quest of laying the groundwork for democracy.

Though the bulk of my project is about 1988, I want to show in this prologue how the seventies set the stage for the very concrete failure of many forms of publicness: public ownership, public housing, public trust, public art. There is a messianism in many of the reactions to this collapse. This is from Churchill's preface to *Buckinghamshire*, dated 1978:

> A revolutionary belief in the millennium went through the middle ages and broke out strongly in England at the time of the civil war. Soldiers fought the king in the belief that Christ would come and establish heaven on earth. What was established instead was an authoritarian parliament, the massacre of the Irish, the development of capitalism. [...] The simple 'Cavaliers and Roundheads' history taught at school hides the complexity of the aims and conflicts of those to the left of Parliament. We are told of a step forward to today's democracy but not of a revolution that didn't happen; we are told of Charles and Cromwell but not of the thousands of men and women who tried to change their lives. Though nobody

[3] These are the apt words of Thomas McCarthy, summarizing the book's argument in an introduction to the 1991 MIT Press edition already cited.

> now expects Christ to make heaven on earth, their voices are surprisingly close to us. (iii)

The last sentence is both a distancing and an approach. In this grungy, disenchanted world, no one still expects that old fabled deity to reappear: we are past that sort of superstition now.[4] But the air is still heavy with expectation. The voices of an earlier age echo in ours; we share a revolutionary belief in a millennium with its own set of apocalypticisms, however sophisticated or secular.

Buckinghamshire is a play that, in reproducing these revolutionary beliefs onstage in 1976, enacts a politics of its own. Its interventions may be less dramatic than the revolutions its characters call for, but they are not insignificant. Produced with the Joint Stock Company and performed at Edinburgh's Traverse Theatre and later in London at the Royal Court's Theatre Upstairs, its communitarian ethos was upheld by the process that created it: rather than writing it in isolation and delivering it to the cast for them to faithfully reproduce, Churchill worked collaboratively for three weeks with members of Joint Stock to put together the script.[5] It was born out of a series of group readings, improvisations, and workshops in which the actors often produced their own dialogue which Churchill would incorporate into the script, and by its opening night it represented a truly communal theatermaking effort. Darren Gobert even suggests that the play could be considered Churchill's feminist intervention within the theater company itself, as Joint Stock was created by, consisted mostly of, and before 1976 had only performed works written by men.[6] A play that so forcefully dramatizes the oppression and disenfranchisement of women might be read as a way of appropriating a patriarchal stage and

[4] Churchill's claim that no one today expects Christ to make heaven on earth is, of course, wrong: in 1976, belief in the literal Christian millennium was in fact making a comeback. I am not accusing her of being ignorant or obtuse, as she seems to be speaking of (and to) her own spheres of life and influence, far removed from circles that preached a messiah. I imagine she has done little shoulder-rubbing with British evangelicals. But one of the strange contradictions of this age is that the same economic currents which produce a Fukuyamish reckoning of the end of history—smooth, homogenous, post-political—also produce an evangelical one—ruptural, messianic, hyper-political. And these apparently very different imaginaries of the end sometimes bleed together and even resolve into the same thing. This is a theme that will return in Chapter 3.
[5] R. Darren Gobert, *The Theatre of Caryl Churchill* (Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2014), 130.
[6] Gobert, 132.

bending it to feminist purposes. Churchill's note on the production stipulates that characters are played by different actors each time they appear; it is less important, she says, that audiences know precisely which character they are seeing than that they get the impression of many people sharing in the same kind of experience. Even those witnessing the play should feel the effect of a mass movement.

But despite its active participation in public discourses of its own, *Buckinghamshire* is never very optimistic about the odds. In fact, instead of insisting on the value of the public sphere (as one might expect a play about the Putney debates to do), it seems to suggest the opposite—that rational, reasoned debate and its corollaries, compromise and inaction, serve as inhibitors, stifling revolution before it ever gets off the ground. To set up this claim, let me start with the speech Briggs delivers not long before the Putney debates begin. Recalling a battle, he relates a moment of confusion and panic as he worries that he may have killed a comrade:

> [...] when I hit this boy across the face with my musket I was suddenly frightened as he went under that he was on my own side; but another man was on me and I saw men I knew and a tree I'd stood under before the shooting began. But after I was wounded, lying with my head downhill, watching men take bodies off the field, I didn't know which was our side and which was them, but then I saw it didn't matter because what we were fighting was not each other but Antichrist and even the soldiers on the other side would be made free and be glad when they saw the paradise we'd won, so that the dead on both sides died for that, to free us of that darkness and confusion we'd lived in and bring us all into the quiet and sunlight. (22)

The violence in the first lines is unsparing. In narrative time, at least, Briggs keeps trying to escape it only to have it return: after he hits the boy across the face with his musket, his mind leaps to an ethical concern about friendly fire, but he has no time to follow it through before someone else comes to fight him. Then for a brief moment, his mind again leaps to other things, "men I knew" and "a tree I'd stood under before the shooting began," fixed points that reference a time before the battle. But he loses them just as quickly because the violence returns again, this time to claim him, leaving him lying wounded in the blood-soaked field and watching as others clean up the carnage.

Just as striking as this scene of destruction, though, is the purpose he imbues it with in the next moment: "I didn't know which was our side and which was them, but I saw it didn't matter because what we were fighting was not each other but Antichrist." Briggs here is reaching for an inarticulable sense of class struggle. It does not matter that the battling sides imagine themselves to be enemies; it does not matter that it becomes impossible to tell friend from foe in the melee, because while the pretense of the war is a struggle between royalists and parliamentarians, Briggs apprehends that its ultimate purpose is to produce a dramatic upheaval of the present order. What matters is that the force of the violence itself, regardless of its origin or target, be sufficient to overcome the status quo. When Christ comes—when history has progressed to its next stage—everyone, women and men on both sides, will benefit, and when they understand the true purpose of the violence, they will be glad to have suffered toward that end. Thus when Star later suggests that Briggs might be thought a traitor for refusing to go fight the Irish, Briggs begins to express a sense that the Irish poor are more their allies than their enemies:

> STAR: We'll crush the papists just as we did in England. Antichrist will be exterminated.
> BRIGGS: But don't you see, the Irish—
> STAR: What, Briggs?
> BRIGGS: The Irish are fighting the same—
> STAR: The Irish are traitors. What?
> BRIGGS: Nothing. (38)

If violence, then, is the driver of real change, it is crucial that this scene is followed almost immediately by its near inverse, the Putney debates. This is a scene about conversation, a reasoned and well-articulated exchange of ideas. So inappropriate is violence in this setting, in fact, that when Rainborough's passion turns to anger at Ireton's property-obsessed myopia, it wins him a rebuke from Cromwell: "I am confident on't, we should not be so hot with one another" (29). This is not yet the idealized public sphere of Habermas's account, but it shares important characteristics: access is conservatively democratized, involving writers, citizens, soldiers, and members of parliament; they "confer in an unrestricted fashion […] about matters

of general interest";[7] importantly, the dialogue Churchill has written is adapted from the notes taken during the actual, historical debate, echoing Habermas's emphasis on the circulation of written texts.[8] (A wider public sphere had obviously already crept up before the debates, one in which Leveller pamphlets and recruiting had generated enough public support to force Cromwell and Ireton to the bargaining table.[9])

But it is the very reasonableness and polyvocality of this near-public sphere that ruins all hope of radical change. The Levellers find their interlocutors to be tolerant, mild, agreeable. Cromwell is always soothing with assurances of good will: "I am confident you do not bring this paper"—their demand for representation, suffrage, and freedom from impressment—"in peremptoriness of mind" (24). Soon after, he responds to the brusque and outspoken Leveller Rainborough by exclaiming, "Truly I am very glad that this gentleman is here. We shall enjoy his company longer than I thought we should have done [...] and it shall not be long enough" (25–26). For both him and Ireton, however, these gestures of courtesy inevitably serve to deflect responsibility for the conservativism of their arguments. They nod and they smile and they meet the Levellers' radical demands with objections that affirm property and oppression. "There are plausible things in the paper and things very good in it," Ireton acknowledges. But then he demurs: "If we were free from all other commitments I should concur with it further than I can." Ireton returns to this tactic again and again, implying that they *would* grant the Levellers' wishes if they were free to do so, but, ah, reluctantly they must say that they have prior commitments to the powerful property owners whose interests would be threatened by universal suffrage, or to a state that would be hobbled by the lack of a warmaking army composed of the conscripted poor.

[7] Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 49.
[8] Churchill, *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire*, vii.
[9] Among other accounts of this seventeenth century textual ecosystem are Joad Raymond, *Pamphlets and Pamphleteering in Early Modern Britain* (Cambridge UP, 2003) and John Rees, *The Leveller Revolution: Radical Political Organisation in England, 1640–1650* (Verso, 2017).

This not-quite-duplicitous shuffling buries the force of the Levellers' proposed utopia in compromise, and compromise kills the revolution. Rich, though himself a Leveller, is taken in by the civil promise of the discourse and becomes an advocate for compromise himself, mediating between Ireton and Rainborough when they begin to talk past each other. "There is weight" in Ireton's objection, he says, for "if the master and servant be equal electors, the majority may by law destroy property. But certainly there may be some other way thought of, that there may be a representative of the poor as well as the rich" (30). Rich's concession that the law should not be allowed to destroy property is the first death knell of their communitarian vision. Later, when Rainborough insists that to press men into the army to defend a country that they have no stake in is akin to slavery, Rich attempts to temper that claim by suggesting a middle ground: "Any wise discreet man that hath preserved England is worthy of a voice in the government of it," he begins, but then he performs the same status-quo preserving deflection as Ireton and Cromwell. "The electorate should be amended in that sense and I think they will desire no more liberty" (33). Extend a little suffrage, in other words, and the people will be satisfied enough. They will no longer push to abolish property.

Thus it is the very nature of the public sphere, which privileges reasoned debate, which requires compromise between conflicting interests, that flattens the potential for change. As in the play, the real Putney debates ended inconclusively, brought to an abrupt close by Charles I's escape from Hampton Court Palace. Fearing a rift, army leaders drafted a pledge of loyalty to commander-in-chief Lord Fairfax and required army members to sign it, thereby making it a mutinous offense to continue agitating against explicit orders. Because nothing was decided before the debates were cut off but because those debates were the only legitimate forum for discussion, the potential for the abolishment of property and the establishment of communal lands mostly petered into inaction. Where it didn't, as in the very next scene about Gerrard Winstanley's Diggers on St. George's Hill, violence, sanctioned by the state, exposes itself as the true source of power: the Diggers are harassed and beaten by a mob while soldiers and the

sheriff look on, indifferent or even encouraging. As a Leveller pamphlet rehearsed onstage intones, "It is the sword that brought in property and holds it up" (35).[10]

The propertied, capitalist aftermath of the Putney debates' failure is bleak. The rest of the play puts on a parade of the perishing and disenfranchised, including both a woman who agonizes over abandoning her baby in the hope that someone else will find and care for it and a butcher who accuses his meat-eating customers of a form of capitalistic cannibalism. "I said give them back their meat," he growls. "You cram yourselves with their children's meat. You cram yourselves with their dead children" (46). Other leaders, too, have sold out, Star chief among them. In the town square at the beginning of the play, he cries, "And who are the saints? You are. The poor people of this country. When Christ came, did he come to the rich? No. He came to the poor. He is coming to you again" (6). In the second act, however, we learn that he has become "the new landlord"—and though he intends to be benevolent, he has bought into the same old system that has always produced cycles of poverty and oppression (41). He has concluded that "it is more important to provide corn for the nation than for a few tenants to fish and trap waterbirds" (42), and while he would like to be able to forgive his tenants their debts, "it would make me responsible for the keep for six years of twenty men and would beggar the estate" (43). He uses the word "beggar" unselfconsciously, unwilling to acknowledge how the economy he has purchased his way into makes beggars of those without currency of their own. Of course, he tries to comfort himself by insisting to the vicar that times have indeed changed, but the vicar registers the feebleness of that change with what I imagine to be an ironic smile: "I'm not against change, Mr. Star. So long as there's no harm done" (44). No harm, no foul. No foul, no revolution.

[10] A telling irony: St. George's Hill is today a 964-acre gated area comprised of golf clubs, tennis clubs, and private estates. Data from the real estate property portal Rightmove show that in 2022, the average home sale price in the area was over £3 million. ("House Prices in St. Georges Hill," Rightmove, https://www.rightmove.co.uk/house-prices/st-georges-hill.html.)

Briggs' last speech of the play is perhaps the most pitiful and evocative. He has grasped the logic of capital and succumbed to it. He has calculated that if he reduces the demand for food by not consuming any himself it will increase the supply for others, so instead of cheese, eggs, or vegetables he stands in a field eating grass. People come to watch. In an economic structure that atomizes communities and proscribes collectivism, the only form of resistance must be an individual one, and individual resistance is so preposterously inadequate that the image of Briggs eating grass in a field like a cow would be comical if it weren't so grotesque.

Of course, this is a portrait of 1976 just as much as of the 1640s and 1650s. Margaret Thatcher, the great privatizer and decentralizer of British politics, would not take office for another three years. But the gears were already grinding toward a philosophy of public life that denied its value or utility: after years of inflation and recession, government spending had become a favorite bugbear, reconfigured from the enabling and enriching force of Keynesian economics to the draining and stifling burden on the taxpayer that would define neoliberal thought. This was the year of the sterling crisis that drove Labour Prime Minister James Callaghan to seek a £3.9 billion loan from the International Monetary Fund, a capitulation to the logic that government spending was a failure, which was seen in some circles as a direct precipitation of the Conservatives' sweeping victory in the 1979 general election.[11] Ideas that had seemed fringe in the fifties, like James Buchanan's contention that individual participation in the market was the purest form of democracy or Peter Thornycroft's resignation from the Macmillan government over growing public investment, now had the tinge of reasonability and foresight.[12]

In Churchill's telling, the Habermasian public sphere is only capable of reinforcing this status quo. The ideal of rational debate by individual citizens over political issues is merely an

[11] Dominic Casciani, "Crisis Threatened Nuclear Weapons: 1976 Government Papers," *BBC News*, December 29, 2006.
[12] See James M. Buchanan, "Individual Choice in Voting and the Market," *Journal of Political Economy* 62, no. 4 (1954): 334–43 and *The Times*, "Mr. Thornycroft's Reasons," January 7, 1958.

illusion that masks the public's fundamental predisposition toward inaction, toward preserving the established equilibrium. Because the public sphere by Habermas's definition "could be understood as the sphere of private individuals assembled into a public body," we would expect that individual voices are irrepressible and that the public sphere is always a polyvocal space.[13] Yet the very use of the word "body" presumes some degree of unity, trusts that some level of agreement can be reached in order for the public to influence policy. (This same fiction underlies democracy's reliance on the "voice of the people," which presumes that a majority can accurately represent a whole, as if the people ever spoke with a unified voice.) The public sphere therefore implies compromise. And compromise, as Churchill's staging of the Putney debates suggests, protects the status quo.

If we take at face value Briggs' belief that royalists and parliamentarians were fighting for the same thing, it requires us to confront his proto-Marxian premonition that the violence of class struggle, rather than the rationality of liberal discourse, might be the only way of producing radical change. The Leveller insight that "it is the sword that has brought in property and holds it up" implies that the sword may be the only offense that can bring property down. Habermas's use of the descriptor "bourgeois" to define the ideal public sphere is much more than merely an adjective identifying an ethos that characterized the eighteenth century; it describes the underlying economic and philosophical structures which make the public sphere possible and which the public sphere tends to reinforce. From here, the public sphere looks like an inherently anti-revolutionary mechanism that gives the illusion of political efficacy but whose actual function is political stagnation.

[13] Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 52.

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II. CONFLAGRATIONS

"London's burning," goes the song,

> London's burning,
> Fetch the engines, fetch the engines,
> Fire! Fire! Fire! Fire!
> Pour on water, pour on water.

The origins of this popular nursery rhyme are unclear. Most obviously it seems to conjure the great fire of 1666, which consumed nearly all of central London over the course of four hellish days before finally being subdued with an overdue change in firefighting authority, and with an overdue change in the winds. An earlier version, though, has Scotland burning instead.[1] Suddenly the song's referent is not the accidental catastrophe that started in a bakery in Pudding Lane but, perhaps, the time in 1544 when Henry VIII ordered a ransacking army to "put all to fire and sword, burn Edinburgh" (144).[2] Much later, Walter Scott would call this England's "rough [...] mode of wooing" Scotland, which popularized the name "the Rough Wooings."[3] Today, we might be more willing to forego the euphemism and call it rape.

These two great burnings, of Edinburgh and of London, face each other across a century as two very different historical figures. The earlier one, part of England's campaign to bring Scotland under its own thumb, has a proto-colonial flavor to it that the label "rough wooing" tries to mellow: it is easy, when one knows that the outcome in 1707 will be a semi-consensual union, to forget how often the English crown enlisted brutal violence to bring it about. Led by Edward Seymour, the king's brother-in-law, English forces set ablaze dozens of towns and

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[1] Jill Vlasto, "An Elizabethan Anthology of Rounds," *The Musical Quarterly*, XL.2 (1954), pp. 222–34. "Scotland it burneth" appears at least as early as 1580 in a scroll found in the collections of King's College, Cambridge, as Jill Vlasto recounts in this article. I can find no scholarly material on the earliest recorded appearance of "London" in the lyrics. Vlasto would "like to imagine that the words were changed in 1666"—but this is mere speculation (229). There is as yet no evidence that this was the case.
[2] Marcus Merriman, *The Rough Wooings: Mary Queen of Scots, 1542–1551* (Tuckwell Press, 2000).
[3] Walter Scott, *Tales of a Grandfather* (Gowans and Gray, 1923), p. 312.

buildings in and around the Firth of Forth. The famous chronicler Raphael Holinshed describes this as doing "what they could to destroie the whole towne with fire," and a Lord Russell, who was present, says that "neither within the walls nor in the suburbs was left any one house unbrent beside the innumerable bodies, pillage and spoils our soldiers brought from thence" (148–149).[4]

In a book titled *The Rough Wooings,* from which I am taking this account, Marcus Merriman includes a brief evaluation of the assault and its aftermath: "the army severely looted and burned Edinburgh [...] but it really did very little of any long-term effect." This remark has something of the historian's characteristic orientation toward the long view, toward situating events within a larger context, toward an interest above all in the forces of cause and effect. It turns its eye upon the burning of Edinburgh not as a catastrophe in itself but as a data point in a larger narrative-historical arc. In this framework, it is neither a climax nor a watershed moment but merely a brief, insubstantial stop along a route whose whole map Merriman's book is at pains to describe. I do not begrudge him this historian's labor. But to say that Edinburgh was "severely looted and burned" and then in the next breath that "it really did very little of any long-term effect" is to downplay the kind of event, the kind of act, it is to set fire to a city. The contemporary sources he draws on are, like him, mostly interested in the burning's broader political-historical dimensions, but hints of the terror of conflagration run through them nonetheless: reports of women calling out "woe to the cardinal" who had at first dismissed the threat and then fled when he finally comprehended its seriousness; of some townspeople leaving the city under the cover of night; of others, upon hearing that the alternative was to hand over their infant queen, deciding that they would have "rather submitted to their last extremities than purchase safety by so ignominious a course" and grimly settling in to resist the onslaught (145–146). Perhaps in the story we tell today of the early modern relationship between England and Scotland, the burning of Edinburgh is just one entry in the long catalogue of events that

[4] Merriman, *The Rough Wooings*.

culminated in the 1707 Acts of Union. But to Edinburgh itself, in 1544, to the people whose city was sent up in flames, surely it must have seemed a cataclysm.

The burning of London, on the other hand, was not an "act," a deliberate event set in motion by a warring king and his destructive army. Instead it was an accident of history, a pileup of knowable but unintentional hazards: an overcrowded city, filled with wooden and thatch structures whose upper floors extended precariously, and flammably, over the streets; a Lord Mayor reluctant to give the order to demolish nearby houses before the fire spread; an enthusiastic wind contributing cheerfully to the destruction. And, above all, that strange property of milled wheat that it becomes explosive when dispersed in the air. As firefighting efforts collapsed and the streets jammed with people and their wagons trying to flee through the slender gates in the city's walls, this, too, must have seemed a cataclysm.[5] But it is worth insisting on the difference between intention and accident, and on the difference this difference makes for how we interpret these two great conflagrations. If both are cataclysms, only Edinburgh was an act of damnation; if both are cities blazing on the horizon, only in Edinburgh was that horizon explicitly political. Both are events in history, but only the one visited upon Scotland has a telos: a colonial vision of utopia on a united British isle that will emerge out of the ashes of the consumed city laid to waste.

One might object that Henry VIII had no such telos in his sights when he issued the order to sack Edinburgh. Indeed, Merriman suggests that the fiery language of the privy council's instruction was ludicrous on his face, as no army had the capacity to wreak such awful destruction:

> Put all to fire and sword, burn Edinburgh town, so razed and defaced when you have sacked and gotten what ye can of it, as there may remain forever a perpetual memory of the vengeance of God lightened upon [them] for their falsehood and disloyalty [...], burn and subvert it and all the rest, putting man, woman and child to fire and sword, without exception where any resistance shall be made against you; [...] turn upside down the Cardinal's town of St. Andrews, as the upper stone

[5] For an account of the fire, see Neil Hanson, *The Great Fire of London: In That Apocalyptic Year, 1666* (Wiley, 2002).

> may be the nether, and not one stick stand by another, sparing no creature alive within the same. (144)

This does not sound utopian. Even setting aside the apocalyptic extremity of the carnage the council urges here, it articulates a wrong to be avenged ("their falsehood and disloyalty") rather than an end to be achieved. The real political union of England and Scotland, the establishment of a strong and cohesive early nation state, may have been merely a distant, abstract glimmer in the imagination; if this warrant for arson had an end beyond retributive violence, it was likely the more proximate, pragmatic goal of restoring the promise of eventual marriage between the infant Mary, Queen of Scots, and Henry's young son Prince Edward. Henry's political vision was certainly more about thwarting France than about establishing Arcadia. But the threat of utter razing has always had a utopian horizon. Take the Lord thundering about Babylon—

> 21 Prepare slaughter for his children for the iniquity of their fathers; that they do not rise, nor possess the land, nor fill the face of the world with cities.
> 22 For I will rise up against them, saith the Lord of hosts, and cut off from Babylon the name, and remnant, and son, and nephew, saith the Lord.
> 23 I will also make it a possession for the bittern, and pools of water: and I will sweep it with the besom of destruction, saith the Lord of hosts.

—only to make this destruction the premise of Zion —

> 32 What shall one then answer the messengers of the nation? That the Lord hath founded Zion, and the poor of his people shall trust in it.[6]

And take Christ, whom the privy council seems to echo when they instruct that in Edinburgh "the upper stone may be the nether, and not one stick stand by another," as he departs from the buildings of the temple—

> 2 And Jesus said unto them, See ye not all these things? verily I say unto you, There shall not be left here one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down. [...]
> 7 For nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom: and there shall be famines, and pestilences, and earthquakes, in divers places.[7]

[6] Isaiah 14:21–23, 32, *The English Bible, King James Version: The Old Testament and the Apocrypha*, ed. by Herbert Marks, Gerald Hammond, and Austin Busch (Norton, 2013).
[7] Matthew 24:2, 7, *The English Bible, King James Version: The New Testament and the Apocrypha*, ed. by Herbert Marks, Gerald Hammond, and Austin Busch (Norton, 2012).

—events he figures as the omens that will precede his second coming. The destruction of cities, in both the ancient Israelite and the English Christian imagination, is a political act toward the telos of the millennium.

If the song "Scotland it burneth" really emerged out of the sack of Edinburgh in 1544, and if the later "London's Burning" really references the great fire of 1666 (neither of which, probably, we will ever know for sure) then this unassuming nursery rhyme preserves an echo of the parallelism between these two very different cataclysms, and of the ecology of the end times they suggest. Conflagrations become limit events at the membrane between deliberate, intentional politics and accidental, existential chance, or perhaps at their shared horizon. In one, the cataclysm is messianic, oriented toward a perfect millennial future; in the other, the cataclysm is empty, meaningless, bringing fire and ash but never rebirth or a new Jerusalem. This nursery rhyme, with its strange historical duality, holds space for both kinds of apocalypse.

In 1977, though, the song changes. "London's burning," sings The Clash,

> London's burning
> All across the town, all across the night
> Everybody's driving with full headlights
> Black or white, you turn it on, you face the new religion
> Everybody's sitting round, watching television
> London's burning with boredom now
> London's burning—dial 99999
> London's burning with boredom now
> London's burning—dial 99999[8]

To write a song titled "London's Burning" in 1977 is to invoke the memory of the earlier cataclysm but, curiously, not its form. In the late twentieth century, during the latter stages of what Richard Halpern has called a "crisis of action," the burning of London is not an "event" in the way the great fire of Charles II's England was.[9] Instead, it is an affect, a mood, a condition: London, if anything, is burning with the stifling, intolerable *lack* of events, the homogenous time that seemed to have settled in after the revolutionary ethos of 1968—so laden with events!—had

[8] The Clash, "London's Burning," Track 8 on *The Clash* (CBS Records, 1977).
[9] Richard Halpern, *Eclipse of Action: Tragedy and Political Economy* (U Chicago P, 2017).

dissipated. The mounting boredom, The Clash seems to say, fueled by the television, by the automobile, by the streetlights lining the Westway, by the endless blocks of indistinguishable run-down flats, is looking for an outlet. The pressure seems to be building toward a kind of Bataillesque expenditure, a pure and absolute waste of excess energy; even the emergency number, the line to call in the case of a catastrophic event, is delivered in excess, five 9s instead of the necessary three. "London's burning" here means not that it is on fire, but that it is waiting, even yearning, for fire to break out—for something, somewhere, to explode.

In Edinburgh 1544 and in London 1666, the conflagration is, unmistakably and irrevocably, an event. In 1977, though, it seems instead to be a kind of *unevent*, a thing we imagine happening but that never in fact happens. (More on this in the next chapter.) There is a messianic strain in the British political and theatrical imagination of the late twentieth century. It was a response to promised ends of history: the rapture preached by a newly awakened evangelical movement, the end of ideology imagined by anti-communists with their eyes on perestroika, the death of politics at the hands of the market that was the rallying cry for a new economics of growth and privatization. Much of the theater of the time imagines the loss of events at the end of history to be tragic, anti-utopian. But the burning of Edinburgh, the echo of trauma in a nursery rhyme that schoolchildren still learn to sing, is a reminder that events with a political telos can themselves be anti-utopian, can dress in the language of Zion while ruthlessly razing cities to the ground. The Clash suggests a kind of answer: that the loss of events, the boredom that is consuming London like a fever, is itself the stuff of utopia.

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LONDON,

1988

On January 26, 1988, Raymond Williams, drama professor and luminary of the British Left, died of a heart attack at the age of 66. He was Welsh, but London loomed over much of his work, especially his 1975 book *The Country and the City*.[1] There he writes of the fantasy of the British imagination—both literary and more broadly cultural—in which "the country" is natural and verdant and leisurely and simple, while "the city" is its dark inverse, constructed and steely and industrious and complex. This is a fantasy that I, at least, tend to ascribe to the Romantics, but Williams, adept at this kind of long-sighted historical analysis, shows how it has been obscuring and reifying the existing distribution of wealth and structures of the social order since the earliest stages of capitalism. Williams wanted not just to expose the falseness of this imaginary opposition, city versus country, but to do away with the binary altogether, to fold country and city into the same tradition of culture and collective action. At the end of the book, he says of himself: "I moved from country to city, and now live and work in both. I learned, in many forms, the shapes of this history, its ideas and its images [...]. This left, in my mind, every kind of question and intricacy, and I had slowly to retrace the experience, in myself and in the record, *as a way of gaining the present and the future through a different understanding of the shaping and fascinating past*" (306).

In the last decade of his life, Williams' work was increasingly oriented toward this question of "gaining the present and the future"—toward, in other words, the elusive figure of utopia. Here in the late twentieth century, a strain of millenarianism had crept into the zeitgeist, laden with promises both propitious and foreboding. Williams had plunged his hands into it in a 1983 book called *Towards 2000*, a kind of state-of-the-nation work that accepts the millennium, however arbitrary, as an opportunity to imagine what kind of future we want the millennium to

[1] Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (Oxford UP, 1975).

be. Its last chapter, "Resources for a Journey of Hope," warns against the Left's tendency to assume that anyone who thinks about the future for the sake of changing the present must themselves be generous, reforming, or progressive, and it describes a new systematized power politics taking shape in Britain that is attentive to the future but still regressive in its vision of human capacity (244).[2] In 1981, he called this ugly, forward-looking conservativism Plan X; by the time of his death in 1988, people were starting to call it neoliberalism.

That sounds bleak. But the chapter ends like this: "Once the inevitabilities are challenged, we begin gathering resources for a journey of hope. If there are no easy answers there are still available and discoverable hard answers, and it is these that we can now learn to make and share. This has been, from the beginning, the sense and impulse of the long revolution" (268–269).

[2] Raymond Williams, *Towards 2000* (Chatto & Windus, 1983).

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I. UTOPIA

I

Judy is sitting next to a pile of ten-pound notes with a decision to make. She could do the sensible thing, a possibility that she does not voice but that the rest of the play implies: put it back in the Fortnum and Mason plastic carrier bag she has just dumped it out of, walk it over to a Trustee Savings Bank, and invest it in shares meant for people of modest means, the middle class, to which Judy precariously belongs.

Or, of course, she could burn it.

Judy and her younger lover Sally have been pursuing what Sally calls "an experiment in living" (21).[1] The word "experiment," though, lends it an air of method and rationality that they are trying to resist: if anything, it is an experiment in the irrational, a refusal of method, a desystematization. On the proceeds of the house that Judy won in the divorce from her ex-husband Jack, she and Sally are waging a war on domesticity, productivity, and respectability. The play to which they belong confines them to a single room of a shabby London flat. It was bare when Judy moved in and has not, in the months since, acquired the furnishings of a middle-class life: no sofa or chairs to receive guests, no end-tables to hold their lamps, no television set to catch *The Sandbaggers* on Monday evenings.[2] The room is a mess, "records out of sleeves, unwashed crockery, a coffee percolator, books and the bric-a-brac of indiscriminate buying for pleasure" (21). Later, soft-spoken memories will hint that this indiscriminacy has

[1] Howard Brenton, *Sore Throats and Sonnets of Love and Opposition* (Methuen, 1979).
[2] I'm exercising a little creative license by invoking *The Sandbaggers,* which is not mentioned in the play. I am not sure I feel authorized to do this. But if I do, it is partly because it is the kind of invocation that the play itself refuses to make: *Sandbaggers* premiered the same year, and its brand of Cold-War-era spy-drama realism is one of the genres *Sore Throats* is aware of and, if only at the margins, resisting—most obviously when Sally almost comically describes humanity as waiting "for the Russians to come. Or the Cubans to land in Kent" (19).

been the substance of their relationship. Sally will even suggest that they use the pile of money to procure one last wild night of sex with a professional footballer and then, "come the dawn, go our separate ways" (24). This proposal is tender, affectionate rather than indifferent; it implies that some kind of end was present for them for the beginning, or that their mutual extricability—that they can be so easily untied from each other—has always been part of their utopian refusal of the rituals of bourgeois life. The money has been the fuel of their experiment, the freedom its fruit.

What is left of the money, sitting in a pile on the stage, is what Georges Bataille, writing in 1949, would have called an "accursed share." His claim that "surplus must be dissipated through deficit operations" sounds antiseptic, but it is in fact an explosive figuration of economy: for Bataille, the age of advanced capital is governed not by scarcity but by energy so abundant that it exceeds human ability to consume it productively. It must therefore be expelled, wasted, in "a pure and simple loss" (22).[3] He imagines the outlets of this excess to be, on one hand, war—an immense expenditure of energy not to produce but to destroy utterly—and, on the other hand, art—luxury, superfluity, spectacle, expression productive of nothing. Judy and Sally have been indulging in all kinds of sex with all kinds of people, including each other; especially this lesbian intimacy, categorically unable to "produce" children, embraces a Bataillesque ethos of luxurious waste. Indeed, their whole experiment can be framed in these terms: the proceeds from the sale of the house represent an immense surplus of energy, an accursed share, and finding resolutely unproductive outlets for its expenditure has been their single aim and pleasure.

But we should be struck by the ominous ring of that word, "accursed," and be prepared to find that while Bataille shares with Judy and Sally the idyllic impulse to luxuriate in the pointless expense of energy, the play here also echoes his attention to its destructive and

[3] Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share* (Zone, 1988).

catastrophic valence. Lying together on the floor among the material debris of their experiment, Judy intimates a violence that exceeds the possibility of expression:

> JUDY. Sorry.
> SALLY. For what?
> JUDY. For thinking you're beautiful.
> *(Sally giggles.)*
> So beautiful, I do want to hurt you.
> SALLY. What, clothes-peg on my nipples?
> JUDY. You know.
> SALLY. I don't.
> *(Wait.)*
> I don't.
> *(They laugh.)*
> *(They stop laughing.)* (25)

It is telling that Sally's first response does not fully credit the menace in Judy's desire. She supplies a friendly, pedestrian image of mild kink, nipples pinned by clothes-pegs, inviting the unthreatening "hurt" that promises pleasure through the suggestion of pain. But this is not what Judy has in mind. "You know," she intones, urging Sally to imagine (or discover?) something deeper, more sinister; a confused "I don't," repeated, is Sally's inability (or refusal?) to comply. I hear the edge of a shadow in the brief, nervous laugh they share before they fall silent. They have strayed too close to the boundary of a violence that, even in their unfettered experiment, remains unspeakable.

Bataille's framework is useful, perhaps, because it starts to illuminate these dark places where excess purged in ecstasy slides into excess purged in violence. One of his key figures for the dissipation of surplus is the practice of human sacrifice in pre-Columbian Mexico, which is where the word "accursed" most prominently features:

> *The Victim, Sacred and Cursed*
> The victim is a surplus taken from the mass of useful wealth. And he can only be withdrawn from it in order to be consumed profitlessly, and therefore utterly destroyed. Once chosen, he is the *accursed share*, destined for violent consumption. But the curse tears him away from the *order of things*; it gives him a recognizable figure, which now radiates intimacy, anguish, the profundity of living beings. (59)

Unsurprisingly, Bataille's account of the Aztecs is anthropologically suspect and troublingly exoticized. The irony is that he need not have reached so far afield for a suitable example: a Frenchman publishing in 1949 might have pointed (as Agamben's figure of the *homo sacer*, so obviously indebted to this passage from Bataille, later would) toward the catastrophes of his own moment and their "victim[s], sacred and cursed." But his language here is nonetheless worth pausing over. The surplus (and though I am about to talk of "surplus" as an "it," we should not forget that in this passage it is "he," a human) is cursed by being "withdrawn" from the useful pool of wealth or energy. The curse means it is "destined for violent consumption," sacrificed, compelled to be slaughtered—but it also means that it is "torn away from the order of things." What better description of Judy and Sally's experiment? There is an order to the things in this play—Fortnum and Mason, Trustee Savings Accounts, the money—that we might call "economy." Judy has "withdrawn" the money not only from the bank but from her society's "mass of useful wealth," brought it here to her tiny London flat where it cannot circulate or produce or grow. In cutting it off, she has cursed it, destined it for murderous consumption, condemned it to total waste. It is both a violent and a utopian act. She has torn it away from the order of things.

So why burn it? Seeing Judy strike a match at the end of the play and move toward the pile of notes on the floor, one might be inclined to wonder: aren't she and Sally already, to borrow a common idiom, burning through the money? Isn't that enough? "Burning through the money" is an apt metaphor for what their experiment is trying to do: it suggests that spending falls into categories of value, implies judgments about what constitutes prudence, or indulgence, or complete and irretrievable waste. Surely the morality against which they are rebelling would huff and puff that Sally's proposed threesome with a footballer constitutes the last. So why feel the need to literalize the metaphor, to do something so brute and unsubtle and incendiary as to actually set the money on fire?

This moment in the second act of Howard Brenton's *Sore Throats* is not about the money so much as the order it belongs to—"economy"—and the scales on which that word operated when the play premiered in 1979. When Judy first insists that they talk about the money, Sally uses "economy" in its domestic register: "What do you want?" she demands. "Us to be good little housewives? Economise? Little lists, little budgets?" (24). And indeed, where the whole world of the play is their intimate, circumscribed living room, one might imagine that this is the only register of any relevance. There is little to anchor the play in the historical specificities of *the* economy: though the characters reference banks and cash machines and the sale of the house often enough, there is no mention of oil crisis or stagflation, no allusion to the devaluation of the pound or public spending deficits. The play's language is resolutely private—domestic—refusing the temptation to slip into categories bigger than those the set itself suggests.

But this is an inclusion by omission, an elephant in the living room. *Sore Throats,* which Brenton describes as "an intimate play in two acts" (5), is about how the intimacy of this private London flat is invaded by the structures of an external world, one that goes unnamed and unarticulated but nonetheless exerts a consuming gravitational pull on the objects (and people) in its orbit. It "orders" them. Judy and Sally's experiment has sought disorder: they have been trying to live beyond the logic of any kind of "economy," in a moment when the rhetoric of economy has taken a totalizing turn, has become an end unto itself. Hints of the experiment's shape—drugs that Judy "kept on throwing up," "the fuck bars of New York," "three single girls, share a villa in Tuscany" (24)—suggest that it has not been unsuccessful. But Judy has begun to sense that this kind of extreme expenditure is incomplete. When she tells Sally they must talk about the money, it is not because she is tired of the experiment, ready to give it up; it is because she is starting to feel that it has not gone far enough. She does not want to do something sensible with what is left, to invest it or to buy furniture with it or to lay it aside for a future emergency. She does not want, as Sally worries she might, to "economise." Instead, she seems to perceive

that the money itself, no matter how they spend it, is implicated in the order they are seceding from, that to "use" it in any sense money can conceivably be used, however wasteful, would be to capitulate. The impulse to burn it is a final rebellion against metaphor. For Judy, a metaphorical "burning through" the money is not enough to extricate it from the order to which it belongs. Only a pure, literal, annihilative burning will suffice. "A luxurious squandering of energy" (33), Bataille would call it; "a wild exuberance" that "consigns men and their works to catastrophic destructions" (24).

Sore Throats is the first in a loose trilogy that Brenton considered his "utopia plays," which also includes *Bloody Poetry* and *Greenland*. *Sore Throats* premiered first in 1979 and *Bloody Poetry* in 1984, but both ran as part of a series at the Royal Court before the premiere of the last, *Greenland*, in 1988. Other characters in this trilogy, too, yearn for immolation. In the last moments of *Bloody Poetry,* after Percy Shelley has drowned, Lord Byron stands with his body on the beach and rages, "Burn him! Burn him! Burn us all! A great big, bloody, beautiful fire!" (104).[4] During a scene in *Greenland* set in roughly Brenton's present, the fervently religious Betty will, in a gasp of personal anguish, also long to be so consumed: "To be a brand," she intones. "Put to the burning. Oh, to catch fire!" (17).[5] (Betty's surname, suggestively, is "Blaze.") This impulse toward conflagration runs through all three plays—indeed, structures the relationship between them. Judy desires a conflagration because it offers rupture from the domestic economy she and Sally are trying to escape, in a moment in which the order of that economy has become the measure and horizon of the human. Brenton's Byron ("a rebel by temperament rather than by intellect," whose death less than two years later will come not in combat, though he is fighting with the Greeks against the Ottomans, but, appropriately, of a consuming fever) desires conflagration as a kind of substitute for an English revolution that has not materialized (234).[6] Betty desires conflagration as personal, purifying martyrdom, but also

[4] Howard Brenton, *Bloody Poetry* (Samuel French, 1985).
[5] Howard Brenton, *Greenland* (Methuen, 1988).
[6] Howard Brenton, *Brenton Plays: 2* (Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 1989), 2.

as part of a larger work, as God's instrument for claiming ("branding") his lost sheep before the renewal of the earth and the building of a new Jerusalem. Fire, sanctifying and destructive, becomes an event at the limits of imagination. What lies beyond it is anyone's guess: occasional brief and blurry glimpses suggest that it could be precipitous, unadulterated violence or, perhaps, utopia. Either way it seems more tolerable than the homogenous time it interrupts. It is a very Bataillesque ambivalence.

In the foreword to the earliest published edition of *Greenland*, Brenton describes being struck with the notion to write a utopian play:

> I was on Epsom racecourse at the Derby of 1977 (Piggot on the Minstrel). It was one of those far-fetched ideas that can come to a playwright on a glorious summer's day—and then take ten years to finally achieve. (3)[7]

The optimism of this scene-setting, with its invocation of the summer sun and an improbable goal not abandoned but, in fact, realized, seems deliberate, a hint that there must be something utopian to the conditions of possibility for a utopian project. Epsom, curious figure both of hierarchy (so many of its spaces ordered by class and wealth) and of democratization (with its famous hill where onlookers can bring picnics and watch for free), is an apt place for such a playwright to have such an epiphany: a child of the middle class, graduate of Cambridge, by then settled comfortably into a well-established role in Britain's leftist theater scene, Brenton may have been particularly susceptible to the warm publicness and camaraderie of a sunny race day in the wide, green downs. That *Sore Throats* should have been the first work to emerge from that impulse is perhaps unintuitive: the most significant thing that can be said to "happen" in the play is that Judy's ex-husband Jack brutally beats her into signing away half the proceeds from the sale of their married house. The play's utopianisms are easily obscured by its moments of staggering cruelty. Brenton was aware of this, calling it "the most violent writing I have ever done," but he also writes that in the second act, Judy, Sally, and Jack "set out on a crazy voyage" (3) whose destination he could not yet imagine but that he would continue to work toward in the

[7] Brenton, *Greenland*.

next two plays. He does not seem to have formed a concrete concept of all three before sitting down to write to write the first; he describes trying on a number of ideas in the years following *Sore Throats*, including an adaptation of William Morris's 1890 utopian science fiction novel *News from Nowhere*, and discarding each in turn. *Bloody Poetry* would eventually emerge from a request for a Shelley play from Foco Novo's Roland Rees. It is not, straightforwardly, a sequel to *Sore Throats*: it is about the intense relationship and attempt at communal living that Mary Shelley, Percy Shelley, Claire Clairmont, and Lord Byron embarked on in Geneva in 1816. But the later play responds to the utopianisms latent in the earlier one, seems aware that the England in which Judy and Sally and their little flat are anchored is an echo of the "reactionary, mean England" (3) from which the Shelleys, Claire, and Byron had fled, that they are all, in some measure, living the same experiment. *Greenland,* finally, would come almost a decade after *Sore Throats,* and it would be named for the actual utopia Brenton dreams up in its second half: characters who spend the first act confronting the dispiriting reality of a sweeping Tory victory in the 1987 UK general elections fall into the Thames and wake up seven hundred years later, in a world where Tories, the UK, and elections are obsolete. Brenton says, variously, that in *Greenland* he tried "to stage a world in which Shelley, Byron, Mary, and Claire would be happy to live" (xiv),[8] or that he wanted "to dramatise how I hope my children, or my children's children's children, will live and think" (3).[9]

Utopia is a genre the English know well. But Brenton's utopia plays, especially as performed at the Royal Court in 1988, strike out against prevailing anti-utopian currents with real implications for the genre's form and function. These plays are not uncomplicated: in some moments they seem to offer a fatalistic and dour response to the flattening effects of Thatcherite politics, to mourn the loss of events, the end of history, cheerily promised by the dogma that would come to be called neoliberalism. In this register, they are characterized by homogenous,

[8] Brenton, *Plays: 2*.
[9] Brenton, *Greenland.*—this is a paragraph where some more tailoring to 1988 will be needed

empty time, by characters who cannot seem to escape the privatizing impulse of modern economy, by the failures of imagined revolutions and the ossification of any meaningful visions of a different future. But this is not their only register. In halting and contradictory ways, these plays also figure the loss of events and the end of history as utopian, as part of a long tradition of what Raymond Williams calls "a classical form of invigoration and hopeful protest" (218); they challenge the primacy of tragedy, with its dependence on action, as the most meaningful dramatic-political form and suggest that utopia, too, with its dependence on place, can have serious political weight and moment.[10] Taken together, they are the story of ruptures that never happen, of history's unevents; they respond, ambivalently and uncertainly, to what might be construed as a longing for conflagration in the blinding glare of an oncoming millennium. They advance a kind of dialectic between tragedy and utopia. Their vision is always incomplete, a utopia that cannot escape its own ghosts, that gets caught continually in the melancholic looping of time without progress—but its failure is almost the point. By rejecting the demands of the realist mode that characterized much leftist theater in the eighties, and by refusing the constraints that ideology places on art, Brenton's utopia plays represent a kind of artistic labor that, in London in 1988, had atrophied almost to the point of disappearing: they perform, or at least try to perform, the important political work of reinvigorating imaginaries of the future in the face of the abrading force of the antirevolutionary present.

II

Brenton seemed to imagine the progression of his utopia plays in simple enough terms. If in *Sore Throats* the characters set out on a crazy voyage, in *Bloody Poetry* they travel and in *Greenland* they arrive. But to put it so plainly is to obscure what a difficult, idiosyncratic, and

[10] Raymond Williams, "Afterword, 1979," in *Modern Tragedy* (Verso, 1979).

even contrarian undertaking such a project was destined to be. Utopianisms were not in vogue in the late twentieth century. The Royal Shakespeare Company, which produced *Sore Throats* in 1979, spent the rest of the season performing things like Nikolai Erdman's *The Suicide*, Barrie Keeffe's *Bastard Angel*, and Seán O'Casey's *The Shadow of a Gunman*, all of which flirt with tragedy much more than with utopia. The Company also staged a brief revival of Brenton's *The Churchill Play,* a famously dystopian piece from 1974. These works captured a prevailing mood: a sense of stagnation, a disappointment at the collapse of the revolutionary momentum that had fueled the liberatory energies of the sixties, a looming despair at the prospect of conservative rule, intense anxiety about an increasingly bleak and impoverished future. (The Thatcher premiership had begun that May.) A kind of gritty postwar realism was the mode *du jour*. It had started, perhaps, with plays like John Osborne's 1956 *Look Back in Anger* and Shelagh Delaney's 1958 *A Taste of Honey*, and it was often carried on by many of Brenton's contemporaries in the seventies and eighties, including C.P. Taylor, Trevor Griffiths, Pam Gems, and Ted Whitehead. This is not to say that there were no dramatists making theater in more inventive or post-dramatic modes—one thinks of Caryl Churchill, Joan Littlewood, Edward Bond, Harold Pinter—but rather that these modes, too, often seemed to preclude or disallow the kinds of utopian thinking Brenton's trilogy was reaching for.

Critics expected realism and were baffled when they did not find it. In *The Guardian,* Michael Billington praised *Sore Throats*'s "horribly accurate picture of marital decay" but went on to say that in the second half,

> So many details struck me as false. Since Judy and Sally are apparently living off the proceeds from the sale of the flat, how come they are still in occupation? If Judy is really devouring 14-year-old boys, wouldn't she either get the whole school queuing up outside her door or a column of angry parents? Would Judy, mother of a teenage son, really turn over a carry-cot she thought contained Jack's new baby?[11]

Five years later, also in *The Guardian,* Robin Thornber wrote*:*

[11] Michael Billington, "Sore Throats (Warehouse, First Night)," *The Guardian*, August 29, 1979.

> What bothered me was that for all its anti-romantic rhetoric and earthy realism, Bloody Poetry seemed to celebrate a wildly romantic view of the role of the writer as society's spoiled child, absorbed in self-indulgent escape from the facts of life. Scorning the staid bourgeoisie is a fine pose for absentee landed gentry who live off the rents of their tenant farmers.[12]

In 1988, when both earlier plays ran at the Royal Court before the first production of *Greenland*, Irving Wardle wrote of the *Sore Throats* revival in a review for *The Times*:

> Still, some degree of plausibility is required; and it is not forthcoming from the girls, and still less in from Jack […]. The feeling takes root that none of these characters has ever ventured outside the room, and the only journey they have made is inside their own heads.[13]

Billington would also review *Greenland:*

> Mr Brenton has magicked a new Jerusalem into being: he hasn't told us how you get there […]. Brenton's dismissal of the classic Labour solutions—"health-care, pensions, decent life"—as flat, lead phrases is wrong. For most people, Utopias are like morals to Alfred Doolittle: "Can't afford 'em, guy". Only when all people are properly housed, clothed and fed will we have a glimpse of paradise.[14]

These literal-minded objections—where are the parents? what of the farmers? too cerebral! too hifalutin and self-important and la-dee-dah!—suggest a surprisingly reactionary demand of form: where, they seem to say, is the path forward? This is what the social realism of the past decades had at least gestured toward. Not that playwrights had been building policy proposals into their scripts, per se, but realism's great strength and vindication was its illuminative function: it could expose, at a stroke, the hypocrisies and vagaries and indifferences of human systems, as well as their deep, horrifying human costs. And to illuminate a problem is to suggest the contours of its solution. Even realism's most dour exemplars radiate with a terrible kind of moral clarity, bristling with righteous indignation and seeming to insist, to scream, that there are alternatives if only we will choose them. George Steiner put it memorably when he argued that realist plays were not tragic plays: "More pliant divorce laws could not alter the fate of

[12] Robin Thornber, "Bloody Poetry," *The Guardian*, October 9, 1984.
[13] Irving Wardle, "Vengeful Intent: Sore Throats (Theatre Upstairs, Royal Court)," *The Times*, April 26, 1988.
[14] Michael Billington, "Paradise Lost," *The Guardian*, June 3, 1988.

Agamemnon; social psychiatry is no answer to *Oedipus*. But saner economic relations or better plumbing *can* resolve some of the grave crises in the dramas of Ibsen" (8).[15]

The realist preoccupations in these reactions to Brenton's utopia plays are telling. They evince a desire for solutions, for things to be done, for "health-care, pensions, a decent life," at a time when such things seemed increasingly out of reach. They struggle to credit theatrical modes that do not imagine concrete and actionable ways forward. In 1979, the same year *Sore Throats* premiered, Raymond Williams appended an afterword to a new edition of his influential book *Modern Tragedy*, first published in 1966. The book's thesis had been further vindicated in the years since it was written, Williams said in the afterword: from Chile to Kampuchea, the complexities and consequences of revolution and "the extended and very bitter resistance to it" (207)[16] had confirmed that a tragic perspective was necessary, that (as the original text had argued) "revolutionary societies have been tragic societies, at a depth and on a scale that go beyond any ordinary pity and fear" (99).[17] But while Williams had felt a defining historical form of 1966 to be revolution, by 1979 his tone had changed. He begins his afterword by diagnosing a malaise he called "a widespread loss of the future." In the early sixties, he says,

> the prevailing official mood was one of calmly and happily extending prospects: a managed affluence; managed consensus; managed and profitable transitions from colonialism; even managed violence, the 'balance of terror'. Some scraps of this repertory survive here and there, as electoral gestures. But the dominant messages from the centres are now again of danger and conflict [...]. Managed affluence has slid into an anxiously managed but perhaps unmanageable depression. Some political consensus has held but the social consensus underlying it has been visibly breaking down, and especially at the level of everyday life. (208)[18]

This is an arresting paragraph. There is something administrative and bureaucratic, Williams sees, about the success of the post-war consensus. He echoes a kind of stabilizing Keynesian language, the vocabulary of an economics in which "managed"-ness ensures increasing

[15] George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy* (Oxford UP, 1980).
[16] Williams, "Afterword, 1979."
[17] Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy* (Broadview Press, 1966). Quotes from the body of *Modern Tragedy* come from this 1966 Broadview edition, not the 1979 Verso.
[18] Williams, "Afterword, 1979."

prosperity; the coldwarism "balance of terror" is more Hobbes than Rousseau but nonetheless figures as an instrument of tenuous peace; "depression" here is a pathology with both clinical and economic resonances, a gesture at the unexpectedly permeable membrane between the *oikos* and the *psyche*. Most striking to me, though, is the theatrical language of "repertory" and "gestures." Like the set of movements or speeches an actor might call on during a performance, the age that is dying in 1979 has a repertory of tools to produce a "managed affluence." These tools are being forgotten or growing stale, losing the sway they once held over their audience, but some of them survive as "electoral gestures," as if the political system in which they developed continues to deploy them not by intentional action but by rote, reflexive habit. There are impressions of this metaphor in Alain Badiou's 1991 essay "Rhapsody for the Theatre." Both theater and politics, for Badiou, are things that *take place* rather than things that always exist, and their only fidelity is not to a text or a scene or an idea but to a "circumscribed event" (11). Badiou's half-serious contention is that parliamentarism, by trying to relocate that fidelity from events to systematic forms, has in fact spelled the end of politics.[19] His figure for its loss is what he calls the "syntagma" *nooppositionmotionaccepted*, a running-together of words apropos of any voting body that signifies not a decision or action but rather an empty formalism, a procedural ritual that masquerades as a vote but exists in fact as a non-vote, an anti-politics, an unevent.[20] Williams did not live long enough to read Badiou's essay, but something of his language here anticipates it. The mask has slipped off the statist forms of the postwar era: their

[19] Alain Badiou, *Rhapsody For The Theatre* (Verso, 2013).

[20] Badiou's paragraph is worth reading in full:

> It's a memory from my adolescence. From 1953. My father was mayor of Toulouse. He tells of the incidents surrounding the vote on the budget of the municipal council. The mayor's role consists most of the time in skillfully linking the answer 'Motion accepted!' to the question 'No opposition?'—after reading at full speed from a book of magic spells whose emollient and somniferous powers are well demonstrated. The speedy syntagma 'Nooppositionmotionaccepted' is the sesame of the vote. But for one chapter at least, this syntagma malfunctioned: when the theatre budget was announced—the budget for the great and glorious Théâtre du Capitole, loved by Stendhal. Ah! It is as though there had been a clarion call. The council members shake, they snort, they click their heels and throw themselves into an endless quarrel. The discussion turns fussy, twisted, people deliberate the retirement of ushers and the replacement of a chipped harp. Wagner or *La Belle de Cadix*? The question poisons the mood.
>
> For the schools and the hospitals, the public roads, transportation, drinking water and public gardens, 'nooppositionmotionaccepted'. For theatre, inevitably, the sound and the fury. The representations wake up the representatives. Theatre's link to the budget is theatrical rather than budgetary. (27)

"managed"-ness has deteriorated to reveal a kind of political emptiness, and in the vacuum have sprung up again "dominant messages" of "danger and conflict." The social consensus is breaking down. To sum all this up as "a widespread loss of the future" is to point toward how the future is predicated on events, how the substance of progressivism—of history—of politics—of the struggle for utopia—indeed of revolution, the subject of *Modern Tragedy*—requires *things to happen*. And in the ascendant dogma of what will come to be called neoliberalism, *things happening* is a bit passé. There is no society, Margaret Thatcher will declare, to form a meaningful public sphere.[21] There are only individuals, and the events that shape their lives are private, economic, domestic. They cannot be historical. Revolution is impossible in an age that imagines itself as postpolitical. The end of history has arrived.

This echoes what, in a striking recent account, Richard Halpern (for whom Williams is an acknowledged influence) diagnoses as a "crisis of action" in modernity.[22] With the rise of capitalism, he argues—on the theoretical side, the discipline of political economy as practiced by figures like Adam Smith; on the practical, the explosion of free markets and private ownership in the eighteenth century—production came to replace action as the substance of human life and happiness. By reducing the sphere of human activity to the *oikos*, by figuring the masses not as publics but as populations, by presenting itself as a set of laws as natural as thermodynamics or gravity, modern political economy overtakes and incapacitates political agency. It produces a world that is fundamentally private or atomized rather than public or collective. Halpern is interested in how the theater grapples with this shift, especially given philosophy's tendency to ascribe to it an inherently political character.[23] He does not go so far as to proclaim, as Nietzsche and Steiner and Badiou did in more or less direct ways before him, that modernity has spelled

[21] Douglas Keay, "Aids, Education and the Year 2000! Interview with Margaret Thatcher," *Woman's Own*, October 1987.
[22] Richard Halpern, *Eclipse of Action: Tragedy and Political Economy* (U Chicago P, 2017).
[23] This is an ascription perhaps most famously made in 1958 by Hannah Arendt, who, also in an influential account of action in modernity, calls theater "the political art par excellence" (Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (U Chicago P, 2018), 188.). Halpern describes Arendt as part of "a countermovement that gins up inflated accounts of action" (27)—but he is, despite himself, sympathetic to her cause.

the death of tragedy, but he does suggest that this new order of things poses strident challenges to the tragic mode:

> It is *political* action that political economy seeks above all to neutralize and disable [...]. What tends to get hollowed out is the political reach and seriousness of action, and therefore of tragedy. It is not a question of whether tragedy continues to exist, but of how and whether tragedy matters [...] [I]f one understands tragedy as a genre devoted both to the depicting of action as significant and to engaging its audience's powers to act, then late capitalism does pose considerable challenges. These attach to theater as such, not merely to tragedy. But since tragedy is a genre deeply invested in the dignity of human action, their consequences may be felt with greater seriousness there. (20)

The result, Halpern contends, is that under the conditions of modernity it becomes harder and harder, even for the theater with its supposedly inherent political character, to imagine meaningful forms of political action. Though his readings stay mostly within the early modern period, he writes a chapter on Samuel Beckett and a "postscript" on Sarah Kane; one comes away with the impression that although the late twentieth century may have shifted the contours of the crisis of action, it did not abate or contravene them. The paralysis of earlier moments remained—and it formed the terrain on which the late-twentieth-century preoccupation with realism operated. In his 1979 afterword, Williams voices a skepticism not so unlike those of Brenton's critics: "The fact is that neither the frankly utopian form, nor even the more qualified outlines of practicable futures, which are now so urgently needed, can begin to flow until we have faced, at the necessary depth, the divisions and contradictions which now inhibit them" (218).[24] This is a passing remark, and it is hard to know what he considers the "divisions and contradictions" of utopian forms to be—but might his critique not have a realist bent? He might say that *Bloody Poetry*'s "wildly romantic view of the role of the writer" (to use Thornber's words) is a contradiction, that the implausibility of Judy's actions in *Sore Throats* (of which Billington complains) is a division. Brenton's plays are too unreal for their own historical moment.

[24] Williams, "Afterword, 1979."

Williams and London's theater critics articulate a strain of opposition to, or skepticism about, utopian forms that was in the zeitgeist: in the waning days of the liberal postwar consensus, as names like F. A. Hayek and Milton Friedman became popular currency, with a new conservative ascendancy in the Anglo-American world and machines of global capital cementing their hold on the rest, they appeared to feel, sharply, that the crisis of action was tightening its grip. Their reflex was to reach for modes that seemed to offer up some form of resistance. For the critics this was realism; for Williams, it was tragedy.

III

There is, in fact, a contradictory way in which parts of Brenton's utopia plays affirm Halpern's account. Brenton seems able to imagine utopia only by starting with its dark inverse, and his arcadian horizons are sometimes visible only through the lens of great terror or violence. The worlds his characters inhabit are often paralyzed by the painful impossibility of action. This is particularly true of the first act of *Sore Throats*. Jack has come to Judy's small, rented flat in hopes of convincing her to evenly split the proceeds from the sale of their married home. (He had, foolishly, sentimentally, signed away his half in the letter he wrote to confess an affair and ask for a divorce.) By the time Sally, at this point merely a stranger responding to Judy's ad for a room to let, arrives at the end of the act, she can sigh with only a little exaggeration, "You open a door, any door. And you find yourself in an abattoir" (17). Jack has violently beaten Judy, kicking her in the stomach, stomping on her head, threatening to break her hands. Typically for a Brenton play—his more famous 1980 *Romans in Britain* sparked censorious lawsuits for staging a drawn-out anal rape—it all happens in plain view of the witnessing audience, who are spared none of its brutality. Even the language is unrelentingly vicious: they have been onstage for all of five minutes when Judy says to Jack, "So fuck yourself," then wonders idly, savagely, what kind of contortions this might take: "What do I mean by that? Anatomically? Pull his little

willie back between his legs, jam it up his arsehole[?]" (7). Moments later, Jack will slide a penknife across the stage to Judy and intimate that she should cut herself with it.

> Go on, you're free. There's no one to care. You don't do you. I don't, do I. The people on the other side of that wall, don't care. This is Metropolitan London. The ambulance that comes to take you away will be of less interest than a minor traffic accident. Go on. Do it. A little real—private destruction. (9)

There is a curious relationship between the self-harm Jack is urging here and the world beyond the flat. Judy, he says, is free—not because this is a liberal humanist sphere where individuals have meaningful agency, nor because this is a theatrical sphere where action presumably drives a work forward, but because this is, fundamentally, a private sphere, where no action can have public ramifications. "There's no one to care" is a statement of alienation. Though this flat is one of many others, though its occupants are surrounded on all sides by neighbors, "the people on the other side of that wall," though—or rather, because—"this is Metropolitan London," the multiplicity of people does not add up to a public. Even an ambulance, with its sirens designed to draw attention and unite hearers (an *audience*, with its telling "*aud-*" root) in awareness of an emergency, "will be of less interest than a minor traffic accident"; even the violent and explosive action of dramatic self-destruction could never register as a meaningful event.

Here I am consciously echoing Halpern's reading of *Death of a Salesman*, which imagines the endless apartments that surround the Lomans, stacked one on top of the other, to be a manifestation of a peculiarly modern contradiction: "between the people as politically sovereign and the people as population—between a people invested with the collective power to act and a mass of isolated consumer/producers that occupies a realm fundamentally alien to action" (16–17). In this modern form of tragedy, everything is private, shifted into the domestic space; the distinction between polis and population is not just linguistic or disciplinary but, at its core, political. Modernity is, as Halpern says of *Death of a Salesman,* "a world without a public arena—a world in which households fill all available space, stretching out of indefinitely and filling the sky" (17). By suggesting that Judy is free because there is no one to care, Jack is

articulating the conditions of possibility for the play's staggering violence: because this is a private household, and because there is no polis outside to constrain or shape it, the only power that matters is a kind of brute, animal force. In this light, the label "domestic violence"—a phrase that has come to feel anodyne in our parlance, largely because of *public* efforts to study and address it—is reinvigorated by a shocking clarity about its structural relationship to domestic space. The violence is possible only because the space is private.

And Jack especially imagines himself to be driven to this violence by the demands of private economy. Explicitly, he denies this: searching after the fact for something that might explain why he has so savagely beaten Judy, he wonders, "Is it money? Can't be money. Money can't make me boot in a woman lying on the floor" (15). But everything else belies this refusal. The blows have come between demands that Judy sign the paper he has brought, forfeiting half of the money to him. With each one, Jack snivels that the times he hit her while they were married were never really violent, "I mean, not really. Little taps. Always kept the floodgates shut" (14). When he pairs this with an insistence that signing is reason, signing is rational, signing is the adult thing to do, the following flashes of savagery (a kick in the stomach, a foot on the head) feel all the more ghoulish—such that when he does finally say "Can't be money," it feels less like denial and more like wonder. That a coward like him should have such capacity for violence, and for the sake of money! Having finally coerced Judy into signing, Jack tries to retreat into gentleness but, rebuffed, acknowledges with as much pride as remorse, "Didn't shy away that time. I did it, didn't I, really did it to you, I really did" (16).

So earlier, when he urges "a little real—private destruction," Jack is invoking the private in both its political and its economic, or in its political *because* in its economic, registers: private, divorced from the polis, and private, belonging to the household economy. They are, in this play, the same thing. Perhaps the most memorable figure for their fungibility is a fantasy Jack describes having during the last stages of their divorce:

> I saw myself discovered by a fellow police-officer, outside a Trustee Savings Bank, my trousers and my Y-fronts down, my bum exposed to the night air and the fingers of passing drunks—with my cock jammed in a twenty-four-hour cash dispensing machine. (10)

The obviousness of this image is almost as crude as the image itself: what more transparent metaphor for late twentieth-century economy than sticking one's cock in an ATM? (Jack calls this "trying to reconcile money and sex," which could be a subtitle of this play.) But there is more going on here. No one mentions metropolitan London, but Jack's previous gesture to it still hangs in the air; the landscape of his fantasy is ill-defined but unmistakably urban, even, one might say, public. The classic exhibitionist fantasy, of genitals exposed, onlookers made to confront and react to them, is one of transgressing common space and community norms, of violating the public by exposing it to the privates. And this is where a third sense of the word creeps into the mix: a gesture to the private parts of the body, which have already been ample fodder for characters each trying to outdo the other in caustic contempt. Jack has complained that Judy would not shave her legs after a decade of marriage, even knowing "I hated the rasp where the smooth should be" (7); Judy, aside from the infantilizing jab about his "little willie," has jeered at him for his shyness during sex and laughed heartily about "that funny bit of skin on your right buttock" (9). So aside from its resonance in both political and economic registers, Jack's urging Judy toward "private destruction" has another layer: violence carried out *against the privates*, the human body's most sensitive and personal parts.

This betrays what is at stake in the first act of this play: that the private sphere—the *oikos,* "economy" in its domestic register—is written on the body. One may imagine the site of the private to be the household, which would be a fair conclusion in a play that never leaves Judy's flat, but *Sore Throats* suggests that this alone is not enough to make sense of the private in 1988, that its site must also be, somehow, human flesh. Demanding early on to know why Jack has come, Judy conjures just such a metaphor: "Revisiting the scene of the crime? Me?" (8). A "scene" is a sphere of activity, a locus of action; by figuring herself as "the scene of the

crime," she imbues her body with an unusual spatial quality, one that exceeds existence as a mere object in space and instead suggests existence as a space itself, a site where action ("crime," in this case, "domestic violence") can play out. To be a space, rather than an agent in space, neuters her own capacity for action, and the dehumanization that this implies underlies everything that follows. The play is rife with language that makes bodies the site of private economic activity. Predictably, much of this revolves around the contested money: it is why Jack has come to Judy's new flat and why, when she will not sign half of it over to him, he becomes so murderously, physically violent. Motivated by his failure to, in some sense of the word, "economise," he does indeed revisit the scene of the crime—or, to put it another way, revisit the crime upon the scene. In a work where little can be said to "happen," it matters that such violence is one of the few things that does. Judy's casual vulgarity, Jack's impulsive, angry abuse, are the extreme manifestation of the play's attention to gore, viscera, the muck of fleshiness and embodiment. It is called *Sore Throats,* after all: a sore throat is the first sign of illness, prelude to fever, chills, vomiting, headache, the inflammation of tissues in response to a virus, the body breaking down as it becomes the scene of a ruinous pathogenic invasion. Judy fantasizes about using the money to pay for a grotesque frankensteinian operation: "I would like bits of ferocious animals grafted onto me. Adders' heads for breasts? Nipples that suck, rather than get sucked? […] A tiger's head for a womb" (8). This striking chimera puts fangs in the place of the gendered organs that gestate and suckle, of course, but it also imagines money as the means of that animalization; it makes Judy the stage for economy's gross perversions, puts the private(s) into the bestial realm of the tiger and the snake. It is hostile to the human.

There is a parallelism between this degradation of the body, from the agent of action to its mere scene, and the trilogy's preoccupation with homogenous time. All three plays circle around what I imagine to be *unevents*: failed interruptions, fissures that do not burst, happenings that are referenced, conceived of, longed for, prescribed, but that never in fact happen. Unevents seem, in their negative valence, to be both cause and consequence of a crisis

of action. In *Sore Throats* this takes the shape of language that adopts world-historical categories but empties them of their world-historical content: Judy describes her vision of becoming a tiger-snake-woman as "Renaissance," then suggests that the present, now that they are post-divorce, is "after the flood" (8). Jack bitterly observes that marriage always seems to end with a "third world war" in the living room and calls their last fight, simply, "Cataclysm" (14). These words echo the shape of history without invoking its substance; they seem to yearn for events to interrupt without having the power to summon them. There are very few events in this play. Jack comes and goes, battering Judy in the meantime; Sally arrives; Jack returns; Judy turns over Jack's carrycot to reveal that it contains bricks instead of a baby. There is little else. Months pass between the two acts, and the characters do things, we are told, in the interim—but these things do not take place onstage. Events do not seem to take place offstage, either, as the play mostly lacks the kinds of allusions that would allow us to date its setting: gestures to Fortnum and Mason and cash dispensing machines give it a *mise-en-scène* but not a history. Plenty was happening in Britain in 1979—rail strikes, referendums for devolution in Scotland and Wales, a general election—but none of that makes its way into Judy, Sally, and Jack's private, unevent-ful world.

In *Sore Throats* the loss of events seems to sit in a personal register, its homogenous time meted out within the confines of Judy's flat. The characters feel it without fully knowing it is a source of their malaise. But in *Bloody Poetry,* the trilogy's second play, unevents are public and acknowledged. *Bloody Poetry* is a curious departure from *Sore Throats* because it inverts many of the earlier play's choices: it offers historical characters instead of anonymous fictional ones, with clear anchors in the real past; it ranges freely in place and time rather than dwelling in one claustrophobic room; even its language is much less self-contained, reaching often for referents outside of the text in a way *Sore Throats* eschews. But this is not so much a change in Brenton's thought as another avenue toward it. No longer are the world-historical categories the characters summon empty of content; instead, Mary, Claire, Byron, and Shelley long quite

explicitly for a literal revolution that never comes. Early in the play, in the summer of 1816, Claire and the Shelleys stand on the beach in Geneva waiting for Byron to arrive. The Shelleys have not yet met him, but Mary is irritable and skeptical. Claire, perhaps already pregnant with his child, rebukes her:

> Oh, we must not—! Be dejected, spiral down, fall into dejection and—hurt each other, we must not [...]. We are privileged to stand on this beach, and see George Byron and Bysshe Shelley meet. It will be history! (12)[25]

What a construction! "It will be history"—almost a clash of tenses, the future "will be" describing "history," the past. In her fantasy Claire is already reifying the event, the way the past is always reified in the present by whatever order has grown out of it. Ignoring another piece of sarcasm from Mary, she continues,

> The two poets meet on a beach. Light blazes off the water, behind them. In their exile, they embrace. It will be like a statue [...]. The men and women of the future will thank us. We are their great experiment. We will find out how to live and love, without fear. (12)

Again the future tense, but this time it describes not history but art: "It will be like a statue." Claire is invoking not only the way sculpture, with its particular role in public monuments, gets conscripted into the memorialization of history, but also the way sculptures seem to freeze a moment, immortalize it, render it *image* rather than *event*. She intuits the complex and mutually reinforcing relationship between history and the artistic modes that get deployed to tell it. And her confidence, her sense of herself and her friends as the "great experiment" that men and women of the future will look back on with reverence, is unabashed: this image, this statue and the moment it reifies, will someday form part of a history that will justify and explain its own future. It is a utopianism that is fully conscious of being built on events—or conscious, perhaps, that history is more than simply a collection of past events and is itself, therefore, a utopian project.

[25] Brenton, *Bloody Poetry*.

I think the play wants us to take Claire seriously. She is very young—the real Claire Claremont was only seventeen when she met Byron—and we already know that her imagined future will never take shape. But we are not invited to condemn her naivete. The play's title suggests that it shares her convictions about the stakes of art: poetry is bloody; philosophy can maim and ideas can kill, as Byron will say (43); "poets," Shelley will insist with his own brand of naivete, "are the unacknowledged legislators of mankind" (87). (This is a line Brenton borrows from the real Shelley's *Defense of Poetry*.[26]) The society they will try to live in the next months is charged with a sort of atheist's faith in revolution. Percy says it aloud in the second act. His legal wife Harriet Westbrook dead by suicide, his life beggared by the rigid prudery that forbad him to live as a free lover with both Harriet and Mary, his children and country estranged and he embittered by the customs that drove him to exile, he finally intones, "I have come to the opinion that there must be a revolution in England […]. In the foreign wars of liberation, as we agonize about who sleeps with whom, heroes scream under the torturers, and children pass their mothers and fathers the gun" (63). A moment later, Mary will describe their homeland as an "English garden, English graveyard" (65). It is the figure against which they will try to build their future in exile. They envision a liberated world, one in which humans are free to think beyond the strictures of conventional expression; to thrive beyond the demands of survival, always mediated by money; to love beyond the claustrophobia of bourgeois institutions like marriage. Claire and Shelley, the most committed rebels, imagine that by living the way they do, they are fighting meaningfully to bring this world about. When Byron and Shelley finally meet, they are swept into a passionate argument about literature in which Shelley is driven to cry,

> Shakespeare did not go far enough! Further than any of us can go but not far enough! King Lear himself, not Gloucester, should have been blinded, and by his own hands. Then in his darkness he should have turned on God himself. (20)

Shelley's implicit argument here is that something world-historical hinges on the ending of *King Lear*. I recognize two almost Nietzschean impulses in this passage: first, a refusal of the

[26] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *A Defense of Poetry* (Ginn & Company, 1903), 46.

structural cliches by which we create meaning, like God; second, an admiration for the Greeks and their willingness in their tragedies to face up to the absolute abyss of being. Shelley wants *King Lear* to be more like Oedipus, wants Lear to gouge out his own eyes upon realizing what he has done. *Oedipus* is one of Aristotle's fundamental examples of tragedy: it is the paragon of a play that is not about characters and their characteristics but rather about actors and their actions. Oedipus's crimes are personal, of course, violations of his parents and children, his nearest kin—but they are also political. He has murdered the king. He has brought famine and pestilence upon his polis. Is his *punishment* also political? Oedipus cries that Apollo is to blame for the fate that drove him to kill his father and marry his mother, but he alone owns the blinding: "the hand that struck me was none but my own."[27] No one compelled him to this self-destructive act.

I think the agency here matters. In saying that Lear should have gouged out his own eyes, Shelley suggests that the diseased politics he introduced by dividing his kingdom should have found its cure not in Cordelia's disposition to forgive him—in her character—but rather in Lear's knowing and willful action to remove himself from the realm of the political. This is what Oedipus does when he blinds himself: his city, "its towers and sacred places of the Gods" (70), can be his to look upon no longer, and he will spend the rest of his life wandering in exile. A Shakespeare who had been more like Sophocles might have conjured a *King Lear* more deeply and profoundly political—grounded in action and with repercussions for the body politic itself.

But though they sometimes believe themselves in their artists' commune to be living the revolution, in their more clear-sighted moments they can see how impossibly far from any real rupture their little world really is. Like Claire, the play wears its utopian vision unabashedly on its sleeve. The difference, perhaps, is that it is rather more given to despair. Another poet enters the conversation as a contrast to Shakespeare: Wordsworth, figure for where the revolution goes to die.

[27] Sophocles, *Oedipus the King*, trans. David Greene (U Chicago P, 1942), 68-69.

> BYRON. […] You know his poems, no doubt, by heart.
> BYSSHE. Those written before 1802 —
> BYRON. Ah! Before reaction got him! Before he went religious. The rats! The rats! The rats that leave the revolution's ship! For the comfort of the Church, or some concocted mysticism, or good reviews in the *Times Literary Supplement*, or the Oxford Chair of Poetry! (21) [28]

Wordsworth presents a contradiction that Byron savagely relishes and Shelley refuses to be deterred by—the poet whose enterprises of great pith and moment are turned awry by his surrender to the existing, anti-utopian order of things. Shelley seems to believe that this was not inevitable, that Wordsworthian genius is still possible without Wordsworthian capitulation. But the tragedy of *Bloody Poetry* is that capitulation lies around every corner. Where Claire imagines the enthusiasm of men and women of the future, imagines herself to be their great experiment, the play in fact often alludes to the men and women of a more immediate future, the children—impoverished, estranged, dead—who haunt the present. When Percy's legal wife Harriet drowns herself in the Serpentine, Percy and Mary wed in the hope that an English court will grant them custody of Percy's son and daughter. The court, though, citing his adultery and atheism, turns them over to foster parents; Percy will never see them again, and he will spend the rest of the play troubled by Harriet's ghost. Byron declares that if one really wants to make Wordsworth squirm one has only to ask him, "Where are the children of the Revolution now?" (34). It is, of course, a jab about the daughter Wordsworth fathered in Paris and left behind upon his return to England, but it is laden with a chilling augury: both Claire and Byron's Allegra and the Shelleys' young Clara, children of their own revolution, will die before the end of the play.

Percy seems unable to process Clara's death in a personal register. "I have written—of the Peterloo massacre," he says desperately to a distraught Mary. He has been laboring over it for weeks, spurred by the plight of the gathered protestors and the eighteen murdered workers, so inattentive to his wife and child that the death has blindsided him. "I have written 'The Mask

[28] This may be a jab at writers of Brenton's own time, "the rats that leave the revolution's ship": the *Times Literary Supplement* didn't exist until 1902.

of Anarchy'. Let it be—a poem—for our daughter" (93). *The Masque of Anarchy* is a supreme expression of opposition to tyranny, a vision of radical liberation that famously proclaims "YE ARE MANY—THEY ARE FEW" (47).[29] It both responds to a world-historical event and imagines others in the future, describes a vision of the disenfranchised masses rising to demand freedom from oppression. But offered up as a response to the death of his daughter, its utopianism withers. It cannot answer the reality of personal devastation. Mary excoriates it for its inadequacy:

> Oh! Can't you hear yourself? Do you know what you're saying? Is the price of a poem—the death of our child? 'The Mask of Anarchy!' No one will publish it. Will Hunt, in *The Examiner*? No, he knows he will go to jail for libel. *(She scoffs.)* The great revolutionary English poem—unpublishable! Bury it in your daughter's coffin, poet. (93)

Brenton puts prophecy in Mary's mouth here: no one will, in fact, publish *The Masque of Anarchy* until 1832, ten years after Shelley's death. Her foretelling lays bare the crisis of action at the heart of the play. The Peterloo Massacre is the outcome of a failed revolution; it is a real, oppressive event, the stuff of the dreary anti-utopian world. But for Shelley it also conjures its own inverse, an unevent, political in a very Badiouian sense, articulated in its best-known stanza:

> Let a great assembly be
> Of the fearless, of the free,
> On some spot of English ground,
> Where the plains stretch wide around. (33)

Those murdered on that field in Manchester become the early martyrs of a future society, a "great assembly." Peterloo is tragic, of course, but it becomes the seed of utopia, to be planted "on some spot of English ground." It is the past that the longed-for future will reify and historicize and memorialize with statues. But it turns out that these unevents, the utopia that Peterloo is meant to unfold, are all in Shelley's head. No one will even publish them. They will

[29] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Masque of Anarchy* (Edward Moxon, 1832). A note on the spelling difference: Shelley spelled it "mask" in his manuscript, which Brenton adopts, but "masque" is used in the title of the first printing and tends to be retained in later reproductions. I use "Masque" except when I quote Brenton using "Mask."

remain private, undisclosed, until time and political change have atrophied their resonance with their present. The unpublishable poem becomes itself an unevent, also a tragic one—another failed revolution.

Notably, 1832 was the year of the Great Reform Act that significantly expanded the franchise. Leigh Hunt, when he does finally publish *The Masque of Anarchy* shortly thereafter, will explain in a preface that he chose not to do so when he first received it in 1819 because "the public at large had not become sufficiently discerning to do justice to the sincerity and kind-heartedness of the spirit that walked in this flaming robe of verse" (v).[30] He is publishing it now, he says, in part because what it advocates for has already come to pass: "the last great national measure recommended by [Shelley], is singularly striking as a *political anticipation*. It advises what has since taken place, and what was felt by the grown wisdom of the age to be the only thing which *could* take place, with effect, as a final rebuke and nullification of the Tories" (x). In other words, according to Hunt, this poem written to further the cause of revolution could not have been adequately understood until the revolution—figured here as inevitable, "the only thing which *could* take place"—had already happened. The irony seems lost on him.

This repeated failure of events is marked by a different kind of time. True, *Bloody Poetry* imagines real, past scenes, arranges them more or less chronologically, proceeds from one to the next, as any historical play might; it has anchors in specific years and recalls specific events. But an epigraph from Richard Holmes' 1975 biography of Shelley foregrounds its tone: "Shelley's life seems more a haunting than a history" (6).[31] Hauntings refuse the contained and linear parameters of the historical; the logic of cause-and-effect breaks down, replaced by terror, excess, melancholy, paranoia. To frame Shelley's life in this way is to suggest that it belongs to a kind of ruptural reckoning of time—but this is not the rupture of a messianic millennium. Where the second coming anticipated by Churchill's radicals comes with a telos, an imagined utopia, a

[30] Shelley, *The Masque of Anarchy*.
[31] Richard Holmes, *Shelley: The Pursuit* (New York Review of Books, 1974).

haunting is an irrationality without purpose, a menace with no discernable *why*. There is a tension between these two kinds of rupture in *Bloody Poetry,* a play whose characters are reaching for a millennium but who find their fingers clutching only gaping, clammy ghosts. It builds not toward a moment of revolutionary success or collapse but merely toward Percy's famous, almost predestined, accidental death. By then, their small commune has already unraveled, and the unspoken afterword is that Byron will die two years later of fever, that Mary will be forced to return to England and, though she will continue to write and publish, will be financially dependent on her disapproving father for most of her remaining life. They will be more remembered for their literary work than for their radical politics, will be assimilated into the mainstream, anthologized, taught in survey courses, and lose some of their teeth, perhaps, along the way. The haunting ends and history proceeds, lumbering along, indifferent to the threat of rupture. This, not Percy's death, is the play's true tragedy.

Greenland is perhaps the most complex, and the most literally utopian, of this trilogy, and in it the loss of events figures differently in ways I will come to later. But for now it is worth pointing to a moment that echoes the strain of paralysis in *Sore Throats* and *Bloody Poetry*, the sense that nothing is happening to move time forward. *Greenland* has two distinct halves. In the first part, set on election day in 1987, a local Labour candidate named Joan stands on a bridge after the sweeping Conservative victory trying, fruitlessly, to conjure some notion of the utopia her campaign had been reaching for. She asks her lover if he has any concrete idea what a true communist England would look like. He admits he does not. Neither does she.

> JOAN: People want to know what we want, Bill. On the doorstep. And we can't describe it. Only flat, lead phrases…. Dignity of the working people…. Right to work…. Healthcare, pensions, decent life… blah, blah. I mean what, what life? (29)[32]

Joan senses that the telos of her political action has ossified, grown (like *The Masque of Anarchy*) cold and sterile by its absorption into the mainstream. Her utopic vision, if ever she

[32] Brenton, *Greenland.*

had one, has blurred and faded. And though she is planning a concession speech that will call on her comrades to "keep the barby going under umbrellas, if needs must" (28)—to stay sharp during the next five years of Tory rule—this image of gritty perseverance belies her real feelings. It is a hopefulness she cannot share. Joan's listing of "healthcare, pensions, decent life" is the language that critic Michael Billington suggested Brenton was too quick to dismiss, the fulcrum of his ambivalent review that closed by arguing that "only when all people are properly housed, clothed and fed will we have a glimpse of paradise."[33] Billington wanted realism, and this is Brenton at his most realist; it offers a scene that might almost have happened on that midsummer night a year before the play was staged. But instead of the faith Billington places in the routine Labour solutions, this moment captures a prevailing dismay: that the modes of socialist thought available to the imagination cannot answer the present, can only repeat Williams' "electoral gestures," Badiou's syntagma *nooppositionmotionaaccepted*, in response to neoliberalism's proposed end of history. The future is flat and featureless, and even the most committed revolutionaries cannot summon an event to interrupt it.

IV

I have tried to unfold how in one register, Brenton's utopia trilogy mourns this loss of events. England is a country whose real revolution never came, whose greatest minds must seek rupture elsewhere, whose public sphere has atrophied so much that it forecloses meaningful history. It is telling that the first act of *Greenland* takes place during an election that does not result in a change of government: not a revolution but a consolidation, a retrenchment, a moment when the status quo does not shift but rather hardens and congeals.

[33] Billington, "Paradise Lost."

It would be wrong to ignore this dimension and the way it seems to confirm Halpern's account of a crisis of action, or indeed Williams' skepticism about the possibilities of utopian thinking. But Williams, one of the great exponents of how our cultural forms structure our material worlds, may also offer models to talk about the complex ways the loss of events figures in the premillennial imagination, and how here, even in Brenton's trilogy that grieves it, it can operate on both a tragic and a utopian plane. Williams wrote *Modern Tragedy* in response to a developing midcentury orthodoxy, an account articulated memorably but not exclusively by George Steiner. Tragedy, for Steiner, is an orientation in which "man is taken to be an unwelcome guest in the world," an alienation captured by the German *Unheimlichkeit* (xi): it evinces a kind of Hellenic nihilism, a sense that the universe and its gods are arbitrary, violent, and irrational, that "the forces which shape or destroy our lives lie outside the governance of reason or justice" (6–7).[34] The books of the tragic do not balance; misfortunes are not compensated for by relief or grace; evil goes unpunished; no justice is served and all that is left is an immense, incomprehensible abyss. The size of the catastrophe is all out of proportion with the mistakes that created it. Tragedy's heroes live in a world indifferent to their suffering and hostile to their very existence; the universe strips them down to what King Lear calls "unaccommodated man," a "poor, bare forked animal" whose suffering has no meaning or redemption.[35]

This is a compelling way to read plays like *Oedipus* or *The Bacchae*, with their potent "metaphysic of desperation" (xi), and it is not an unconvincing prelude to Steiner's argument that the Enlightenment makes tragic thinking, in its Hellenic sense, impossible. But it places politics in rather a strange place. Politics is, at its core, a hopeful enterprise: it is action in pursuit of a goal, and why act on any measure, at any scale, if there is no possibility of change? Steiner's view is antipolitical: it abstracts the tragic from its contexts of deep social crisis and

[34] Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy*.
[35] William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, ed. Grace Ioppolo (Norton, 2008), III.iv.100–101.

insists that it "belongs to a deeper and closer experience, to man," Williams says, "not to society" (87).[36] Tragedy is an existential crisis for its hero, a moment in which they come face to face with the arbitrary, wanton violence of the universe and find that it cannot be diverted from its destructive course. There is nothing to be done but scream into the void. In this world, social catastrophes cannot be tragedies because tragedy, true tragedy, is fundamentally individual. It can have nothing to do with the political. The stakes of this generic argument are real: "Before," Williams argues, referring to an era when the tragic hero's status as ruler or prince had lost its quality as metonym for a body politic, "we could not recognise tragedy as social crisis; now, commonly, we cannot recognise social crisis as tragedy" (88). The way Steiner's (by then orthodox) view boxes tragedy into the private sphere, into the realm of the internal, the existential, the subjective, Williams shows, is a failure of political vision as much as it is a literary or historical claim. It is a model that cannot touch some of the most sensitive and radical and unstable forms of our politics. The orthodox view of tragedy explicitly opposes the idea of revolution: revolution is fundamentally optimistic, while tragedy is fundamentally not. Revolution imagines that human action can have some impact toward human liberation; the orthodox view of tragedy imagines, in Williams' striking phrasing, "that man cannot change his condition, but can only drown his world in blood in the vain attempt" (99).

One can hear in that language why he feels we must reject this view. *Modern Tragedy* is, among other things, an exposition of the deep tragedy at the core of even the most revolutionary political forms. "The idea of 'the total redemption of humanity,'" Williams says, with a nod to Aristotle,

> is born in pity and terror: in the perceptions of a radical disorder in which the humanity of some men is denied and by that fact the idea of humanity itself is denied. It is born in the actual suffering of real men thus exposed, and in all the consequences of this suffering: degeneration, brutalisation, fear, hatred, envy. It is born in an experience of evil made the more intolerable by the conviction that it is not inevitable, but is the result of particular actions and choices.
>
> And if it is thus tragic in its origins—in the existence of a disorder that cannot but move and involve—it is equally tragic in its action, in that it is not

[36] Williams, *Modern Tragedy*.

> against gods or inanimate things that its impulse struggles, nor against mere institutions and social forms, but against other men [...]. What is properly called utopianism, or revolutionary romanticism, is the suppression or dilution of this quite inevitable fact. (102)

Williams' tone, with its reduction of "utopianism" to mere "revolutionary romanticism," is dismissive here, but it softens somewhat in his 1979 afterword. I have already quoted part of the following passage:

> It has been argued that it is time now to move from a tragic to a utopian mode, and there is some strength in this; it is a classical form of invigoration and hopeful protest; it is also, at any time, a necessary mode of one area of social thought. But [...] neither the frankly utopian form, nor even the more qualified outlines of practicable futures, which are now so urgently needed, can begin to flow until we have faced, at the necessary depth, the divisions and contradictions which now inhibit them. (218)[37]

Though he does not say it in so many words, what emerges between these two passages is a dialectic of tragedy and utopia. They are modes of thought that contradict but also generate each other: politics is simultaneously tragic, starting as it does with the radical *dis*order of "evil made the more intolerable by the conviction that it is not inevitable," and utopic, imagining as it does the radical *order* of "the total redemption of humanity." For a politics made up of events, as Badiou says all politics are, a loss of events can figure as both. Such a dialectic cannot exist within a tragic universe like Steiner's: if suffering and evil are the immutable conditions of being, then utopia is not just the "no-place" its etymology implies but is in fact fundamentally inconceivable—not just "not anywhere" but simply "not." But to acknowledge, as Williams does, the tragic conditions of revolution's birth and the ongoing tragedy of its politics is to make utopia its natural inverse, its forever unreachable telos, its always-already-failing vindication.

These are the lines along which Brenton's utopia trilogy operates. An early scene in *Greenland* hints at this structure by invoking, of all things, a passion play.[38] On election day 1987, the telegenic evangelizer Betty Blaze has planned a counter-protest with members of the South London anti-pornography committee. When it arrives, the protest itself consists of an

[37] Williams, "Afterword, 1979."
[38] Brenton, *Greenland*.

acting troupe staging a crucifixion scene under a banner that reads "PASSION OF A WOMAN VOTER." They are led by a Virgin Mary lamenting "the housewife voter crucified" and a bare-breasted female Christ in fluffy pink slippers. Other set pieces are scrawled with "DON'T VOTE," "NOBODY CARES," "VOTE FOR NOBODY" (15). This performance is more complex than perhaps even the protestors realize. It does, as they intend, subvert the sacred iconography of the crucifixion: mortification of a woman's body instead of a man's, the invocation of a "Mother in Paradise," an offensive shade of decidedly irreverent, artificial pink. But a conventional passion play, which ritualistically re-performs Christ's salvific death in terms that look strictly religious, tends to obscure how deeply political that death in fact is. The passion is the originating event of kingdom come, the descent into and conquest over death that makes possible the millennium, when, in one literal reading of Revelation, Christ will return and personally govern the earth for a thousand years with his faithful servants at his side.[39] A passion play is a political-theological act, a recreation of a founding event in anticipation of a coming eschatology; like Claire's imagined statues, it is the future's reification of images of the past. But the protest here does not have such an eschatology. It is, or at least imagines itself to be, anti-political rather than tragic: the injunction "DON'T VOTE" is a refusal of the electoral forms that have continually reproduced Tory rule, and it is a resolute negative, suggesting no alternative and foreshadowing no oncoming millennium. The protesters are subverting not just the reified images of the *Via Crucis* but also their telos. Where a typical passion play offers a hope both for redemption and for the advent of the kingdom of heaven, this one offers only apathy; instead of dying to save her people, this Jesus dies for a kind of nothingness, a failed politics, a homogenous, anti-utopic future. After all, nobody cares. In 1987, not even a woman Christ is mighty to save.

[39] Revelation 20:1–6, *The English Bible, King James Version: The New Testament and the Apocrypha,* Herbert Marks, Gerald Hammond, and Austin Busch, eds. (Norton, 2012).

But though a nearby constable breaks up the passion play, something like the telos it does not imagine itself to have is only beginning to take shape. To Betty's acute dismay and embarrassment, the Christ actor being arrested for public nudity turns out to be her own daughter, Judy; to Judy's acute dismay and embarrassment, her censorious moral campaigner of a mother pulls strings to get her released from jail without charges.[40] Later that night, after Judy has angrily decapitated all Betty's carefully-tended flowers with a pair of hedge shears, and after Betty has moaned that her personal Gethsemane will be "a wrecked garden in Wimbledon" (24), Judy manages to articulate a sense that they are not so different from each other:

> JUDY. Mother, has it never struck you that we both want the same thing?
> BETTY. Never!
> JUDY. You and your Christian lunatics, your anti-porners, your clean-up TV campaigners, in your gospel halls? I and my friends, street-theatre clowns, squatters, in our resource centres in shabby shops? We all want a new world. That has… Light. That's human, and decent, and… Clean? We both want… A new Jerusalem? (24)

Betty is not ready to consider whether this soft, postulative speech of Judy's might hold some truth; uncharacteristically agitated, she storms outside and drives off into the rain. But Judy has just gestured toward the dialectic that her earlier passion play somehow captures. The crucifixion is not a tragic event in Steiner's terms. Quite the opposite, in fact: rather than a mark of the essentially arbitrary nature of suffering, it is the emblem and embodiment of suffering's rationality, final proof that mortals will be justified before the divine, that wrongs will be made right and evils compensated by holy law. But it might be a tragic event in Williams' terms. It is, after all, "born in pity and terror: in the perceptions of a radical disorder," in a terrible estrangement between humans and their god; that the disorder is transcendent, cosmic rather than immanent or material does not make the vision of "the total redemption of humanity" less revolutionary. For a brief moment here, Judy strains toward a world that might be the telos of both the radically religious and the radically secular, bound to the sacred iconography that her

[40] This Judy is not the same as the Judy as from *Sore Throats,* though the name suggests a parallel—another (lesbian?) character whose utopianism takes the form of an absolute refusal.

believing mother worships but of which she, too, has borrowed the clothes. To label this world a "new Jerusalem" is to invoke the crucifixion, to acknowledge both its tragic foundations—in suffering, in deicide, in the Old Jerusalem and the Way of the Cross—and its utopian horizons, its vision of a world that is decent, clean, remade.

Four of the characters who make up *Greenland*'s mostly realist first act are about to plunge headfirst into the Thames and, like the four lovers in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, wake up to find themselves in a fairy kingdom. Betty is among them, as is Joan, the Labour Party candidate who could not imagine a communist England. They stumble seven hundred years into Britain's future, where they will spend the second act coming to terms with the actual, tangible utopia it has become. Its inhabitants call it Greenland. In Greenland, there is no money, no economy; no centralized decision-making, no concept of private property; no one does work they do not want to do. Its people are farmers, artists, mathematicians, philosopher kings. Joan encounters a jeweler named Jace, who hands her a beautifully polished gem. She asks how much he wants for it, but he is puzzled by the question. "You want me to have this? A gift?" she asks. He answers, as if the very premise were silly, "You don't *have* it, do you? A jewel. A jewel belongs to itself. All you can do is carry it around. Lose it. Pass it on. Chuck it away" (34). Betty comes across a trio of lovers romping naked in the forest, unburdened by guilt or shame; she is appalled, but also—against her own will—intrigued, even aroused. She loudly condemns them, tries to teach them how to pray, but finds herself confessing in an aside that she keeps a stash of porn at home, that she, like them, feels the thumping of desire in her ears (41). Echoing Sally in *Sore Throats* and Claire in *Bloody Poetry*, the lovers make it their "experiment" (43) to try to love Betty, too.

After months of living in this future, Joan is dismayed to find herself becoming like the Greenlanders, and then dismayed that she is dismayed:

> I am in a world where everything I have ever dreamed of, has happened.
> In here, all value is the value of labour. No one works, but everyone is busy.
> [...] You may spend two years growing tea. Just... get into tea growing. If you get

> fed up, you drift away. Build a boat, drown sailing in the Indian Ocean. But there's always tea to be had. I go mad! 'How is it organized? Production and supply?' They shrug and say, 'There are enough people in the world.'
>
> 'But what,' I say, 'if everyone wants to grow tea in India?'
>
> Again, a shrug. 'There'd be a lot of tea' they say.
>
> It can't work! There are no politics! No one decides anything! No one's in charge! I just die for… some authority! A little touch of leadership, a bit of bracing tyranny! God what am I saying? (46–47).

There is a kind of tragic comedy to the figure of the communist Labour Party candidate who, against all her deeply-held convictions, finds herself yearning for "a bit of bracing tyranny"—as if even the most visionary, illuminated human plans will always be checked by a primal impulse toward a world governed by the Leviathan. In a Hobbesian universe, paradise is not impossible because humans fail to organize themselves in pursuit of it; it is impossible because humans do not, in the end, actually want it.

But Brenton's tongue is in his cheek here. This is not to say that we are meant to treat Greenland unseriously: on the contrary, like Claire's confidence in *Bloody Poetry* that Shelley and Byron's meeting "will be like a statue," Joan's incredulity registers the magnitude of the worldbuilding, the weighty and earnest political imagination, that underlies such a future. (After all, declares the epigraph to *Greenland*, a quote from Joseph Beuys, "We're here to build cathedrals" (11).) Rather, the teasing characterization of Joan in this speech is part of Brenton's refusal of the literalism that critics of his day seemed to want. In a 2008 essay on *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Hugh Grady describes a contemporary critical derogation of aesthetics, a tendency to reduce art to ideology.[41] "In an era dominated by French poststructuralist theory," he writes, "the aesthetic has been the opposite of the political" (274); to study aesthetics at such a moment feels inescapably conservative, retrograde, preoccupied by forms and frills and niceties while ignoring their wider context or social milieu; it is a mode of criticism associated, Grady says, with the likes of Northrop Frye, now thought priggish and passé; though aesthetics has not been so maligned in Shakespeare studies, Grady suggests, "it has instead been removed

[41] Hugh Grady, "Shakespeare and Impure Aesthetics: The Case of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 59, no. 3 (2008): 274–302.

from the work of art and applied to cultures as a whole, effacing the distance between art and the society which produced it and thus threatening to rob the artwork of its critical stance" (275). One outcome has been "that art's utopian potential—its ability to create visions of the nonexisting, to embody desire and not just received ideas—has become virtually unthinkable" (276).

Grady is not thinking about Brenton at all, of course, but he is very aptly describing the condition of utopia as a genre in 1988. When the *Guardian* critic Billington chides Brenton for discarding the "classic Labour solutions—'health-care, pensions, decent life'"—he is insisting, perhaps unwittingly, that the aesthetic is bound by the real and that the political is the horizon of art; he is doubling down on "received ideas" and rejecting the notion that the play might "create visions of the nonexisting," might "embody desire." But Grady argues that a tradition of utopian thinking—attributable largely to Ernst Bloch but also to Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, Frederic Jameson and others—refuses such easy circumscription of the aesthetic by the political. The artwork, while not free of its social and cultural context, is not reducible to that context, either; somehow it stands apart. In this tradition, "the aesthetic is a site for fantasies of all kinds, social as well as sexual" (284). Art, in other words, can have utopian horizons precisely *because* it discards the classic solutions, because it cannot be curtailed to the merely realist. Grady's account of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which I find persuasive, suggests that this very old, very English play stages just such a theory of art's relationship to the real:

> In relation to the privileged or heightened material of the fairy plot in *Midsummer Night's Dream*, the young-lovers plot represents the familiar world of human experience in an idealized form and language, but clearly in a more realist mode than the fairy realm. The play models in its own aesthetic space an implied theory about the relation of the aesthetic to the larger social world. (281)

And indeed, this is the model that finally made *Greenland* possible for Brenton. He describes struggling for years to write a utopian play until, taking Shakespeare as a template, he relinquished the demands of realism:

> Imagine then the folly of a writer trying to describe a new 'world culture,' seven hundred years hence, free of conflict and oppression. How do you dramatize *people without fear*? We wouldn't understand a word they said. It was not surprising that the first draft for *Greenland* was [...] definitely one for the bonfire.
>
> Then I realized there was a model, Shakespearean romantic comedy: *As You Like It* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. I took the basic joke—people like us, with all our hates, confusions and contemporary troubles hanging from them like rags, get lost in a 'magic wood', a new, alternative reality. The comedy comes from them loving or hating it, and from watching our assumptions about our 'human nature' challenged and changed. (xv)[42]

There is a deliberate flavor of Titania and Oberon's fairy kingdom to the play, with its fanciful characters who seem plucked out of fables, its pretense of distance from history and politics, and, especially, the premonition that it might all be a wild, rapturous dream. The *eros* in Grady's language—desire, fantasy, embodiment—suits *Greenland,* which is in some measure a play about desire. Most literally this manifests in Betty, who has spent her life suppressing and condemning and concealing any suggestion of arousal and who, in a utopia where no one suffers, suffers bitterly from desire. In agony she excoriates herself for sleeping with the trio of lovers who are trying to love her: after months of working to convert them to a new Christian church while guiltily sharing their bed, she finally cries, "I know what you are. You are my gaolers. I am in hell. And you are my keepers" (49). The Greenlanders cannot understand. "Why do they think they are in hell, or in gaol?" a bemused Oh' wonders of the four time-travelers. "When they are at liberty?" (49).

But the desire is not only sexual: it is the very substance on which Greenland is built. A pair of chatting far-future archaeologists, Sasha and Annette, are discussing visionaries, Greenlanders who seem to be able to spin any imagined object into reality:

> SASHA. [...] I have had the most unfortunate experiences with visionaries. I spent a year in a sleeping bag in the Sahara because of one of 'em.
> ANNETTE. Why? [...]
> SASHA. There's a two-thousand-year-old Arabic story. It goes... ready?
> *She nods.*
> 'Destitute. Friendless. In a foreign land, Maruf at first mentally conceived, then described, an unbelievable caravan of riches was on its way to him. But this fantasy did not lead to his exposure, or

[42] Brenton, *Plays: 2*.

disgrace. The imagined caravan of dreams took shape. Became, for a time, real. And arrived.

ANNETTE. […]Did your caravan become real, and arrive?

SASHA. Oh yeah, it arrived all right.
A pause.
Came out of the haze. Like a sailing ship. Over the sand. I nearly died. (37)

The story Sasha seems to be citing is the last in *The Thousand and One Nights*, which tells how Ma'aruf the Cobbler is spirited away from his tyrannical and abusive wife in Cairo to adventures in a faraway land.[43] Ma'aruf begins his new life by pretending to be wealthy, and the fantasy seems to summon wealth to him; by what is almost an act of conjuring he emerges married to a princess and keyed in to the royal coffers. Sasha's recounting of the story is remarkable: it suggests that the act of imagining this "unbelievable caravan of riches" was enough to summon it into being. This is not quite what has happened to the play's time travelers—Joan, remember, could not, and Betty would not, imagine the utopia that is Greenland—but Ma'aruf's story nonetheless echoes theirs. All are swept from their exhausted, unhappy realities; all find themselves in new worlds that operate on alien, unfathomable rules. What is even more remarkable, though, is that having heard this story from a visionary, Sasha seems to have taken a sleeping bag into the Sahara to live such a story himself—that, like Ma'aruf's, his caravan became real, and arrived. "Came out of the haze. Like a sailing ship. Over the sand."

There is no indication in the text that Sasha means this any way but literally. Desiring the apparition is enough to make it reality. It seems that Greenland itself is summoned out of desire, and much of the play's comical confusion comes from characters who, desiring, still cannot relinquish the mean, impoverished gestures of their twentieth-century realities. Brenton's fairy forest, charged with *eros* and buzzing with magic, is partaking of a literary genre that had become almost unimaginable in 1988: utopia, unbruised by the constraints of the real. What Joan is voicing when she yearns for "a bit of bracing tyranny" is the same kind of skepticism that made this trilogy such an unlikely project to begin with. "It can't work!" she cries. "There are no

[43] N. J. Dawood, *Tales from the Thousand and One Nights* (Penguin, 1980).

politics!" She is, in a way, like other characters in other moments of this trilogy, protesting the loss of events. She spends much of the second act trying to restore them by piecing together what has happened in the centuries that have elapsed since her own time—that is, how the cruel and bleak 1987 she left behind could possibly have turned into such a verdant future. But she finds that Greenlanders generally make poor historians. When she asks about events in the past, they laugh and offer up personal mundanities:

> JOAN: Just tell me what has happened in the last seven hundred years.
> *He stares at her.*
> JACE: What? History?
> *She nods. A pause.*
> JACE: Well.
> *He laughs.*
> I picked m'nose. (47)

Eventually Joan goes to visit Severan Severan, who is, in the words of the play, "the last reactionary" (48). He is crabbed and wheelchair-bound from a life of principled contrarianism; he shouts loudly about the importance of pain, "to concentrate the analysis!"; he considers it his function "to make as much trouble as possible in their" —everyone else's—"insipid ideal" (51). Nearly alone among Greenlanders, he retains a memory of history because he still conceives of history as struggle. In Greenland, in utopia, this is rather passé. "For a world at peace," Severan says, "the only authentic history is an endless 'now'."

For who needs history in a world without politics? What history can be written without wars, famines, migrations, regimes, coups, dynasties, nations? Without events? Greenlanders are insistently frivolous. Their things are beautiful for no reason. They drift from one occupation to the next without concern for whether either fills a useful role. When Joan asks how all of this happened, the answer is not (as Percy Shelley might have expected) a revolution: there was no bloodshed, no politics, no great assembly of the fearless, of the free. "A mass defection!" Severan rails. "Humanity defected! Just… walked away! To piss in the hedges, walk in the woods, mooning about. Bah. I hate it so" (54). Like Joan, Severan, the last reactionary, is personally offended by the disappearance of politics. It matters here that the word "reactionary," from the

French *réactionnaire,* emerges in the late eighteenth century to describe those opposed to revolution;[44] the strange, comical insistence that Severan is the last one, and that his stance, contrarianism, matters more than its content, would suggest that he is the lone holdout against an apocalyptic, world-changing event like one imagined by idealists wandering the streets of Paris in 1789. But that is not quite right. I have written at length about how the loss of events in this trilogy is often anti-utopian, how revolution always seems just on the horizon only to be smothered by the dead march of neoliberal time, the homogenous end of history. Here, though, it takes on another valence: here the last great event is anti-political. It introduces a new time which is also homogenous but in which the loss of events constitutes utopia itself. Greenland's last reactionary is protesting not revolution but rather its failure to materialize, its capitulation to, its disappearance among, billions of lazy, mooning hedge-pissers. Severan issues a complaint about his young assistant's nails: "Hologram nail varnish. Bah! Millennia of struggle! For decoration on a young woman's hand!" (52). *Greenland*, with its persistent will to figure the loss of events in a utopian light, seems to ask: what more should, or could, millennia of struggle be for?

There is reason to return now, for a moment, to *Bloody Poetry*. When Byron, in a tone that is somehow both tongue-in-cheek and desperately earnest, confesses to Shelley that he has fallen into a kind of despair, Shelley rebukes him:

> BYSSHE: What right do you have to do that? You do not have the right. Despair? Easy, George! Cheap merchandise for a writer. You will end up silent or making a pretty lyric out of the phrase 'I have nothing to say.' The people of England—they may well have the right to despair. So would you—if you were a mill-hand in Manchester, or a child down a mine, or a mother to a laborer's child in a filthy hovel—
> BYRON: Perish the thought—
> BYSSHE: But for a poet to despair? Obscene! We claim to be the poets of the people of England. How dare we—luxuriate in denouncing the human cause as lost? The great instrument of moral good is the imagination. We must not let it become diseased! We must be optimists for human nature.

[44] *Oxford English Dictionary*, "reactionary (n. & adj.)," July 2023, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1055808026.

I do not believe Brenton is being dogmatic: his plays stage the pitfalls and contradictions of his characters' idealisms alongside their affective power. But I do think Shelley is voicing Brenton's own commitments here. "The great instrument of moral good is the imagination"—a rebuke of those whose imaginations have atrophied, who reject utopian thinking in Brenton's own time, whether columnists like Billington in the *Guardian* or drama professors like Williams out of Cambridge. It is perhaps the most straightforward declaration of the aesthetic theory implied by this trilogy: that imagination—fantasy, invention, vision, *eros*, midsummer nights' dreams—is art's province and privilege, and to impose on it the limits of the real is to invite despair, is to luxuriate in denouncing the human cause as lost. If we are to take the Greenlander Sasha at his word that his imagined caravan came out of the haze, like a sailing ship over the sand, we must consider that the act of envisioning something has a kind of constitutive power, that to think it is to materialize it. Hearing Sasha invoke a sailing ship, one remembers Oscar Wilde, imagining a future in which human days are spent in the making of beautiful things: "Is this Utopian? A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing" (43).[45]

Recall Brenton's epigraph to *Bloody Poetry,* about how Shelley's life is "more a haunting than a history." To excerpt a single sentence like this necessarily obscures somewhat its intended meaning, and there is more to it than meets the eye. The biography's author, summarizing the contributions he believes it makes—additional original research, an emphasis on Claire's role in Shelley's life, closer attention to the gradual development of his central poetic themes—concludes his introduction thus:

> Finally, I have redrawn the critical estimate of both Shelley's major poetry and his prose, and attempted to set it as vividly as possible in its immediate physical setting, and against the disturbed and excited political period which brought it into being, and which flashes up through the years towards our own. This last is a comparison that I have never presumed to mention, since that has not been my task. But it stands there for anyone who has eyes to see, ears to hear, or heart to

[45] Oscar Wilde, *The Soul Of Man Under Socialism* (Arthur L. Humphreys, 1912).

> feel, sometimes so close that Shelley's life seems more a haunting than a history. (xii)[46]

Isolated as an epigraph, "more a haunting than a history" sounds like it perhaps describes Shelley's experience of his own life, and indeed this is one way *Bloody Poetry* means it; Shelley says as much himself ("Hasn't my life become a kind of haunting?") when Harriet's ghost first appears (72). But the fuller context is a flash of illumination. Holmes does not mean that Shelley experienced his life as a haunting but rather that Shelley's own historical moment "flashes up through the years towards our own," and that if we have eyes to see or ears to hear, we might feel him haunting the present. History, in other words, *is* the haunting. Holmes gestures, via Shelley, toward a kind of historical circularity, perhaps even toward a Benjaminian *jetztzeit* in which the present cites prior ages as precedents, as inspiration or pattern for its own revolutionary ethos.[47] In such a frame, though a haunting may suggest an eternally echoing ghost of the past, it is not in fact antithetical to the historical; the looping of time it implies could itself be iterative, progressive, ruptural—utopian.

V

Shortly after Judy, in *Sore Throats,* dumps the money out onto the stage, a kind of silence will slip between her and Sally. They begin speaking past each other, delivering alternating asides:

> SALLY: […] *(Aside.)* You slum. You slink around. Don't go out for weeks. Don't get dressed. Don't even stand up much, just lie on the floor. When you want a drink, walk to the fridge on your knees.
> JUDY: *(aside)* You want 'an experience.' The moment, once and for all, when everything—burns.
> SALLY: *(aside)* You watch the tomato sauce on the old dinner plate. First it goes hard, then greeny. One of the reasons you get up around midday is to see—what's happening to that bit of tomato sauce.
> JUDY: *(aside)* Sometimes you see it, sometimes you don't.

[46] Holmes, *Shelley*.
[47] I hear echoes, too, of Caryl Churchill's description of the Levellers during the English Civil War, quoted in the prologue: "Though nobody now expects Christ to make heaven on earth, their voices are surprisingly close to us." Caryl Churchill, *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire* (Bloomsbury, 2013), iii.

SALLY: *(aside)* Yeah, there's a lot to do when you personally disintegrate. Counting the bits of you as they fall off.
JUDY: *(aside)* See a country, the other side of the wall. Sweet fields, rivers, forests. All you have to do is knock a few bricks out, wriggle through a hole onto the grass.
SALLY: *(aside)* Still, it's warm, for a while.
JUDY: *(aside)* You think—when the sunlight falls on the floorboards, along that edge of the rug, it'll begin.
'The new life?' The walk in Paradise Gardens?
But the sun goes in.
Or you weren't actually looking for that split second.
Or fall asleep and wake up when it's raining.
(She scoffs.)
What am I trying to do, make magic? (25–26)

The images in their reveries are at odds with each other, but they are converging on the same thing. Sally is describing a non-event. The tomato sauce dries, goes green, but this is a process so mundane and so gradual that it takes days; her tone implies a change like the drift of the continents, not an event in time so much as a manifestation of time itself. The only thing approaching an "event" is waking up to observe it. Judy, on the other hand, is describing missing an event, "the moment, once and for all, when everything burns." She imagines picking a marker, a "when" for it to transpire—when the sunlight falls on the floorboards on the far edge of the rug—then waiting, determined to catch it happening only to blink at the wrong moment, to be foiled by incoming clouds, to fall asleep and wake up to rain. Sally is speaking of time uninterrupted; Judy is speaking of an interruption that, when attention slips and time passes unobserved, does not happen. Both, strangely, reach toward a temporal homogeneity removed from the external markers of events or history.

The "experience" Judy conceives of is not content-less. In a departure from Bataille, for whom expended energy is wholly without a telos, a figure of "a pure and simple loss" (22), Judy imagines not merely a flash of fiery destruction and then nothing, oblivion; there seems a way in which, like some kind of Rapture, "the moment when everything burns" yields a new kind of horizon. It is not always visible, but glimpses of it suggest "a country, the other side of the wall, sweet fields, rivers, forests." And, what is more, Judy imagines, there is a way to get there: "All

you have to do is knock a few bricks out, wriggle through a hole onto the grass." From where, one wonders? From inside a space, like the living room? From inside a time, like the present? (Judy is right to wonder if what she is trying to do is make magic, conjuring Narnia-esque doors to other worlds.) There is something messianic about a conflagration that gives way to a "walk in the Paradise Gardens." Indeed, some kind of apocalypse is what Judy and Sally long for, a rupture in the flattened, homogenous time meted out by the private "economy" of their little flat. But Judy, describing an unevent, seems to be registering the failure of rupture, or at least its contingency: the sun may only ever reach the edge of the rug in one future out of thousands. In all the rest, the barest accident of weather or the briefest lapse of attention derails the Rapture and its implied promise of utopia.

There are apocalyptic biblical passages that warn against such an unevent as Judy's. In Mark, a Christ who has just foretold that the temple will be destroyed, nations riven by wars and rumors of wars, the world rocked by famines and troubles and earthquakes in divers places, cautions his disciples:

> 34 For the Son of Man is as a man taking a far journey, who left his house and gave authority to his servants, and to every man his work, and commanded the porter to watch.
> 35 Watch ye therefore: for ye know not when the master of the house cometh, at even, or at midnight, or at the cockcrowing, or in the morning:
> 36 Lest coming suddenly he find you sleeping.[48]

My next chapter, about Timberlake Wertenbaker's *Our Country's Good,* will also dwell on a biblical passage with a metaphor of household and of masters or husbands absent. Where in that passage, from Proverbs, the empty house is a place for the adulterous wife, the "strange woman," to bed the lover she has seduced, in Mark it is a place for the undiligent servant to shirk his duties when he believes himself unobserved. But this latter unfaithfulness comes with a threat of interruption: ye know not when the master of the house cometh. Watch ye, therefore, lest coming suddenly he find you sleeping. If Proverbs finds itself tangled in a geopathology, in

[48] Mark 13:34–36, *The English Bible, King James Version: The New Testament and the Apocrypha*, ed. by Herbert Marks, Gerald Hammond, and Austin Busch (Norton, 2012).

which the home is both the setting of appropriate domestic behavior and of lascivious and sinful extramarital sex, Mark's pathology is a temporal one. The household has a routine, each servant a work to carry out, and the authority to do it while the master is away on his far journey. The metaphor asks how well they will preserve the routine in the master's absence. Insofar, at least, as they are faithful stewards, the routine can run on as it always does, regardless of whether the master is there; his absence may be abnormal, but it is not necessarily disruptive. The unwatchful servant is not even a named hypothetical but merely the figure implied as the mode shifts from parable ("the Son of Man is as a man taking a far journey") to direct command ("watch ye therefore"). So the promised event, "when the master of the house cometh," threatens to restore continuity by interrupting it, just as in millennialist Christianity the second coming promises to bring a thousand years of peace via schismatic violence, the razing of nations, peoples, temples. "There shall not be left one stone upon another," says Christ earlier in the same chapter, "that shall not be thrown down." The temporal homogeneity of the end of history can come only via rupture.

But Judy, conjuring such a rupture, also imagines sleeping through it. To use the figure whose possibility Christ only implies, she is the unwatchful servant. Yet unlike in the biblical parable, where the master's coming will happen whether the servant is watching or not, in *Sore Throats,* unwatchfulness seems to deflect it: if you blink at the wrong moment or if the clouds roll in or if you fall asleep, Judy's speech seems to say, the rupture doesn't happen. No calamities unfold; no messiah comes; there is no "moment, once and for all, when everything burns." Sally's tomato sauce goes on greening.

Rupture deferred, revolution stalled, the millennium foreclosed—this is the stagnancy that, in the first act, makes *Sore Throats* almost unbearable, that characterizes metropolitan London and the empty, homogenous time that traps the play in Judy's private little flat. It is the set of unevents that makes up the substance, indeed the tragedy, of *Bloody Poetry* with its band of helpless, hopeless Romantics who cannot live utopia among themselves, let alone carry it to

the rest of the world. It is the election of 1987 and the cementing of conservative power with which *Greenland* begins. But it is also, here, the stuff of Judy and Sally's experiment against the order of things: resolutely unproductive, irresponsible, and indolent, they have spent weeks, Sally implies, letting this homogeneity wash over them, getting up only to watch the tomato sauce decay on the unwashed dinner plate. This rejection of the actions that make up a proper bourgeois life under Thatcherism in the eighties—showering, getting dressed, doing the dishes—is both a refusal of neoliberalism's end of history and a refusal to respond to it by *restoring* history, and its events, to the imagination. Severan Severan would rail against this flattening, but Sally and Judy have attained something like the experience of other Greenlanders: their only history "is an endless 'now'" (51).[49]

As a genre, English utopia is sundry and idiosyncratic: its conventions are loose and its functions varied. But one way of framing it here, in response to Brenton's utopia plays, might be to set it explicitly against the genre of tragedy. One cannot avoid starting with Aristotle: that "the subject represented" in tragedy "is an action; and the action involves agents, who must necessarily have their distinctive qualities both of character and thought"; that the action must be "serious and also […] complete in itself" (2320)—these stipulations have foregrounded most political-dramatic criticism in Western thought, from Hegel to Arendt to Williams.[50] Richard Halpern's thesis rests on this Aristotelean model: tragedy is in crisis in modernity because its substance, action, has been hollowed out, and therefore its political reach and seriousness have collapsed. I agree with Halpern that tragedy in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is hardly dead, and by no means do I wish to advise playwrights about what forms might adequately answer our own historical moment. But I do think it worth asking if there are other genres of theater that might carry the political reach and seriousness that tragedy once did—and if, channeling Aristotle, we might hazard a guess at their substance.

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[49] Brenton, *Greenland*.
[50] Aristotle, *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, vol. 2 (Princeton UP, 1984).

Could not one answer be utopia? Brenton's plays suggest that the response to Halpern's crisis of action is not to bring action back to the center of human life but rather, perhaps, to start dreaming of alternatives. Sasha's imagined caravan took shape, became, for a time, real, and arrived—not because of any action he took but because he thought it into existence. The moment Byron and Shelley meet is figured, for Claire, not as an event but as a statue, an artwork that will endure through history or in spite of it. Sally, having walked in on Jack mercilessly beating Judy, in maybe the most eloquent speech in all of *Sore Throats*, yearns not so much for the return of history but rather for a strange kind of unevent:

> JUDY. Well if I can't do that the least I want is a good fuck.
> SALLY. Don't we all. […] While we're waiting for the bastards who run our lives to die out. Or give up. Or the Russians to come. Or the Cubans to land in Kent.
>
> Or more than the odd nutter in this fucking country to up and say 'no'—a measly million or so to up and say 'Enough is enough!' Of sitting in this tatty public lavatory on the edge of the continental shelf, constipated right up under the rib cage, bursting for something to happen. Peace to break out, truth to break out, something to break out. The end of the world as we know it, eh? (19)

Bursting for "peace to break out"—such a contradiction! Peace is an empty category, constituted by absence: absence of disturbance, absence of war, absence of hate and violence and oppression. Can we speak of peace breaking out, in the way (or precisely *not* in the way) we speak of war breaking out? Does it constitute something happening, the "measly million" standing up to say "enough is enough!" that Sally longs for? Can it be an event? Or can it be only the absence of events?

One thing is certain: peace breaking out would, indeed, be "the end of the world as we know it."[51] This is a refrain with echoes of apocalypse, catastrophe, millennium. But those echoes are false here. As in the far-future Greenland, peace breaking out implies no great historical or political rupture. If anything, it implies the mass desertion Severan Severan will describe when Joan asks about history: "Humanity defected! Just… walked away! To piss in the

[51] The R.E.M. track you are thinking of came out in 1987. This is eight years after *Sore Throats* was written, but right on time for audiences, too, to think of it when they saw the 1988 production.

hedges, walk in the woods, mooning about" (54). Sally even gives it the indignity of its own scatological metaphor. Far from a great world-historical event like a flood or a renaissance, peace breaking out is like finally shitting after a bout of constipation on a dirty toilet in Camden. The play begins with Jack and Judy reviling each other, disgusted by one another's bodies; by this moment at the end of Act I, the body has become the site of the unevent that, empty though it is, Sally is waiting for, that she imagines will change everything. This very literal privatization—remember, in *Sore* Throats, the site of the *oikos* is the body—strips the unevent of its publicness, of its place in history. Peace breaking out is antihistorical not just in the sense that it is counterfactual, a thing that has not happened, but also in the sense that even if it happened it could not belong to the set of events we call history. It is no more significant than sitting in a tatty public lavatory. Without being antirevolutionary, it is the antirevolution. It's the end of the world as we know it, and Sally feels fine.

So the loss of history, of events, of politics—of action—is, at least here and at least in part, utopian. But is a negative, a "loss," the only way of constructing this genre? I do not think so. There are hints throughout Brenton's three plays that as tragedy is to action, utopia is to place. *Greenland* is almost on-the-nose here. *Sore Throats* takes place in metropolitan London and *Bloody Poetry* in Geneva, but only *Greenland* is named for its setting, and that name is hardly mysterious: it is a land, and it is verdant and flourishing and green. Many characters in the trilogy struggle to imagine beyond their immediate loss of the future, but when they do it is nearly always in terms of place. For Jack it is Canada, where he imagines going to become a timber merchant: he comes back in Act II of *Sore Throats* to announce that he has been there and back and to deliver a wild story about a car accident and a baby born on the roadside and being lost for two days in the wilderness, a story that seems too extraordinary to be real. We, the audience, are not sure whether to believe he has been to Canada, and we also suspect that whether he has been or not is perhaps the wrong question. For Judy in *Greenland*, trying to find a language that her religious mother will understand, it is the scriptural New Jerusalem: "a new

world. That has… Light? That's human, and decent, and… Clean?" (24). For Judy in *Sore Throats*, it is almost more abstract: a glimpse of "a country, the other side of the wall. Sweet fields, rivers, forests." Even Shelley in *Masque of Anarchy* puts his "great assembly" on "some spot of English ground / Where the plains stretch wide around" (33). None of them can imagine the actions that will take them in any meaningful way to the places they have conjured. But they can imagine the places themselves.

That "utopia" depends on place is perhaps not surprising for a word derived straightforwardly from the Greek *topos*. But the overlap with theater lends this a striking dimension: like *action* (and its derivative *acting*), *place* is constitutive of theater itself. This is visible not just in our many uses of the word "scene," which originates in Latin (or perhaps Greek) as a theatrical term for the background against which a play is performed—in English, we have appropriated it for many idioms that invoke place, from *the scene of the crime* (as Judy imagines her body to be) to *a change of scene*.[52] It is also visible in our material architecture: places purpose-built for theater have been a feature of cities in the West for most of modern history. In fact, given late-twentieth-century experiments in postdramatic and non-narrative theater, from Peter Handke to the Wooster Group, I would argue that place is *more* central to theater than action: while it turns out a play does not need characters or plot or action or indeed speech to be a play, it must nonetheless still *take place*. Perhaps one of the last unifying characteristics of what we call "theater" is that it brings an audience together in a particular place. Some might go so far as to say that the mode is not theater if it does not.

This is the ground on which Badiou's claim that theater is most fundamentally *an event* seems suspect to me. He himself uses the phrase "take place" to describe what the theatrical spectacle does; as with politics, its temporariness, the fact that it must begin and must end, that "there can be no permanent theatre," is definitionally necessary (11).[53] But he does not dwell on

[52] *Oxford English Dictionary*, "scene (*n.*)," March 2025, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/ 2815499557.
[53] Badiou, *Rhapsody For The Theatre*.

the implications of this idiom or seem to register the structural demand it creates: that for theater to take place, there must be a place to take. Naturally this does not have to be a literal theater building—living rooms and public parks will do—but the demand holds. Theater must have a scene. And while the *u* (Greek *οὐ*, for "not") in *utopia* may seem an abjuration, utopia too must have a scene: quite fundamentally, the genre is not about actions and their agents or about characters and plot but rather about a place, one that exists nowhere, true, but whose substance is not the less—well, substantial. The "not-place," or the "place that is not," is, somehow, different from "not a place." To point to this common dependence on place as a basis for some kind of identity between theater and utopia would be a step too far, but the parallel is hard to ignore: it seems significant that, regardless of the content, both necessarily begin with a gesture of place-making. Might we extrapolate a little further and call it "worldbuilding"? That may be a stretch, but then again—even Handke begins his anti-drama *Offending the Audience* by describing the atmosphere that should prevail "when the theatergoers enter the room into which they are meant to go" (5).[54] Worldbuilding indeed.

Maybe the strongest claim I can risk about this affinity is that the theater might be an uncommonly intuitive mode for the political work of dreaming utopias. This is a modest enough proposal, but it does put a different cast on what Brenton and the Royal Court were doing when they staged a not-very-popular and not-particularly-well-received "utopia trilogy" in 1988. The late eighties felt stagnant: British political thought had failed for decades to raise a meaningful challenge to the widespread loss of the future, and contemporary art struggled to answer with any kind of new or inventive radicalism. Long dismissed as merely "postmodern" and therefore empty and complicit with power and capital, it had lost its utopian horizons. Its practitioners were left amid the detritus, wondering if a shitty world deserved shitty art or if something more was, in fact, possible. (See the short essay that follows this chapter.) And perhaps the theater offered a place—a stage, a scene—to do the idyllic labor of thinking through what that might be.

[54] Peter Handke, *Kaspar and Other Plays* (Macmillan, 1989).

"Labor" is the right word here, not least because the idyll is so often thought to be without it. It is tempting, especially given all I have said about the loss of events in these three plays, to fall into this conventional assumption: if utopia is constituted primarily by place, if it is defined by the absence of action, surely the corollary is one of idleness. Surely the idyll is defined by the idle. Yet there is no etymological connection between *idle*, from the Old English for "empty, worthless," and *idyll*, which developed in Greek to describe the poetic form with which we still associate it.[55] This surprised me, since it seems so natural that one might be *idle* in an *idyll*, or that the Arcadian associations we heap on idyllic poetry imply a place of idleness, a rustic, picturesque landscape free of labor or action. But the similarity is an accident. Mo Brouwer has written in work yet unpublished about the falseness of idleness in the idyll, about how pastoral poetry and the ways we read it sometimes obscure the labor of the rural landscape; my surprise that *idle* and *idyll* are unrelated is evidence of how susceptible I, too, am to that obscuring tendency. But the insistence of Brenton's utopia trilogy is in fact the opposite. Remember that Joan, describing Greenland, marvels that it is without economy but not without labor: "In here, all value is the value of labour. No one works, but everyone is busy. […] I go mad! 'How is it organized? Production and supply?' They shrug and say, 'There are enough people in the world'" (46–47).[56] There is a Marxist bent to this utopian valuation of labor divorced from capital. It may be useful here to borrow Hannah Arendt's categories but to bring them to a different conclusion: Arendt dismisses *labor* as the low-level, routine, repetitive mundanities that sustain biological life (eating, farming, sex), and she extols *action* as the high-level activities that sustain public life (speech and politics). This is why, for Arendt, "theater is the political art par excellence" (188): it is the only art form that literally consists of speech and politics, that is, of action.[57] But Brenton's restoration of labor to the idyll revalorizes it. Labor

[55] Oxford English Dictionary, "idle (adj. & n.)," December 2024, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/ 7346693777; "idyll (n.)," December 2024, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/ 2263514468.
[56] Brenton, *Greenland*.
[57] Arendt, *The Human Condition*.

divorced from capital is, in Greenland, the purest expression of humanity; it suggests that the substance of utopia is neither idleness nor Arendtian action but, in fact, Arendtian labor—those very mundanities (eating, farming, sex) that have always been neither here nor there, lingering in the periphery, caught in political-dramatic theory's in-between.

W. B. Yeats was thinking about the labor of art in 1903, in his poem "Adam's Curse." This is the second stanza:

> I said 'a line will take us hours maybe,
> Yet if it does not seem a moment's thought
> Our stitching and unstitching has been naught.
> Better go down upon your marrow bones
> And scrub a kitchen pavement, or break stones
> Like an old pauper in all kinds of weather;
> For to articulate sweet sounds together
> Is to work harder than all these and yet
> Be thought an idler by the noisy set
> Of bankers, schoolmasters, and clergymen
> The martyrs call the world.' (23)[58]

The first three lines perform a feint: they insist that to write poetry is to labor, "hours maybe," unless it *feels* like labor: "if it does not seem a moment's thought, / Our stitching and unstitching has been naught." A utopian paradox—labor away, but the moment you think of it as labor it vanishes. (Joan might be saying the same thing when she cries that no one works but everyone is busy.) And then a rueful, wry affirmation and avowal of that artistic effort: "to articulate sweet sounds together / Is to work harder than all these and yet / Be thought an idler by the noisy set / Of bankers, schoolmasters, and clergymen / The martyrs call the world." The poem is describing the conditions both of writing utopia and of utopia itself. Critics scolding Brenton in 1988 for his lack of realism might almost be calling him an idler: why write nonsense about a fairy forest when actual people lack housing and healthcare? And Brenton's *Greenland* imagines a world untainted by Adam's curse—"It's certain," Yeats's speaker goes on, "there is no fine thing / Since Adam's fall but needs much labouring"—a world where work and pleasure are one and the same. That such a world is beyond any realistic reach is beside the point.

[58] W. B. Yeats, *In the Seven Woods* (Macmillan, 1903).

In a 2010 essay titled "Utopia as Method, or the Uses of the Future," Fredric Jameson argues that imagining utopia is itself a kind of necessary political act:

> [It] consists in a prodigious effort to change the valences on phenomena that so far exist only in our own present and experimentally to declare positive things that are clearly negative in our own world, to affirm that dystopia is in reality utopia if examined more closely [...]. This kind of prospective hermeneutic is a political act only in one specific sense: as a contribution to the reawakening of the imagination of possible and alternate futures, a reawakening of that historicity with which our system—offering itself as the very end of history—necessarily represses and paralyzes [...]. [Utopia] revives long-dormant parts of the mind, unused organs of political, historical, and social imagination that have virtually atrophied for lack of use, muscles of praxis we have long since ceased exercising, revolutionary gestures we have lost the habit of performing, even subliminally. (42–43)[59]

To produce deliberately utopian art in Thatcher's postlapsarian England is stubborn, counterintuitive, fruitless, perhaps always-already failed. Brenton has not been remembered for these three plays; *Bloody Poetry* is the only one that sees revivals now, and only very occasionally; *Greenland* is so specific to 1988 that it might be nearly unperformable today. But the very implausibility of this project echoes Yeats's paradoxical insistence on the value of poetic labor and the uses to which Jameson believes the future can be put. Resolutely staging an English utopia in such an anti-utopian age may have been a gesture not at utopia as an end but rather at utopia as a method, a "reawakening of the imagination" toward futures that otherwise seemed impossible. Like an undeveloped negative, it suggests the contours of an alternative, the photo that could, but may never, be.

[59] Fredric Jameson, "Utopia as Method, or Uses of the Future," in *Utopia/Dystopia: Conditions of Historical Possibility* (Princeton UP, 2010), 21–44.

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“POSTMODERNISM”

In July 1988, an art exhibition opened in a rundown warehouse in London’s docklands, an audacious vote of youthful self-confidence by a group of students and graduates of Goldsmith’s Art College. The work that has become most emblematic of this exhibition is Mat Collishaw’s “Bullet Hole,” a closeup photo of a head wound scanned from a medical textbook, blown up, and plastered across a grid of fifteen lightboxes. To call it “Bullet Hole” is a mislabeling—it in fact shows an injury from an ice pick—but the organizers run with the fiction: the exhibition itself was called *Freeze* because, like “Bullet Hole,” it was “dedicated to a moment of impact, a preserved now, a freeze frame.”[1]

Almost nobody cared about *Freeze* when it happened. The only contemporary review appeared in *The Guardian*, where Sacha Craddock describes it as an “antidote to tired thematic Postmodern styles”:

> Maybe the very nature of art school products has changed in order to reflect the set-piece one-liner that succeeds in the commercial world. […] It seems no longer necessary to chart each stage of decision-making in today’s art; mistake and confusion are no longer virtues, humble grind has been replaced by ‘I can do that too’. Minimal art was only allowed at the end of the journey but here we have speedily attained simplicity.[2]

Though few saw it in 1988, *Freeze* now seems like a watershed moment in British art, the closest thing to an origin story for the loose collection of sculptors, painters, and installationists who would become known as the Young British Artists. They were cut from the same cloth as the “in-yer-face” theatermakers, like Sarah Kane and Mark Ravenhill, who were about to explode onto the London stage and supplant the dominance of realist, issues-driven dramas like *Our*

[1] This description comes from the exhibition catalogue, quoted in Richard Cork, “The Essay (The Saatchi Collection),” *The Observer*, April 20, 2003.
[2] Sacha Craddock, “The Fast Dockland Track to Simplicity,” *The Guardian*, September 13, 1988. Two different print issues of *The Guardian* appeared on this date, and one issue carries a different review by Robert Clark instead of Craddock’s review of *Freeze*. At the time of writing, a scan of an original clipping can be downloaded from the author’s website, https://www.sachacraddock.com/.

Country's Good, the subject of my next chapter. These playwrights, with a commitment to overwhelming experience that seems right out Artaud, are sometimes called Thatcher's children, a generation shaped by fracture and factionalism on the Left and an increasing economic orthodoxy on the Right. Like the Young British Artists, they were confronted with an artistic tradition that seemed to yield only ruins. In a 2008 retrospective interview, Richard Patterson, one of the students who participated in *Freeze*, mused, "[We were] dealing with what it meant to inherit postmodernism—it seemed a shitty fate. Those that didn't know what postmodernism actually meant were free to bang out whatever they saw fit and have never looked back."[3]

There is a sharpness to Patterson's insight here, with its double critique: didn't know what postmodernism meant, never looked back. Perhaps there is a little envy, too. It is unclear what "postmodernism" means to Patterson, of course, but no matter: as in the ancient Adamic curse of knowledge, to understand it is to be felled by it. The burden of that "shitty fate" leaves Patterson unfree, looking eternally back, where before him the pile of debris before him grows toward the sky.[4] There was a rising intuition on the Left that "postmodernism" was a kind of straw man, a category onto which cultural critics could project their anxieties about secularism, nihilism, and social collapse, and which the Right could then leverage in the service of its authoritarian vision. In 1989, introducing his reconstruction of Raymond Williams' talk "When Was Modernism?" for *The New Left Review*, Fred Inglis would write, "Postmodernism for [Williams] was a strictly ideological compound from an enemy formation, and long in need of this authoritative rebuttal."[5] Only two years later, in 1991, Frederic Jameson would give his latest book a polemical title: *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*.

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[3] Jessica Berens, "Freeze: 20 Years On," *The Observer*, May 31, 2008.
[4] This, of course, borrowed from Walter Benjamin's reading of Klee's *Angelus Novus,* Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," in *Selected Writings* (Harvard UP, 1996), 392. It may be an unfair characterization; there is no reason, despite this single quote from an interview nearly twenty years ago, to believe that Patterson has not had a stable, fulfilling, forward-looking career.
[5] Raymond Williams, "When Was Modernism?," *New Left Review*, no. I/175 (June 1, 1989): 48–52.

It is not at all clear that, when Patterson's peers banged out whatever they saw fit and never looked back, they were, in fact, escaping postmodernism, whatever Sacha Craddock thought. These days some seem to have bought wholesale into the cultural logic of late capitalism. The student who organized *Freeze* was a pre-fame Damien Hirst, then twenty-three years old. Hirst, who has spent the intervening years amassing property—galleries, villas, restaurants, branded studios run by dozens of assistants, warehouses full of merchandise, and, of course, elaborate and expensive art—is now the wealthiest artist in Britain. He has been known to admit that "it's hard to see the art for the dollar signs," or that he "can't wait to get into a position of making really bad art and get away with it."[6]

Whether *Freeze* really mattered all that much is uncertain. Much of the importance ascribed to it today is likely thanks to active self-promotion and mythologizing on Hirst's part; Matthew Higgs writes that "tales of Hirst ferrying curators to the exhibition in taxis are now part of its folklore."[7] And the Young British Artist label, perhaps, has more conceptual utility than cohesion. Patterson says ruefully, "[It] has to rank as the silliest of all names. Certainly not a movement. I suppose it is a kind of license to show tits and arse more than anything."

[6] Colin Gleadell, "How Damien Hirst Tried to Transform the Art Market," *The Telegraph*, March 21, 2012.
[7] Matthew Higgs, "1988: Freeze," *Artforum*, April 2003.

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II. REPUBLIC

I

Halfway through Timberlake Wertenbaker's 1988 play *Our Country's Good*, Lieutenant Ralph Clark finds himself caught on the threshold between categories of being. He is waiting for midnight on Sunday, the only day he will allow himself to kiss the picture of the wife he has left in England, and he wanders around his tent with picture in one hand and pocketwatch in the other. It is his weekly ritual. So far, through a year at sea and months camped on the distant shores of New South Wales, he has been faithful, the only officer in the penal colony who has not taken a lover from among the women convicts. But now he feels himself slipping. His musings are disjointed, feverish, jumping from reading a passage from Proverbs ("rejoice with the wife of thy youth") to muttering his wife's name ("almost midnight, my Betsy") to narrating to her, as if she were present, some of his surroundings ("Good God what a scene of whoredom is going on there in the women's camp")(44).[1] He is trying, rather valiantly, to pretend to himself that his agonized passion is all for his distant wife, but the lie is transparent: having scraped together a convict cast to mount a play, he has fallen in love with one of his actors, Mary Brenham.

Lieutenant Clark likes to think of the categories he belongs to as settled. He is an officer and a Christian, which sets him apart from the irreligious actor-convicts with whom he spends his time. He takes seriously his duty to the state and to God: as he will say to the prisoner Ketch Freeman only moments later, perhaps with more confidence than self-awareness, "I'm not a convict: I don't sin" (47). An enforcer of the king's law and an abider of divine law, not a criminal or a sinner—for Ralph, these categories are both ontological and determinative, what

[1] Timberlake Wertenbaker, *Our Country's Good* (Dramatic Publishing, 1989).

their inhabitants can *do* circumscribed by what they *are*. When Ketch recounts the circumstances of his arrest and helplessly asks Ralph, "What would you have done, sir?", Ralph's cold response is, "I wouldn't have been in that situation, Freeman" (48). Ralph's sense of self, and his orientation toward the world around him, is rooted in his perception of a fundamental, essentialist difference between the categories he belongs to and those he does not.

His anguish in this scene is palpable in part because he feels that difference collapsing. With his desire for Mary haunting, disrupting his professions of love to his wife's image, he is on the threshold not just of committing a sin he evidently abhors but of becoming, categorically, a sinner. The possibility is simultaneously unthinkable and irrepressible. In spurts that recall the strokes of a self-flagellator, Ralph reads the very scripture that condemns him—in this case, one of the many chapters of Proverbs scandalized by the evils of harlotry. It appears in Ralph's speech only in fragments, but it is worth reproducing more fully here. The speaker is describing a foolish man who goes to seek the recurring figure of "the strange woman":

> 8 [I beheld him] Passing through the street near her corner; and he went the way to her house,
> 9 In the twilight, in the evening, in the black and dark night:
> 10 And behold, there met him a woman with the attire of an harlot, and subtil of heart.
> 11 (She is loud and stubborn; her feet abide not in her house:
> 12 Now is she without, now in the streets, and lieth in wait at every corner.)[2]

After describing their encounter, in which the strange woman kisses the foolish man "with an impudent face" and seduces him into the bed she has perfumed with spices, the poem concludes,

> 25 Let not thine heart decline to her ways, go not astray in her paths.
> 26 For she hath cast down many wounded: yea, many strong men have been slain by her.
> 27 Her house is the way to hell, going down to the chambers of death.[3]

Una Chaudhuri has used the word "geopathology" to describe the ways place, especially starting in the late-nineteenth-century, is (or is framed as) a problem in theater.[4] What interests me in

[2] Proverbs 7:8–12, *The English Bible, King James Version: The Old Testament and the Apocrypha*, Herbert Marks, Gerald Hammond, and Austin Busch, eds. (Norton, 2013).
[3] Proverbs 7:25–27, *The English Bible*
[4] Una Chaudhuri, *Staging Place: The Geography of Modern Drama* (U Michigan P, 1997).

this passage from Proverbs is how place becomes constitutive of ontological categories, and how the passage's geopathology, its problem of place, troubles the distinction between them. The strange woman in Proverbs, unlike the prostitutes of the New Testament, is not rootless and liminal: she has a regular corner where the foolish man knows to look for her, a home where, husband absent, she can bring the men who seek her out. The speaker doesn't quite seem to know how to figure this. He (for it is certainly a he) tries to have it both ways: at first, the woman's home is the implied counterfigure to her harlotry, the place of duty and righteousness that is neglected in the charge, with its imputation of wickedness, that "her feet abide not" there. It is the foil to her sin of being "without, now in the streets, and [lying] in wait at every corner." But by the end of the passage, her home has become "the way to hell, going down to the chambers of death." These locational metaphors—houses and ways and chambers—lend spatial shape to Proverbs' ontological category of evil, as if there is some fundamental connection between place and being. To enter the strange woman's house is to become a sinner. But the conflicting valences of her home here, emblem of obedience and appropriate domesticity on one hand and inevitable route to damnation on the other, is a geopathology, a problem of space that complicates the categorization of the woman who inhabits it.

Ralph is reading this chapter on the shore of New South Wales in 1789, in an English penal colony facing the threat of starvation, in a play with its own many geopathologies. These, too, are tangled in the figures of strange women. *Our Country's Good* opens on the deck of the transport ship that is dislocating its passengers, officers and convicts alike, from their home in England. For the prisoners it is a punishment and for the soldiers an assignment, but for both it is an exile, an expulsion. In the opening scene, convict John Wisehammer describes the journey in language that conflates place, England, with a visceral and profane encounter with a woman's body:

> At night? The sea cracks against the ship. Fear whispers, screams, falls silent, hushed. Spewed from our country, forgotten, bound to the dark edge of the earth, at night what is there to do but seek English cunt, warm, moist, soft, oh the

> comfort, the comfort of the lick, the thrust into the nooks, the crannies of the crooks of England. Alone, frightened, nameless in this stinking hole of hell, take me, take me inside you, whoever you are. Take me, my comfort and we'll remember England together. (7)

The metaphor of spewing is bodily: Wisehammer feels himself to have been vomited out of England. No wonder, then, that his search for comfort is bodily, too, and that he finds it in "English cunt." This national and locational descriptor, *English*, would hardly be extraordinary—after all, if you can have English hats and English people and English beef, why not English cunt?—but for the ambiguity of what follows, the lick "thrust into the nooks, the crannies of the crooks of England." *Crooks* is the confounding word here: on this prison ship, its most obvious meaning is a literal, slangy reference to the convicts themselves, all thieves, swindlers, crooks. But its adjacence to and assonance with *nooks* and *crannies* makes it sound like their synonym. Indeed, the ship's real historical passengers would likely have understood it this way. *Crook* has carried the meaning of an odd corner, a small piece of ground, since at least the fifteenth century, while it did not mean *criminal* until Americans began using it so nearly a hundred years after the play is set.[5] So "the crannies of the crooks of England" are simultaneously the secret crevices of convict bodies and the hidden niches of their homeland, "English cunt" not just the cunt of an Englishwoman but somehow of England itself. Here again is the strange woman, a conflation of body and place, a contradiction in the mind of the speaker. He imagines her simultaneously as both a real, embodied convict and as a figure for the country they are being transported from, the country they will remember together. The difference here is that the foolish man, Wisehammer, is already condemned to "this stinking hole of hell" (another spatial metaphor). He may as well embrace the harlot because he is, categorically, a sinner and a criminal.

Like Ralph as he agonizes over his wife's picture, Wisehammer and the other convicts are on the threshold between categories. The ship is the literal location of this liminality, a placeless

[5] *Oxford English Dictionary*, "crook (n. & adj.)," December 2024, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/5388612485.

transition between places. But it is not just a transition from England to the place they will come to call Australia; it is also a transition from Englishness to—what is to them, at least, if not to its indigenous inhabitants—nothingness, to dispossession, an emptying of the category of belonging the word *English* represents. When they arrive at Botany Bay, the place that will become Sydney, many convicts will recall their homeland with anguish and longing and a foreboding sense of being forever separated from it. Wisehammer will later observe that *country* can mean opposite things: "It renews you with trees and grass, you go to rest in the country, or it crushes you with power: you die for your country, your country doesn't want you, you're thrown out of your country" (49). Their dislocation, in other words, is a question not just of place but of identity and ontology.

What *Our Country's Good* stages most clearly is how this dislocation is created, justified, and sustained by the legal apparatuses of nation and empire, and how the spaces delineated by the law trouble (and are troubled by) the persons who inhabit them. The title of the work comes from the prologue Wisehammer writes to introduce the play Ralph is directing, which declares stoically of the convicts, "True patriots all; for be it understood, / We left our country for our country's good" (38). The geopathology here is audible in the paradoxes: true patriots (from Latin *patriota*, "fellow-countrymen"[6]) sifted from among their fellow countrymen and expelled from the *patria*, owning as "ours" a country that no longer owns them, their highest claim to citizenly service the fact that they have been decitizened. Giorgio Agamben writes of figures who are included in the law only by their exclusion;[7] transparent in this piece of late-twentieth-century British theater is how inclusion and exclusion are part and parcel of each other, sliding into indistinction in the very places, like prison ships and penal colonies, meant to hold them apart. In *Our Country's Good*¸ by way of the plays and the histories it invokes, the ontological lines between such categories blur: convicts dress up as officers, officers are played by actors,

[6] *Oxford English Dictionary*, "patriot (n. & adj.)," March 2025, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/4882786016.
[7] Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer* (Stanford UP, 1998).

punishments bleed into crimes, the dead quicken to possess the living, actors become the characters they play, their acting takes on the force and weight of real-world action. The instability of these categories in the liminal spaces outside the law concords with the confusion of the speaker in Proverbs, who cannot make the strange woman's home a straightforward symbol either of righteousness or of wickedness, and with John Wisehammer's imprecision in his opening speech, where he cannot keep spatial categories from falling into the visceral, the sexual, the profane. These texts suggest not only a slipperiness of supposedly ontological terms but a geopathological zone where that slipperiness gives way to collapse.

Our Country's Good was received with adulation when it premiered, with critics calling it "the very stuff of the theatre,"[8] an "affirming tribute to the transforming power of drama."[9] The play recreates a penal colony whose horizons are bleak indeed but whose inhabitants find a kind of redemption through the civilizing, humanizing power of art as they come together to stage a play. Wertenbaker herself imagined it in this light, as a spirited defense of an Enlightenment-style humanism indebted to Locke, Rousseau, and Plato. It evinces the will to believe in a renewed leftist politics and in its aspirational utopias. After all, this was 1988: in some respects, it was the only conceivable response to the flattening tendencies of a growing neoliberal order, to the decay of the post-1945 consensus and the creeping logic of a kind of *homo economicus*. But its optimistic thesis is belied by anxieties it cannot escape. Deeply troubled by the looming specter of the state of exception, by the collapse of the categories of thought that girded leftist humanism, and by a sense that the very Enlightenment project it throws its weight behind has been irreparably compromised by the calamities of the twentieth century, *Our Country's Good* is a deeply ambivalent play that points toward a fundamental shift in the premillennial imagination, a reevaluation of the political functions of art in a world with a newly-awakened sense of the possibility of catastrophe.

[8] Michael Leech, "Royal Court: Our Country's Good," *The Stage*, October 6, 1988.
[9] Michael Billington, "The Play's the Thing," *The Guardian*, September 12, 1988.

II

The 1988 play *Our Country's Good* is based on Thomas Keneally's 1987 novel *The Playmaker*, which in turn fictionalizes a real 1789 theatrical performance by convicts early in the British colonization of Australia. The event itself is attested only by a pair of contemporary officers' journals that provide few details about how the performance came about or who was involved, but they do name the play: *The Recruiting Officer*, a 1706 comedy by the Irish playwright George Farquhar.[10]

To the extent Farquhar gets mentioned at all, it tends to be in the same breath as other Restoration playwrights staging bawdy and irreverent comedies at the turn of the eighteenth century. In some ways, he is a last, dying gasp of his age, writing convoluted love plots populated by waggish rakes and scheming heiresses—at precisely the moment when a growing bourgeois audience, with its distaste for the crassness and extravagance of the aristocracy, was ushering such unseemly things off the stage. In 1699, Reverend Jeremy Collier published his famous pamphlet whose title, *A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage*, captured a prevailing mood; though the favorite plays of the last fifty years would continue to be performed, it was often in badly bowdlerized form. Farquhar died in 1707 at the age of thirty, impoverished and obscure. The modest success of a few of his plays could not compensate for the failure of the others, nor could their royalties support a wife and four young children. Even now, in the twenty-first century, Farquhar is little known, rarely anthologized, hardly ever translated.

So it would have surprised him to learn that he was to become, by some measures, the most popular playwright of industrializing Britain. According to one scholar's count, Farquhar's plays would be performed more often on the London stage during the eighteenth century than

[10] Many of the details of my account come from Robert Jordan, *The Convict Theatres of Early Australia, 1788–1840* (U Hertfordshire P, 2003). I am working from a digital version of this text without page numbers.

those of any of his contemporaries,[11] and his last work, *The Beaux Stratagem*, would appear in no fewer than forty different printed editions in the same period.[12] In this light, *The Recruiting Officer* seems as natural a choice as any for that 1789 convict performance: it would have been a popular and familiar work, one that some of the colonists may well have seen in performance on a British stage. Contemporary sources do not explain why it was selected or by whom, but one need not conjecture too far. No one thought to include a rich library of theatrical texts on a convict ship, and it is likely that *The Recruiting Officer* was selected for the simple reason that someone happened to bring a copy along. There cannot have been many to choose from.

However predetermined, though, the choice was auspicious. The play's first performance at Drury Lane in 1706 and its reprisal in a penal colony in 1789 face each other across many decades and a vast geographical distance, but made to stand side-by-side they start to look like head and tail of the same coin—different manifestations of the ghoulish cost of burgeoning British power, each tangled in a growing imperial machine in ways neither company of actors, free or unfree, could have fully understood. At first blush, their circumstances seem to have little in common. *The Recruiting Officer* was inspired by a year Farquhar spent as a recruiting officer himself, stationed in Shropshire and trying to muster troops who would sail off to put down Catholic rebellions in his native Ireland. It satirizes, quite jovially, the extremes such officers had to resort to—bribery, trickery, wheedling, threats—to enlist enough recruits. Though military service made Farquhar deeply unhappy, and though the commission meant to ease his financial straits in fact drove him further into poverty, the play captures his real fondness for the countryfolk he befriended during his enlistment. He dedicates it to "all friends round the Wrekin," the prominent hill above Shrewsbury, and his introductory epistle suggests that it should be read as a gesture of gratitude for the welcome he experienced there.[13] The result is a

[11] James J. Lynch, *Box, Pit, and Gallery: Stage and Society in Johnson's London* (U California P, 1953), 41.
[12] Shirley Strum Kenny, "Perennial Favorites: Congreve, Vanbrugh, Cibber, Farquhar, and Steele," *Modern Philology* 73, no. 4 (1976): 4–11.
[13] George Farquhar, *The Recruiting Officer* (Methuen Drama, 2010), 3.

play whose tone is warm and genial, fond of poking fun at magistrates and townspeople alike, of drawing sly parallels between marriage and military service, of making as many good-humored jokes about sex as a five-act play can reasonably accommodate, and especially of taking jabs at the ineptly run recruiting system that so bedeviled England's military efforts in the early eighteenth century.[14]

The play's comfortable Shropshire scenes would have felt alien indeed to the convicts and soldiers in New South Wales, who were living in tents and makeshift huts, surviving on shrinking rations, finding themselves unable to coax crops out of the unfamiliar soil, and every day losing hope that a supply ship would arrive to save them from starvation. Watkin Tench, one of the two officers who mentions the 1789 performance in his journal, describes it as a kind of reprieve: "That every opportunity of escape from the dreariness and dejection of our situation should be eagerly embraced," he writes, "will not be wondered at."[15] But the colonists would still have found plenty to laugh at in the familiar portrait of military life. Enlisted men would likely have recognized, may even have personally encountered, such underhanded tactics as those of the titular recruiting officer Sergeant Kite, while the convicts, transported mostly for crimes of poverty like theft, perjury, and fraud, may have felt a kinship with the play's uncommonly sympathetic portrayal of non-genteel classes. Tench alludes tantalizingly to a now-lost "prologue and an epilogue, written by one of the performers," that "contained some tolerable allusions to the situation of the parties";[16] it seems likely that in spite of its deep alienation from the world in which *The Recruiting Officer* originated, the prologue would have pointed to experiences that mirrored the convicts' own and registered the significance of such a play for such a moment.

What may have been less transparent, though, was how this play about soldiery, recruitment, and marriage was also a play about systems of imprisonment and unfreedom—in

[14] David Roberts, *George Farquhar: A Migrant Life Reversed* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018). This biography contains a detailed description of the system Farquhar was satirizing.
[15] Jordan, *The Convict Theatres of Early Australia, 1788–1840*, n.p.
[16] Jordan, n.p. Tench deemed the prologue and the epilogue "not worth inserting here"—whether we should consider this a tragic loss or a wonderfully provocative absence is up for debate.

fact, about the same systems of imprisonment and unfreedom that had condemned these actor-convicts to service in a penal colony in the first place. As the story progresses, it becomes clear that on a deep, often-obscured level it documents the state's increasing use of a kind of biopower in violation of its subjects' will and at the expense of their wellbeing. The mechanisms of such power link the original play with the circumstances of that later convict performance and expose just how far the categories of soldier and prisoner—categories that Ralph Clark, as a character in *Our Country's Good*, tries so hard to keep apart—overlap each other. Though neither transportation nor conscription was a new practice in the eighteenth century, these two moments, 1706 and 1789, capture a shift in the role they played in Britain's expanding empire, and they start to bring into focus why, centuries later, a playwright like Wertenbaker might have felt compelled to revisit them.

Transportation and conscription were two of the categories of unfree labor that made up the growing Atlantic capitalist economy. Another, of course, was enslavement, but when Farquhar wrote *The Recruiting Officer* in 1706, England's role in and reliance on the slave trade was still in its infancy; the coast of West Africa was dominated by the Portuguese and the Dutch, and English overseas holdings were still modest and often tenuous compared to those of its neighbors. According to Hamish Maxwell-Stewart, the expense and inaccessibility of enslaved labor meant that early English commercial development in the Atlantic was largely built on indentures, both of free persons bartering their work to pay for the cost of migration and of convicts whose imprisonment was essentially privatized, passed into the hands of corporations or merchants who would demand remuneration in labor.[17] This latter category had developed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as a way to reduce the costs of administering punishment and decrease the burden on overcrowded prisons—themselves a new phenomenon, driven at least in part by an influx into cities of a rapidly growing body of rural poor—but, as

[17] Hamish Maxwell-Stewart, "Transportation from Britain and Ireland, 1615–1875," in *A Global History of Convicts and Penal Colonies*, ed. Clare Anderson (Bloomsbury Academic, 2018).

Maxwell-Stewart observes, it quickly came to be shaped by the increasing demand for settler-workers in the colonies. In 1717, the Transportation Act would take what had largely been an ad hoc and haphazard practice and formalize it with a set of rules, including standardized sentencing, explicit legal requirements for the merchants who purchased and moved convict labor, and permanent mechanisms by which prisons and bridewells could easily shuffle their incarcerated populations into the transportation system. This meant that these institutions, originally built to contain a problem, suddenly found their *raison d'être* in reproducing it: after the Act was passed, convict transportation increased more than tenfold, from an average of around a hundred per year to figures often surpassing fifteen hundred, and transported convicts would make up fully a quarter of British migrants to the New World until the American War of Independence.[18] Between when *The Recruiting Officer* was written and when it was first performed in New South Wales, in other words, Britain systematized the commodification of punishment.

Impressment developed along a parallel and, importantly, supplementary path. It, too, was a crucial form of unfree labor: when the crown had trouble supplying troops for its wars abroad, which was nearly always, it often turned to conscription to fill the ranks. As an institution, the press varied in how formally it was codified and how furtively it was carried out, but Farquhar wrote *The Recruiting Officer* during a period of unusually high press activity. Impressment was never popular and always met with widespread, creative resistance from townspeople across the commonwealth. In 1706, at the height of the War of Spanish Succession, a set of impressment acts tried to discourage such resistance by levying hefty penalties against anyone found to be impeding conscription. Legally, an Englishman had the right to sue a constable for false arrest if he had been jailed for the purpose of impressment, but the acts

[18] Hamish Maxwell-Stewart, "Convict Transportation from Britain and Ireland, 1615–1870," *History Compass* 8, no. 11 (2010): 1226.

tripled fines for those who lost such a suit—and they were difficult suits to win.[19] Impressment law was usefully nebulous: unlike imprisonment and transportation, which required someone to first be convicted of a crime, impressment was subject to the whims of local officials and could be forced upon anyone thought likely to offend or otherwise deemed undesirable. Wrongful impressment was therefore hard to prove. These and other press acts meant that conscripted labor would continue to play an important role in the expanding English empire through the American Revolution. Historians disagree on the precise figures, but it is possible that of the ten percent of able-bodied British men who served in the Royal Navy during the eighteenth century, as many as half were conscripted; though the primary targets for impressment were the highly coveted skilled sailors already employed by merchants or privateers, during wartime the net expanded to catch anyone strong enough to lift a cannonball, experienced at sea or not.[20] Things were little different on land, where recruiting officers were desperate to raise enough men to recoup the personal expenses they had incurred, and where local constabularies were always eager to get rid of poachers, vagrants, petty thieves, debtors—anyone considered a burden to the parish.

Crucially, transportation and impressment worked together to, on one hand, feed the interests of capital and growth via private means and, on the other, to protect and expand those private enterprises via military means. The eighteenth century is often characterized as one of deregulation and an increasingly laissez-faire form of capitalism for Britain and its colonies: vagrancy acts were less likely to be enforced, restrictions on labor mobility were often seen as outmoded, wage regulations lapsed. But as Nicolas Rogers points out, this picture obscures how the appearance of liberalization depended not on free markets but on increasingly formalized, state-sanctioned forms of unfree labor.[21] Impressment and transportation were early population

[19] Arthur N. Gilbert, "Army Impressment During the War of the Spanish Succession," *The Historian* 38, no. 4 (1976): 689–708.
[20] Nicholas Rogers, "Vagrancy, Impressment, and the Regulation of Labour in Eighteenth-Century Britain," *Slavery and Abolition* 15, no. 2 (1994): 102–13.
[21] Rogers, 103.

control measures, intended to corral bodies from where they could not be useful and redirect them to where they could—in other words, an early form of modern biopower. Neither kind of labor was new, of course, but this was the first time they had existed in such an institutional way and on such a wide scale; like the racialized enslavement practices that were developing at the same time, they grew out of the state's assertion and systematization of control over bare life. In this brave new world, the poor often found themselves caught in a kind of legal quicksand: mere idleness or unemployment was enough to thrust them into the hands of the law, and once there, every one of its institutions was grasping to suck them into forced labor that could be profitable for the state.

The Recruiting Officer is a lighthearted satire, but glimpses of this new biopolitical machine are visible through its genial comedy. The goal is to shift bodies: Captain Plume and his recruiting officer, Sergeant Kite, must enlist enough men from the village of Shrewsbury to fill a regiment that will march off and fight in the crown's battlefields in France. Trouble is, Shrewsbury men do not want to go. Much of the play's humor derives from the schemes Kite cooks up to trick them into enlisting when more honest forms of persuasion prove not very persuasive at all. He poses as a fortune-teller who foresees that a townsperson will one day make five hundred pounds as surgeon general if only he will join the regiment; he makes false promises of commissions and captaincies left and right. In one early scene, he gives the pair of villagers Costar and Thomas a broad-side coin apiece, worth twenty-three shillings and sixpence, and insists that there are no strings attached: "never talk of buying; 'tis the same thing among friends, you know!"[22] Imagine their surprise, then, when Captain Plume enters and Kite demands that they salute him as their superior officer. When they protest that they are not enlisted, Kite swears that they are and, indeed, that he paid them their enlistment fee. Plume asks them to turn out their pockets; lo and behold, each has an incriminating coin worth twenty-three shillings and sixpence, precisely the sum paid to new recruits.

[22] Farquhar, *The Recruiting Officer*, 44.

For all of Kite's ruses, though, the villagers maintain a sort of wily independence. They are the agents of their own lives: when no one is trying to pull the wool over their eyes, they tend to be firm in their opposition to enlistment; they distrust Kite and, though they can be deceived, are on the lookout for his tricks; they insist on their right to refuse to join up even in the face of great pressure or ridicule. There is a modern tendency to imagine that pre-Enlightenment European sovereigns could do whatever they liked to their subjects, that until all that heady talk of liberty and social contracts summoned the idea of a rights-bearing human seemingly out of thin air, their power was totalizing and invulnerable. But the townspeople's resistance to recruiting relies on what in 1706 was already a long-established precedent that English subjecthood entailed duties not only from subject to sovereign but also from sovereign to subject. Hannah Weiss Muller, in an expansive work that catalogues how the eighteenth-century inhabitants of Britain and its colonies regularly invoked their subjecthood to claim rights or concessions from the crown, troubles political theory's distinction, often far too neat, between subjecthood and citizenship:

> The teleological argument that the individual evolves from subject to citizen, from someone who obediently accepts law and membership to a person who actively manages and chooses his relationship to the state [...] creates a false distinction. Viewing the subject as a kind of disenfranchised citizen overlooks the possibilities embedded in the relationship between subject and monarch. Subjects persistently laid claim to economic, political, and legal concessions, and they powerfully expressed both deference and demands.[23]

The townsfolk of Shrewsbury never deny that they are Queen Anne's subjects or resist subjecthood as a means of resisting enlistment. On the contrary, they toast her health, acknowledge Kite's characterization of her as "a generous queen, [who] loves her subjects" (12), and lustily sing, "The Queen commands and we'll obey, / Over the hills and far away" (41). But this loyalty does not translate to a sense of duty to turn soldier. Instead, it lends their refusal a kind of legal status: when Kite gives Costar and Thomas the gold coins and tries to pretend to

[23] Hannah Weiss Muller, *Subjects and Sovereign: Bonds of Belonging in the Eighteenth-Century British Empire* (Oxford UP, 2017), 4.

Plume that they accepted them as their enlistment fee, Thomas invokes his right "to be carried before the mayar" (47) to have the dispute sorted out. When another, Pluck, goes to hear his fortune told and the disguised Kite predicts that he will join the army, he protests in surprise, "Oons, sir, the justices can't press me!" (101). The villagers are aware that being subjects of the crown means being subject to its laws. These laws work against them sometimes, yes—Costar jokes that he would rather be not a king but a justice of the peace, because "since this Pressing Act they are greater than any emperor under the sun" (42)—but they also, by laying out the circumstances under which subjects can be pressed, protect them from being pressed under others. That is, they grant subjects a measure of standing before the law. Kite's efforts to recruit them largely fail *because* the townsfolk are subjects of the crown, not *in spite of* it.

So *The Recruiting Officer* is about the nuances of eighteenth-century Britons' relationship to power: it dramatizes the complex system of legal and cultural practices by which the crown tried to net its subjects into fighting its wars abroad, and how those subjects often managed to wriggle free. But it is telling that at the climax of the play, Kite and Plume abandon the trappings of persuasion and volunteerism that have so far given the townspeople a means of escape. Months in Shrewsbury have yielded too few recruits, so together with the local magistrates, they convene a tribunal to decide which unwanted townspeople should be forcibly enlisted. One by one, the village's poor common folk are brought before the justices, where Kite makes increasingly funny and absurd arguments for why each man should be conscripted. A convicted thief and vagrant? Yes, for he is doing no one any good growing old and fat in prison. An unemployed man who supports a wife and five children mostly by foraging and poaching? Yes, lest he father more offspring who will inevitably become a public burden: "the parish had better maintain five children this year," Plume reasons, "than six or seven the next!" (128). A collier, gainfully employed in a coal mine? Yes, because the law allows the conscription of anyone without "visible means of employment"—and the coal mine is not visible, being, as it were, underground. At the end of the scene, Captain Plume has a complete regiment and Justice

Balance has conveniently rid his town of its least desirable inhabitants (and lost the coal miner, his one concession).

The court is therefore the mechanism by which subjects are enfolded into the law, so that the law can place them in categories that it simultaneously creates and excludes. The one these townsfolk are conscripted into can rob them not merely of their labor but of their very lives, a category in which an enemy can kill them and, because this is war, not worry about being punished for a crime. Captain Plume gives voice to this state of exception by framing it in the opposite terms. Having rebuked Kite for deceiving Costar and Thomas, he nonetheless works to convince them to enlist of their own accord by inviting them to imagine the spoils of war. "What think you now," he enjoins them, "of a purse full of French gold out of a monsieur's pocket, after you have dashed out his brains with the butt of your firelock, eh?" (49). Gruesome, inhuman, forbidden though such murderous violence would be at home, it is legitimized by deployment abroad, by the category Plume is inviting the townsfolk to inhabit. Become a soldier, he seems to say, and you can indulge your most brutal and transgressive fantasies without intervention or retribution from the law. What is left unsaid, of course, is that in that extralegal space of battlefield and war, the French are not the only ones who get their brains dashed out by firelocks. English skulls are just as fragile.

Such darkness emerges only in fragments in *The Recruiting Officer*, amid scenes of comic buffoonery and lovers' mishaps. But in a deeper sense, the play's action is predicated on this particular moment in English history, when the appearance of increasing liberalization tended to conceal the crown's growing power over the bare lives of its subjects, as well as the slow expansion of spaces that stood outside the law. Farquhar's characters feel it encroaching on their small Shropshire village; the convict-actors who played them in Botany Bay in 1789 were themselves, in some measure, its victims. And, turning now to London in 1988, this moment in English history seems to leap again to life by virtue of its resonance with something like the present.

III

When *Our Country's Good* premiered in September of 1988, it was double-billed with a simultaneous production of *The Recruiting Officer*. Max Stafford-Clark, who at that time had been artistic director of the Royal Court Theatre for nearly ten years and had been supportive of Wertenbaker's earlier work, approached her about adapting Keneally's novel *The Playmaker*. In a process that echoed the method pioneered by the short-lived but influential Joint Stock Theatre Company (of which Stafford-Clark had also been a founding member), Wertenbaker and a crew of actors spent two weeks researching and probing the possibilities of such a play:

> I could come in the morning and say I wanted to understand eighteenth-century theatrical convention, or the effect of long-term brutalization, and Max and the actors would find some way of doing it. We visited the theatre museum and improvised eighteenth-century acting styles there; we had 'beating workshops' where everyone went around being hit by newspapers. Actors went and interviewed ex-prisoners, or army officers, and brought back the characters they had found. Or I might just send them to the library. It was a rich way of working and after two weeks it seemed possible to write the play which became *Our Country's Good*.[24]

It is unclear when the decision was made to turn it into a two-play project, a Wertenbaker playing in repertoire with its referent, a Farquhar. But the double-billing was deliberately evocative of *Our Country's Good*'s central themes. One evening the troupe of actors—mostly the same as those who had participated in those initial exploratory two weeks—would play the characters in *The Recruiting Officer*, Sergeant Kite and Captain Plume, Plume's friend Mr. Worthy, their lovers Sylvia and Melinda. The next evening, they would become the corresponding convicts who play them in the 1789 performance imagined in *Our Country's Good*. The point was to challenge categories that may have seemed settled. A viewer sitting down to see *The Recruiting Officer* might categorize Kite as an officer, plain and simple—but the juxtaposition with *Our Country's Good* inevitably recalled a performance in which that officer was played by a convict. And the transmutability of actors from one play to the other would have

[24] Timberlake Wertenbaker, *Plays 1* (Faber & Faber, 2014), viii.

made the acted-ness all that more transparent, an inescapable reminder that all of these officers and townsfolk and convicts are no such things at all—that they are, in fact, merely actors at the Royal Court Theatre.

These two defining elements of the project that was *Our Country's Good*—its genesis as a collaborative, polyvocal work that decentered authorship, as well as the metatheatrical choice to play it against *The Recruiting Officer*—are part of a larger complex of themes that give the whole thing a utopian bent. In 1988, it represented an attempt to re-infuse a vision of Enlightenment humanism with vigor and vitality against a background of Thatcherite neoliberalism, to insist on that Rousseauian insight, explicitly echoed by the play's character Governor Phillip, that "man is born free, yet everywhere he is in chains" (27).[25] Phillip, against all evidence, nearly against all hope, believes his little colony may contain the seeds of a better world, free of the violence and barbarity that shape the convicts' lives. And encouraging a group of weary, often dehumanized prisoners to put on a play seems a way to gesture toward that vision. Phillip's utopianism is the play's moral center, and Wertenbaker intends her audience to take it seriously. An introduction to a collection of her plays freely admits as much: "I wanted to explore the redemptive power of the theatre, of art," she says, "for people who had been silenced."[26]

This is why the polyvocality was so important. The collaborative process that produced *Our Country's Good* echoed one of the interventions it was trying to make, an invocation of a kind of Habermasian public sphere. The world of this eighteenth-century penal colony in New South Wales was conjured into being by the contributions of and debates among a group trying to arrive at a collective vision of something. Indeed, just such a world-building debate runs through the play itself: though Governor Phillip is in favor of letting the convicts perform a play, convinced of the civilizing power of the theater, the idea is opposed by several of his officers, including Robbie Ross and Watkin Tench. Scattered throughout *Our Country's Good* are scenes

[25] Wertenbaker, *Our Country's Good*, 1989.
[26] Wertenbaker, *Timberlake Wertenbaker Plays 1*, viii.

where, as if in a real Enlightenment-era coffee house, the officers engage the governor in free-flowing, spirited discussions about the purpose of punishment, the nature of criminality, the value of art. Wertenbaker's stage directions even describe one such scene thus:

> It is late at night, the men have been drinking, tempers are high. They interrupt each other, overlap, make jokes under and over the conversation but all engage in it with the passion for discourse and thought of eighteenth-century men. (25)

There is a rosiness here, but that is the point. The play does not for a moment doubt the possibility—or the value—of such an eager, heterogenous, egalitarian conversation; in fact, it insists on it. In the pages that follow, Phillip (supported by Ralph) and Tench (supported by Ross) articulate conflicting visions for converting their colony of convicts into a civilization of citizens. Phillip reminds the officers that when they finish their sentences, the convicts will no longer be convicts. "They will become members of society again, and help create a new society in this colony […]. [The play] will remind them that there is more to life than crime, punishment" (29–30). Tench insists that "there are more important things than a play. If you want to teach the convicts something, teach them to farm, to build houses, teach them a sense of respect for property […]. Teach them how to work, not how to sit around laughing at a comedy" (30). Civilization is at stake, and the debate is over whether its currency is labor or culture. Phillip's vision wins out, of course, and the convicts undertake the performance. But it is important that we witness the debate at all, for the play wants us to see that its victory is an active choice, not an inevitable function of the passage of time; that progress is reasoned and deliberate; that the privileging of culture is, as it were, Enlightened.

Ross, the most strident and unsympathetic of the play's detractors, spends the debate trying to insist on an essentialist criminality. To him, "convict" is a category that cannot be overcome: "A crime is a crime," he blusters. "You commit a crime or you don't. If you commit a crime, you are a criminal." Tench makes this essentialism even more explicit, adding that criminality is "more than a habit, an innate tendency. Many criminals seem to have been born that way. It is in their nature" (27). This is the thesis that *Our Country's Good* works so hard to

disprove. Ralph, the play's director, is an important figure here; he is, categorically, not a convict, but the sinful, forbidden allure of an affair with Mary Brenham swamps his sense that these categories are distinct, that being an officer somehow preserves him from the taint of evil. In the same scattered speech in which he mutters to his wife's portrait and reads from Proverbs, he reveals that he is so haunted by the indistinction that it has made an appearance in his nightmares. "Dreamt my dear Betsey," he frets as though to his wife, "that I was with you and that I thought I was going to be arrested" (44). So far he has committed no crime or sin, but the possibility is enough to unsettle his sleep. Even more central, though, is midshipman Harry Brewer, Ralph's friend. We learn early on that Harry's life has wound its way through criminal paths of its own. He confides to Ralph, "Sometimes I look at the convicts and I think, one of those could be you, Harry Brewer, if you hadn't joined the navy when you did. The officers may look down on me now, but what if they found out that I used to be an embezzler?" Ralph, uncomfortable, snaps, "Harry, you should keep these things to yourself" (13)—but his shushing cannot quiet Harry's mind. Harry is both officer and criminal. The creeping disquiet produced by this knowledge sends him into spirals of madness, where he is possessed by the ghosts of convicts he was responsible for hanging. Taking over his mouth, they accuse him of the worst kind of hypocrisy, of killing them for crimes no worse than he himself has committed. In a conversation that Harry holds with himself, half in his own voice and half in the voice of the ghost of Thomas Barrett, this guilt is so painful that he can only call out for Duckling, the convict woman he loves:

> HARRY. You shouldn't have stolen that food! 'I wanted to live, go back to England, I'd only be 24. I hadn't done it much, not like you.' Duckling! [...] 'Didn't you ever steal?' No! Yes. But that was different. Duckling! 'Why should you be alive after what you've done?' Duckling! Duckling! (74)

Other characters, too, feel that the line between officer and convict is perilously thin; in this penal colony where it is meant to be most rigid, they are haunted by a sense that only fleeting

fragments of luck, good or ill, have placed them on one side or the other. In Harry's case, the haunting will claim his life.

In *The Recruiting Officer*, the instability of these categories—the idea that the difference between soldier and criminal has been rather overstated—is one of the central running jokes. This works in one direction at the climax of the play, when prisoners are conscripted *en masse* to fill ranks already populated by the unscrupulous sort ("Let me have one honest man in my company for the novelty's sake!" cries Plume), but it works in the other direction, too, for Kite reveals that he himself has a criminal past. He boasts that he was raised among thieves and pimps who taught him "canting and lying," "bullying and swearing," and "whoring and drinking. So that if your worship pleases to cast up the whole sum, *viz.* canting, lying, impudence, pimping, bullying, swearing, whoring, drinking, and a halberd, you will find the sum total will amount to a recruiting sergeant!"[27] The satirical implication is that all it takes to turn Criminal Kite into Sergeant Kite is a sergeant's weapon and a bit of luck.

It is a very funny moment. But *Our Country's Good* takes seriously the stakes of the irony that Farquhar is pointing out here. On one hand is Harry, an officer tormented by the way only a sergeant's weapon and a bit of luck, so to speak, separate him from the living convicts who surround him and the dead ones who possess him. On the other is Dabby Bryant, a woman convict-actor who hears Kite's speech for the first time and, shocked, amazed, exclaims that it is about her: "That's my story," she insists. "Why do I have to play a silly milkmaid? Why can't I play Kite?" (91).[28] If Harry senses that little sets him apart from those like Dabby, Dabby also senses that little sets her apart from those like him. But the implications of which category each has stumbled into are starkly different. To be an officer is to administer the law, while to be a convict is to be subject to it and its austere mechanisms of justice. Though Harry and Dabby are

[27] Farquhar, *The Recruiting Officer*, 57. A sergeant's ceremonial weapon was a halberd.
[28] Wertenbaker, *Our Country's Good*, 1989.

equals in substance, to label one an officer and the other a criminal is to ensure the most unequal of outcomes.

For Wertenbaker, the unsettling of these categories is very deliberate. There are other lines being muddied here, too: between living and dead, between representation and reality, between acting and action. All of these are part of the play's attempt to refuse any kind of essentialism. Thomas Barrett is dead, hanged at seventeen for stealing food; if even he can come back to speak his part through Harry's mouth, why should any category of being be permanent, immutable, inherent? Maybe this is a literalism too far, to treat as ghosts—as the real voices of the real dead—what are clearly Harry's hallucinations. But to say that Harry's ghosts are not diegetically real is not to say that they cannot be real to the audience, in much the same way that Harry himself is "real," that is, a character invested with presence and physical, three-dimensional being by the actor playing him. That the audience may read Harry's ghosts as more real than, say, Duckling does, as she helplessly watches him hallucinate, suggests that the slippage between representation and reality—seemingly ontological categories—runs much deeper than the basic theatrical observation that real actors must play representational roles. It suggests, indeed, that their ontological status is beside the point, that whether such categories are stable is less important than how the audience encounters them and how that encounter produces meaning.

Wertenbaker dramatizes the collapse of so many ontological categories because the thesis of the play is the same as Locke's: that no one is born with ideas, with preexisting conceptions of reality, but must learn them through sensation and reflection, through experiencing and processing the visceral world.[29] Ross and Tench are convinced that criminality is a predisposition—instinctual, not learned. But the tendency that these categories have of melting into each other sets the play down firmly on Governor Phillip's side. Its scenes contain moments of disorienting cruelty; it opens, in fact, on the sight of prisoner Robert Sideway

[29] John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Hackett, 1996).

receiving the last of fifty unforgiving lashes, after which, untied, he collapses on the deck of the ship. Later, Ross, recounting this moment to humiliate Sideway, will callously spit, "I have seen the white of this animal's bones, his wretched blood and reeky convict urine have spilled on my boots" (78).[30] There are beatings for insubordination, hangings for petty theft. But these are almost the necessary backdrop against which the strain of Enlightenment humanism works, against which the convicts begin to reclaim their own humanity. If, as Locke says, the human mind is a *tabula rasa*; if, as Rousseau says, men are born free; if crime is not a matter of predisposition but merely of experience and education—then surely reform, not retribution, is the answer?

And sure enough, Philip imagines culture to be the means and the emblem of that humanization. Ralph comes to Phillip wanting to stop the play: it has made him the target of ridicule and threats, and, as Ralph despairs, "Half my cast is in chains, Sir" (70). But Phillip obliquely reminds him that these obstacles make the play even more necessary. "Would you have a world without Socrates?" he asks. "Socrates demonstrates that a slave boy can learn the principles of geometry as well as a gentleman […]. It is a matter of reminding the slave of what he knows, of his own intelligence […]. You must see your actors in that light" (70–71). Ralph puzzles over this for a moment. It is a conviction he himself has expressed, defending his play to Ross and Tench by claiming he has seen a change in some of the convicts. But other actors have proven more stubborn. "John Arscott—" he begins. The governor interrupts. "He has been given 200 lashes for trying to escape. It will take time for him to see himself as a human being again." Ralph also names Liz Morden.

> PHILLIP. Morden is one of the most difficult women in the colony.
> RALPH. She is indeed, Sir.
> PHILLIP. Lower than a slave, full of loathing, foul-mouthed, desperate.
> RALPH. Exactly, Sir. And violent.
> PHILLIP. Quite. To be made an example of.
> RALPH. By hanging?
> PHILLIP. No, Lieutenant, by redemption. (71)

[30] Wertenbaker, *Our Country's Good*, 1989.

This is Phillip's vision for his colony, the little republic he has been tasked with setting up thousands of miles from home: that its most miserable inhabitants, condemned, isolated, held in contempt, subjected to unimaginable indignities, dehumanized at every turn, might nonetheless still be reclaimed, and it is the theater that will do it. It will remind Arscott that he is human; it will rescue Liz from her depravity and desperation. Other characters, perhaps unconsciously, come to share this belief in the theater's power. Ketch Freeman is an outcast among the other convicts because he serves as the colony's unwilling hangman, but in the play he gets to be a justice of the peace. The others hiss and spit at him in early rehearsals, but by the end their resistance has melted away and he has become part of them once more. In the last scene, backstage before the performance begins, the cast imagines a future where there is no more brutality, where they are free at last, where they are finally citizens, not prisoners, of the world they are helping to build. Sideway announces that he will start a theater company.

> WISEHAMMER. I will write you a play about justice.
> SIDEWAY. Only comedies, my boy, only comedies. [...]
> LIZ. I'll be in your company, Mr. Sideway.
> KETCH. And so will I. I'll play all the parts that have dignity and gravity.
> SIDEWAY. I'll hold auditions tomorrow.
> DABBY. Tomorrow.
> DUCKLING. Tomorrow.
> MARY. Tomorrow.
> LIZ. Tomorrow. (103)

"Tomorrow" here has a peculiar quality, both concrete *and* abstract, aspirational, utopian. Opening a theater company "tomorrow" is absurd. Their material conditions—convicts near starvation in a camp with scarcely a permanent dwelling—forbid it; Dabby has already confided that she will attempt an escape that evening, will be gone by tomorrow; Governor Phillip's authority is on tenuous ground in the face of resistance from Ross, which makes permission for future plays unlikely. The actors know this, but for a moment they pretend not to. It matters that the first institution in their "tomorrow" will be a theater company: here at the end of the play, they become part of a tradition of conceiving of the stage as both present locus and future telos of a kind of radical world-building, a platform on which to experiment with and produce the

kind of society they imagine. The concrete declaration that they will "hold auditions tomorrow" gets a kind of vindication in the actual historical record. Only seven years later, the real Robert Sidaway would open the first theater in the growing town that was now called Sydney, a small building typical of the standard English provincial playhouse.[31] This is a clever bit of backward engineering from Wertenbaker, of course; there is not enough information about the 1789 performance to know whether the real Sidaway even participated in it. But that creative license is more than just the purview of historical fiction—it is itself a utopianism, an imagining of the past that creates possibilities for the future.

This potentiality is clearest a few scenes earlier, in a moment when *acting* takes on the weight and force of *action*, where a cultural form is justified by its real political consequences. Not long after his conversation with Governor Phillip, Ralph and the convicts gather for a rehearsal. The play has been in the works for some time, but now four of the actors have been implicated in an attempt to steal food and escape the camp. Major Ross delivers three of the four to the rehearsal, but Arscott is kept back to receive the rest of his punishment, and Ross orders that Liz remain chained throughout in case she should try to flee. Then he sits back to watch and deride. When Ralph nervously protests that they want to rehearse in private, that "there is a modesty attached to the process of creation," Ross explodes: "Modesty? Modesty!" He orders Sideway to take off his shirt to expose the scars from his flogging. "Are you feeling modest, Sideway?" He commands Dabby to mime wagging a tail and begging for food on all fours like a dog, demands that Mary expose herself to reveal a tattoo high on her inner thigh. "Modesty." Ralph himself is at a loss for how to intervene in the grim bodily violations unfolding before him. As Ross threatens to lift Mary's skirts for her if she will not, though, Sideway intercedes. He "starts acting, boldly, across the room, across everyone" and delivers a speech from the scene

[31] Jordan, *The Convict Theatres of Early Australia, 1788–1840*, n.p.

they are rehearsing: "I shall meet with less cruelty among the most barbarous nations," his character laments, "than I have found at home" (77–79).[32]

It is a line well-suited to all its sundry historical moments. In 1706's *The Recruiting Officer*, it is played to laughs by a Mr. Worthy who is convinced that shipping abroad will be less painful than being jilted by a lover in Shropshire. In Sideway's mouth, though, spoken in by an actor in 1988 but inflected by its setting in 1789, it becomes an indictment of the barbarity he has suffered under the aegis of the country he calls his home, of the dehumanizing English penal practices that were already taking shape during Farquhar's life and finding their worst expression in Sideway's. The line points accusatorily to how Britain's systems of unfreedom stand as the repudiation of its pretentions to Enlightenment. Sideway's performance is enough to derail Ross's abuse and thrust the rehearsal forward. In this moment, acting in its theatrical sense transmutes into action in its political sense; as Wertenbaker suggests in an interview, "The idea is that if you can start this rehearsal, you can stop the brutality."[33] Culture, in other words, is the antidote to violence.

IV

This vision is clearly utopian. And in some ways, this was the only conceivable response to the world in which *Our Country's Good* had emerged. It is customary—and not wrong—to point to Margaret Thatcher as the originator and standard-bearer of the political mood that prevailed through the eighties, but the roots of the policies that would come to be called Thatcherism began long before she became prime minister in 1979. The oil crisis of the early seventies, the global recession, and a comparatively meager UK growth rate precipitated what often gets called a crisis of legitimacy for the state, and one was precipitously behind the times in establishment

[32] Wertenbaker, *Our Country's Good*, 1989.
[33] Hilary de Vries, "Of Convicts, Brutality and the Power of Theater," *The New York Times*, September 30, 1990.

circles if one was not wringing one's hands about imminent economic and moral collapse.[34] But this conversation had been ongoing since the fifties without a norms-breaking government like Thatcher's coming into power. In retrospect, it is easy to imagine the birth of Thatcherite neoliberalism as a wholly thought-out and strategically implemented ideology, but the truth is that it was much more ad-hoc and piecemeal than this implies, especially in its early days. Finding themselves newly in government after a calamitous Callaghan premiership, the Conservatives' modus operandi was to throw things at the wall to see what would stick; an initial experiment with monetarism and wage suppression during the first two years, for example, proved disastrous and was quietly binned. But the legitimation crisis had sparked a determination to be done with the post-1945 consensus about the state's supportive role in a mixed economy, and privatization (today almost synonymous with Thatcherism) was simply the model that happened to catch on.[35] The partial privatizations in 1980 of British Aerospace and Cable and Wireless received, starting in about 1983, plenty of post-hoc rationalization full of appeals to Fredrich Hayek and Milton Friedman. By 1987, it had coalesced into a coherent enough program to make the denationalization of even British Steel, British Petroleum, and British Airways seem reasonable—nay, necessary—for the good of the public.

Where was the Left in the face of this solidifying conservative orthodoxy? Different historians offer different accounts. In a book that grapples with Foucault's supposed late-in-life embrace of the Chicago School, Mitchell Dean and Daniel Zamora join a long tradition of reading neoliberalism as the unintended consequence of the system smashing that leftists had tried to do in the sixties: in this version of events, it was the 1968-style radical critique of the center-aligned, mixed-economy, welfare-statist, post-war consensus—and of the norms and institutions that girded it—that paved a way for the success of Thatcherism, which, after all, also had a system-smashing impulse at its core. The only real difference was its version of what

[34] Andrew Gamble, "Privatization, Thatcherism, and the British State," *Journal of Law and Society* 16, no. 1 (1989): 1–20.
[35] Gamble, 7.

would replace it.[36] Other accounts point to the deep divisions within the Left itself during the seventies, especially between a pro-theory wing, full of rigidly classical structuralists and disciples of Louis Althusser, and a pro-history wing, which resisted structuralism and insisted on the value of much-contested categories like objectivity. To many, even before Thatcher's rise to power, this factionalism was a cause for deep concern. The 1981 feminist work *Broken Fragments* celebrated the diversity of leftist thought and experience that had emerged from the sixties but made the case that these ingroups had become too insular, that only by joining with and reinventing the Labour Party would the real Left be able to mount an offensive against the Right.[37] That vituperative and small-minded philosophical absolutism undermined the leftist cause in the eighties has become such a naturalized narrative that it often gets taken for granted in textbook-style histories of the late twentieth century.[38]

A somewhat different explanation, though, takes shape in the last pages of Dennis Dworkin's book *Cultural Marxism in Postwar Britain*. One of Thatcherism's crucial successes, Dworkin suggests, was its "reconstruction of the 'popular' along conservative lines" (247).[39] The Tories were reinventing themselves, at least ostensibly, as the party of the people: they reframed government spending as an affront to the taxpayer, implemented schemes to make stock ownership more accessible to the middle class, cast welfare recipients as a burden not on society but on individuals and families. For the first time, and with real consequences, the consumer had become the central object of politics—and what was every Briton if not a consumer? (The obvious answer would be "human," of course, but Thatcher would prefer we let the question remain rhetorical.) Stuart Hall recognized as early as 1979 that the Left was ill-equipped to grapple with the threat of this "authoritarian populism" (15).[40] Orthodox marxism with its

[36] Mitchell Dean and Daniel Zamora, *The Last Man Takes LSD: Foucault and the End of Revolution* (Verso, 2021).
[37] Sheila Rowbotham, Lynne Segal, and Hilary Wainwright, *Beyond the Fragments: Feminism and the Making of Socialism* (Alyson Publications, 1981).
[38] See, for example, Mark Mark Donnelly, *Sixties Britain: Culture, Society and Politics* (Routledge, 2014). His chapter on "Anxieties, Beliefs, and Intellectuals" frames the sixties as the origin of these serious tensions within the Left.
[39] Dennis L. Dworkin, *Cultural Marxism in Postwar Britain* (Duke UP, 1997).
[40] Stuart Hall, "The Great Moving Right Show," *Marxism Today*, January 1978, 14–20.

notion of false consciousness, he pointed out, has a tendency to dismiss the Right as merely a fraud, which the working classes will see through soon enough when their "natural" ideology reawakens. Dworkin suggests that for Hall, "Thatcherism had made real inroads into popular consciousness, had made connections with people's experience and found a way to articulate it" (257).[41] In other words, the Right was succeeding because the Left was prone to underestimate—and therefore fail to counter—its claim to truth.

The year before *Our Country's Good* premiered, Thatcherism had coalesced into a coherent enough worldview that the prime minister could sum up her movement's governing philosophy in her now-infamous interview with *Women's Own:*

> Too many children and people have been given to understand, "I have a problem, it is the government's job to cope with it!" [...]. they are casting their problems on society and who is society? There is no such thing! There are individual men and women and there are families and no government can do anything except through people and people look to themselves first.[42]

Labour had capitulated to much of Thatcherism's logic; under the leadership of Neil Kinnock, it had dropped its positions on the nationalization of certain industries, supported policies widely regarded as anti-union, and stopped talking about nuclear disarmament. It was also facing a challenge from the newly formed centrist Social Democratic Party / Liberal Alliance. To Thatcher's negation of the collective, to her suggestion that nothing about British polity could be a joint enterprise, Labour had hardly anything of substance to say and hardly any communal vision to advance. In a key 1988 speech, Kinnock excoriated Thatcher for her comments but still tied his party's platform to the same rhetoric of growth that had spurred her ascent.[43] Conservative ideology had, not unsuccessfully, reduced its constituents from Aristotelean political beings, imbued with something more than bare life by virtue of their civic—their

[41] Dworkin, *Cultural Marxism in Postwar Britain*.
[42] Douglas Keay, "Aids, Education and the Year 2000! Interview with Margaret Thatcher," *Woman's Own*, October 1987.
[43] Dworkin, *Cultural Marxism in Postwar Britain*.

political, their social—roles, to something like a *homo economicus*, individuals whose greatest potentiality was the power to act rationally in a free market.

It seems only natural, in this light, that Wertenbaker would feel the impulse to respond by evoking the figure of humankind as Enlightenment thinkers imagined it: freed by knowledge and rationality, given less to Hobbesian violence than to Lockean contract-making, a *tabula rasa*, the bearer of agency and of rights. An early published edition of the play begins with an epigraph summarizing the thesis of Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobsen's 1968 book *Pygmalion in the Classroom:*

> Twenty percent of the children in a certain elementary school were reported to their teachers as showing unusual potential for growth [...]. The names were drawn out of a hat. Eight months later these unusual or "magic" children showed significantly greater gains in IQ than did the remaining children who had not been singled out for the teachers' attention. The change in the teachers' expectations [...] had led to an actual change in the intellectual performance of those randomly selected children.[44]

My first encounter with this epigraph left me feeling irritable, as it strikes me as a bit on-the-nose—yes, I found myself thinking, go ahead and spell out the play's themes for us, why don't you. It is also, as we shall see, rather too cut-and-dried to capture the complexity of this work. But I admit that it has grown on me somewhat. Already underway in 1988 was the work that would result in Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray's 1994 book *The Bell Curve*, which argued from an American perspective that "intelligence" was largely innate, that it changed little throughout a person's life, and that it had more predictive power for many outcomes—job performance, income, family stability, and criminal behavior—than external factors like wealth or poverty at birth. (Perhaps unsurprisingly, it also argued that apparent IQ differences between races were at least partly genetic in origin.) *The Bell Curve* is a particularly high-profile and groan-worthy example, of course, but it was evidence of a larger trend: sure enough, as neoliberal conceptions of the human took over global politics, there followed pseudoscientists eager to justify them in ontological terms. Heritable intelligence became to neoliberalism what

[44] Timberlake Wertenbaker, *Our Country's Good* (Methuen, 1988).

social darwinism had been to the Nazis: a largely post-hoc rationalization for the political motivated idea that hierarchies were naturally occurring, rather than human-made. After all, if something called "intelligence" was the biggest determiner of outcomes, then poverty was not the unfair result of inherently exploitative free market forces but merely of the poor's lamentable but inborn, unfixable stupidity.

This is the cold, paralyzing anti-utopia to which *Our Country's Good* refuses to cede ground. In that 1789 convict performance, Wertenbaker found not just a parallel to but a shaper of her own historical moment: the eighteenth century was the origin of the kind of humanism that, in 1988, she felt she needed to reassert. What *Our Country's Good* tries most fervently to stage is the convicts' humanity, the possibility that they can be redeemed if only the world will recognize it, the inherent tendency of art and theater to draw it out. It is, to the extent that it can be, an attempt to intervene in the west's alarming swing toward much more circumscribed, reductive horizons of the human.

V

I have painted quite a soaring picture of this little play's ambitions. Perhaps I have made it sound naïve. There is something to this: the first time I read it, the wild thought flashed through my mind that perhaps the character of Governor Phillip was intended as some kind of satire. Surely we cannot be meant to take seriously this idealized eighteenth-century sage who wanders the set spouting quotes from Plato and Rousseau?

But I think Wertenbaker intends us to hear him in earnest, and Phillip is a useful emblem for how the play's intricacies exceed, even complicate, the simplicity of what is clearly its thesis. The real Arthur Phillip, admiral of the Royal Navy, first governor of New South Wales from 1788 to 1792, cuts a figure of considerable ambivalence across the historical stage. Like other acute and agile bureaucrats of modernizing Europe—Thomas Cromwell and Jean-Baptiste

Colbert come to mind—Phillip was a pragmatic colonialist whose statesmanship was nonetheless influenced by the revolutionizing currents of his age, which he had picked up on as a young man at Greenwich Hospital School. Greenwich was at the time the closest thing there was to a bourgeois education; first established in 1712, forty years before Phillip arrived, it was a charity school for the sons of poor seamen in the royal and merchant navies. It captured an early instance of the shift, which would become much more common as the centuries wore on, toward a different model of schooling, one that combined liberal instruction with vocational training—a gentleman's education rolled in with that of a tradesman. There Phillip both mastered complex navigational techniques and encountered Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, and the new, controversial *philosophes* of his own time. The first prepared him to skillfully manage the day-to-day operations of the First Fleet and, later, the establishment of the Botany Bay penal colony; the second prepared him to articulate just what kind of civilization he wanted that colony to be. Contemporary accounts paint him as a governor who both implemented harsh penalties for those caught breaking the law *and* stayed many executions, both kidnapped indigenous Australians and forced them to live in the colony *and* considered them to be rights-bearing British citizens.[45] In other words, he was both a standard administrator, arm of the colonial state, *and* a philosopher occasionally able to glimpse beyond it. He would embody this strange, new bourgeois contradiction for the rest of his life.

Our Country's Good is troubled, not always consciously, by similar odd marriages of ideas and praxis, by the ways in which the Enlightenment humanism it wants to promote is compromised by the very structures of power and capital it is complicit in. As recently as 2018, Wertenbaker described herself as allergic to orthodoxies of all kinds: "The rebel in me goes berserk, and I start pawing at it. I like the area where the questions are, and the ambiguities of political life, rather than the certainties."[46] This resistance to ideological homogeneity runs

[45] Michael Pembroke, *Arthur Phillip: Sailor, Mercenary, Governor, Spy* (Hardie Grant, 2013).
[46] Nelson Pressley, "Grappling with Jefferson's Legacy: 'A Playwright Doesn't like Nice People,'" *Washington Post*, January 24, 2018.

throughout the play and often haunts the more straightforward affirmations of her humanist utopia. The result is a work that is uneasy about its own intervention—that simultaneously feels it to be necessary and worries that it is insufficient or inconsistent, that captures a particular form of philosophical uncertainty that had crept into the post-1945 imagination: what do we do with the state of exception?

Not that the phrase "state of exception" had suddenly entered theatrical parlance or anything—it would take Giorgio Agamben's 2005 work on the subject to bring it to the attention even of most academics. But in the wake of the twentieth century's great catastrophes, it became hard to swallow the Enlightenment theory that political power had its origins in some kind of social contract. Governor Phillip aspires to this kind of Lockean world: he tells Ralph that he wants "to rule over responsible human beings, not tyrannise over a group of animals. I want there to be a contract between us, not a whip on my side, terror and hatred on theirs" (72). [47] But the play itself betrays the lie of this civilizing narrative. Convicts and officers alike live in a kind of state of exception. They have been dislocated from the homeland that anchors the structures of their law; though they have brought along an impression of those structures to replicate in their colony, violence is the real governing force. Robbie Ross has authority over the prisoners because the state has given it to him, but that he can terrorize them so arbitrarily and without oversight suggests that the law is insufficient, that it cannot limit sovereignty once it has granted it. The colony is itself a legal construct, of course, a prison contained not by walls but by vast oceans—but, as all prisons do, once constructed it becomes a legal blind spot, a category that is simultaneously included in and excluded from the law. Like the battlefield where Captain Plume invites Costar and Thomas to imagine bashing in a Frenchman's skull, the penal colony is an extralegal space where those with raw power can inflict arbitrary violence on those without.

What is troubling for this play is that these states of exception are themselves Enlightenment categories. In his famous formulation of the social contract, Rousseau embraces

[47] Wertenbaker, *Our Country's Good*, 1989.

a kind of extremist collectivism: if the purpose of the social contract is the "conservation of the contracting parties" (and if in its absence, as Hobbes thought, life would be nasty, brutish, and short), the benefit of such communal conservation comes at the cost of giving up individual liberties. Parties to the contract should be prepared to make sacrifices to preserve it, up to and including their own lives. "When the prince has said to [the citizen], 'It is expedient that you should die,'" Rousseau writes,

> he should die. Because it is under this condition alone that he has lived in security up to then and because his life is not only a kindness of nature, but a conditional gift of the state [...]. It is in order to avoid being the victim of an assassin that a person consents to die, were he to become one. (159)[48]

This is in service of an explicit argument for capital punishment, but its implications are even broader: by this theory, upon entering into a social contract, one agrees that violating it will result in being stripped of all its protections. To pervert Earl Warren's clever formulation, citizenship is a license that expires upon misbehavior.[49]

In this scheme, the convicts are excluded from the law as a natural consequence of having broken it, and the penal colony is merely the location of this unfranchise. But what Rousseau cannot account for is, unsurprisingly, a failure of consent that has its roots in the new machines of capital and private property that had emerged in the preceding centuries. The front matter of at least one edition of Keneally's novel *The Playmaker* lists the crime and sentence of each real convict fictionalized in the story. Most were charged with petty theft, many consigned to the noose but granted reprieve by transportation instead.[50] Details of their lives escape modern knowability, attested only by brief court records and ships' logs. We know little about them. But general trends among Britain's eighteenth-century underclasses shed light on the things we *do* know. A sizeable number of First Fleet convicts are listed as laborers, like Ketch

[48] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Basic Political Writings*, trans. Donald A. Cress (Hackett, 1987).
[49] In his 1958 opinion on *Trop v. Dulles,* Warren famously wrote that "Citizenship is *not* a license that expires upon misbehavior," emphasis mine. "Albert L. TROP, Petitioner, v. John Foster DULLES," Legal Information Institute, n.d., https://www.law.cornell.edu/supremecourt/text/356/86.
[50] Thomas Keneally, *Playmaker* (Simon and Schuster, 1993).

Freeman, or as having no trade, like John Wisehammer. The rise of a growing, restless body of unskilled workers was a symptom of the enclosure and privatization of rural lands, which displaced farmers-no-more into cities (primarily London) in search of the means to survive. A lack of work drove thousands to theft. English penal law also underwent a dramatic increase in severity between 1688 and 1815, such that it was dubbed the "Bloody Code"; during this period, the number of offenses punishable by death increased nearly fivefold, from under 50 to 225, with almost no lenience on the basis of youth, sex, or circumstance (xi).[51] This is how Duckling, at age sixteen, came to be sentenced to death for stealing a pair of candlesticks worth around fifteen days' wages.[52] Even many of the Bloody Code's administrators were alarmed by its excesses, but they allowed such sentences to proceed because the dreadful possibility of being hanged for the least offense was supposed to deter others. Frank McLynn argued in 1989 that

> In functional terms the Bloody Code was the response of a society whose capital enterprise was releasing new forms of wealth which could not be adequately protected without a regular police force [...], an adaptation by a society to protect new forms of property and to restrict the benefits of a huge increase in wealth. (xi–xii)[53]

If social contract theory is formulated around the consent of the governed, Ketch, Wisehammer, and Duckling are proof that any such consent is an illusion—for who can consent to a contract when its structures for allocating resources and administering the law have already effectively shut them out? Transportation to the other end of the world becomes not so much a body politic removing those who refuse its terms as a modernizing regime grappling with a demographic upheaval, a threat to a solidifying new social order. It is not a contractual displacement; it is a biopolitical one.

Haunting this play, too, is the way in which this contractual fiction is sustained by a colonial logic. Governor Phillip imagines a *utopia*, a word which Thomas More invented out of the Greek *οὐ* ("no") and *τόπος* ("place"), a "no-place." This etymology often gets invoked to point

[51] Frank McLynn, *Crime and Punishment in Eighteenth Century England* (Routledge, 2013).
[52] See the National Archives' currency converter, https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/currency-converter/
[53] McLynn, *Crime and Punishment in Eighteenth Century England*.

to utopia's impossibility, to More's self-aware acknowledgement that such a place cannot really exist. But here it takes on a more sinister dimension. Phillip's vision, the Platonic civilization he imagines, *needs* a utopia, a no-place, to come into being. Utopianisms often do: they cannot conceive of themselves as extensions of existing places but must rather invent themselves out of whole cloth. Social contract theory was no different. It conjured a lost state of nature in which an egalitarian consensus about communal governance had organically emerged to create a previously unknown category of action, *politics*. This was the supposed origin of all complex society. In other words, a world like the one Phillip wants to create needs to be planted in ground that can be claimed as fresh, new, uninhabited, empty. Writers like Montaigne, Locke, and Montesquieu found the possibility of such a place arresting, and Locke in particular is famous for his insistence that the state of nature was not merely a useful philosophical theory but a historical and contemporary fact; to him, the indigenous peoples of the New World (itself a telling phrase) were the manifestation of the prepolitical society *par excellence*.[54]

The role of Enlightenment thinkers in imagining other lands as both pre-civilizational and ripe for the civilizing—that is, in rationalizing and encouraging empire—has been well-documented.[55] Wertenbaker's play cannot quite escape this compromising foundation of its own utopianisms. One way to approach such a question is from Said's fundamental insight that culture, rather than being somehow removed from and independent of empire, is deeply implicated in it;[56] *Our Country's Good* tries to assert the transcendent, redemptive value of the theater but gets tangled in difficult questions about what culture is and how it becomes a tool of state power. Peter Buse notes that *The Recruiting Officer* makes for a troubling central emblem: it is, quite literally, about how the crown recruits its subjects into imperial service, and while happy to lampoon officers and townsfolk alike, it can hardly be construed as an anti-imperial

[54] John Locke, *The Second Treatise of Civil Government* (Broadview Press, 2015).
[55] See, for example, Anthony Pagden, *Lords of All the World* (Yale UP, 1995).
[56] Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (Vintage, 1993).

play (168).[57] If this genial comedy is the instance of "culture" that Ralph and Phillip pin their hopes to, their argument starts to look weak indeed. When Phillip occasionally tries to articulate what it is about the theatre that might change the nature of their society, he tends to fall back on words like "fine language, sentiment" (11), a bourgeois notion of art that feels toothless in the face of beatings and hangings and forced labor.[58] Quite the opposite, in fact, of Ross's fear that "the theatre leads to threatening theory" (33) or Phillip's claim that "the theatre is an expression of civilization" (29), it seems that the theater may at worst be a tool of empire and at best, in Tench's dismissive formulation, "words written no doubt by some London ass." To this, Ralph can offer only a feeble rejoinder: "George Farquhar was not an ass! And he was from Ireland" (28).

That may be too simplistic a reading. As I have argued above, moments of subversion in Farquhar's play—and in how Wertenbaker receives and adapts it—suggest that neither can be assimilated into an easy imperialist ideology. But neither can be fully exculpated, either. The indigenous Australians who lived in Botany Bay before the arrival of the First Fleet are very nearly absent from *Our Country's Good*, mostly included only by officers' offhand mentions of "the odd savage" (11). The exception is a character called the Aborigine. They (never explicitly gendered) do not interact with others onstage: they simply appear briefly, occasionally, to offer troubled reflections on the presence of foreigners on their shores. At first they figure the British as "a dream that has lost its way" (8); when it becomes clear that it has come to stay, they wonder, "How can we befriend this crowded, hungry, and disturbed dream?" (75). By the last scene, though, as the convicts gather to perform and Ketch observes that the natives "come around the camp because they're dying: smallpox," the Aborigine doubts their own metaphor. "Look: oozing pustules on my skin, heat on my forehead," they despair. "Perhaps we have been wrong all this time and this is not a dream at all" (102). There is a chilling parallelism here.

[57] Peter Buse, *Drama + Theory: Critical Approaches to Modern British Drama* (Manchester UP, 2001).
[58] Wertenbaker, *Our Country's Good*, 1989.

Governor Phillip's utopian dream is solidifying into a kind of reality: convicts and officers alike are about to put aside their alienation from home and their imbalanced power relations and their growing fears of starvation, and for a few hours become the kind of civilization that Phillip believes culture can bring about. At the same time, the Aborigine's dream is solidifying, too, but into a very different kind of reality—a waking nightmare in which their body is devoured by a foreign disease they do not have the immunity to fight. This is their last appearance. In this moment, the play seems to be staging the ugly obverse of its own Enlightenment humanism, how the category of freely contracted, rational man can only exist via the erasure (in this case, the literal dispossession and death) of the subaltern other.

Other scenes intrude to challenge the play's privileging of art. One of its underlying currents is that the convict-actors feel that the roles they play are real, not representational, that they *become* the characters they are playing and so metamorphose for a moment into something other than prisoners. Ralph's early halting defense of his rehearsals rests on this fungibility; describing the convicts to his fellow officers, he stammers, "It seemed to me, as one or two—I'm not saying all of them, not all—but one or two, saying those well-balanced lines of Mr. Farquhar, they seemed to acquire a dignity, they seemed—they seemed to lose some of their corruption" (31). Arscott articulates it most persuasively: "When I say Kite's lines, I forget everything else. I forget the judge said that I'm going to have to spend the rest of my natural life in this place getting beaten and working like a slave […]. I don't have to remember the things I've done, when I speak Kite's lines I don't hate anymore. I'm Kite. I'm in Shrewsbury" (89). In the play's account, in other words, it is from the imaginative parallel between acting and being that the theater derives its transformative power.

But this power is sometimes strangled by the limits of representation. In one scene, Liz has assumed an unconvincing posture and Ralph asks her to imagine being Melinda, the wealthy woman she is meant to play. "Have you ever seen a lady in her own house?" he asks.

LIZ. I used to climb into the big houses when I was a girl and stand there, looking. I didn't take anything. I just stood. Like this.
RALPH. But if it was your own house, you would think it was normal to live like that.
WISEHAMMER. It's not normal. It's not normal when others have nothing.
RALPH. When acting, you have to imagine things. You have to imagine you're someone different. So, now, think of a rich lady and imagine you're her. *(Liz begins to masticate.)*
RALPH. What are you doing?
LIZ. If I were rich, I'd eat myself sick. (60–61)

Ralph explicitly calls on the transformative function of acting only to have it fail. This gulf is too big for imagination to cross: it cannot take a starving prisoner and turn her into a mannerly gentlewoman. The outcome of the attempt is both amusing and grotesque. The theater demands an act of extrapolation, demands that Liz draw conclusions about genteel behavior from the premise of imagined material abundance. This demand leads Liz not to a picture of reality as it is—to an accurate impression of how a real gentlewoman named Melinda might behave—but to the premise's logical conclusion, that those who *have* too much would likely *eat* too much, too, indeed, eat themselves sick. The disjuncture suggests that actual genteel behavior (which the play repeatedly sets up as civilized behavior) under conditions of material abundance is a kind of non sequitur, that it does not follow from the premise. It exposes more than just a fundamental incompatibility between the posh, bounteous English countryside of *The Recruiting Officer* and the deprivation and violence of the penal colony; it exposes a failure of cultural forms like the theater to conjure any scenario in which they can be reconciled.

Most telling, perhaps, is that the scene that seems most emphatically to locate theater as a space of political potential ends with a terrible kind of ambiguity. When Ross's casually cruel humiliations of Dabby and Mary are derailed by Sideway's "acting, boldly, across the room, across everyone" (79), it seems for a moment that his intervention really has, at least for now, stopped the violence. It summons Liz into movement, too—she follows his lines with her own, and they proceed into the scene—and Ross and his henchman Campbell seem to have no choice but leave the stage. Political action indeed! But their reprieve is short-lived. Ross and Campbell

have not exited to slink back to their tents in defeat but rather to carry out the work of violence they intimated at the beginning of the scene: fifty-three remaining lashes for Arscott, who had fainted after the first hundred and forty-seven. Liz's speech is suddenly interrupted by Arscott's screams from offstage. She loses her lines. Sideway tries to prompt her. They carry on briefly but they, too, have been derailed. The scene ends with a stage direction: "But she stops and drops down, defeated. Silence, except for the beating and Arscott's cries" (80).

This is no resounding victory for culture in the face of violence. If anything, this scene stages the dramatic imbalance of such a fight: for all its pretensions, Ralph's play has little power against the anti-utopian reality of the colony's retributive justice. All it has to offer is silence.

VI

At the end of the play, Wisehammer reminds Ralph that he has written something to preface the performance that is about to happen. "The prologue," Ralph says. "I forgot. *(Pause.)* Let me hear it again." Wisehammer complies:

> From distant climes o'er widespread seas we come
> Though not with much éclat or beat of drum
> True patriots all, for be it understood,
> We left our country for our country's good.
> No private views disgraced our generous zeal,
> What urg'd our travels was our country's weal,
> And none will doubt but that our immigration
> Will prove most useful to the British nation. (107)

Much has been written about this prologue and its rich textual history. It is not Wertenbaker's: though its real source is obscure, it seems to have first been published in the 1801's *Annual Register,* a reference work, and is often attributed to an otherwise unknown gentleman named Henry Carter. The next year, it was reprinted in former convict George Barrington's memoir *A Voyage to New South Wales*, which led to the widespread impression that Barrington himself

had written it for and participated in the 1789 production. This was impossible—Barrington was not even transported until 1790—but for his audience, imagining they were reading the real thing was too tempting to let minor considerations like chronology get in their way. It has since been known as the Barrington prologue.[59]

Its origins make it difficult to interpret in the context of *Our Country's Good*. As part of a longer poem in the *Annual Register*, it reads as satire or perhaps as kitsch: it is a work of fantasy by a comfortable British writer imagining a performance on the far-flung periphery of empire. The last couplet with its cheekily facile rhyme, *immigration* / *nation*, might suggest a parody, and indeed, Robert Jordan documents how the English, first receiving news of the production in 1796, "found the idea of a Botany Bay theatre irresistibly funny" (42). He also notes that, whether in an ironic vein or not, the sentiment the prologue expresses is in fact quite pedestrian; the figure of someone who leaves their country for their country's good, with its note of sentimental patriotism, was exceedingly common, especially in reference to transported convicts (55). [60] It is unclear where Wertenbaker found the prologue (Keneally does not include it in his novel) or how much of its history she knew (Arthur Jose had identified its real roots in 1927, but Jordan's article more thoroughly establishing its literary context would not come out until 2014), but *Our Country's Good* credits it as a subversive piece of writing: after Wisehammer repeats it for Ralph and the other actors, Ralph decides that it is "too—too political. It will be considered provocative" (107). Wisehammer will not be allowed to perform it.

Others have wondered how subversive such a prologue, with such an origin, can really be.[61] But I find this much less interesting than the questions that such a prologue, with such an origin, raises about the political vision of theatermakers in the late twentieth century—and,

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[59] Arthur Jose, "The 'Barrington' Prologue," *Royal Australian Historical Society Journal* 8, no. 5 (1927): 292–94.
[60] Robert Jordan, "The Barrington Prologue," *Script & Print* 31, no. 1 (2007): 39–57.
[61] More optimistic readings, while nuanced, tend to affirm the play's central thesis about the redemptive power of the theater, while more skeptical ones tend to problematize it. See, for a smattering of the literature, Stephen Weeks, "The Question of Liz: Staging the Prisoner in Our Country's Good," *Modern Drama* 43, no. 2 (2000): 147–56; Ann Wilson, "Our Country's Good: Theatre, Colony and Nation in Wertenbaker's Adaptation of The Playmaker," *Modern Drama* 34, no. 1 (1991): 23–34; Esther Beth Sullivan, "Hailing Ideology, Acting in the Horizon, and Reading between Plays by Timberlake Wertenbaker," *Theatre Journal* 45, no. 2 (1993): 139–54.

more broadly, about the horizons, limits, and potentialities of art in a leftism that was swiftly approaching the millennium. Writing not long after *Our Country's Good* premiered, Leo Bersani identified what he called a "culture of redemption" in both literature and literary criticism, a tendency of even the most high-minded thinkers and writers to imbue art with a redemptive function, the assumption

> that the work of art has the authority to master the presumed raw material of experience in a manner that gives value to, perhaps even redeems that material [...]. I want to show that such apparently acceptable views of art's beneficently reconstructive function in culture depend on a devaluation of historical experience and of art. The catastrophes of history matter much less if they are somehow compensated for in art, and art itself gets reduced to a kind of superior patching function, is enslaved to those very materials to which it presumably imparts value.[62]

Our Country's Good is swimming in this culture, even if it has trouble unproblematically reproducing it. To ascribe to it a "thesis," as I have done, is to acknowledge not only that it imagines the theater to be enslaved to the affirmation of human dignity but that the play itself is enslaved to the particular humanist project that seemed so urgent in 1988. And yet I think this is a work that is deeply unsettled by the catastrophes of history and, even in its most eloquent moments, finds it cannot compensate for them. The curiosity that is the Barrington prologue—a piece of kitsch, discardable, untroubled by catastrophe, plucked from history and repurposed for a play that cannot quite get behind its own intervention—seems to me to be an emblem of the irreducibility of both history and art. The prologue cannot be fully assimilated by the subversive logic of the play, whether that subversion succeeds, as in charitable humanist readings, or, as in critical postcolonial readings, fails. For this is beside the point: the actual success of failure matters less than the conditions under which this particular theatrical experiment was undertaken, one in which playwrights like Wertenbaker were having to confront and reimagine the function of art in a world where, to invoke Benjamin, the state of emergency had become the

[62] Leo Bersani, *The Culture of Redemption* (Harvard UP, 1990), 1.

norm—or, to invoke Adorno, a world after Auschwitz. The Barrington prologue is stubborn in its refusal to conform to such a world.

The real prologue, alluded to in Watkin Tench's diary, remains lost to history.

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III. LANZAROTE

I

When the curtain rises on the first scene of David Hare's play *The Secret Rapture*, Isobel is sitting alone on the end of a bed in a darkened room. Her father has just died. His body is covered by a sheet; Isobel, trying to escape a ruckus downstairs, is keeping quiet vigil. "There's actually a moment when you see the spirit leave the body," she will say. "I've always been told about it. And it's true…. Like a bird" (3).[1]

Not realizing Isobel is in the room, her sister Marion arrives in search of a valuable ring she had given her father. It is too soon to worry about such things, Marion knows this; it makes her look miserly and unfeeling; but, as she will say to Isobel, she is worried that if she doesn't collect it, their scheming and volatile young step-mother Katherine, liable to "sell it tomorrow," will (4). Marion is discomfited that Isobel has witnessed her search for the ring and assumes that she disapproves. She rushes to explain:

> For God's sake, I mean, the ring is actually valuable! Actually no, that sounds horrid. I apologize. I'll tell you the truth. I thought when I bought it—I just walked into this very expensive shop and I thought, this is one of the few really decent things I've done in my life. And it's true. I spent, as it happens, a great deal of money, rather more… rather *more* than I had at the time. I went over the top. I wanted something to express my love for my father. Something adequate (4).

Marion's language here recalls a much more famous scene from the catalogues of English drama, one in which a pair of daughters heave their hearts into their mouths and express, in exchange for a great deal of land, rather *more* love than they have at the time.[2] (They go over the top.) The parallel is not exact. Regan and Goneril find themselves playing a game in which they

[1] David Hare, *The Secret Rapture* (Samuel French, 1990).
[2] William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, ed. Grace Ioppolo (Norton, 2008).

must perform their love with their dowries hanging in the balance, and the division of the realm—Lear's show of absolute kingly authority by the final dissolution of the kingship itself—has immense political and economic stakes. And the tragedy of that play will of course center on Lear, not his daughters. Isobel and Marion's father is already dead. They have no third sister (although Katherine, who is no older than they, might adequately substitute), and here in this un-courtly, domestic scene there is no game to be played or stately consequences looming over the proceedings. Yet there is still something performative to Marion's speech. This is not to question her sincerity, though "sincerity" will be a touchstone in this play and we will sometimes have reason to doubt hers. No: Marion may in fact be describing her real feelings, but like Goneril and Regan, she is doing so in response to an unexpected demand to perform affection for her father. She feels pressure to justify her material interest in the ring to Isobel, feels the need to explain it in terms that are less mercenary than they seem. And, though she tries, she is similarly unable to escape the logic of exchange on which the first scene of *King Lear* is predicated. This "one of the few really decent things" she has done in her life is not to have helped care for her father in his last days, although there are intimations that things were bad at the end, nor is it to have dealt patiently and kindly with Katherine, who drinks too much and crumples easily under others' expectations. Instead, it is a purchase, a self-indebting in an expensive shop, and even now in the hours after the loss of her father she is wondering if she can somehow undo the expense she incurred to express her love for him.

The Secret Rapture is, like the Shakespeare play it sometimes echoes, a tragedy about economy. *Lear* is written at a moment when the nobility is transitioning from a militarized class to a consuming class.[3] *The Secret Rapture*, too, comes at a moment of transition: the precarious formation only recently known as "the middle class" is changing from a credentialed and salaried but still laboring class to a financialized and investing class. Part of the great decentralizing push of the eighties was to shift a greater burden of economic risk from

[3] Richard Halpern, *The Poetics of Primitive Accumulation* (Cornell UP, 1991).

government and financial institutions onto individuals: with the Conservative effort to individualize pension plans, dramatically expand private share ownership, and create a society of finance-minded citizens whose moral sensibilities and economic behaviors buttressed the free market, Chelsea dock workers and Wimbledon grannies alike could become investors, taking on the labor and the hazards of providing for their own retirements.[4] (This was imagined—in a twist that would set Marx spinning in his Highgate grave—as a democratization of ownership.) The welfare-statism of the postwar consensus had produced a feeling of collective security, but this was atrophied by inflation and economic crisis in the seventies and radically overturned by the eighties; by 1988, the centralizing consensus itself had become the villain. A 1985 paper from the Tory-aligned Centre for Policy Studies articulated the shape of this narrative:

> [S]ocialists argue that wealth should be garnered by the central authority, which alone can be trusted to control it and share it out equitably and impartially. We insist that the opposite is true. Only if individuals participate directly in the creation of wealth can they understand the benefits which it brings to society at large. Ownership at second hand, whether through institutions or through the State is a sorry substitute. Institutionalised capitalism, because of its concentration of power and diminishment of individual enterprise, is just as much a betrayal of the open society as socialism itself. (2)[5]

The underlined "individuals" is an emblem of this new ideology. "Ownership at second hand" is a sorry substitute; "institutionalised capitalism" is a betrayal; the gestures at something bigger, "society," are framed by appeals to wealth and openness, with no hint of communal obligation or reciprocity. Individuals should be "owners all," the title of the paper, while no collective body can be trusted to control and share resources equitably and impartially.

In an interview, Hare locates one origin of *The Secret Rapture* in an experience he had shortly after the 1987 general election that affirmed and consolidated Margaret Thatcher's premiership. During a weekend at a big country house, he was sat at dinner next to a high-profile novelist, "who seemed mainly interested in money":

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[4] Aled Davies, "Pension Funds and the Politics of Ownership in Britain, c. 1970–86," *Twentieth Century British History* 30, no. 2 (2019): 81–107.
[5] Philip Chappell and Vinson, Nigel, "Owners All: A Proposal for Personal Investment Tools" (Centre for Policy Studies, October 1985).

> He asked me what I did with my earnings, and I said I put them in the bank, and the whole table roared with laughter at my naïveté. It turned out that before he began to write each morning he spent an hour going through his portfolio. He said, you'd have to be very stupid not to have doubled your money this past year.[6]

Doubled your money! Here is the rhetoric of fantastical growth independent of labor that had taken shape throughout the eighties. Hare was a committed socialist who at this time was known mostly for his 1985 play *Pravda,* cowritten with Howard Brenton. He registers that this uncomfortable conversation marks a shift in a kind of structure of feeling: "I thought, this is something new in English life. Anyone who simply plies their trade without thinking about cash is thought to be a fool, an idiot." *The Secret Rapture* is a response to this shift, and in some ways an elegy for the vanishing world the new financialism was replacing. In one register it is a kind of realist work that puts Isobel, who plies her trade without thinking much about cash, in conflict with Marion and Tom, whose intention to grow the business is both economic and spiritual. More than this, though, it is an experiment in genre, in the function of tragedy at a moment when all publicness, both the mode and setting of conventional tragedy, seems foreclosed. Isobel makes a quiet kind of vow to take care of Katherine. This vow is not entirely rational: she was bound to her stepmother via her father, who is now dead. But Isobel will honor it to the end of the play, despite the way it provokes increasing hostility and, ultimately, murderous violence from those around her. The tragedy that unfolds as she pursues her lucid purpose suggests a fundamental incompatibility between her world and the world of magical growth she has been thrown into, and the play is not optimistic about the outcome. But it does stage another possible response to the growing neoliberal order: *dépense*, or destructive expenditure, embodied by Katherine and her wild and ruinous rebellions against the system. This might be the play's only utopian horizon.

[6] Benedict Nightingale, "David Hare Captures His Muse Onstage," *New York Times*, October 22, 1989.

II

The Secret Rapture goes, briefly, something like this:

After her father's death, Isobel agrees to hire her unstable stepmother Katherine at the small graphic design firm she shares with Irwin, though there is not enough work to support another employee. Marion's husband Tom proposes that Isobel sell the firm to him and his company, with the promise that the investment of cash will allow the business to take on more employees, including making Katherine's position permanent. Isobel reluctantly agrees. As it becomes clear that the expansion has failed, Katherine violently attacks a client and is hospitalized in a psychiatric ward; Isobel assumes the responsibility of caring for her; Tom decides to close up the firm and sell it off piece by piece. Isobel takes Katherine back to Katherine's small flat, where they live for a time on what little mother her father left. Then one night, knowing that Isobel keeps the door bolted for fear that Irwin will show up, Katherine unbolts it and goes to bed. Irwin shows up. He shoots Isobel.

The structure of this play is familiar enough. In interviews from the years after he wrote it, Hare makes it very clear how he imagines it: *The Secret Rapture* is a tragedy. It is a picture "of people trapped, wriggling, unable to escape," he tells Benedict Nightingale of the *New York Times*.[7] "When you get to the age I'm at," he says to Kathleen Tynnan—he was scarcely in his forties, but perhaps playwriting makes one dour before one's time—

> then you feel death not at the end of the road, but death all around you, in everything. […] And tragedy is the form that recognizes whichever the protagonist is—is going to die, and it's as inevitable as it can be from the moment you see her. The play would be a failure for me unless the sense that she must die is there as a drumbeat throughout.[8]

Since the play would be a failure if the end were not known from the beginning, it won't spoil anything to tell you that Hare's tragic hero is Isobel. By the time Irwin arrives to menace her

[7] Nightingale.
[8] Kathleen Tynan, "New Again: David Hare," *Interview Magazine*, April 29, 2015. This interview originally ran under the title "Dramatically Speaking" in 1989, not long after the American premiere of *The Secret Rapture*.

with a gun he has brought—or so he says—to shoot himself, her life has in many ways collapsed: she has lost the firm that was her work and her pleasure; she has rejected Irwin, whom she once thought she might marry; she has been repeatedly taken advantage of and betrayed by Katherine. As with any tragic hero, to lay the burden of all this at Isobel's feet is both entirely wrong-headed and perfectly sensible. On one hand, she *is* victimized by everyone else around her. Marion and her husband Tom think quite highly of themselves for buying Isobel's firm to help her expand and then, when the expansion fails, sell it off for parts with sighs of regret. Katherine is a skilled emotional blackmailer who seems always about to implode if Isobel doesn't offer her a job, doesn't accede to the expansion, doesn't approve of her plan to sell her dead husband's house and buy a flat in London. Irwin's repeated, earnest "I love you"s provoke Isobel to say, "I never hear the words without sensing something's being asked of me" (73). She is assailed on all sides by those who say they have her best interests at heart but continually violate her wishes and her autonomy.

And yet Isobel is no Blanche DuBois. The other characters seem to think that her nostalgia for her dead father, like Blanche's for Belle Reve, drives her to make foolish and naïve decisions in a futile effort to preserve the crumbling world he lived in. But this is not quite right. Hare's characterization of Isobel is very careful: she is neither naïve nor carried away by nostalgia, and even after what seems like a kind of break—she gets up abruptly in the middle of a film screening and boards a plane to not even she knows where—she is clearly not mad. She has made a decision, it seems, perhaps even before the play begins, to honor a particular vision of the world and the set of commitments that come with it. She apprehends the consequences in advance. She knows the expansion will fail, knows that her kindness will not protect her from Katherine's malevolence, knows that Irwin's obsession might drive him to violence. But, quietly and intentionally, she makes herself responsible for Katherine's wellbeing, because she knows it is what her father would want. The tragedy of *The Secret Rapture* is not that Isobel blindly digs

her own grave; it is that, eyes wide open, she chooses to get into the one that has been dug for her.

III

At first blush, it is not clear why this set of events should come together under the title *The Secret Rapture*. But perhaps this is the most revealing point of ingress. The suggestion of evangelicalism in "rapture" is enticing, especially given the evangelical Tom, whose strange zeal for Christ is striated with a strange zeal for capital that is as much principled or metaphysical as it is material. Such a reading is supported by an earlier title, *The Power of Prayer,* whose winking, dark irony might point to the alliance between the neoliberal and the religious, embodied here by a literal marriage between Marion and Tom.[9] They at first seem like strange bedfellows. Tom is building a pool in their back garden so that he can perform his baptisms—"if you look carefully round his chest," Isobel says of his suit, "you can see a sort of watermark" (32)—and discomfitingly introduces Jesus into casual conversations. Marion is a junior Tory minister whose cell phone (in 1988, still an impressive marker of prestige) is always ringing off the hook and who gloats about having told a delegation from the anti-nuclear Green party to "come back and see me when you're glowing in the dark" (46). Neither their professional nor their ideological commitments seem to have much to do with each other. But more than just tolerating each other's eccentricities, they are energized by them: Marion is impressed by and proud of her husband's work as "Chairman of his church's Ethical Committee" (50) and as "President of Christians in Business" (49); Tom regards his wife's dedication to her job, and her role in shaping the future of the country, as "incredible" (9). Even in the very last scene, after Isobel's death and amid the senselessness of her absence—when everything feels muddled and

[9] This title is mentioned briefly in Tynan's 1989 interview with Hare.

confused, Tom uncharacteristically alienated from his faith and Marion uncharacteristically nostalgic about her childhood—they share a sensual moment: they are meant to leave for the funeral but find themselves kissing passionately, whispering to each other, pressing together as if about to make love. It is a strange moment, not straightforwardly a sign that they are indifferent about Isobel's death but instead complicatedly bound up in their remorse and their feeling of mutual, if not wholly conscious, responsibility for it. No one is watching, and there is no reason to put on a performance of their love for each other. It seems quite sincere.

This marriage between the forces of laissez-faire capital and faith is almost too on-the-nose. Though there are superficial ways in which Tom's Christian sensibilities are sometimes injured by Marion's personal profit-seeking, their similarities run much deeper than their differences, and Hare's play in fact illuminates the deep and inextricable entanglement of their ideological roots. Early on, just after Marion has come to find the ring, Tom recounts to Isobel what it was like listening to Marion talk on the drive over:

> She kept saying, 'I hope we're not late." Late? I didn't know what she meant. Then she said, 'I'll never forgive myself if I get there and the ring has gone.' I was rather shocked. But you're saying, what, it's because the death was such a blow? (8)

"Shocked"—Marion's show of crass materialism here grates against Tom's sense of propriety. That she should be thinking of the ring at a time like this! Moments later, he will confess that he doesn't understand why, in office herself and her party in power, "she is angry all the time" (9). But these moments are emblems of his—and Marion's, and Irwin's—construal of politics as a kind of affect, where niceness, sincerity, and friendliness are not just social norms that lubricate politics but rather the substance of politics itself. Marion's emotions betray greed or impatience or anger; these, not the actual policies she is pursuing, are what form Tom's grounds for objection. Early in the play, gathered after their father's funeral, the family is shaking their heads at the ineptitude of the priest who conducted the service:

> ISOBEL: I feel terrible. Dad never spoke to a priest in his life. So I tried to give that man some sort of briefing. […]

MARION: He was doing his best. I thought he was very sincere. [...]
ISOBEL: I stressed forty years of opposition to nuclear armaments. [...] Of course the vicar never used any of that.
MARION: I asked him not to. [...] There's such a thing as a suitable time. Funerals shouldn't have politics dragged into them. (12–13)

Marion has just staked an ideological orientation that will characterize her for the rest of the play: straightforwardly, the affect of the vicar's sermon (very sincere) matters more than its content (wildly wrong). It is an early signifier of how her politics and her marriage to Tom will shape the play's outcome. The ideal Christian and the ideal businessman resolve themselves into the same tie-wearing, clean-cut, swearing-averse image, whose function is to obscure the substantial shared interests of the religious and the economic. Marion vigilantly polices these boundaries: to say that "funerals shouldn't have politics dragged into them" is to make herself the arbiter of what counts as politics. Funerals should be nice, decorous, uncontroversial; to have spoken of their father's lifelong pacifism—never mind that, as Katherine objects, "it was what he believed" (13)—would have been "political." Leaving it out, importantly, would not.

One origin of the play's tragedy is that Tom and Marion push this emptying-out of politics onto Isobel. Katherine announces, without having asked Isobel first, that now her husband is dead she plans to move to London and begin working at Isobel's firm. Guardedly, sensible already that Katherine's marriage to her father has incurred to herself an obligation that she intends to honor, she articulates a hesitation: "We're very small beer. Each of us knows what each of us does. [...] And, to be honest, we're not making a great deal of money. If we wanted to expand, we'd have to be sure of the work to pay for it" (19). This is a very gentle and tentative piece of honesty, but it sends Katherine into a typical combustive rage and drives her off in pursuit of a drink. Marion reprimands Isobel:

MARION: You have to pretend. [...] Keep her calm. String her along.
ISOBEL: I tried.
MARION: *Lie* to her.
(There's a moment's pause.)
ISOBEL: No.
MARION: Why not?

ISOBEL: Because I can't. She pushed me. I could have said, 'Yes, fine, there is a job.' But there isn't. She'd have found out pretty quickly. What's the point of lying? *(She looks at Marion a second.)* Anyway it's wrong. [...]
MARION: There you are. *That's* what it's about. That's why she's crying in the kitchen. With a bottle of whisky in her hand. Because *you* can't understand there are actually more important things in life than your wretched sense of honesty. (22–23)

What Marion is recommending here is, of course, an unkindness: an offer of a job may soothe and pacify Katherine for the moment, but the disappointment would be all the sharper when it became clear that the job was a lie. But Marion is unperturbed by the falsehood—not just by the literal lie she wants Isobel to tell Katherine but by the lie she is telling herself, by the false pretense that they can create calm now without incurring worse suffering later. She frames this as a proper ordering of priorities: "there are actually more important things in life than your wretched sense of honesty." But it's not clear here what is meant to be more important. Katherine's wellbeing, it is obvious, will not be served by pretending there is a job; what Marion in fact wants is not to secure Katherine's wellbeing but merely to pursue the appearance of it. Isobel's affect, not her honesty, is what matters.

And when Isobel gives in—which is not so much in capitulation to Marion's plea as it is in deciding that her bond to Katherine requires her to do her best to squeeze another job out of the firm—Tom's reaction is telling. He watches Isobel and Katherine embrace:

(Tom stands admiring the couple in each other's arms.)
TOM: Perfect.
MARION: I must say I'm pleased. [...]
TOM: Praise the Lord.
MARION: What?
TOM: No. Nothing. I'll shut up.
(The three women look at him. He stands a moment, cheerful, embarrassed.)
I'm sorry. It just slipped out. (28–29)

Tom's eagerness is sincere enough; there is no reason to believe he is malevolently plotting the betrayal he will ultimately carry out, which is to buy up the firm and then sell it, for a profit. He is genuinely charmed by the appearance of generosity and reconciliation presented by Isobel and Katherine's embrace. But he knows as well as anyone that the job is a lie. Perhaps this is a

bit of magical thinking: he has convinced himself that abundance will materialize, manifest itself, thanks to the goodwill shown by those who want it to; perhaps it is this magical thinking that, a few scenes later, nudges him to buy up the firm in the interest of helping it expand. The firm will move to bigger premises, hire more staff, get sleeker desks and table lamps—but the abundance will not materialize. None of it is enough to summon more work into being, not in an niche industry where Isobel had long scouted out and built relationships with all potential clients. But the belief that he can will it into existence is the basis of Tom's economic and religious faith: put on an affect of abundance, "praise the Lord," and watch your investment grow. These are the conservative politics of 1988.

IV

In this reading, the title *The Secret Rapture* does have an evangelical flavor. But Hare himself tended to brush off its born-again overtones. In the playbill for a 1989 Broadway performance, he explains what it means:

> *THE SECRET RAPTURE* is that moment when a nun expects to meet Christ. In other words: it's death. (56)[10]

This is a strange change from "*The Power of Prayer*," and a telling one. I cannot find any evidence that a "secret rapture" is a common category in either Anglican or Catholic catechism; nuns of all stripes may indeed imagine the moment when they will meet Christ, but only Hare seems to use this phrase to describe it. It is both a re-Anglicanization—evangelicals don't have nuns—and an internalization; where "the Rapture," as the anticipated category of the righteous collectively gathered up to God before the tumult of the apocalypse, is a fundamentally public event, compassing all humanity, "the secret rapture" is an utmost experience of ecstasy that cannot but be intimate, confidential, supremely subjective. It is not the millennium come, the

[10] "Playbill for The Secret Rapture" (October 26, 1989).

moment the world burns in a flash of redeeming fire; it is an internal apprehension or transformation. "The secret rapture" is, unexpectedly, a reversal of the very un-secret Rapture.

There are no nuns in the play, but there are vows. Not for everyone: it is clear that their father's death before the beginning of the first scene has begun to dissolve some existing bonds. Whatever Marion's ring represented when she bought it, for example, is finished enough for Marion to try to reclaim its monetary value. Katherine, who inherits the house that is Isobel and Marion's childhood home, shows no attachment to it and is little moved by Isobel's pleas not to sell it. But for Isobel, bonds incurred by family relationships remain strong. At their father's bedside, when Marion delivers her evaluation of Katherine's relationship with him—"an old man was taken for a ride"—Isobel objects:

> He saw himself as a failure. […] The only thing that distinguished his life—as he felt—was this late passion for a much younger woman. So now he's dead, Marion, you mustn't take that away. (7)

This seems in marked contrast to what she says just moments before, in response to Marion's complaints about Katherine's drunkenness: "Well, it hardly matters. Least of all to Dad" (6). While Katherine's alcoholism—which their father seems to have tolerated rather cheerfully—"hardly matters," the relationship itself, a "late passion for a much younger woman," is figured as something that can still be taken away from him even in death. It might be possible to locate the power of this bond in a literal marriage vow, but Isobel seems to think of it in broader terms, taken on not via legal or formal institutions but simply by virtue of having loved. She intuits that, her father gone, this vow devolves upon her. "If you're loved back," she will shrug, "then it's a bonus" (7).

This vow binds Isobel for the rest of the play, indeed until Katherine unlocks the door through which Irwin will come to shoot her. The contours of the vow are ill-defined and Isobel's own sense of it inchoate, but her self-consecration not the less willing or more naïve. Irwin tries to insist to Isobel that the others' vows have been dissolved:

> Isobel, they're cutting loose. Now you've got to. [...] They're saying the whole thing is over. Your father's dead. There is no family. You're the only person who's still hung up on it. (39)

Irwin does not use the word "vow" here, but it is what he is implicitly describing as a hang-up: a problem, an obstacle, an inappropriate obsession or a bad object. The tragedy of *The Secret Rapture* is that Irwin is, perversely, right. The very nature of a vow is a committal to what is at the very least inconvenient, unintuitive, indifferent to self-interest; else why make one at all? Isobel feels her implicit vow to her father, and her family, to be binding in a way that poses a problem for the world she inhabits, a world in which self-interest is increasingly pursued as if it is a virtue: this is Tom's world where magical growth is the natural outcome of selfish consumption, masked by an affect of niceness; Marion's world where weekends are "the right time for the family," where "it's crazy when it starts infecting your week" (78). The inevitable, irreconcilable clash throws the order of things into turmoil and, ultimately, costs Isobel her life.

There is a similar obligation between her and Irwin at the beginning of the play: she loves and is loved by him. He wonders, casually, in a moment of tenderness,

> IRWIN: Will you marry me? *(Isobel turns and looks at him.)* Will you marry me now? If I ask?
> ISOBEL: I think we *will* get married. [...] It's something Dad said—for no reason—a few days before he died. [...] He only met you once. He said, 'Will you marry Irwin?' I said, 'Yes, I rather think I will.' (29)

This is a strange distancing. Irwin asks "Will you marry me?", and then, as if to clarify that he is not asking for a prediction about the future but rather a commitment in the present, repeats: "Will you marry me now, if I ask?" And Isobel, as if sensing the difference, avoids the second question and responds to the first, not "I will marry you" but "I think we *will* get married." She seems to envision a possible future in which they marry each other but not a present promise to do it. This is a vow she is not ready to make. And there is a betrayal in the middle of the play that will foreclose that future for her entirely. At the end of the first act, Tom, Marion, and Katherine assemble at their father's old home, its furnishings packed away, to persuade Isobel to let Tom buy and expand her firm. Isobel brings Irwin with her, and she goes in with the understanding

that he is on her side—that they are united in their opposition to the proposal they know is coming. But Marion gets to Irwin in private with the promise of a doubled salary, and then, when she finally suspects that Isobel will not be brought to heel, Marion plays her last card:

> MARION: Also Irwin did mention, you don't mind my saying this…?
> IRWIN: What?
> MARION: He did think perhaps you were hoping to get married. (54)

Isobel is astounded. "*Married*?" she repeats. "Did Irwin say that?" Irwin tries to backtrack; Marion brushes it aside, moves quickly to other things. But the damage is already done. In a way Irwin will not understand, he has betrayed a confidence that Isobel was still holding secret. Stanley Cavell's essay about *King Lear* imagines that a young Cordelia, accustomed to settings of honesty and intimacy with her father, is driven to her confused "Nothing, my lord" by his own violence, by the harm he has done by asking her to perform her love in his public game of chess.[11] Irwin here has committed a parallel violation, a taking of something meant for the most internal and private experience (much like a nun's secret rapture) and putting it on public display, offering it up for economic consumption. Irwin has made their love a tool in Tom's game of acquisitions and profits. This, a violation of a kind of vow, is the beginning of the end of their relationship.

But while she starts in this moment to disentangle herself from Irwin, Isobel simultaneously commits herself even further to Katherine. She yields to Tom's expansion so that she can keep her stepmother on permanently. Katherine is a toxic and unpredictable coworker: she drives Gordon, the third member of their small firm, out even before Tom proposes the acquisition; she makes leering passes at Isobel's longtime clients and close friends; she spends profligately and expects the others to cover her bills. Isobel knows how destructive she is. Yet though she has a premonition that Katherine will prove to be her own undoing, she remains steadfast in her refusal to fire her. When Katherine attacks a client with a knife and is hospitalized, it seems obvious that things have gone too far, that Isobel should cut her off,

[11] Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Six Plays of Shakespeare* (Cambridge UP, 1987).

denouncing her and leaving her to sort life out for herself. But she cannot do this. She tries. She impulsively boards a random plane in an effort to escape. She describes the experience to Marion and Tom:

> Paradise. I took all my clothes off and walked along the beach. Lanzarote was paradise. But unfortunately no use to me. *(She laughs.)* You can't get away. You think you can. You think you'll fly out. Just leave. Damn the lot of you, and go. Then you think, here I am, stark naked, sky-blue sea, miles of sand—I've done it! I'm free! Then you think, yes, just remind me, what am I meant to do now? *(She stands, a mile away in a world of her own.)* In my case there's only one answer. *(She looks absently at them, as if they were not even present.)* I must do what Dad would have wished. (93)

Marion is always imagining herself to be at the center of Isobel's attention, assuming she knows what is happening in her head, bristling before the fact at the criticisms she thinks Isobel will level at her. But Isobel's absent gaze communicates how little any of this has to do with Marion at all. The obligation she has inherited from her father is intrinsic, metaphysical almost, not connected to the material demands of her firm or her family: it exists *a priori*, and no *a posteriori* claims against it can prevail. Marion, enraged by this speech, growls, "You are truly insufferable. Hide behind your father for the rest of your life. Die there!" Isobel responds, correctly: "Yes, well, no doubt I shall."

This kind of commitment is baffling to Marion. Toward the end, in the pivotal scene when Marion and Tom ask to meet with Irwin and Isobel to break the news that they will sell off the firm, it begins to look like Isobel will not come. Irwin says that she has stopped showing up to work, has lost all interest in the firm:

> IRWIN: While I work there, I don't think she's going to come near it. *(He smiles sourly.)* My guess is she's made some sort of vow. [...]
> *(Marion is extremely provoked by what Irwin has said.)* [...]
> MARION: I don't believe this. This is most peculiar. What is this? A *vow*? It's outrageous. People making *vows*. What are *vows*? Nobody's made vows since the nineteenth century. (83–84)

It seems an overreaction for Marion to be so incensed, to take Irwin's word so literally, to characterize Isobel's refusal as a relic from a previous century. But her strident protest communicates her alienation from a world in which any sort of vow forms a meaningful part of

the social fabric. There is an unselfconsciousness here, of course—presumably she made a vow when she married Tom?—but more importantly, there is a kind of panic: Isobel's "vow," however figuratively Irwin intended the word, threatens the order of the world Marion and Tom live in. It cannot be compassed by the logic of growth and acquisition that drives their purchase of the firm, nor can it explain the way Isobel has so suddenly turned on Irwin, whom everyone else feels is such "a nice man" (92). Marion cannot explain why Isobel would act against her own rational self-interest. It is only facing down Irwin's gun at the end of the play that Isobel manages to articulate it for herself. He is angry that she continues to accept Katherine but has rejected him:

> IRWIN: You didn't even want her.
> ISOBEL: No. She came my way. It was an accident, really. But I made a commitment. Why should I drop it just because the going gets hard? (101)

This is the moment of Isobel's secret rapture. She is no nun, and there is no Christ whom she expects to meet; yet facing Irwin and knowing (perhaps better than he does) that he will shoot her, the vow she has made solidifies and becomes real. She cannot turn back now.

This all sounds rather Sophoclean. Antigone, after all, knows that the punishment for burying Polyneikes will be death, and to call her naïve when she does it anyway would be to miss the profundity of the conflict *Antigone* stages between her and Kreon, and between the monadic absolutes they represent. Their deadlock is political in perhaps the most etymologically pure sense: it is an aporia for the *polis*, a Thebes ravished by the stain of Oedipus' sin and then by devastating civil war. Kreon's court, the play's setting, has a clear publicness to it, guards, messengers, prophet, and chorus coming and going, the king's intransigence upholding not just his personal grudges but the law of the city. There are whispers that the Thebans are on Antigone's side, and the weight of their opinion is part of what provokes Kreon's anagnorisis (169).[12] The royal characters of *Antigone* and their personal and family catastrophes are metonyms for the body politic, motivated by civic questions with high public stakes. The

[12] Sophocles, "Antigone," in *The Norton Anthology of Drama*, 3rd ed., vol. 1 (Norton, 2018).

problem at the core of the Sophocles is the clash between the law of the state and the law of the conscience; Antigone exceeds her existence as a character to take on the shape of a principle. Her death is inevitable because this civic problem is fundamentally insoluble. A reconciliation can only happen via the dissolution of her embodied absolutism—that is, via her death—that is, via her secret rapture.[13]

Hare's tragedy is almost Greek in this way. But where arguably both the setting and the mode of conventional Hellenic tragedies like *Antigone* is this kind of metonymical publicness, *The Secret Rapture* is destabilized by the dismantling of that publicness. Isobel, bound by the same family obligations, has made the same vow: as Antigone will care for Polyneikes in the way the gods prescribe, Isobel will care for Katherine in the way her father would have wished. There is, of course, some resonance between the religious tones of Isobel's "secret rapture" and Antigone's couching of the burial as an obligation to deity. But the similarity is misleading. Though the choice they face is in some ways the same, the title in fact gestures at the unbridgeable chasm between them. I have already established that "the secret rapture" is a private category, a supremely subjective experience of ecstasy, a reinternalizing of a teleological concept that the evangelical imagination had externalized. It is fundamentally unpublic. Where the conflict between Antigone and Kreon is a metonym for a civic aporia, Isobel's private vow does not have stakes for the polis. How can it? This is Thatcher's London; with the political metonymy of tragedy unavailable to it, the play's mode is a kind of unwilling privatization, an effort at tragedy that becomes looping, melancholic, chasing a referent that no longer exists, occupying a present where the civic structures that gave tragedy its meaning have collapsed.

More than a Blanche or even a Cordelia, Isobel is perhaps an Antigone, pursuing a course that can only end in her destruction but which she has chosen, and which she will hew to, until it does. She rejects the brave new financialized world that Tom and Marion and Katherine

[13] This is quite a Hegelian reading of *Antigone*; see Mark W. Roche, "The Greatness and Limits of Hegel's Theory of Tragedy," in *A Companion to Tragedy*, ed. Rebecca Bushnell (Blackwell Publishing, 2008). Though I adopt it here as if it were, this reading is not inevitable.

and Irwin have embraced, and she pays for that rejection with her life. But the classic(al) models of tragedy that help make sense of Antigone's death cannot explain Isobel's. These models tend to come with a civic telos: for Aristotle, catharsis; for Hegel, synthesis; for George Steiner, the ennoblement of man via the excess of his suffering.[14] As offstage somewhere Antigone is led to the cave where she is to be entombed, Kreon listens to Tiresias's prophecy and feels his blood run cold: "It won't be long," the prophet foretells, "before wailing breaks out / from the women and men in your own house. / And hatred against you will surge in all / the countries whose sons, in mangled pieces, / received their rites of burial / from dogs" (169). Kreon has never known Tiresias to be wrong before. In an agony of anticipation he rushes away to stop the death he has ordered, but it is too late: a string of cascading suicides will surround him with the corpses of his niece, his son, and his wife. Knowing as we do that this is a tragedy whose heroine must die, we are filled with pity and dread by Kreon's desperate bid to fix his error before it becomes catastrophe, per Aristotle; Antigone's monadic absolutism collapses with her death, as Kreon's does with his anagnorisis, and the dialectic is resolved and "the whole of ethical life is purged of its one-sidedness," per Hegel;[15] Kreon is left wishing for death as he contemplates the wanton and arbitrary cruelty of the universe, and he is hallowed "as if he had passed through flame," per Steiner.[16] These theorists imagine that all these outcomes angle toward a preservation or rejuvenation of the polis, whether Thebes or our own.

But none of these neat civic ends play out in *The Secret Rapture*. In the last scene, back in her father's house before Isobel's funeral, Marion tries to put the living room back as it was when her father died. She is changed, in some ways: she will not answer the work calls that she used to be so beholden to, and she indulges a kind of nostalgia—"we played over there, under the piano"—that she has always resisted (106). She looks at her husband and says, "You must

[14] Aristotle, *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, vol. 2 (Princeton UP, 1984); Roche, "The Greatness and Limits of Hegel's Theory of Tragedy"; George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy* (Oxford UP, 1980).
[15] Roche, "The Greatness and Limits of Hegel's Theory of Tragedy," 52.
[16] Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy*, 10.

understand, Tom. I can't come to the church" (106), and she does not explain why. But the alteration in Marion is not so clear-cut as it seems in Kreon, and it is hard to assign any political metonymy to the conflict between her and Isobel. This is not an Aristotelian or a Hegelian tragedy. And where Kreon's ultimate ruin happens as the public watches, it matters that what Marion is doing here is rearranging a living room: a space that is, if anything, a metonym for the private, the personal, the *oikos*. Marion is trying to reclaim a domestic life that has vanished from her own horizons of possibility. When she is finished, Tom's response is striking:

> *(He looks at her, then smiles. She smiles too. Then she gestures round the whole room. It is perfectly restored into an English sitting room—furniture, carpets, curtains, ornaments.)*
>
> Yes. Well done. It's lovely.
>
> *(There's a pause.)*
>
> A perfect imitation of life. (108)

Striking because he is talking about furniture and curtains, things that are, obviously, not alive. Whether Hare intends the echo of Aristotle, who says that "tragedy is essentially an imitation not of persons but of action and life," is unclear, but in this context the echo feels almost ironic: while Tom seems to mean that the furniture and curtains are exactly as they would have been while Marion's father lived, the life itself is gone, the scene hollowed out to a dead imitation. For the centuries of dramatic theory that have relied in some measure on Aristotle, where tragedy's political character is located in its imitation of action and life, this is a mockery. Imitation is not the invigorating and metonymical rehearsal of human action for the consideration of the public; it is instead the flat, static, reproduction of space and the material things that occupy it. This tragedy is not public at all. Isobel is an Antigone of the neoliberal age, *The Secret Rapture* a tragedy emptied of its political telos.

V

This, anyway, is one economic-aesthetic mode the play explores. But there is another one worth taking seriously, located not in Isobel's relation to the world she inhabits but rather in Katherine's. The play does not take Katherine's side: it perhaps agrees with Irwin when he tries to tell Isobel, "she's dreaming of ways to destroy you," or a moment later, "There's such a thing as evil. You're dealing with evil" (76). Isobel herself is always figured as profoundly good. (*The Secret Rapture* is a tragedy in part because, as Hare says, Isobel has a fatal flaw. "What is her fatal flaw? That she's a good person."[17]) Yet Katherine's role in this play is not merely as some kind of moral opposite or metaphysical foil to Isobel. Katherine is a wild card, a psychopath, a gun loaded for a game of Russian roulette. Isobel tries to explain to Irwin what her father loved about her:

> He said that living with Katherine was like being on manoeuvres with a great army. You had no idea where you'd wake up the next day. Once he woke up at four. She was in the kitchen with a drinking friend. She had a gun in her hand, and was yelling, 'Go on, do it! Do it! I want you to! Go on, if you love me shoot me in the leg!' He loved that story. […] She wasn't dependent on anyone's opinion. *(She smiles.)* You know what it was? He thought she was free. (39–40)

Katherine and Isobel are both extremists, in a way: Katherine in the force of her libidinous volatility, Isobel in her unbendable commitment to her vow. (Hanif Kureishi calls Antigone "a rebel, a refusenik, […] a suicide perhaps, certainly a martyr"; Isobel, despite her gentleness, is the same.[18]) But the contrast here is marked. Over the course of the play, Isobel is slowly boxed in by her absolute adherence to her monadic principle: first into hiring Katherine, then into selling her firm to Tom, then into the living arrangement that Irwin exploits when he arrives determined to possess her or to end her. Her excess is the excess of classical tragedy, the one that hands her a role and seals her fate from the outset. Katherine, on the other hand, rejects all

[17] Tynan, "New Again: David Hare."
[18] Hanif Kureishi, "Foreward: Antigone—If Their Lips Weren't Sealed by Fear," in *Antigone, by Slavoj Žižek* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2016).

containment: no intervention from the others can reign in her extravagance or destructiveness, and she remains to the end wholly unpredictable and capricious. (There is no reason for her to unbolt the door, but she unbolts it anyway.) Isobel's extremity binds her; Katherine's sets her free.

Here I am taking my cues from Richard Halpern's essay "Historica Passio," which examines and critiques common economic readings of *King Lear*.[19] One Marxist-flavored interpretation is that Lear's decision to dismantle the kingdom, and his daughters' subsequent decision to dismantle him, is a kind of nostalgic allegory of the collapse of feudalism into capitalism: characters like Cordelia, Kent, and Edgar represent the values of the old order (fealty, magnanimity, honesty) and characters like Regan, Goneril, and Edmund those of the new (avarice, cunning, accumulation). Halpern argues that this is, at best, an oversimplification: he shows that *Lear* is in fact a nuanced meditation on James I's coalescing political theology, his appeal to divine authority to justify a model of absolutist power that earlier feudal kings were not apt to claim.[20] Its tragedy emerges, in part, from what Halpern calls the "zero-sum" of the land-based economy, whose currency—property—cannot be multiplied or extended but only divided and redivided. One possible response to this zero-sum, he says, is *dépense*, or destructive expenditure: the rigid and punishing logic of exchange laid out in the first scene is sometimes answered not by an appeal to rational apportionment—wouldn't this all have ended differently if our mechanisms for distributing resources were more sensible?—but to annihilation, the total laying-waste of items of value as a means of rejecting the hierarchies that produce that value in the first place. (Lear tears off his clothes, damns them, destroys them.) In this reading, when Lear pleads "reason not the need," he "*rejects reason in order to reject need*,

[19] See, for example: John Francis Danby, *Shakespeare's Doctrine of Nature: A Study of King Lear, by John F. Danby* (Faber & Faber, 1968); Paul Delany, "King Lear and the Decline of Feudalism," *PMLA* 92, no. 3 (1977): 429–40; Paul Siegel, *Shakespearean Tragedy and the Elizabethan Compromise* (New York UP, 1983).
[20] Halpern, *The Poetics of Primitive Accumulation*.

in order, that is, to escape the cruelly logical system of conservation and apportionment imposed by his daughters" (264).[21]

I think something similar happens in *The Secret Rapture*. Katherine sometimes echoes ideological positions, accusing the conservative government of "the awful sanctification of greed" (18) or insisting "it's immoral, all that disgusting trading in shares" (38). But these are whims, not carefully considered critiques, and they crumble as soon as Tom offers to buy Isobel's firm. ("If we don't make the money," she insists, "someone else will" (52).) Katherine has not staked out a principled stand against the prevailing economic order. But she is nonetheless the agent most dramatically opposing it, acting wildly, ruinously, destructively to lay waste to Marion and Tom's tidy illusion of sanity and growth. Sometimes this takes the form of such crass capitulation to the system that its hypocrisies are laid startlingly bare: when she begins work at the firm, her first move is to try to seduce a longtime client as if it were simply the way all business is done; she frames it as having to make "the ultimate sacrifice on behalf of the company" (35). Elsewhere it is her utter disregard for money, as when, after the sale of her late husband's house, she buys the whole flower stand outside the firm's premises (35). Mostly, though, it is when she picks up her steak knife at a restaurant and plunges it toward a potential client's heart. The setting, the structure of her meeting, are conventionally businesslike. It is the kind of world Tom (the President of Christians in Business) occupies, rational, collegial, profitable, posh. But when the smug managing director turns down the firm's services—a routine market-driven act—it throws Katherine into full rebellion. This is how she tells it to Isobel:

> He says, 'No hard feelings.' I start counting to five. I don't even get to three. I suddenly yell out, 'Yes, there fucking well are. There *are* hard feelings. Because you have all the power. And you love to exercise it. And oil it with vodka. And smile your stupid shiny smiles. And you have just ditched me, you have just landed me, right back, right back into my terrible unconfidence…' *(She shakes her head.)* You know what happened. I reached for a drink. A few minutes later I picked up my knife. (96–7)

[21] Halpern.

Katherine here names the lie in the logic of supply and demand: he has all the power, and he loves to exercise it. So she does the most radical thing she can do in protest. She rejects his soothing cliché by insisting that "there fucking well are" hard feelings, and then she enacts them; she tries to turn the staid and conventional business meeting into the plot of a slasher film. It is the wildest reversal in the play. While Isobel's vow and the catastrophe that follow give *The Secret Rapture* the structure of a tragedy that has lost its political metonymies, Katherine's destructive expenditure—to use Halpern's words, her "suicidal exhaustion of value" (267)—hints at a different kind of critique. Tragedy is fated: Isobel's slow but sure march toward her death makes the triumph of Tom and Marion's world seem inevitable, the new order of economy overwhelming and inescapable. But though Katherine unbolts the door for Isobel's fate to come in and find her, nothing is fated for Katherine herself. She alone in this play attains a kind of freedom—from expectation, from genre, from economy.

The freedom is false, in a way. With Isobel's death, Katherine loses the only person who has been willing to care for her; Tom and Marion have always talked a big game but rarely followed through with real help. Katherine's volatility looks much less like agency when she is drunk or hospitalized. But *dépense* is always like this: it is the total annihilation of anything with substance, so it cannot retain substance for itself. It is destined to burn itself out, to combust in an extravagant blaze, the way Katherine herself will certainly do now that Isobel is gone. Strangely, though, Katherine's real conviction seems to be that this kind of anti-economism is her role. She says as much in an emotional moment, after trying to articulate the love she felt for her husband: "Everything I did, before or since, he forgave. *(She sits, tears in her eyes, quiet now.)* People say I took advantage of his decency. But what are good people for? They're here to help the trashy people like me" (24). Marion "looks on disapprovingly from the back" during this speech; she is, after all, one of the people who say Katherine took advantage of her father. But this reconfiguration of the notion of "taking advantage" is significant: rather than a deceit or a fraud, which here would have an economic character—Katherine inherits everything he has,

after all—she suggests that her love embodied a kind of relationship for which Marion's language has no words. Robert was good, she was bad; somehow, their meeting in a dingy motel in Evesham incurred an obligation of aid and kindness. Katherine is a problem that economy cannot solve. *Dépense* is one of this play's answers to the problem of neoliberal tragedy.

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WHETHER IN PARAPHRASE OR VERBATIM

On September 30, an inquest jury in Gibraltar returned a verdict in the Operation Flavius case. Gibraltar is only British by a strange kind of colonial legal fiction, one that shrugs at such pedestrian notions as geography when it comes time to draw national borders. It was because of this legal fiction that this densely-populated little town at the very southern tip of Iberia became the target of suspected IRA activity, and where on March 6 British special forces agents killed three Irish people supposedly in self-defense, only to discover that none of them was carrying a bomb or even a gun.[1] In returning a guilty verdict that fall, the jury would have chosen between two charges: that the British government conspired to kill the IRA members, the more serious charge, or that the agents involved were individually responsible, the lesser charge.[2] Instead, the jury returned a verdict of not guilty. The killing was ruled lawful.[3]

This dissertation has scarcely mentioned the Troubles, though they shaped London in 1988 as much as, or perhaps more than, any other force. I will confess that I am overwhelmed by the prospect of tackling them: choosing a place to start is like trying to find the end of a miles-long rope that you happen to have picked up in the middle. There is always more to talk about, both in the past and in the future. But this will have to suffice. Operation Flavius clearly captures the strange contradictions of twentieth-century biopower, the deadly intersection between empire and extralegal spaces: that the British only had jurisdiction because Gibraltar is a colony, but that they still had to send in special military forces to take control from the local police and perform an extralegal operation; that the special military agents were tried in a civil inquest, by

[1] For an account of Operation Flavius and its aftermath, see chapter 12 of Ed Moloney, *A Secret History of the IRA* (Norton, 2002).
[2] Tony Dawe, "Complex Issues the Jury Must Assess," *The Times*, September 30, 1988.
[3] Tony Dawe, Michael Evans, and Richard Ford, "Verdict of Lawful Killing by SAS: Government Welcomes Gibraltar Inquest Jury's Majority Verdict," *The Times*, October 1, 1988.

a jury of Gibraltarians who were also, by virtue of that legal fiction, British; that the killings were pronounced lawful even though they were carried out by special military agents whose remit for violence is supposed to be limited to places *outside* the civic spaces of their home territories. In a sense, a military killing of a civilian is inherently extralegal.

The wages of Operation Flavius was an unspooling string of violence. During the March 16 funeral of the murdered Irish trio at Milltown Cemetery in Belfast, three people were killed and sixty injured in grenade attacks by a loyalist; during the funeral of one of *these* victims on March 19, three days later, a pair of British Army corporals—presumably by accident—wound up in a street surrounded by a procession of mourners. Members of the crowd, on edge from the attacks three days before, suspicious of all British officers, dragged them from their car, beat them, drove them to a waste ground near Penny Lane, and shot them dead.

This last killing sparked a chain of events unprecedented in the relationship between the British media and its government.[4] Amid a national reaction of shock and outrage, determined to uncover every detail and hold the perpetrators accountable, the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) began collecting all available film that had captured the attack. On March 22, the chief constable requested all unaired footage from major news outlets, including the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), Independent Television News (ITN), and Radio Television of Ireland (RTE). At first the outlets refused. On March 23, Margaret Thatcher went before parliament to berate them for being unforthcoming: it was their "bounden duty," she argued, to aid the government in its prosecution; "either one is on the side of justice in these matters, or one is on the side of terrorism."[5] Still they refused. Then, on March 24, the RUC brought to bear the authority of the law, citing the Prevention of Terrorism Act, the Emergency Provisions Act,

[4] David Miller of the Glasgow Media Group has done the considerable legwork of assembling the details of the following account. An abbreviated version is published in a chapter that I will cite more extensively in the coming pages (David Miller, "The Media and Northern Ireland: Censorship, Information Management, and the Broadcasting Ban," in *Glasgow Media Group Reader, Vol 2* (Routledge, 1995), 45–75.) Most of the information in this paragraph, though, comes from his unpublished dissertation: David Miller, "The Struggle Over, and Impact of, Media Portrayals of Northern Ireland" (University of Glasgow, Department of Sociology, 1994), 43–45.
[5] Quoted in Miller, "The Struggle Over, and Impact of, Media Portrayals of Northern Ireland," 43.

and the Criminal Law act of 1967, threatening warrants and seizures if the media companies did not comply. They complied.

It was in this climate, and due in part to this brief standoff, that on October 19, only a few weeks after the Operation Flavius verdict, Home Secretary Douglas Hurd announced a sweeping ban on the broadcasting of interviews with Sinn Fein and other Irish republican organizations. The idea was to starve the insurgency of any platform that would earn it sympathy or legitimize its cause; the ban was justified, in the government's language, by labeling its opponents "terrorists" and foregoing any kind of due process in the name of national security. (This rhetorical trick is old hat now, but the British in 1988 were among its early innovators.) Effective immediately, a formal Notice declared that television and radio waves were prohibited to carry "any words spoken" where "(a) the person speaking the words represents or purports to represent" one of the named organizations, or "(b) the words support or solicit or invite support for such an organization."[6] Outrage over this overt act of media censorship was widespread,[7] and anyway it was hardly clear what the order would mean—were written words acceptable? who determines what it means to "represent" an organization? how to distinguish between "support for" and merely "description of"?—so in the days after the ban the Home Office released what it considered a clarification:

> the Notice permits the showing of a film or still picture of the initiator speaking the words together with a voice-over account of them, whether in paraphrase or verbatim [...] Programmes involving the reconstruction of actual events, where actors use the verbatim words which had been spoken in actuality, are similarly permitted.[8]

It seems obvious enough to me what the authors of this clarification imagined when they wrote it: haven't we all seen endless documentary-style films that feature voice-over accounts,

[6] Quoted in Miller, "The Media and Northern Ireland," 49.
[7] See, for example, the *Times* front page the day after the ban was announced: Richard Ford, Richard Evans, and Jamie Dettmer, "Critics Attack Sinn Fein TV Ban Loopholes," *The Times*, October 20, 1988. It is worth noting that despite cataloging many groups' and individuals' objections to the ban, the article has a subtitle that rhetorically takes the government's side: "Hurd silences the voice of Irish terrorism."
[8] Quoted in Miller, "The Media and Northern Ireland," 49.

whether in paraphrase or verbatim, read out over historical footage? What they do not seem to have anticipated, though, was just how widely this opened the door to a creative new genre of film. In seeking to adhere to the new Home Office rule, British broadcasters would no longer transmit the direct speech of Sinn Fein leaders and other Irish republicans. But the ban explicitly allowed voice-over, in paraphrase or verbatim, along with footage of the subject speaking the words. Surely there was only one natural outcome: over the following six years, hundreds of segments aired on British television and radio in which republican voices had been dubbed, word for word, accent for accent, by enterprising actors hired by the BBC and other broadcasters. As an ad-hoc body of practices developed around the ban, meant to cover the news as fully as possible while deflecting the ire of the government, some solidified into rules: the dub had to be out-of-sync with the footage, for example, and the imitation of the subject's voice was not allowed to be too precise.[9] But the muddied nature of the ban, the uneven application of these practices, and the often volatile political circumstances sometimes meant that it was unclear to viewers whether the voice they heard belonged to a Sinn Fein representative or an actor. In 1993, in the wake of the Shankill bombings, Conservative MP Jill Knight would complain that the effect of a Belfast-accented actor dubbing Sinn Fein president Gerry Adams' words "was virtually indistinguishable from him speaking," and that "one constituent with partial hearing who was trained in lip-reading had not been able to tell an actor's voice was being used." She felt the dubbing was exploiting a "loophole" and called upon Prime Minister John Major to tighten the restrictions.[10] By this point, though, the ban was on its way out; it had been clear for some time that it was untenable in its current form, and anyway, progress on peace talks made it seem increasingly backward that a legal and legitimate political party was forbidden outright to speak on public airwaves.

[9] Miller, 56.
[10] Patrick O'Flynn, "Major to Strengthen Broadcast Ban," *Birmingham Daily Post*, November 3, 1993.

This backwardness had become more obvious as Sinn Fein made inroads into the mainstream, but it had always been the Achilles' heel in the government's defense of the ban. Colonial legal fictions reassert themselves here. There was a distinction, both in legal-political practice and in the public imagination, between Northern Ireland and Britain's other colonies. Singapore and Palestine and Kenya had been far-flung outposts, populated by racialized subalterns and alien Others; they were lands subject to, rather than constitutive of, the British state. In such places, Anglo rule had always been more transparently sustained by ideologies of hierarchy and the mechanisms of violence and control they rationalized. But Northern Ireland was part of the United Kingdom, not the British Empire. A ferry from Birkenhead to Belfast was a matter of a few hours; Northern Irish residents could bear British passports; its constituencies sent 17 MPs to Westminster in the 1987 general election. The British Army responded to Northern Ireland with counterinsurgency techniques developed to repress uprisings among distant subjugated peoples, but these techniques were a harder sell so much closer to home:

> The restrictions and harsh measures which had made a successful campaign possible in Malaya could not be applied readily in Britain, with its long traditions of individual liberty and freedom of the press. In Malaya, thousands of miles from home, operations beyond the jungle fringe could be conducted in almost complete secrecy; in Ulster, the daily movements of a patrol may be seen on TV that evening, in Belfast and in London. Moreover, because Northern Ireland is constitutionally part of the United Kingdom, the problem is a domestic one.[11]

This passage (from a 1977 article from the war-hawk right that frames the loss of the "harsh measures" employed in Malaysia as cause for disappointment, not relief[12]) is, perhaps unconsciously, a remarkably perceptive statement of the logic of colonial control: distance and secrecy hide the things that, if you showed them on a television set in a London living room, would provoke horror and outrage. The 1988 broadcasting ban, a strategy that in those faraway

[11] David Charters, "Intelligence and Psychological Warfare Operations in Northern Ireland," *Royal United Services Institute Journal* 122, no. 3 (1977): 25–26.
[12] Earlier in the paper Charters laments that "complete freedom of the press, any restriction of which would be politically unacceptable, left the Government and the security forces at the mercy of the media" (25)—alas that news reporting should be independent of the state!—and that in 1976 the European Commission on Human Rights had condemned "interrogation in-depth" as torture (24).

secret places might have gone unnoticed by the British public back home, gave the lie to Northern Ireland's special positioning: it was an overt sign that the Home Office imagined Northern Ireland less as "constitutionally part of the United Kingdom" and more as a foreign asset to be bridled and controlled by authoritarian means. The slippage here between the government—imposing unilateral restrictions on the freedom of the press—and its public—comedians lampooning it, party leaders condemning it, broadcasters dubbing to get around it—is also a slippage in the philosophy of rights and liberal democracy, which lays bare, just momentarily, the biopolitical mechanisms underneath.

To be clear, the ban was not ineffective, at least not in its stated goal: David Miller shows that Sinn Fein appearances on mainstream television, which had already been sparse and often unfavorably framed, dropped markedly while it was in effect.[13] (Having to hire an actor to dub English into English, after all, is a substantial disincentive to run a segment.) But the resistance to censorship in the form of actor dubs was quite a stunning new kind of political theater. Part of what was striking about the ban was the power it ascribed to the voice: video was acceptable, text was okay, but the transmission of republican *voices* posed too great a threat to be permitted. This anxiety is a little strange. (Even as a child, writes Séamas O'Reilly, "I found it hard to believe Martin McGuinness's voice possessed some especially dangerous siren's allure, given that we sat behind him in Mass. I thus heard his distinctly unremarkable tones in real life every Sunday, but only ever heard him speak on TV or radio with a weirdly dulled and ponderous actor's voice."[14]) A ban on voices seems to imbue them with a magical, somniferous, persuasive power; it assumes that in encountering words transmitted by text, not speech, the public (by some equally magical rationalizing property of text) would be more discerning, less prone to emotional manipulation or swayed by pathos-laced arguments. It is an anxiety that calls to mind others: Plato's suspicion of imitative art, the seventeenth century Puritan reviling of theater that

[13] Miller, "The Media and Northern Ireland," 56.
[14] Séamas O'Reilly, "'Counterproductive and Silly': 30 Years since the End of the Bizarre Irish Political Voice Ban," *The Guardian*, September 15, 2024.

led to a ban of its own, moral panics about violence in video games. It's a little funny that in tiptoeing around the new regulations, broadcasters landed on a form that might have alarmed Plato and the Puritans as much as Home Secretary Hurd.

The actor's voice thus takes up a strange political flavor, here in the waning days of 1988. The revolutions of 1989 were not yet fully foreseeable; the fall of the Soviet Union seemed a distant dream; Conservative government felt entrenched and inevitable, and indeed it would go on to underlie a long-lasting rightward phase shift in British civic life, one emblematized today by the Starmer premiership. This is amid a culture in which politics—at least a politics of the Left, as an organized and cohesive force opposing the destructive policies of the empowered Right—had fallen flat, had lost its orientation toward action and hope. Its thinkers were left dreaming of 1968: envying its momentum, mourning its failure, at a loss for how to rejuvenate its utopianisms. Perhaps there is nothing utopian about the politicization of the actor's voice. It emerged more than anything as a pragmatic workaround that broadcasters adopted to avoid running afoul of the Home Office, and it was not employed to any inherently progressive or pro-republican ends. But its function is well-suited to the theatrical currents of its moment: like the plays considered in this dissertation, it is part of the theater's answer to the eighties' stagnation of political thought.

On September 17, 1994, the lead story in the *Times* described John Major's first considerable concessions to republicans: a promise of a Northern Ireland referendum on its own constitutional future. The next column over, in what seems like very earnest language, warns:

> Yesterday Sinn Fein and the IRA unleashed a weapon against the mainland that threatens untold chaos and may pose the biggest hurdle to mutual understanding on the new road to peace: the real voices of Gerry Adams and Martin McGuiness.[15]

The promised referendum would be held in 1998. Gerry Adams continued to use his real voice, that chaotic weapon against mutual understanding, as president of Sinn Fein until 2018.

[15] Joe Joseph, "Sinn Fein Unleashes Painful War of Words," *The Times*, September 17, 1994.

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