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Robert Vork Date

Opening Acts:
The Performance of Trauma in the Work of Shakespeare, Artaud, Brecht, and Cervantes

By

Robert Vork
Doctor of Philosophy

Comparative Literature

Cathy Caruth
Advisor

Shoshana Felman
Advisor

Claire Nouvet
Committee Member

Accepted:

Lisa A. Tedesco, Ph.D.
Dean of the James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies

Date

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Robert Vork
M.A., University of Chicago, 2004
B.A., University of Minnesota, 2001

Advisors: Cathy Caruth, Ph.D.
Shoshana Felman, Ph.D.

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James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies of Emory University
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Abstract

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By Robert Vork

Opening Acts: The Performance of Trauma in the Work of Shakespeare, Artaud, Brecht, and Cervantes, argues that problems of theater and theatricality are irreducibly linked to the unspeakable performance of trauma and madness, and examines a selection of influential playwrights—Shakespeare, Cervantes, Brecht, and Artaud—to explore the intertwined themes of madness and theater at the heart of their dramatic work. Chapter 1 examines the struggle to witness unburied, unremembered, and unmarked death in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Chapter 2 explores the staging of unspeakable acts in Artaud's *Les Cenci*. Chapter 3 focuses on Brecht's attempt to enact a revolutionary overthrow of war, death, and voiceless silence in *Mother Courage and Her Children*. Chapter 4 examines Cervantes' self-displacing portrayal of his experiences as a ransomed slave in *El Trato de Argel*. In each of these cases, the work in question is shown to repeatedly align trauma with theatrical problems such as action, doubling, the exchange of persons, false appearances, misdirection, and displacement. Through such motifs, the various dramatists attempt to express what has been radically excised from human experience (both their own experience and the collective experience of their societies), and come to terms with the forces responsible for that excision. In reading these attempts, I highlight the dramatists' deep insights into the limits of human understanding, and show how their works invoke the dangerous, revelatory, and revolutionary possibilities latent in all theatrical performance and all instances of madness.

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Introduction: What is an Opening Act?

In the following work I explore Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Artaud's *Les Cenci*, Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children*, and Cervantes' *El Trato de Argel* through what can rightly be called their opening acts (a phrase which gives this work its title). *Opening acts*, in this sense, would be those key, driving forces and events of the plays, enacted both on their stages and in their texts, wherever cleanly structured boundaries break down and, in a disturbing overlay of theatrical presentation and enactments of traumatic violence, expose an otherwise occluded dimension of human experience.

How is this different than the more colloquial, figurative uses of the phrase? Conventionally, the term "opening act" is used to denote two separate, equally revealing circumstances in the world of stage performance. It can refer to the first section of a play, Act One—the initial scene or scenes through which the main characters are introduced to the audience, all necessary expository information is given, and the story's central problem is revealed (setting in motion a cascade of events that together comprise the following action, in which, according to Aristotle, every possible outcome should be contained and foreseen somehow in this, the very beginning). On the other hand, "opening act" refers to the first of several complete, self-contained performances that take place successively on a stage. Used in this way, the phrase indicates a primary and thus seemingly preeminent position in a show, and yet the opening slot is not generally recognized as a location of importance amongst performers and audience members.

Both these uses of "opening act" conceal an inaugural crisis within a seemingly simple state of affairs. Strictly speaking, the exposition of a play is ancillary to the action, or at least large portions of it are, and yet it somehow sets the action in motion and must be integrated as part of that action after the fact. Somehow it establishes the action and yet nothing prior possibly establishes *its* place. Similarly, the status of the opening entertainment in a night's show is disturbingly undeterminable. The starting place must function as an introduction for whatever follows and yet there is no prior introduction for it. Its position is thus uncomfortably denigrated—accurately recognized as the backdrop over which following enactments occur—included in the whole yet simultaneously and inevitably set apart not for any reason of merit but by an unhappy accident of order. Accordingly, it is often reserved as a venue for lesser, unproven performers suitable only to warm up the audience and prepare them for the real, substantive entertainments to come. Retroactively, it can be clearly recognized as the first instance of a repeated event (that is, the first of many acts which follow), but its performance occurs prior to that repetition being codified. Even if the audience knows fully well that multiple acts are to come, in itself the initial performance does not yet stand in relation to any other actual event. It is simultaneously in and out of the overall show, both much more and much less than the acts that follow.

On the one hand, in both sets of circumstances the non-position of opening is enormously and even dangerously powerful. Its awkward status poses a real threat to the show as a whole insofar as it is uniquely capable of disrupting all semblance of ordered unity from the outset (as anyone can attest who has witnessed an abominable opening to a

play or seen either a truly abysmal or truly extraordinary opening band in a concert). On the other hand, the opening non-position is troublingly, abjectly powerless. Anything—and anyone—presented within its space lays a base for the following action, but thereby becomes inevitably glossed over.

These various and complex implications become even more complicated if one ties them to the literal meaning of the phrase's two words. *Opening* refers to a beginning, a necessary site of introduction that closes one state of affairs by marking the start of another. But it also indicates an entry or access point through which passage is made across an otherwise delimited and closed boundary, as though through a doorway or a window. Conceptually, these two meanings need not be necessarily and essentially linked—the relationship between beginnings and entrances is metaphorical rather than logically derivative—yet both apply equally well to the two kinds of opening acts discussed above. In each, a beginning occurs, and a performance is delimited in time and space; at the same time, the very act that constitutes the boundary facilitates passage across it, opening a doubled world of the stage. Furthermore, the word *opening* functions as both a noun and a verb (or, in this case, an adjective and an adverb). That is, it can refer to an objectified location or thing, and so determine a stable field of structural relationships. Or it can refer to a force—the performative power that opens, necessarily inaugurating beginnings and carving entryways by somehow breaking through and radically destabilizing the fabric of our otherwise austere subjective world.

A similarly problematic double-meaning is expressed by the word "act." On the one hand it refers to the expression of a force, as through kinetic motion, where the power of

movement and the movement itself are irreducibly one. An *act*, in this sense, is neither authentic nor inauthentic. It is anything and all that occurs, pure and simple, functioning as the unmediated manifestation of being and beings. Yet on the other hand, *act* also refers to affected role-play. It denotes the self-reflective world of performance, in which stylized, repeatable motions and appearance are adopted, unwittingly or by calculated design, and carried out for such various purposes as subterfuge, play, theatre, ceremony, or to facilitate the basic, functional execution of one's many roles in social life. These two meanings of *act* are mutually exclusive, and yet their collapse within the same word suggests that each is somehow implicated in or predicated on the other. At the same time, like *opening*, the term *act* can also be understood as either a noun or a verb, and this has an especially interesting and important effect in the phrase "opening act" (which in turn reveals an essential feature of the situations to which it refers). In addition to adding yet another level of ambiguity, the doubled play of noun and verb in the two words introduce a twist: the rhetorical-grammatical relationship between the words requires that whenever one takes on the valence of a stable, locatable noun, the other emerges as the force of a modifying verb, and vice versa. As it stands, what we rightly call an opening act is thus never wholly determinable as either an object or an action. Upon whichever our focus alights and stresses, the phrase's essential, determining quality emerges instead in the other.

The phrase "opening act" thus quite appropriately presents a paradox of meaning that names—and in that act of naming, repeats—a real paradox of performance.

Yet something is lost in this paradoxical performance, no matter whether we conceive it as an irreducible problem of human action (as did Diderot) or a paradox of

language (as did de Man). That is to say, an unspeakable dimension of experience is categorically ruled out by the *opening* of any inaugural doorway as an *act* of objective or subjective force, in the flurry of confusion through which those words and deeds are finally interpreted and codified in real life or on a stage.

Such foreclosure cannot be known in itself, but, like a photo negative, a dark outline remains in what takes its place and inevitably fills its void. There in the invisible darkness: a doorway, yes, but not one created by benevolent design. Rather a traumatic wound, still open and bleeding. A force, yes, but not one proper to the laws and structures of nature or subjects. Rather an annihilating power that broaches all limits by recognizing none, and explodes the surface of forms to reveal not an underlying, stable reality but instead a gaping chasm of nothingness, knowable only through the deadened, empty horror left where subjective life must and should have been.

Any gesture that opens onto this void finds its domesticated double in the opening acts described above, and in a way recreates their same inaugural crisis. Like its double, it manifests in the most disturbing and dangerous ways, simultaneously overwhelming in its force and yet desolated in its abjection. It too presents an insurmountable rupture of meaningful subjective experience; contains the whole of life and yet has no determinable place within it; functions as both an isolated, unique event and the instance of a repetition, always simultaneously closed off and yet endlessly unfinished; acts as both noun and verb, event and force (though each equally un-locatable, unspeakable, and unknown). Yet unlike its double, this opening of horror is finally charged with the full brunt of its radical, unmediated, unmarked, murderously preclusive power, and the weight of its crime is

passed on to those who have impossibly survived their encounter with it—*survived*, I say, rather than *lived through*, for life is precisely what this force excises. To be forced through such an opening is to renounce life, whether or not there is a reemergence at the other end. Such an unspeakable, subject-shattering crime cannot be found anywhere in the manifest content of words and deeds. And yet it can be committed, and in fact *must* be, over and over—always the same and always anew, with every repetition drawing in fresh victims (who then inevitably become fresh perpetrators).

* * *

The following pages address the unique relationship between the foreclosed, violent opening act of trauma and the always-opening acts of theater. Over the course of my research I have become convinced that, due to the performative nature of trauma, theater occupies a privileged position as an avenue through which to express traumatic experience. My understanding of the vital work of performance in this link relies on a notion of performance rigorously identified by J.L. Austin in his book *How to Do Things with Words*. Austin's thesis asserts that speech primarily functions by what it does rather than by what it says. This conception does not necessarily contradict a more meaning-centered, structural understanding of language (language as a self-determining field of content and form such as Saussure imagines, for example), but it implies that alongside and prior to any structural abstractions, the force of speech-acts ties language to its real consequences. This insight potentially extends to all human action—a rightly unspeakable performative force

underlies every human endeavor, whether individual or collective, grand or mundane. Fascinating readings of Austin by Jacques Derrida[1] and Shoshana Felman[2] reveal this performative dimension of life especially in theater, where it emerges not just as the central problem of the stage but the central problem of all experience. On the one hand, theater is surely not alone in its ability to convey the performative power of life. Artistic expression of any kind is essentially performative (as is any human act). Yet on the other hand, more than any other art form or activity, theater is the medium of performance and performers unadorned. It presents performance not as a necessary means to some ulterior end but offers it as itself the end, distilled and pure. And it is pure, unspeakable performance, unbiased by subjective appropriation and design, that finally allows the silence of trauma to be transmitted in the place of that real person who is the actor-subject, as it resonates, embodied, with his or her unknown yet real pain and with the similarly unknown yet real pain of a witnessing audience. Theater, both in its artistic, proper sense and as a mode of life, thus serves a vital role for individuals and societies. It potentially expresses that which has been radically excised from human experience in a way that does not simply and only repeat its foreclosures, and so—possibly—interrupts the endless cycle of repetition and violence.

Beyond the general claim that trauma and theater share an irreducibly linked, however, I have declined to draw any broad, universalizing conclusions from my readings, choosing instead to honor the singular specificity of the texts (which is also to honor the singular lives—and singular suffering—of the human beings who wrote them). My work is accordingly organized to match the traumas that guide it: each chapter can be read as a

separate essay which stands alone and yet can and should be taken as part of a greater whole. Chapter 1 examines the struggle to witness unburied, unremembered, and unmarked death in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Chapter 2 explores the staging of unspeakable acts in Artaud's *Les Cenci*. Chapter 3 focuses on Brecht's attempt to enact a revolutionary overthrow of war, death, and voiceless silence in *Mother Courage and Her Children*. Chapter 4 examines Cervantes' self-displacing portrayal of his experiences as a ransomed slave in *El Trato de Argel*. In approaching these texts and their challenging subject matter, I have tried to disregard my own preconceptions and expectations, and have left aside any theoretical agenda (though an astute reader will doubtlessly recognize that my roots lie in deconstruction, trauma theory, performance theory, and psychoanalysis). The single guiding principle that has directed my work has been the need to meet the text I am reading at its level and on its terms. I believe this is the only truly critical imperative—one that we must attempt to adhere to uncompromisingly and unapologetically, recognizing it as ethical as well as methodological and holding true in our encounters with other people just as much as our encounters with texts.

Nevertheless, I will go so far as to point out that despite these four readings' profoundly heterogeneous natures they unfold through strikingly similar, repeated themes. Written in the aftermath of trauma, each of the plays is deeply concerned about the status of the individual. Inevitably, they replay scenes in which the bonds that tie subjects together as people are most affirmed and most betrayed, in which the grounds of subjective experience and knowledge are radically questioned, and in which the performative dimensions of trauma, subjective experience, and theater overlay. War, imprisonment, and

torture (both physical and emotional) provide the general backdrop of all the examined plays. This is linked repeatedly to the problem of unmarked death, and in different ways the plays are all haunted by specters of those unburied, unremembered dead they have left behind. Madness as both an individual and social phenomenon repeatedly appears on the stages of these plays, both as a force of subject-annihilating horror and as an enactment of rightly unspeakable force. Love is a similarly constant theme, explored by all in heartbreaking depth and honesty. Problems of theatricality, actors, and acting are explicitly addressed by Shakespeare and Artaud, but performance conceived as the fabric of subjective life—especially as the essential possibility of inauthenticity, faithlessness, and self-deception—is a central problem of all the plays. A closely related, similarly constant theme is the issue of theatrical displacement—the act of taking another's place, whether to present and preserve that position or to supplant, replace, or invisibly erase it. Several other seemingly unrelated themes also surprisingly recur, and thus demonstrate that they too are implicated in the power of the opening act. The terrible force of sacrifice, both recognized and unrecognized, has an essential role in the plays, and is especially pivotal for Brecht and Cervantes. Similarly, the force of names and naming is a particular concern of Shakespeare and Cervantes, and the failure or inadequacy of names in general is presented as an implicit problem in them all. Likewise, the power of dreams and the uncertain status of dreamers are central problems for Artaud and Cervantes, and dreams figure problematically at certain points in the other plays as well.

I have laid out these essential, repeated themes only to provide a kind of loose guide to the following readings. The issues raised here are discussed in detail in the context of

each specific play—the constellation of problems is the same in all (and in fact is apparently universal, cutting across boundaries of culture, time, and place), but the manner in which they are presented is absolutely unique, and can only be treated adequately in context.

One final consistent theme of the readings requires additional acknowledgement. In the end, quite unintentionally I would add, the readings each follow a trajectory, or metamorphosis, wherein the underlying concept of the play's function quietly but radically changes. In the beginning of each reading, the play in question is unpacked as a proper literary text—neutral, independent, and wholly unclouded by presupposed meanings, morals, or critical judgments, especially those (falsely) supplied by concern for authorial intent and ownership. Yet over the course of the encounter, the play begins to reveal itself not as an abstract text but as an immediate, urgent expression of subjective force, as though a cry of pain or horror, all unspoken and yet conveyed in the very emptiness of the text as such. At that point, the reading inevitably turns (or perhaps I should say returns) to an always-implicit question of authorship. The central issue is then still not one of authorial intent, or of overthrowing what Roland Barthes called the death of the author (a phrase that here can be taken literally); there is no commanding subjective presence in any of these works. Rather, it is a crushing knowledge, carried in the heart and not the intellect, that behind the radical void of these texts must nevertheless lie a real person—not a great author and theorist of theater and trauma, but a human being who now appears only in the performative force of his work, where he is inevitably eclipsed by the voices of all those who can now only take up his words.

Maimèd Rites: Mourning and Madness in *Hamlet*

What Ceremony Else?

In *Will in the World*, Stephen Greenblatt presents an extraordinary addition to our collective understanding of the historical context surrounding *Hamlet*. Greenblatt first sites the now well-established fact that Shakespeare's young son Hamnet died several years prior to the writing of *Hamlet*, and Greenblatt quite justifiably suggests that, whether or not Shakespeare initially recalled his son's loss through the play, the very act of repeatedly writing a version of his son's name must have reopened the wound of his death and created a pathway along which Shakespeare's pain and grief would have entered into the text (311). For Greenblatt, Shakespeare's attempt to express his own deep personal loss—the raw, un-healing ache of a father attempting to mourn his dead child—is at the heart of the play's profoundly moving and epoch-defining portrayal of Hamlet's inner self (318, 321). Yet Greenblatt further suggests that the play's grieving anguish may be more complicated as well. In a subtle shift of emphasis, he points out that Shakespeare buried his son in a period of religious flux during which all of his society's traditional rituals were disrupted. The people's underlying belief system remained the same, but official doctrine was radically altered. Most specifically, all Catholic rites were abolished. Greenblatt indicates that, particularly in the case of death and mourning, these rites had previously held an important theological function. Appropriate rituals of remembrance could literally save a loved one's soul from torment in purgatory (314). Yet whether or not an individual like Shakespeare took seriously the professed purpose of Catholic burial rituals, the rituals

themselves would have held an important symbolic role. Such ceremonial acts of mourning provided an avenue through which death could be publically observed and consecrated, wherein an attempt was made to recognize and reconcile both the loss of the dead as well as the pain of the living. Greenblatt suggests that this ritual function of mourning was denied to Shakespeare just as it is frequently denied to the characters in *Hamlet*. His reading refers particularly to Laertes' repeated cry at the grave of his sister, "What ceremony else? […] What ceremony else?" (5.1.230, 232)[3], and to the ghost of Hamlet's father who returns from the tortures of purgatory begging, "Remember me" (1.5.98). As Greenblatt argues, such desperate pleas for ceremony and remembrance prove far more difficult to satisfy in the play than one might expect from their seemingly simple and direct nature (318), and demonstrate that in the play, as in Shakespeare's life, "the whole ritual structure that helped men and women deal with loss has been fatally damaged" (320). On the one hand, then, the play's central problem is indeed one of grief, stemming from the terrible, unspeakable pain of a father forced to bury his child. Yet on the other hand, the deeper problem of the play is precisely an inability to grieve, expressing the even more terrible, preemptive fact that, on a subjective level, the son could not truly be buried at all.

Greenblatt supports his argument with carefully researched historical evidence, but I believe the most compelling proof that his interpretation holds merit lies in the text of *Hamlet* itself. In the following pages I prove that the question of preempted and/or inadequate burial not only "echoes throughout *Hamlet*" as Greenblatt claims (312), but consistently appears as a burning, crucially unsolvable problem that drives the action of the entire play. Furthermore, in my reading, I show how *Hamlet* presents its traumatic

horizon of failed mourning as a catastrophe at the very heart of subjectivity; how it expresses that failure in the radical limits of madness and theatre; and, most importantly, how it attempts to imagine and enact through theatre the possibility of experience both within and beyond its traumatic loss. For my part, I hope I also convey something of why the play's unique insights are so vitally relevant. In the closing section of Greenblatt's reading—in a parenthetical aside, as though it were an incidental indulgence and/or a sentiment not fully appropriate to include anywhere in his properly rigorous, well-thought and well-articulated argument—Greenblatt nevertheless inserts a comment: Shakespeare's "world of damaged rituals" is, he adds, "the world in which most of us continue to live" (321). In the context of its parenthetical self-exclusion, I find this observation to be especially moving and haunting. As I will show, the kind of always-illegitimate emotional insight Greenblatt's comment displays is in fact central to *Hamlet* and its problem of unburied dead, and conveys its share of a history and pain that nevertheless belongs to us all.

Within a Month, a Little Month, Within a Month

None of *Hamlet*'s many themes circumscribes the play within a single, unifying message. One can rightly assert the play is all about death, but then, with equal justification and certainty, one must also claim it is simultaneously all about love, and madness, theatre, friendship, kingship, parenthood, betrayal, and revenge, to name only some of the more openly general and obvious of the play's central, repeated issues. Any one of these themes can be isolated and used as an access point into the play—a guiding thread that we, as

audience members and readers, might attempt to hang on to as though for dear life as we plunge into the labyrinthine tangle and try to make sense of it—and in fact, the play invites this kind of approach. It is as though the play recognizes the plight of its readers, and with its many clearly-articulated, well-differentiated themes casts out lines, any one of which promises safe deliverance from the unfathomable depths. Yet rather than make good on its offer of meaningful comprehension, the play with its apparent lifelines instead functions as a deadly trap. None of its themes remains distinct from the others, either on the level of the plot or, even more importantly, in the language of the text. Rather, the central issues parasitically overlap and interweave, so that any pathway that might and should lead out of the incoherent jumble instead draws its follower deeper and deeper into a pit of obscurity and confusion, pulled forward like Hamlet, always too quickly, along a closed but therefore endless circuit of "words, words, words" (2.2.210) that lead everywhere except to the heart of the matter—whatever that heart might be.

In contrast to the various obscure, mutually profound and unfathomable themes the play presents in the absence of a meaningful heart, it repeatedly presents a single, tangibly pragmatic issue at the heart of its action. Every major plot development derives as a direct consequence of the fact that, after each death, a question of improper burial is raised and the surviving characters must attempt to resolve the issue, whether by concealing, dismissing, rationalizing, avenging, or in some way coming to terms with it, or by seeking some way to have the chosen means of resolution publically acknowledged and sanctified. Hamlet's opening soliloquy reveals his father's burial as a travesty. Though his mother showed outward signs of being overcome with her husband's loss—following after his

body "like Niobe, all tears" (1.2.153)—nevertheless she must have suffered so little that she had neither the shame nor the presence of mind to subsequently maintain even the decorum of grief. Instead of observing an appropriate period of mourning, she remarried, Hamlet struggles to report, "within a month" (1.2.149), twice more repeating the words that describe, but in no way adequately express, the unspeakable magnitude of his mother's betrayal: "a little month," "within a month" (1.2.151, 158). Later, when confronting his father's ghost, Hamlet makes a point of the fact that his father seemed to have been buried successfully, with all appropriate ceremony. The body was "canonized," "hearsèd in death," and "quietly interred" (1.4.52, 54). And yet, Hamlet asks, how is it then that the tomb has "oped his ponderous and marble jaws / to cast thee up again" (1.4.55-56). Quite literally, Hamlet recognizes, his father's funeral failed to bury its dead.

The problem of unburied dead resurfaces again after the murder of Polonius. Hamlet initially impedes the king's attempt to find the corpse and begin burial proceedings, by hiding the body and mocking the pious attitude behind such solemnities (4.2, 4.3.19-43). Yet Claudius himself then proves the truth in Hamlet's irreverence when, fearing a scandal, he not only denies Polonius a state funeral but refuses even to publicly acknowledge the death. Instead, as Claudius privately admits to his wife, Polonius was interred "in hugger-mugger" (4.5.91). The phrase is obscurely idiomatic, but its original meaning is precise; it refers to a clandestine act orchestrated to ensure secrecy. Applied to Polonius' death, the term implies that he was not so much given a funeral as simply made to disappear, as though he had vanished from the earth or had never existed at all. It is unlikely that Polonius' children were even informed of what occurred. Laertes, at least, when he

rebelliously storms the palace and demands to be given his father (4.5.128), seems to have no clear idea that Polonius is already dead. Later he vows to avenge his father's wrongful death, but again, the crime that for him most cries for vengeance is not the murder itself but the failure to acknowledge the murder through a proper burial: "His means of death, his obscure funeral / (No trophy, sword, nor hatchment o'er his bones, / No noble rite nor formal ostentation) / Cry to be heard, as 'twere from heaven to earth" (4.5.238-241).

As I will later demonstrate, Ophelia expresses the same terrible lack of acknowledgement through her madness. When Ophelia then dies, the crisis of failed burial arises once again. As was the case after Polonius' murder, even the initial shockwaves of Ophelia's drowning express a deep disturbance of proper mourning. Gertrude's narration frames the death in movingly beautiful terms (4.7.190-208), but also, I would suggest, in terms that are disturbing for their very beauty, facilitated through a neutral third-person point of view that presents the scene as though witnessed from a distance by no one in particular—as if its tragic ending had been inevitably and impersonally frozen under glass from the very beginning—allowing neither Gertrude nor anyone to become emotionally present to the death as a terrible and unnecessary travesty. The funeral then codifies this failure of recognition. Deeming Ophelia's death to be caused by suicide, the church denies her any holy rituals of remembrance. The vitiated proceedings in the graveyard first draw Hamlet's notice, leading him to wonder aloud whose funeral it could be that displays "such maimèd rites" (5.1.226) even before Laertes echoes the same sentiment with his own repeated cry to the silent clergyman, "What ceremony else? […] What ceremony else?"

(5.1.230, 232), and plunges into his sister's open grave—a grave that, for him, will now never be completely closed.

The fate of improperly observed death is even (or especially) shared by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. At the end of the play, after all others have died and Gertrude, Claudius, Laertes, and Hamlet leave the stage literally piled with their unburied corpses, the ambassador from England enters to announce that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have been killed according to the instruction of the letter they carried (5.2.407-412), which, as Hamlet earlier reveals to Horatio, contains only one additional directive: there should be "no shriving time allowed" (5.2.52), that is, no time for confession or last rites. Presumably Hamlet's intention is to deny his former companions any chance of talking their way out of their fate, but what is certain is that, in the single line of dialogue that in any way contextualizes the death of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, the play shares only that the necessary rites and rituals of mourning were not observed, just as they were not successfully observed at the death of any other character in the play.

This central theme of unburied dead is not hidden in *Hamlet*. In fact, its obviousness may be the reason it has been afforded so little serious critical scrutiny. It straightaway raises the question: Is it possible that any work as compellingly powerful as *Hamlet*, disclosing such real, unspeakable pain, could also, simultaneously, bluntly (or even profanely) come right out with its central problem in a way that does not simply offer a misleading cover for something deeper and more inscrutable? From the start, the play implies that such an obvious disclosure should not be possible, or at the very least should be regarded with deep suspicion by any reader. Hamlet mistrusts the inherent treachery of

surface-level appearances. In his introductory exchange, he warns his mother against confusing the "trappings and the suits of woe" for "that within which passes show" (I.2.88-89), emphatically and memorably positing an authentic heart which outward signs only (possibly) express, the way symptoms may or may not express their underlying cause. Death itself would be such an underlying, authentic problem, worthy of Hamlet and his play. On the one hand, in the abstract, death presents Hamlet with a profound intellectual conundrum; on the other hand, in lived experience felt through the loss of his father, it ruptures the foundations of his world. And in fact, at various times in the play Hamlet attempts to work through both of these radically troubling aspects of death. Burial, by contrast, appears ancillary to the whole issue. It would be the all-too-material but necessary chore that inserts itself into what seems to be grief's real intellectual and emotional work. To then focus critical attention on the play's preoccupation with burial would seemingly make the very blunder Hamlet warns against. It would confuse the superficial for the profound; take a bracketed interruption of grief for the meaningful labor it diverts; displace the play's true substance with its artificial show.

However, as is suggested by Hamlet's pivotal encounter in the graveyard, where he finally finds an interlocutor—in the form of a gravedigger, he who is charged with burying the dead—and achieves a flood of memories and self-revelation only after death is first placed in the most shockingly coarse and vulgar of terms, burial's profanely obvious appropriation of death might in fact conceal in plain sight the most important work of all. I will return to the scene in the graveyard later. For now, let me simply point out that all the key characters in *Hamlet* express some understanding that burial, literally and figuratively,

should be carried out regardless of intentions or motives. As mentioned above, even Claudius and Gertrude in some way are disturbed by their own wrongful treatment of the dead. And Hamlet, especially, is very clear on the subject. On the one hand, he is appalled at his mother's superficial display of mourning. Yet on the other hand, and more to the point, he is shocked by the fact that she did not *even* manage to put on a superficial display. What should have been her extended period of grief was preemptively cut off ("within a month," "a little month," within a month"). In this, Gertrude's questionable and duplicitous intentions clearly matter to Hamlet. But her acts themselves, *in* themselves, matter as well. "Assume a virtue if you have it not," Hamlet says crucially when he finally confronts her (3.4.181). He understands only too well that the aspect of mourning which is most ancillary to any question of intention or motive—i.e., burial in itself—is what he, his mother, and all the other characters have failed to observe, precisely because their seemingly deeper, more urgent and immeasurably more important intentions and motives inevitably get in the way. Burial sharply contends with the pressing demands of life, and in each individual moment the rights and requirements of the living always unthinkingly supersede or preempt the empty threats of the dead. However, as the play shows, if the vital, deceptively dangerous work of burial is then left undone, incomplete, or is carelessly mishandled, it unleashes a terrible, obfuscating violence upon the world, and leads only to further repetitions of death and madness.

Remember Me

"Something is rotten in the state of Denmark" cries Marcellus in terror and dread after seeing the ghost of his former king walk from the grave (1.5.100). Almost certainly he intends his words to be understood figuratively, as a reference to some unknown evil or sickness that plagues the land. And there is indeed a collective illness in Denmark. A radical devaluation of human beings leads them to be disregarded in death. At least at the highest levels of society, there is a consistent inability or unwillingness to recognize either the unspeakable loss of singular beings or the equally unspeakable crime of disavowing their loss. Yet this deeply figurative understanding of Marcellus' words preempts the reactive, vulgar insight conveyed by their literal meaning. First and foremost, the rottenness of which Marcellus inadvertently speaks is the corporeal decay of unburied corpses, in a world where the bodies of the dead have been left uncovered to putrefy in the open air. Marcellus' comment itself functions as such an uncovering—a speech act that inadvertently and profanely lays bare all there is to know, say, and see—and yet the terrible implications of his statement go unheeded in the play, while, at the same time, the revelatory insight they might have initiated is forestalled.

What would it mean in the play to successfully bury the dead? No example is given. Clearly it includes the act of actual, physical burial, but it cannot merely be that. Similarly, it must have something to do with the enactment of proper ceremony and ritual, but it cannot merely be that, either. The ghost of the unburied king names but one key task that will lay him to rest: "Remember me," he begs of Hamlet (1.5.98). Yet remembrance, in this

context, is no simple thing. Until this point in the play Hamlet has done nothing but "remember" his father in all normal senses of the word, and yet the ghost still cries.

Hamlet immediately attempts to make sense of his task by equating memory with writing. Calling out to the disappearing ghost, he answers:

> Remember thee?
>
> Yea, from the table of my memory
>
> I'll wipe away all trivial, fond records,
>
> All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past,
>
> That youth and observation copied there,
>
> And thy commandment all alone shall live
>
> Within the book and volume of my brain…
>
> (1.5.104-110)

Hamlet understands memory as a composition of inscriptive, recording marks. In this, he takes his cue from the ghost itself, who, if understood in these terms, mirrors its final plea for remembrance with its first arresting command, "Mark me" (1.5.3), literally from beginning to end framing the entire encounter with Hamlet as a problem of inscriptive memory. There is a certain logical continuity between this particular conception of remembrance and the play's central problem of burial. Burial is that act through which death is made most tangibly, materially manifest. It is thus also the act through which the rightly unspeakable, traumatic force of death most unmistakably collides with the all-too speakable materiality of speech, with all the necessary dissembling, displacing violence that this encounter implies. On the one hand, grief can never be adequately expressed. The

irreplaceable uniqueness of the life that was lost, the terrible pain of his or her excision, the unspeakable crime of taking that life away—these are things that Hamlet desperately needs to share, and yet cannot. On the other hand, Hamlet's equally heartrending problem is that his grief absolutely *can* be expressed. Hamlet has seen the name of his loved one placed on a tomb (1.4.52-54); he uses objectively definable terms such as "mourned" (1.2.155) and "death" (3.1.86) to explain and conceptualize what is happening, and to provide comforting meaning that happily—or is it catastrophically?—displaces the unnamable heart of his loss. Whether Hamlet knows it or not, he invokes this terrible dilemma at the heart of burial, and suggests that an act of writing, opposed to an act of proper speech, is part of its necessary task of bridging or mediating the gap between the speakable and the unspeakable.

Hamlet calls on writing to supplement and circumvent his own foreseen absence of memory.[4] He is desperately aware that memory, in every normal, non-inscriptive sense, is going to fail him, and thus demands that his father's commandment be set in his brain as though in a tablet of stone in order to indelibly remind him of what he is certain to forget. When this always forgotten, always re-learned message is received, it of course will then also convey an implicit reminder *that* he forgot something in the first place, furthermore proving that he must have, beyond all possible knowledge, at least for a moment forgotten that he forgot—that he must have lost track of the fact that anything at all was lost to begin. Remembrance, in Hamlet's inscriptive sense, would then be any act that somehow leaves space open to implicitly acknowledge the unspeakable, unknowable loss of memory. Not as

a noun but as a verb, it would somehow mark the very fact that some things cannot ever be truly marked—even, or especially, all that is occluded in the very gesture of marking.

The task is all too easy to talk about in the abstract, yet for that very reason it proves exceedingly difficult to actually accomplish in a subjective, personally meaningful way. In fact, the play suggests it is impossible. Only one act of remembrance in *Hamlet* claims to actually carry out an inscriptive, memorializing gesture, but this proves to be a false claim concealing the greatest travesty of all. After the play's opening prelude scene, Claudius officially inaugurates the start of the action with an address to his attendant audience, at once the people of his nation and the audience of the play. With this first official act, he explicitly remembers and commemorates the former king. "Though of Hamlet our dear brother's death / The memory be but green," he begins, emphasizing from the start the importance of memory and remembrance in his speech, "[…] Yet so far hath discretion fought with nature / That we with wisest sorrow think on him / Together with remembrances of ourselves" (1.2.1-7). With these words Claudius professes his deep and genuine grief. He recognizes and shares the sorrow of Gertrude and all the people of his kingdom (1.2.3). Yet, he adds, the very fact that they thus collectively recognize and grieve the loss of their previous ruler then excuses their subsequent actions. Claudius continues:

> Therefore our sometime sister, now our queen,
> Th' imperial jointress to this warlike state,
> Have we (as 'twere with a defeated joy,
> With an auspicious and a dropping eye,
> With mirth in funeral and with dirge in marriage,

> In equal scale weighing delight and dole)
> Taken to wife. Nor have we herein barred
> Your better wisdoms, which have freely gone
> With this affair along. For all, our thanks.
> (1.2.8-16)

Claudius adopts the powerful rhetorical strategy of full disclosure. In this, he justifies himself with a logic that is impeccably tautological: they all have nothing to hide because they have done nothing wrong; there was no cover up so there must have been nothing to cover. Claudius' claim proves itself true through both its tone and content. All along, he suggests, the series of rightly questionable events leading to the new king's coronation have occurred in plain sight and with the tacit endorsement of the entire nation, then as now demonstrating that everything done was carried out honestly, honorably, and in good faith. There neither is, nor ever was, any crime against the memory of the dead king, not even one that was unintended or unfortunately necessary to preserve the state. Claudius' rhetorical handling of his past deeds here precisely aligns with his treatment of his dead brother. He remembers them in order to bury them together, literally and figuratively, not by covering them up (which might indicate he still bears some unresolved doubt or guilt), but by covering nothing at all, as though there were nothing unspeakably lost that might have required covering in the first place.

As an act that seems to fully recognize and honor the death of his brother, Claudius' speech seems to successfully execute precisely those duties of inscriptive remembrance the ghost requires. However, as understood by Hamlet, a true gesture of remembrance

presupposes the fact that, even though the loss of a loved one may be impossible to articulate, and have no easily graspable and definable object, it is for that very reason painfully real. Yet Claudius' gesture presupposes that just the opposite is the case. The loss of the former king *is* articulated, apparently, and anything that this magisterial gesture might fail to mark and remember is categorically defined out of every admissible dimension of experience to begin.

In this act of pious "memory" and "remembrance" that nevertheless executes an insidious excision of his brother's unspeakable loss, Claudius receives implicit support from language as a structure. Similarly to an economic system which makes no distinction between the priceless and the worthless, Claudius's model of subjective experience cannot differentiate that which is unspeakable from that which has no meaning. All one can say is that, whatever might constitute such non-entities, they are equally precluded from articulation, and thus from any consideration whatsoever. Anything that then goes unmarked in language must be, by that very fact, nothing of any possible consequence, that is to say, nothing at all. This inaugural, self-proving claim of Claudius—his marking of all, his burial of nothing—becomes ironically reversed by Hamlet later when, to the shock of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, he declares mysteriously that "The King is a thing—/ […] / Of nothing" (4.2.28-30). In itself, however, once again, Claudius' logic is insidiously, tautologically perfect, and leaves Hamlet with no actual, admissible defense. Claudius accuses him of engaging in a childish disavowal of reason, nature, God, and the dead (1.2.105-107), that is, essentially, of rebelling vainly against the structural necessity of meaning that Claudius so aptly demonstrates. His implicit reasoning requires Hamlet to

accept an object of mourning, and the fact that Hamlet cannot do so means that he is in fact not mourning at all—just as Claudius suggests, he must be driven by something else, perhaps "impious stubbornness"—childish narcissism—rather than properly circumscribable grief (1.2.98). When Claudius finally concludes his accusatory remarks, Hamlet sullenly acquiesces and then falls silent, left literally speechless (1.2.126). Perhaps better than anyone, he appreciates that, as far as speech can possibly articulate, his uncle is absolutely right: he does indeed mourn nothing. In fact, that is *exactly* the problem. Even silence here cannot function as an enclave for Hamlet's unspeakable loss. Rather than open onto meaninglessness, it, too, conveys a properly linguistic message by seeming to corroborate Claudius' judgment.

Yet Hamlet alone understands that a terrible excision takes place precisely where such nothingness is forcibly appropriated and preempted by meaningful speech—which it always is—and that, even though he cannot mark the difference he must nevertheless try, and never cease trying, to show that there is and must be a distinction made between things that are insignificant and those that are utterly beyond significance. In loving memory of his father, he must show that a human being's singular life and death amount to more than nothing in the end. And in painful memory of his father's loss, he must show that all the people around him are willing participants in a shocking, literally unspeakable crime they insanely refuse to acknowledge even occurred. Yet no acts of vengeance or displays of mourning can possibly right the terrible wrong they have all committed. The entire action of the play hinges on an impossible task: Hamlet must never stop attempting

to make reparations to and for his unmarked, un-memorialized, and un-mourned father, and yet can do nothing but fail in that task always again.

A Noble Mind is Here O'erthrown

Claudius' inaugural act proves that what appears to be proper burial might not in fact bury anything. He deals with traumatic loss by preemptively expunging it from its place in subjective experience. In this, he is all too justified. Such a loss would be (for it *is* not anything) that which annihilates meaningful experience and decomposes the subject, literally and figuratively, objectively and subjectively, in an unmarked well of death. It indeed occupies no place in the subjective world. Yet by obtusely disregarding it, Claudius then demonstrates himself unable or unwilling to even recognize the failed attempt to express its rupture, let alone participate in it or officially mark the failure with his own seal. Like Gertrude when, as queen, she refuses to grant an audience to mad Ophelia (4.5.1-25), Claudius cannot provide any official validation of unspeakable pain.

Claudius' kingship thus frames a social world in which unspeakable crimes take place as a point of order in plain sight, as though no wrongdoing had occurred, and denials are unnecessary to register even the outside possibility of a crime. In this insane situation, madness rightly befalls any character in the play who recognizes and attempts to resist what is occurring. With all other avenues of expression foreclosed on the stage, madness alone remains as the only outlet through which the force of excised loss might be adequately impressed upon the play's world. Yet madness then also functions as a terrible

punishment, as though the necessary retribution for rebelling against an irrefutable sovereign, and therein it potentially becomes a sentence of endless, living death.

Hamlet initiates a mad enactment of death when, confronting Ophelia, he briefly loses his mind and embodies the unmarked loss of his father.[5] As Hamlet and Ophelia talk in what he believes to be open and heartfelt intimacy—for a moment it seems he has found someone with whom he can actually speak—he suddenly becomes aware that Ophelia acts as an agent of Polonius and the king:

> HAMLET. … Where's your father?
>
> OPHELIA. At home, my lord.
>
> HAMLET. Let the doors be shut upon him that he may play the fool nowhere but in 's own house. Farewell.
>
> OPHELIA. O, help him, you sweet heavens!
>
> HAMLET. If thou dost marry, I'll give thee this plague for thy dowry: be thou as chaste as ice, as pure as snow, thou shalt not escape calumny. Get thee to a nunnery, farewell. Or if thou wilt needs marry, marry a fool, for wise men know well enough what monsters you make of them. To a nunnery, go, and quickly too. Farewell.
>
> OPHELIA. Heavenly powers, restore him!
>
> HAMLET. I have heard of your paintings too, well enough. God hath given you one face, and you

> make yourselves another. You jig and amble, and
> you lisp; you nickname God's creatures and make
> your wantonness your ignorance. Go to, I'll no
> more on 't. It hath made me mad. I say we will have
> no more marriages. Those that are married already,
> all but one, shall live. The rest shall keep as they are.
> To a nunnery, go. *(He exits.)*
> (3.1.141-162)

"It hath made me mad," Hamlet says of Ophelia's perceived betrayal, and the shock and horror she expresses in her subsequent reaction reveals how right he is: "O, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown!" (3.1.163), she says. In this moment Hamlet becomes, as Ophelia apprehends, "blasted with ecstasy" (3.1.174), that is, quite literally obliterated via a terrible displacement. He unfairly accuses Ophelia of faithlessness, deception, and wanton lust, but the most shocking aspect of his attack is not in his allegations' unmerited content, but in his murderously violent, preclusive tone. Ophelia ceases even attempting to communicate with him—deprived of an interlocutor, she instead directs her appeals to heaven—for, as is painfully clear, Hamlet in no way speaks to *her*. Unwarranted from any point of view, Hamlet's assault only makes sense as a presentation precisely of that foreclosed scene of reckoning which Hamlet's father could never live out. Hamlet does not here speak in his own voice. It is Hamlet's precluded father who suddenly appears on the stage in Hamlet's place, crying out in all his un-admitted pain and rage not against Ophelia's inadvertent repetition, but against the awful, faithless betrayal of Gertrude. Ophelia plays an essential

role in this mad enactment. She is violently forced to occupy the place of Gertrude from within, while, at the same time, she sustains Hamlet's place from without. Through her double-role, the voice of Hamlet's father is in some way heard and (though neither she nor Hamlet knows it) Hamlet is preserved from descending utterly into madness. Yet Ophelia is forced into this role only insofar as she, too, becomes a finally unmarked and unrecognized victim of the same violent, annihilating force that first takes Hamlet in place of his father.

In much the same way, Laertes madly embodies his unburied sister when, interrupting her funeral, he suddenly leaps into her open grave. Readers may question whether Laertes has truly lost his mind in this moment—no character accuses him of madness—but it is difficult not to recognize that his act rightly throws the proceedings into a mad parody of grief. Ophelia's burial was already a sham. Now, to the shock and dismay of all, Laertes overturns even the tattered semblance of propriety and decorum. On the one hand, like a terrible melodrama, his excessive display preempts authentic, heartfelt remembrance rather than aids it. "What is he whose grief / Bears such an emphasis," cries Hamlet as he advances, "whose phrase of sorrow / Conjures the wand'ring stars and makes them stand / Like wonder-wounded hearers?" (5.1.267-270). Yet on the other hand, if Laertes' display then has any point, it is to indicate precisely how thoroughly all authentic grief has already been excluded from the burial. In this context, Laertes' demand to be buried alive alongside his sister, with the earth piled as a mountain above them (5.1.263-265), demonstrates a desperate wish that the grave itself, in the absence of any lasting, remembering mark, might function as a silent monument to the very foreclosure of

mourning. However, as was the case in Hamlet's madness earlier, this effective attempt to express unmarked loss also inevitably repeats its crime. Once again, as her grave and body are literally trampled, for a moment forgotten by all, the silently eclipsed, unintended victim is Ophelia herself.

Nowhere is this collective, repeated preclusion of Ophelia more acutely demonstrated than in her own mad attempt to bear witness to the hugger-mugger of her father's death. She displays this clearly as the central theme of her madness. Her refrain, over and over, is failed burial charged with the betrayal of love. In Ophelia's mad appearance on stage, she sings a song of disrupted grief about a pilgrim who, while his true love awaits his return, dies alone; we are told he "bewept to the ground did not go" (4.5.44). She then sings of a maid who is sexually used and discarded by a man who she believes loves her and wishes to marry her, but who instead finds in her forthcoming show of love a corroboration of his own frivolous, shallow affections (4.5.63-71). She makes reference to her father's uncertain burial and her own accordingly uncertain response: "I cannot choose but weep to think they would lay him i' th' cold ground" (4.5.74-75). She then attempts to convince the company to join her in yet another song of grief (4.5.194-195), and though they balk she nevertheless conscripts them beyond their will into her enactment by passing out symbolically meaningful flowers—perhaps the very flowers which she earlier sang bedecked the pilgrim's shroud (4.5.43). Along with this is a reference to a "false steward" who dishonestly seduces the ward he is charged with protecting (4.5.196-197). She then makes a final explicit reference to her father's ambiguous death ("I would give you some violets, but they withered all when my father

died. They say he made a good end"), and sings one last song of mourning (4.5.207-209, 210-222). These displays rightly overlay her father's unremembered death with her own traumatic rejection by Hamlet in his mad, preclusive fury. Together, those acts align as two repeated incarnations of the single great crime of radically failing to remember a loved one.

Ophelia's madness expresses the underlying horror of Claudius' self-deluding façade. Formally, Ophelia's madness functions identically to Claudius' inaugural act of full disclosure, and in fact radically extends it. Like him, she puts everything in plain sight; she hides nothing. And, exactly as with Claudius, her total disclosure for that very reason precludes the loss of which it speaks. As Ophelia's troubled physician says when he attempts to describe her display, "Her speech is nothing, / Yet the unshaped use of it doth move / The hearers to collection" (4.5.9-11). The "nothing" which this sensitive man notes Ophelia somehow never ceases to convey is that same "nothing" which Hamlet earlier recognizes is proper to the king (4.2.30). The key difference between the two gestures—and in this difference lies everything—is that Ophelia charges her disclosure with the terrible non-meaning at its heart and thus lives out its annihilation in both word and deed, displaying its mad omission for all to (not) see. Her madness presents itself as the force of nothingness embodied in the place where she, as a subject, should be, displacing her and simultaneously preempting her very being. This is why, as even the king recognizes (4.5.91-93), her madness is such a terrifying thing to behold. It is also why her madness finds no audience for its message anywhere in Claudius' Denmark: its message is not something that can be properly articulated and understood. Everyone around Ophelia grasps her madness' obvious, overt content. "Conceit upon her father" declares the king

(4.5.50). "O, this is the poison of deep grief. It springs / All from her father's death" (4.5.80-81). That much is clear enough. But that clear message is not where the real significance of Ophelia's gesture lies. To grasp its significance a reader must, as Ophelia initially pleads, "Mark […] mark" her display (4.5.33, 40)—echoing the entreaties of the ghost in its ever-forgotten pain and loss—by understanding her point is not in what her words say but in what they necessarily omit. More than a story of failed burial and grief, the story she can in no way express would tell of the radical preclusion of all burial and all grief. The lived enactment of this scene is the only way she can possibly avoid Claudius' fatal error. And yet it still repeats his crime and leaves silent all that Ophelia needs to convey: her absolute inability to mourn her father's passing, to feel and express his loss, to mark his excised death, and, finally, to express herself as an unrecognized casualty of that same terrible violence. The sacrifice of taking this violence on herself and containing it alone—neither passing on its force nor repeating its crime in the place of any other unwitting victim, even unto her grave—is an act that the characters of the play are more than complicit in allowing her to carry out.

Whose Grave's This?

Regardless of what the characters in the play do, they all eventually prove that they can only repeat in some way the play's initial crime. Its failure of burial is inevitable. Even and especially those few characters who are sensitive enough to recognize the problem and engage it directly in acts of mad resistance either inflict their mad violence on others (who must then, like them, endlessly pass it along onto more innocents) or become pariahs in

their self-immolation. Neither choice is particularly noble nor has any redeeming aspect. To this, a reader sensitive enough to take Ophelia's part might rightly protest, for she indeed performs a great act of heroism for the other characters of the play. Appealing to a different social reality from the one in which she inhabits, her madness can be recognized not as a crime the others inflict upon her, functioning as the living proof that she acts as a mindless victim of death, but rather as something she takes on herself as a reasonable response to their insane world. Through her madness she simultaneously expresses their violence and preserves them from it. Yet this viewpoint is completely out of step with the social reality in which Ophelia actually finds herself, where there was no choice on her part, where any possible message in her madness is absolutely not heard, and where her sacrifice saves exactly no one. Unmarked death, in Claudius' Denmark, is guaranteed for all, and to believe otherwise is to be as delusional and dreamy-eyed as Gertrude and the rest—it is to partake of exactly the kind of profoundly dishonest, untrue thought in which Ophelia, and Hamlet, refuse to take refuge.

Yet the play does not end simply in madness. That is one option, always left open. But there is another, as Hamlet discovers when he and the play together pause to behold their own inescapable doom. Following Laertes' ominous pledge of fealty to Claudius and Ophelia's heartbreaking suicide, and with Hamlet's own murderous plot playing out beyond his control, there, at the very bottom of their mad pit, Hamlet nevertheless finds that he has fulfilled his promise to his father's ghost, seemingly (and yet necessarily) in the most unexpected place, in a wholly unintended manner, and in the presence of a most unlikely companion.

When Hamlet enters the graveyard he unknowingly steps onto the scene of his own nightmarish hellscape. This should be the very site of burial—that place where, if nowhere else, mournful remembrance finally leaves its mark, and the dead and the living come together to make peace at the juncture of the unspoken and the spoken, allowing each other to rest. Yet what Hamlet finds is precisely the opposite. Where the solemn work of burial should be taking place, a gravedigger instead unceremoniously tosses bones *out* of a grave. Not only that, but as the man works he sings inappropriately, prompting Hamlet to wonder aloud "Has this fellow no feeling of his business?" (5.1.67). Furthermore, the man's song coarsely compares the grave and the grip of death to a lovers' bed and embrace (5.1.63-99). In any other context these lyrics might be understood as a profound commentary on the relationship between love and fatality, and/or seen as a repetition of Ophelia's mad theme, but coming from the gravedigger, who has already shown an inclination to mock his surroundings (5.1.46-49, 56-61), the song does little more than transform death into a bawdy, tasteless joke. On the one hand, the gravedigger's attitude repeats Claudius' original gesture. He quite literally buries nothing and at the same time obtusely disregards all that he should be burying. The gravedigger even extends Claudius' obtuse failure. The king earlier speaks of "mirth in funeral" and "dirge in marriage" when he justifies his union with Gertrude (1.2.12), but it is only here, in the gravedigger's heedless and probably half-drunken song, that these words are actually realized. The only difference between the two men is that the gravedigger does not even bother to claim that he carries out an act of memorial remembrance; he neither tries to do so, nor recognizes that he should. On the other hand, then, the gravedigger also repeats the enactment of

madness. As his subsequent conversation with Hamlet reveals, like Hamlet, Laertes, and Ophelia, this man is the first to fall prey to his own formal trappings, so that he is made the dupe of his ignorance, playing the fool (5.1.151-152). And, like them in their madness—as himself a madman—he enacts a theatrical scene that is nevertheless all surface, with nothing underneath it. Opposed to proper theatrical play, this fool's play does not so much mark itself as pretend, and so acknowledges no relationship to any underlying reality. It is at once theatrical and real. Again, however, the gravedigger's repetition contains a key missing element. Neither pain nor horror charges it with the annihilating force of unmarked loss. Not even nothing remains.

The scene of the gravedigger's enactment is thus, in Hamlet's terms, one of total forgetting. He displays complete disregard for what should be his own obvious insult to the dead, and he cannot be convinced otherwise. Hamlet tries to re-introduce the force of precluded loss back into the scene. By this point in the play he is jaded enough not to be entirely surprised by what he sees, but he is still sufficiently sensitive to the gravedigger's underlying crime that he is unwilling to let it pass unchallenged, in the vain hope of provoking some acknowledgment. "I will speak to this fellow" (5.1.119), he declares. In their ensuing dialogue, Hamlet attempts to convey to the man some sense of the sanctity of individual life. For example, Hamlet opens by demanding that the gravedigger remember the name of the person he so casually effaces. In this request, Hamlet's intentions are doubtlessly justified and good. But formally, on a rhetorical level, his argument attempts the same insidious silencing that Claudius first levies upon him, and that he later executes upon Ophelia in his madness. What looks like innocent wordplay is in fact designed to trap

the gravedigger in the inescapable logic of his own words, leaving him literally speechless—and defenseless:

> HAMLET. Whose grave's this, sirrah?
>
> GRAVEDIGGER. Mine, sir. […]
>
> HAMLET. I think it be thine indeed, for thou liest in 't.
>
> GRAVEDIGGER. You lie out on 't, sir, and therefore 'tis not yours. For my part, I do not lie in 't, yet it is mine.
>
> HAMLET. Thou dost lie in 't, to be in 't and say it is thine. 'Tis for the dead, not for the quick; therefore thou liest.
>
> (5.1.120-130)

As he has done before, Hamlet conveys his own pain and horror only insofar as he inadvertently enacts its preclusive force. Yet the gravedigger, unlike Hamlet in the same place, has a response. "'Tis a quick lie, sir; 'twill away again from me to you" (5.1.131-132). Through a rhetorical flip—one that doubles Hamlet's own—the gravedigger emerges unscathed from their exchange. If he has been harmed, the wound has left no mark.

Throughout the rest of their conversation, the gravedigger time and time again dodges Hamlet's attempts to entrap him, always in the same way, by proving that in fact he dodges nothing at all. It quickly becomes apparent that Hamlet's assault can in no way hurt this man, and that his naïve innocence is therefore warranted and unfeigned—here, at least, neither Hamlet's latent mad repetition nor the latent madness of the gravedigger's callous attitude carries force. Rather than battle to the figurative and literal death, their exchange slowly unfolds as a kind of happy, shared game that Hamlet and the audience can

enjoy together. For a moment, all are allowed to forget the howls of the unburied dead without shame, and watch as the fool effortlessly avoids Hamlet's verbal snares and pitfalls, as though he were, from the very beginning, always out of their reach. In these few brief moments of harmless, innocently theatrical forgetting, Hamlet finally lives the truth that one cannot forget what one never remembered in the first place. And thus he is primed finally to keep his promise to his father, by remembering what—and who—*he* must always have lost.

Hamlet's remembrance begins unknowingly, with a rightly innocent question leading to an equally innocent disavowal:

> GRAVEDIGGER. Here's a skull now hath lien you i' th' earth
> three-and-twenty years.
> HAMLET. Whose was it?
> GRAVEDIGGER. A whoreson mad fellow's it was.
> Whose do you think it was?
> HAMLET. Nay, I know not.
> (5.1.178-183)

Hamlet's question, "Whose was it?" echoes his initial pointed interrogation of the gravedigger, "Whose grave's this?" Now, however, as is revealed by Hamlet's simple and honest response when the question is returned to him, it has been exhausted of any sinister implications of forgetting. Hamlet's concern now addresses only his necessary and therefore guiltless lack of knowledge. Yet however necessary and guiltless is this lack of

knowledge, it also constitutes a real foreclosure of memory, and thus it carries an equally real loss. This loss, too, the gravedigger returns to Hamlet:

> GRAVEDIGGER. A pestilence on him for a mad rogue! He poured a flagon of Rhenish on my head once. This same skull, sir, was, sir, Yorick's skull, the King's jester.
>
> HAMLET. This?
>
> GRAVEDIGGER. E'en that.
>
> HAMLET. Let me see. Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio—a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy. He hath bore me on his back a thousand times, and now how abhorred in my imagination it is! My gorge rises at it. Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft. Where be your gibes now? your gambols? your songs? your flashes of merriment that were wont to set the table on a roar? Not one now to mock your own grinning? Quite chapfallen? Now get you to my lady's chamber, and tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favor she must come. Make her laugh at that. (5.1.184-202)

It may be that, as Lacan asserts, the key moment of the play's surface-level interaction occurs later in this same scene, when Hamlet strides forward and grandly interrupts Laertes' mad display with the statement, "This is I, / Hamlet the Dane" (5.1.270-271), words through which he simultaneously names himself, claims his personhood, reconciles himself to his kingship and lineage, and apparently works through the entire structure of Oedipal dilemmas. Yet the foundation for that act of naming is laid here, where Hamlet

keeps his promise to his dead father by remembering not the king that he and we mistakenly believed he had pledged to recall, but that fool who was always behind the king, eclipsed—that unknown and unknowable real-life father of flesh and blood (at once caregiver, companion, and playmate) who, all unspoken, must nevertheless have loved him so deeply, constantly, and unobtrusively that he simply faded into life's background scenery.

Like nothing.

And like the gravedigger himself, who now falls silent so that Hamlet can speak. Hamlet, for his part, now is able to reflect on life and death as though from a distance (5.1.209-223), and soon he proves that he has similarly learned to distinguish himself from his prior mad performances, both distancing himself from his madness and reconciling himself to it, at once forgiving himself and yet still seeking forgiveness from those alive whom he has wronged (5.2.240-258). Yet the gravedigger's work is displaced by the incoming royal procession, and as the funeral begins he apparently takes his leave. No textual marks signal a departure. He may or may not exit the scene. Yet one way or another he fades away, wholly forgotten and perhaps only seemingly unharmed, as though slowly vanishing from the stage.

The Play's the Thing

For Hamlet, the play begins and ends in the graveyard, as he holds and then casts aside the skull of Yorick (5.1.207). The entire final scene could then be regarded as *denouement*: an inessential yet necessary addition to the play tasked with mopping up all

the remaining outstanding issues of the plot—which, by the way, is almost exactly how Hamlet regards his duties in the scene (5.2.227-238). However, like all other necessary and apparently dismissible acts in the play, this one conceals something essential at its heart. Despite the play's appearance and despite its name, it does not belong to Hamlet alone. Others survive him. Laertes. Fortinbras. And the play's real attendant audience. Placing Hamlet's death onstage in the final scene enables all of us who are watching to fully take on the vital role of bearing witness to his death. Fortinbras explicitly emphasizes the importance of this gesture. "Let four captains / Bear Hamlet like a soldier to the stage" he orders (5.2.441-442). As with Claudius, this inaugural sovereign act defines Fortinbras' new kingship, and with it he promises to be a very different kind of ruler than was his predecessor. His mournful display ties off a story that must otherwise endlessly repeat. Yet the burden of the play then falls on us, who together may or may not accept our share in marking, remembering, and burying the dead Hamlet—which is also, it seems, to accept our share in *not* burying him. The play itself pleads us to mark his loss as we should mourn our own ever-unburied, ever-unknown loved ones, recognizing in his place what must have been an equally real loss—a real loss of a real father who, long ago, wrote his son's unburied death into his own fading, forgotten, and yet undying love.

Things That No One Can Say: The Unspeakable Act in Artaud's *Les Cenci*

Artaud and the Annihilation of Experience

In 1935, at the Folies-Wagram Theater in Paris, Antonin Artaud staged what would be his last theatrical production, *Les Cenci*. He adapted his script from Shelley's dramatic work *The Cenci* and drew further source material from real life events described by Stendhal in his historical chronicles.[6] The play shares the tragic downfall of the powerful and ruthless Cenci family. Surrounded by political corruption, decadence, and the excesses of renaissance Rome, Count Cenci is driven to ever-increasing extremes of violence. He dominates and terrorizes his family before finally murdering his two oldest sons and raping his daughter Beatrice. In desperation and vengeful anger, Beatrice and the remaining family members conspire to have Cenci killed. The assassination plot succeeds, but the family's conspiracy is uncovered by papal authorities. Captured and tortured, Beatrice alone refuses to admit any wrongdoing. As the play draws to a close, she is led away to be executed, with the Cenci lands and legacy surrendered to the state.

From both a critical and commercial standpoint the play proved to be a disappointment. Audiences found Artaud's staging to be bewildering but not particularly provocative or profound, and due to poor attendance *Les Cenci* was forced to close after only seventeen performances.[7] In part, the show's box office failure can be blamed on artistic shortcomings. *Les Cenci* was the only play in Artaud's career over which he had sole artistic control, and working alone, without collaborators capable of mediating his ideas and translating them into a palpably conventional form, he was obviously unable to

effectively connect to his audience.[8] Yet the show's fatal inability to engage audiences has a deeper cause as well. At the time of the production, Artaud had already developed his own radical vision of the stage—what he called the Theater of Cruelty—and had written many of what are now his most well-known and important essays articulating his theories. Published together under the title *The Theater and Its Double*, these seminal texts compare the Theater of Cruelty to the death-frenzied carnival of the plague; the lawless, incestuous drama depicted on the canvas of Lucas van Leyden's "Lot and his Daughters;" an alchemical process that fuses, resolves, and/or annihilates all conflicts and antagonisms into pure, naked formlessness; and the unspeakable spectacle of the Balinese theater. Through these metaphors, Artaud attempts to imagine the conditions of an ideal performance space in which the most radical limits of theater as well as life could be attained. The fact that audiences were repelled by his play indicates that, in some way, he succeeded in bringing his radically inassimilable vision to the stage.

Artaud, for his part, believed the show was a success. On the one hand, he was willing to admit that *Les Cenci* fell short of his radical ideals. Throughout the show's production, practical and financial limitations repeatedly forced him to compromise on the power and scope of his vision.[9] Yet Artaud did not believe he was compromising his vision's fundamental integrity. In an article about *Les Cenci* published just prior to its opening (reprinted in English with Simon Watson Taylor's translation of the play), Artaud comments:

> The difference between the Theater of Cruelty and *The Cenci* will be the difference which exists between the din of a waterfall or the unleashing by

> nature of a hurricane on the one hand and, on the other hand, whatever degree of their violence may remain in a recorded impression (viii).[10]

Artaud's comment refers to a specific incident typifying the kind of compromise he had been willing to make. Instead of four huge cathedral bells positioned one in each corner of the performance space, *Les Cenci* utilized a recording of a cathedral bell blasted over four huge loudspeakers. Artaud suggests that, though muted, some degree of the original, un-mediated violence that first created the bell's sound is indeed transmitted through the "recorded impression," and that the sensory effect he was trying to create of being permeated and overwhelmed by these sound vibrations is thus not substantively altered by the recording process. For Artaud, the difference between the recording and the original is a difference in the degree and mediation of the force, but not in the force's essential, violent quality. Viewing his entire play in these terms, Artaud could content himself with presenting what he believed to be merely a first reflected glimpse of the theatrical world he would one day fully reveal. In the same article he directly states that *Les Cenci* "is not yet the Theater of Cruelty but is preparing the way for it" (vii). From Artaud's professed point of view, *Les Cenci* was a practical experiment, a test case for the Theater of Cruelty. In fact, it was the most complete, concrete example ever produced of his theatrical vision, and as such it reveals a great deal about Artaud's methods, goals, and underlying message.

To grasp this message and what it puts at stake requires a reader to confront the violent trauma and madness the play expresses both through its script and in the performative force of its staging. In addition to more general readings of Artaud by Susan Sontag, Jacques Derrida, and Julia Kristeva (each of which attempts to recognize Artaud's

inassimilable core), two especially powerful attempts have been made to read Artaud specifically through *Les Cenci*. In *Artaud and the Gnostic Drama*, Jane Goodall argues that the play is organized by what she calls the "devouring principle" of Gnostic mythology (123-124). Taking her cue from a line of Artaud's dialogue ("Is there a law which commands fathers to devour their progeny, and sons to give themselves to be devoured?"), Goodall identifies an underlying logic by which Count Cenci is driven to physically and psychically consume his children and in turn be consumed by them (113). She explains the devouring principle and its significance in the play:

> Artaud's endeavour to understand primal repression is bound up with an enquiry into the great religious themes of becoming, creation, and chaos. The devouring principle, associated as it is with the plague as the *mal* (evil/sickness) installed in the very foundations of created being, is an expression of the Gnostic equation between materialization and evil determinism. … It is only when the 'mal' is conceived of as substantial and essential to incarnate being that it is possible to perceive the correlative roles of the father and creator-god in the dynamics of the drama. … The father-creator, whose 'mouvement naturel' is that of a kind of magnetic hatred towards his progeny, is the repository of the devouring principle. (124)

In opposition to a controlled and limited economy based on a cycle of consumption and production, *Les Cenci* imposes a model of radical consumption that conceives of any (pro)creative act as instantly and irreducibly equivalent to a violent act of destruction. According to this logic, all of existence consumes to create and creates to consume, caught

in the perpetual cycle of a cannibalistic—and ultimately self-cannibalistic—drive towards death (114). When threatened by this all-consuming force embodied in the form of her father, Beatrice reveals that the only possible response is to match it with an equally violent counter-force. As Goodall states, "The curative process must engage with a given condition that has never been other than contaminated, and can do so only through using contamination against itself" (124). Goodall continues later, "If there is a cure for the creatures who find themselves in the field of these nefarious forces it is to be found through the generation of counter-forces, not through a compliance which amounts to prostitution" (125). From this point of view, the play's ultimate message is that, in defending herself (or rather, her self) from the chaotic, devouring forces that underlie existence, Beatrice cannot seek solace in a complicit semblance of order, or regress into a prior state of blissful ignorance. Rather, her attempt to break free from devouring imprisonment achieves its aim only by pressing forward through the most radical limit of her own all-consuming death (132).

Kimberly Jannarone offers an opposing reading of the play in her book *Artaud and His Doubles*. Jannarone argues that *Les Cenci* is an "exercise of power," a staging mechanism for portraying and carrying out what amounts to Artaud's own violent designs of mass coercion and control (160). According to Jannarone, this mass coercion is first presupposed by the play's text, which excises "the poetic, human, and rational elements from the drama" in order to project its own violent presuppositions into their place (164). Even more importantly, however, Artaud's staging and theatrical effects are designed to carry out an identical excision on the play's audience. An unnerving barrage of lights, sounds, and

strange choreography aims to push audience members to their physical and emotional limits while simultaneously seeking to numb them mentally, preclude their critical faculties, and dissolve their ability to make meaningful distinctions (169).

As Jannarone reveals, Artaud's ideal, de-individuated audience, lost in what she refers to as "the inescapable impetus of the crowd," has deeply sinister implications (118). It simultaneously promises, demands, and requires absolute freedom from all constraint, and to that end it tolerates no limiting boundaries of any kind, whether the practical rules and laws of civil society, the abstract faculties of rational thought and reasonable discourse, or even the basic distinctions presupposed by phenomenological experience. Jannarone argues in her preface:

> Artaud's writings reflect an implacable belief that every material thing, every differentiated object and every force compelling them, is cruel, corrupt, sick, evil. … The force animating Artaud's oeuvre—what gives it its inexhaustible power—is the desire to expose the underlying foundation of *le mal* and, more still, to call for the material annihilation, liquidation, or erasure of all those debased concrete and discrete objects that constitute our world. (x)

As a vehicle of "annihilation," "liquidation," and "erasure," *Les Cenci* attempts to valorize and finally carry out a mass-effacement of the subjective world that is literally unspeakable in its scope, and which recreates the very subject precluding mechanisms of totalitarianism it seems to oppose.

The two readings offered by Goodall and Jannarone are sensitive to the same underlying issues, they utilize strikingly similar methods of close textual analysis, and to a

large extent they rely upon an identical vocabulary. And yet, in their final, substantive assessment of Artaud and his play, they wholly diverge. Goodall is highly sympathetic to Artaud's project. She positions his work in the context of Gnosticism in order to depart from previous critics who she believes have determined his life and theories as expressions of "madness," and have thereby inadvertently excluded the profoundly troubling nature of his insights (5-6).[11] Only by reading Artaud on his own terms, Goodall believes, can one apprehend the truly revelatory and revolutionary potential of his work—a potential which never ceases to resist all forms of coercive, alienating systems of control and domination, and which, from the ashes of those all-devouring forces, expectantly foresees the possibility of a true awakening of the self (15, 18). Jannarone, on the other hand, is highly critical of Artaud. She, too, explicitly aims to demystify his work by reading it to the letter of its text, but in doing so she reveals what she believes are its deeply troubling consequences (iiiv, 196). Instead of an awakening self, she finds an insidious mechanism of control in which all traces of the individual must be removed and finally eradicated.

Side by side, these two readings of *Les Cenci* are equally powerful and equally exclusive, for they both hinge on the same fundamental point: in Artaud's text, in his staging, and in his use of theatrical effects, *Les Cenci* attempts to carry out a radical annihilation of subjective experience. The unknowable end of this violent enactment gives rise to the urgent dilemma that Goodall and Jannarone together reveal. Does the death of experience staged by the play ultimately express a self struggling to bear impossible witness against the totalitarian mechanisms that would deny its existence? Or does the play provide the absolute, triumphant expression of those mad, totalitarian forces?

In itself, this dilemma is disturbingly un-decidable. However, as I will demonstrate, the play does not necessarily require a reader to choose between its two possibilities. Reading *Les Cenci* as an act of mad witnessing in which the play attempts to relay through its performative force the reality of an act that cannot be spoken or shared in any other way, I consider how the two latent possibilities the work reveals—on the one hand an awakening of the self, and on the other hand an expression of totalitarian violence—function simultaneously. Receiving the work in these terms, there is no question of deciding whether the play finally annihilates or sustains a subject. In its act of bearing witness, the play performs both of these functions at once, and both must be recognized if the play's potential, vital message is to be understood. Despite its terrifying impetus Artaud's Theater of Cruelty should not simply be rejected—its insight into the literally unspeakable depths of trauma and madness is vitally urgent for all of us—but neither should its explicit directives and violent aims be unreservedly accepted or implemented on any stage.

In reading *Les Cenci* as an act that simultaneously presents and repeats the force of a trauma, I am deeply indebted to the work of Françoise Davoine and Jean-Max Gaudillière. Their book *History Beyond Trauma* provides a broad framework through which to conceive theatrical enactment as a mode of traumatic witnessing, and refers to Artaud's project in particular as an attempt to stage events that have been unspeakably cut from subjective experience (170, 245).[12] I am also indebted to Artaud's own implicit guidance to any would-be readers of his work. Throughout *The Theater and Its Double*, Artaud frequently warns against language's inevitable failure to articulate traumatic events. To this end, he

demands that words be regarded as bare phonic elements emptied of meaningful content. Speech on the Theater of Cruelty's stage becomes reduced to inarticulate sounds, cries, and gibbering screams, no longer inviting a subject into being but seeking to preclude its very existence (*The Theater and Its Double*, 37-47, 54-57). From this standpoint, any passage of Artaud's play that is divorced from its violent, performative force and closely read for its meaningful content necessarily becomes abstracted from its most essential quality. And yet, in his published article on *Les Cenci* Artaud articulates a flipside to his seemingly pure rejection of language. "In *The Cenci* we will, in the first place, be listening to what the characters say; and they say more or less everything that they think; but we shall also find things that no one can say, however great may be his natural sincerity and the depths of his self awareness" (viii). In a potential paradox, Artaud asserts that the "things that no one can say" nevertheless shall be voiced by his characters. The paradox is reaffirmed a few sentences later when Artaud claims his characters "describe the things that are troubling them and which human speech is incapable of expressing" (viii).[13] On the one hand, Artaud seems to be suggesting that his play reveals emotions and experiences that we all attempt to proscribe and are unwilling to acknowledge, but which nevertheless occur. Yet on the other hand, the literal meaning of Artaud's words indicates something more radical. By saying "everything that they think"—that is, by saying literally everything that can possibly be said—Artaud's characters reveal the absolute limits of what their language is capable of expressing. And thus, with uncanny precision and eloquence, their speech simultaneously reveals exactly that limit beyond which their words cannot possibly indicate. To register the message of this unspeakable, radically inassimilable limit my reading remains sensitive

not only to what the text explicitly reveals and asserts, but what it leaves shrouded in silent darkness. It is this silent darkness in *Les Cenci* that I ultimately wish to address, and to which I pose this opening question: How, and to what ends, can we discern the "things that no one can say" which Artaud so forcefully asserts can be found buried in the language of his play?

The Unspeakable "Act"

The action of *Les Cenci* is charged by crimes of such horrifying scale and violence that they cannot be fully assimilated within speech and thought. Filicide, patricide, incest, torture—all of these acts occur along an impossible boundary. They broach a taboo limit that not only breaks the rules of the established social code, but potentially defies the structural order of the code itself, rendering it dysfunctional and obsolete, or effectively annihilating it altogether. This radical obliteration of all structural foundation is proclaimed by Cenci in the opening scene of the play:

> I feel—I know—that I am a force of nature. For me, life, death, god, incest, repentance, crime do not exist. I obey my own law. I can look into myself without becoming giddy, and so much the worse for anyone who trips and topples into the abyss which I have become. (1.1.24)[14]

Cenci's words should be understood literally, without reducing them to affectation or hyperbole. When he denies the existence of life, death, god, incest, repentance, and crime, he is not merely denying the validity of any moral compass which gives particular meaning to those words through a hypocritical collusion with ideology and power. Rather, he is

rejecting structured order as such, and refusing to presuppose any internal consistency or coherency that might give rise to a structured system in the first place. According to Cenci, beneath and prior to any façade of objective order (and in opposition to the artificial, imposed order supplied by the human world) "nature" in fact amounts to a raging cacophony, an empty "abyss" of lawless, limitless nothingness. Paradoxically, Cenci posits a law of this lawless nothingness ("I obey my own law"), but the necessary paradox of his gesture only underscores the radically foreclosed status of the impossible reality he is attempting to embody and transmit. The law he serves is the law by which all laws are finally abolished, and thus irrevocably precludes any reference being made to it or anything else. It indeed enacts the end of all things that exist, for existence itself is barred from emerging. Just as Cenci asserts, life, as both the subjective experience of being and beings, and the field of work and play for language and thought, is made impossible. Likewise death, as both the absolute limit of experience and the absolute loss of singular being, is dissolved. In their place, what emerges is simply an unmarked chasm of nothingness.

This nothingness in the place of experience is expressed throughout the play by characters who feel its force inflicted upon them through the extreme violence of unthinkable, forbidden acts. It appears in the wild, inarticulate panic of Cenci's houseguests after they witness him rejoice depravedly over the death of his sons (1.3.21-34). This same force drives Beatrice to paranoid terror when she realizes her father's unspeakable intentions to rape her, and it is expressed again through her insensible, inconsolable raving after the deed is committed (2.1.2-12, 3.1.1-17). This same radical emptiness provides the source of reasonless dread felt by the would-be assassins as they attempt to approach

Cenci's sleeping body (4.1.8-10). Its obliterating power is expressed again in Beatrice's flat indifference to worldly concerns after her father's murder and in the midst of her torture (4.2.5-15, 4.3.2-9). And its radical silence finds a voice in the wailing, repeated cries of Beatrice's younger brother when he is finally torn from her (4.2.30-34). In each of these instances speech and reason fail, as does any subject that speech and reason support.

These instances of annihilation cannot be rightly named. The words we use to describe them (such as the ones used above—filicide, patricide, incest, and torture) are necessarily sanitizing terms that posit a meaningful, definable value in the place of a radically inadmissible destructive force. Through the irreducible sleight-of-hand of catachresis, nothing is rendered into both speech and thought as something. The "abyss" of which Cenci tries to speak is by that transformation seemingly filled with content. A subject is projected onto its emptiness, and the semblance of an actual occurrence is projected onto its unspeakable event.

Artaud's script is acutely sensitive to this linguistic paradox. In its attempt to voice that which cannot be spoken, it seldom refers to any of the play's unspeakable deeds by name. Instead, the characters continually refer to undefined "acts" or "action" (relying, in French, on the noun "*l'acte*" and the verb "*agir*"). For example, Cenci, contemplating his incestuous drive alongside the limitless void of night, strikes himself on the chest and demands, "You, night, you who magnify everything, enter here with the vast shapes of all the crimes imaginable. You cannot expel me from myself. *The act I carry within me* is greater than you" (2.1.42, emphasis added). Beatrice, sensing her father's incestuous intentions and prefiguring her murderous retaliation, declares to her priest and would-be

lover, Orsino, "No sacrament can conquer the cruelty that has me in its grips. *Only action*" (1.2.13, emphasis added). Similarly, when the family conspires together against Cenci, Beatrice declares that what is needed is an "immense act," declaring further that "I would lend myself to any measure, however atrocious. *It is vital that we act* without delay" (3.1.29, 31, emphasis added). Orsino affirms and repeats this reference. "Act. But act discretely," he says, before finishing a line later, "Remain four in the secret of the act" (3.1.34, 36).

These repeated references to "acts" and "action" serve to obscure the very acts to which they refer. On the one hand, these words displace the concrete content of the deeds and so leave open the possibility of an unnamed and unnamable event having occurred. On the other hand, they refer to the unspeakable event with acutely precise terminology, not as a static, circumscribable object of speech and knowledge, but as a dynamic vector of force. The raw physical power of kinetic motion is here invoked—unstoppable, radically impersonal, and in itself wholly unthinkable. This radical conception of action is incompatible with action viewed as the practical expression of subjective agency or will. Action here occurs prior to all possible distinctions and precludes them. It names the force of the unspeakable, and posits the unspeakable as pure force.

Les Cenci attempts to unleash this violent, obliterating force upon its stage. In opposition to the world of action typically associated with theater and theatricality—the world of the subject, the world open to the possibility of pretense and façade, hypocrisy and double-speak—Cenci proposes to reveal a truly authentic, radical baseline of action:

> The great difference between the villainies committed in real life and the villainies acted out on the stage is that in real life we do more and say less,

> while in the theater we talk endlessly and accomplish very little. Well, I shall restore the balance, and I shall restore it at the expense of real life. … I shall torture the soul by abusing the body: and when it is done as thoroughly as a living man can do it, then let anyone try to accuse me of being a mere play actor. (1.1.29)

To "restore the balance"—to close the curtain on hypocritical "play acting" once and for all, both on the stage and in real life, and in its place to reveal the violent, annihilating force of pure action prior to any possible distinctions—that is Cenci's goal. It is a goal the character shares with Artaud himself. In a quote first given above, Beatrice refers to her father's terrorizing, obliterating force as "cruelty" (*cruauté*). "No sacrament can conquer the cruelty that has me in its grips," she says (1.2.13). Artaud invokes precisely this sense of the word when he uses the same term to name his culminating theatrical project the Theater of Cruelty, *Le Théâtre de la Cruauté*. As its name affirms, it was to be a theater in which to create and perfect ever more effective means of performing the radical annihilation of experience. This annihilation would be shown on the stage but also, even more vitally, it would be enacted in the real life positions of the actors and the audience.

Opposed to equivocating pretext, surface-level deceptions, and the unreliability and inherent treachery of words, the destructive force of cruelty emerges as a mode of revelation. In the quote above, even Cenci, the eternal demagogue, while celebrating pain and death solely for their own sakes simultaneously demands that this same pain and death be recognized in the service of truth. Upon his radically refigured stage, annihilating action strips away masks and appearances, tearing through to the underlying reality of

events. Rather than present merely a servile copy of realty's endlessly dissembling repetitions, the forbidden itself is impossibly given form. In the world of *Les Cenci*, nothing is concealed or forbidden; everything—even or especially the unspeakable—is made possible.

However, remarkably, although the underlying force of action in the play demands that everything be revealed (so that precisely nothing remains withheld, hidden, or repressed upon its thus boundless stage), the two monstrous deeds upon which the entire story hinges, the incest and the patricide—the two deeds that are specifically, repeatedly named as "acts"—are not directly portrayed. Cenci ominously voices his intentions to rape his daughter before the crime is committed, and Beatrice reports afterwards what was done, but the act itself occurs in silence between the end of Act 2 and the beginning of Act 3. Similarly, the plotters speak beforehand of their plans to have Cenci murdered, they are shown onstage waiting for the deed to be completed, and afterwards their hired assassins reenter spattered with Cenci's blood, but the act itself takes place invisibly offstage.

Artaud's version of the play adopts these excisions from Shelley, whose script follows classical conventions governing what is appropriate to display before an audience. However, whereas Shelley's script might very well be concerned with preserving some semblance of classical modesty, Artaud's version respects no such limit, and the two sets of similar excisions thus serve very different functions in the two plays. In Shelley's play, however revolutionary it might have been in other respects, good taste still dictated that its most violent content should not be presented. In Artaud's version, the omitted acts are not shown for the same reason that they cannot be named except as "acts." They contain no

substantive content in the first place. There is literally nothing there to show, so that no possible witness could now or ever be made present to them. Where these scenes of annihilation might and should have been shown, as a direct result of their radical force an absolute foreclosure has occurred in both the play's text and in its performance.

Just as these two unseen points of dissolution can enter into language only insofar as they are displaced by an indirect reference to "acts" and "action," they enter onto the stage only by way of two scenes that occur in their place. Each of the two excised acts finds a corresponding scene inserted by Artaud via alterations to Shelley's dialogue or the addition of original stage directions. The horror of incest and rape is occluded by a scene of tender emotion and serene calm, and the horror of parricide and murder is displaced by a scene of bare life persisting past the point of death. These two added sections perform identical functions. In each case, the replacement scene frames itself as a sublime expression of an overwhelming, vital force—something profound, fascinating, beautiful, terrible, and true. And yet within the scenes' negative ecstasy, in the endless stillness of living death, they both nonetheless precisely indicate and repeat the very horrifying acts they have replaced, just as they reveal the annihilation of the subject those foreclosed acts have ultimately carried out. In this way, though the world of the play provides no access to its two foci—the bottomless, empty eyes of its storm (eyes like twin black holes, invisible except as the total absence of visible form)—yet it displays their force, with all movement oriented by and through them, and recedes endlessly back into their void.

After Beatrice attempts to denounce her father in the midst of his public celebration at the death of his sons, Cenci orders away the other family members and houseguests,

declaring menacingly, "I wish to be alone with her" (1.3.34). What Artaud's stage directions then describe is not a literal rape (which comes only later). Nor is it, as one might expect, a scene of frenzied, savage fury between Cenci and Beatrice. Rather, it is a scene that exhibits what Artaud refers to as "*calme inoui*"—extraordinary, unprecedented calm, such that arises only at the eye of the storm itself. This terrible calm in fact figures the act's absolute, annihilating force:

> BEATRICE *and old* CENCI *remain face to face. They stare at each other steadily for a long moment.* CENCI *goes to the table and pours himself a fresh glass of wine. Several torches flicker out suddenly. The bells can be heard; their tone has become sepulchral. An extraordinary calm descends upon the scene. Something like the sound of a viola vibrates very lightly and very high up.* BEATRICE *sits down in a chair and waits.* CENCI *approaches her gently. His attitude is completely transformed; it radiates a sort of serene emotion.* BEATRICE *looks at him and it seems that her own misgivings too have suddenly vanished.*
>
> CENCI (*in a humble tone touched with deep emotion*): Beatrice.
>
> BEATRICE: Father. (*She speaks the words that follow in a deep voice filled with emotion.*) Withdraw from me, impious man. I shall never forget that you were my father, but withdraw. On this condition I might perhaps be able to forgive you.
>
> CENCI (*passes his hand across his forehead*): Your father is thirsty, Beatrice. Will you not give your father a drink?

> BEATRICE *goes to the table and brings him back a great goblet filled with wine.* CENCI *takes the goblet and makes a tentative gesture of passing his hand over Beatrice's hair.* BEATRICE*, whose head was bent slightly forward, suddenly jerks it back violently.*
>
> (*In a low voice, between clenched teeth*.) Ah! Viper, I know a charm to make you meek and tame.
>
> *Hearing these last words of Cenci's,* BEATRICE *feels herself filled with utter panic. As he finishes the sentence she darts away as though she has understood fully.* ANDREA, *who is following his master's movements, makes the gesture of barring the way to* BEATRICE.
>
> Let her go.
>
> *A pause.*
>
> Let her go; the charm is working. Now she cannot escape me.
>
> (1.3.36-38)

On the surface, the scene's "extraordinary calm" exhibits a confused intermingling of loving care and seductive, forbidden desires, and indicates that all distinction and conflict between these two dimensions of love has been abolished. However, the appearance of endless tenderness that then arises between Cenci and Beatrice in fact expresses a deadly boundary violation. As Cenci says to Beatrice in the following scene, "You have probed me too deeply for me to feel shame any longer for what I am thinking," indicating that the line of distinction between them has been broached, or even obliterated (2.1.14). Here, wavering at the event horizon of their broached limit, Beatrice and Cenci effectively

dissolve as subjects. They are annihilated together in the terrible force that radiates over the scene, that which Artaud refers to as a vast, serene "emotion" (a "*grande émotion sereine*"). This serene emotion has nothing to do with positive feelings of love, tranquility, or peacefulness. Rather, like the hollow, funerary tolling of the bell called for by Artaud's stage directions, the underlying atmosphere of peace acts as the only visible surface of death's endless void. "Emotion," as the term is used here, indicates the very absence of what we normally consider emotion to be. It names the unthinkable force of non-feeling, at once displacing and emptying all subjective expression of any kind. It not only implies the end of abstract, structured experience, but the end of the subject, the end of life. Like Cenci speaking of the abyss he has become, the guests in their mad panic, Beatrice in her terror, and Beatrice's brother in his raving lament, Cenci and Beatrice are here supplanted by nothingness. For a terrible moment, they present evacuated, empty shells driven by abstract, agent-less forces—people transfigured as abject marionettes in the place where a subject's thoughts and feelings might have been.

This absolute, radical annihilation of all subjectivity is reconfirmed in the scene Artaud adds in place of Cenci's murder. Following Shelley's version, in Artaud's play Beatrice sees the bloody evidence of the assassins' success, congratulates them, and pays them for their deed. However, Artaud then includes the following additional stage directions:

> *The* ASSASSINS *run off, jostling each other.* CENCI *can be seen high up, at the back of the stage, staggering, his fist closed over his right eye as though*

> *gripping some object. At the same time, terrifying fanfares erupt in ever increasing volume.* (4.1.10)

This terrible, ambiguous vision of Cenci marks the end of the scene. Perhaps the overhasty assassins struck clumsily and neglected to confirm their kill, or perhaps this spectral image is projected forward from mere moments ago when Cenci struggled prior to his imminent death. Either way, Cenci appears from beyond the grave, persisting ever onward even in and through the point of his death—the point that should have forever marked his final exit from the stage. As stated earlier, Artaud's stage admits of no limiting boundaries, and thus permits no final exit. Cenci's claim is proven true: death, as an absolute limit, has no force here ("…life, death..do not exist"). What then is revealed to persist endlessly in Cenci's place is not the man Cenci was or seemed to be, but rather a monstrous non-being, a thing that always was neither alive nor dead. It is driven forward, staggering and blind, by what might be imputed as torment or hunger in the place of a subject, but there is no subject here. The "act" alone compels this undead monster to stumble mindlessly across the stage, now as ever wholly void of agency or will.

The Dream of the Subject, the Subject of Dreams

Similarly to the acts themselves, the subjects such acts foreclose cannot be explicitly presented in *Les Cenci*. However, just as the acts are replaced by corresponding scenes, the occluded subjects are likewise replaced. At every point in the play where the subject of language and thought is annihilated, a lost, eternally sleeping subject of dreams and dreaming simultaneously emerges. On the one hand, the displacing dream-space offers the

promise of escape by seeming to present an alternative to the horrors and lies of waking life, but at the instant this happy escape is embraced it transforms instead into a terrible nightmare from which there is no awakening. Yet on the other hand, in sharing this endless nightmare, the dreamer's voice emerges like that of a ghost, transmitting an impossible message of death and thus also potentially leaving a trace of the subject's irremediable loss even in and through the force of its own displacing obliteration.

After Beatrice is raped by her father she appears before her stepmother Lucretia, weeping and raving. As in Shelley's script, when Beatrice finally attempts to articulate the terrible event, she trails off into silence—there are no words capable of expressing such a horror. However, Artaud rewrites the line upon which Beatrice falls silent. Whereas Shelley's Beatrice ends with the words "But never fancy imaged such a deed / As—," this sentiment is translated by Artaud's Beatrice as "But imagination never dreamed…" ("*Mais jamais la pensée n'a rêvé*…") (Shelley, 3.1.54-55, Artaud, 3.1.18). In Artaud's rewriting, the speech-ending "deed"—equivalent to the all-annihilating "act" in his own terminology—becomes transfigured instead as a "dream." This strange refiguring, at once an act of translation, mistranslation, and displacement, first of all forecloses the unspeakable void yet again. As in Shelley's version, Beatrice's speech grinds to a halt here on the edge of a precipice. However, this same terminal ending now also functions as an unexpected beginning. Beatrice's thought moves laterally, caught on the intruding word "dream," and the space of the void is suddenly filled by the recollection of a real dream from her childhood:

> This savage world has witnessed horrible things, monstrous couplings, strange confusions of good and evil. But imagination never dreamed…
>
> *A pause.*
>
> When I was small, there was a dream which I dreamed every night. I am naked in a large room and a wild animal, the kind that appears in dreams, is breathing heavily… I realize that my body is shining.—I want to escape, but first I must hide my blinding nakedness… At that moment a door opens… I am hungry and thirsty and, suddenly, I discover that I am not alone… No!... There is not only the animal breathing beside me, it seems that there are other creatures breathing; and soon I see a mass of vile things swarming at my feet… And this multitude, too, is famished… I set out stubbornly, determined to try to find the light once more; for I feel that only the light will allow me to eat and drink my fill… But the animal is still close behind me, chasing me through cellar after cellar. Then I feel it upon me and realize that my hunger is not merely willful. And, each time, just as my strength ebbs away I awake very suddenly… Lucretia, you have been so like a mother to me! Today, my dream seems strangely distant. (3.1.18)

The scene played out in this recurring childhood nightmare parallels the rape through which Beatrice has just survived, and it resonates with the same obliterating force. On the one hand, due to Beatrice's careful and controlled tone (a tone further buttressed by the repeated assertion of a centering "I" and the seemingly stable position of the actress-subject who inevitably delivers the lines), the speech seems to provide evidence of a

subject finally stepping in to articulate and claim the nightmare events of the play. And yet, on the other hand, this is exactly the kind of seductive, false appearance that Artaud warns his reader against, and which the underlying force of Beatrice's dream precludes. As Beatrice narrates, the dreamer is driven by hunger and thirst, but this drive is "not merely willful." It does not originate in the dreamer, nor can the dreamer take possession of it. Rather, prior to any question of assent, it invades and invests the dream and makes the dreamer its powerless extension. Likewise, potentially delimiting boundaries dissolve in the dream. Its all-consuming hunger simultaneously invests all positions, belonging as equally to the dreamer as to the wild beast and the vile, swarming mass. Yet it also changes position with each new sentence, and by turns the dreamer appears as both the chaser and the chased. Individual identities are erased as the breathing of the beast becomes the breathing of the anonymous, faceless and nameless swarming multitude, and the dreamer's famished hunger likewise becomes theirs.

Such a nightmare should be claimed by the waking subject after the fact and so dispelled, but this is not an option for Beatrice. The horrors of the dream indeed appear "strangely distant" to her, but not because they are displaced by the safe and stable reality of the living world. Rather, they are displaced by the real horrors that now engulf her—horrors from which, unlike those of her dream, there can be no awakening: "If only I could believe what I have dreamed, that my childhood dream has overtaken me, and that a door on which a knock will soon be heard will open and will tell me once again that it is time for me to wake from sleep" (3.1.20). The prose translation adequately captures the meaning of Beatrice's words, but in Artaud's script these lines are uniquely and unexpectedly written

in verse. Beatrice is not extending her narration, nor is she, as a fully formed, waking subject, reverting back into conversational dialogue. Rather, delivering a kind of chant or trance-like incantation, the speaking "I" of her voice is displaced by the fateful, revelatory voice of the poetic muse—a voice which rightly belongs to no one. Since antiquity, this unclaimed voice has found its parallel in the mad cries of the furies, and yet for this very reason it alone is capable of expressing truth and pronouncing doom. Displacing Beatrice herself, this spectral voice speaks from the place of radical emptiness and death she carries within her. It shares its lost hope for a "knock" that could welcome Beatrice as a subject out into the waking world, ending her nightmare and freeing her from its grip. Through the firm insistence of this awakening knock, the sinister door which opens onto unspoken nightmare terrors and allows them entry ("At that moment a door opens…") would be miraculously transfigured, and would become instead a door that the voice says "will open and will tell me once again that it is time for me to wake." In the first place, this transfiguration would act as a metaphor indicating the opening of lived experience, and thus provide an entryway into the metaphor-driven world of language and thought. But just as importantly, it would refer to a point of orientation posited in the living world—the actual, physical, real-life door of Beatrice's childhood bedroom through which her loved ones might have entered and gently roused her (loved ones such as Lucretia, "so like a mother," has apparently tried to be). The knock, here, would compose an entirely new kind of radical act. On the one hand, its performative force would lie utterly beyond words; it would be a physical, real world event with equally physical effects. On the other hand, its force would compose a properly linguistic, meaningful gesture as an intentional awakening.

The knock would be thus simultaneously linguistic and extra-linguistic. It would be that act uniquely capable of mediating the two incommensurate dimensions of experience and binding them together at and as the birth of a subject—the birth of Beatrice. And yet, as Beatrice's lost voice indicates, neither this metaphor, nor this real world door any longer appears believable even in the impossible land of dreams. Perhaps at one time they together might have been brought into being by a transfiguring act of awakening, but such an act now has been revealed to carry no force. There is no such door, there are no such loved ones, and there never was, nor could there ever have been, the transfiguring power of such a knock. In this moment, the dream is revealed as a mediating space where the waking subject contacts the limit of its own radical dissolution and the ever-slumbering survivor imagines the impossible conditions of its awakening reconciliation to speech and knowledge. And yet the necessary encounter between the subject and its lost double does not and cannot occur.

An identical sentiment repeats at the end of the play. Captured by the authorities and facing her impending execution, Beatrice offers her younger brother words that will, she says, "cure the evils of existence" (4.3.4). As soft, sinister music of ever-increasing volume begins to play, her voice is again displaced by poetic verse as she invokes the impossible hope and terrible reality of dreams:

> Just as a sleeper, lost and groping in a dark dream more fearful than death itself, hesitates before opening his eyes, knowing that to continue in this life means never to wake again—so do I renounce a soul bruised by the harsh

> business of living, and hurl that soul back in the face of the god who made me, as a blazing fire to cure him of creating. (4.3.4)

Beatrice's lost voice initially opposes a world of dark dreams to the world of waking life, but that opposition falters as her dream world proves itself to simultaneously supplant and replace the waking world at the moment the sleeper tests the distinction by attempting to depart. For Beatrice, to "wake" means to awaken into a dream from which there is no awakening. The endless nightmare that reality reveals itself to be allows no escape, either by seeking refuge in life or exiting into death.

Even so, the "sleeper, lost and groping" through the inescapable nightmare world is positioned in the place of the foreclosed subject, and Beatrice's self-displacing, chanting voice thus seems to promise some kind of access or witness to the foreclosure. However, what seems to be this voice's one great act of subjective resistance, its proclaimed hesitation prior to waking—that is, its defiant refusal to recognize a world predicated on horror and so lose itself in that world forever—in fact repeats in the dream the same radical violence that it attempts to avoid in reality. In the "blazing fire" of the sleeping voice's renouncement, it, Beatrice, and all of creation are consumed. And the dream, which seemed for a moment to provide a last enclave of resistance and hope for the lost subject, instead now frames yet another repetition of the nightmare "act" and its annihilating force. As Beatrice says of her father in the last, devastating line of the play, "I fear that death may teach me that I have ended by resembling him" (4.3.35).

The final message of *Les Cenci* is thus unequivocal: the obliterating force of the "act" reigns supreme, and any attempt to resist it merely repeats its same killing force. As has

been shown, Beatrice's spectral voice reports precisely what a counter-force would be, if such a thing were possible. It would be an act of literal and metaphorical awakening. In it, the nightmare door that opens onto ever-greater nightmares would become a door onto waking reality; the violence of the deed would become the movement of a dream; the act of annihilation and foreclosing displacement would become the knock of an unknown subject capable of giving rise to translation, transfiguration, and rebirth. And yet, as Beatrice repeatedly pronounces from the place of this same "lost and groping" sleeper, any such awakening force is impossible, having been wholly foreclosed. In the place of the world, and in the place of the subject, there is not nor has there ever been anything but a nightmare abyss.

However, what is thus precluded from being seen or said anywhere on the play's stage is that these denials of awakening in a different way perform the very act of recognition they deny.Beatrice adopts a voice that belongs to no one in order to proclaim the subject's annihilation, but by doing so that voice's lost place is asserted and its impossible emptiness is potentially transmitted to an audience. Artaud himself, in his translation of Shelley's text, refigures the act as a dream so that his text might disavow such a refiguring gesture, but he thus shows that such a move, however impossible it may be to name anywhere on his stage, can nevertheless be performed upon it. In both cases, the latent performative force of the text transmits an unspeakable knowledge of the annihilation of subjective experience, not simply in order to repeat that annihilation, nor to leave an impossible trace of what it irremediably omits, but rather to mark the very fact that something vital has nevertheless gone unmarked. Like the sleeper who hesitates

before opening his eyes to the endless nightmare, this attempt itself perhaps leaves some trace of a survivor still struggling against the killing force he simultaneously attempts to convey. Such a dream subject is certainly "lost and groping," slumbering always and ever in the place of the abyss, and yet he must not have yet entirely abandoned himself to the oblivion of the act, nor ceased waiting beyond hope to hear the call of a knock with the power to realize his double's awakening.

The counter-force of awakening remains unmarked in the play, but it runs throughout. A potentially refiguring invocation of dreams and dreaming appears in the context of every unspeakable act. In the opening scene, in the same speech where Cenci announces the meaninglessness of life, death, god, incest, repentance, and crime, and further declares his entire being to have been supplanted by an abyss, he first frames this embodiment as the work of a dream: "*In my dreams* I often find that I am destiny personified" (1.1.24, emphasis added). Similarly, during Cenci's rejoicing over the death of his sons, his horrified houseguests equate the madness they are witnessing to that which occurs in a dream:

> CAMILLO. Cenci, you are not in your right mind. *I still wish to believe that you are dreaming*. Let me tell them that you are unwell.
>
> A GUEST. Yes, yes. *I must be dreaming* that I have heard all this.
>
> (1.3.26-27, emphasis added)

Cenci's killers approach him when he is asleep, and as Beatrice notes, the murderous act thus occurs within the bounds of a dream: "You are scared of an old man mouthing a discourse with his conscience in his dreams" (4.1.10). And, as has already been discussed, a

dream arises in the context of Beatrice's rape, her torture, and her subsequent execution. Furthermore, Artaud's article on the play explicitly compares the entire production of the play to a staged dream: "*As though in a dream*, we witness these beings roaring, spinning around, flaunting their instincts or their vices, passing like great storms in which a sort of majestic fate vibrates" (ix, emphasis added). Reiterating this fundamental link, Artaud's writings in *The Theater and Its Double* rely on the imagery of dreams to conceptualize the Theater of Cruelty as a whole:

> …We believe that the images of thought can be identified with a dream which will be efficacious to the degree that it can be projected with the necessary violence. And the public will believe in the theater's dreams on condition that it take them for true dreams and not for a servile copy of reality; on condition that they allow the public to liberate within itself the magical liberties of dreams which it can only recognize when they are imprinted with terror and cruelty. (86)[15]

As these repeated references make clear, the Theater of Cruelty finds its double in a Theater of Dreams. In them, Artaud continuously asserts that the dream's "magical liberties" are projected with "violence," and imprinted with the "terror and cruelty" of the act. However, as I have shown, this explicitly named, obliterating act and its foreclosed, wholly impossible subject are always paralleled—and might always be transfigured anew—as the unnamed, unspoken, lost and yet potentially waking subject of the dream. In that sense, in the works of Artaud the dream indeed acts as a repetition of violence. But at the same time, the refiguring potential of the dream—even the nightmare dream—holds

open the door to a further possibility of awakening. With this in mind, one must recognize the extreme danger *Les Cenci* presents, insofar as it can be read as an exaltation of violence or extended as part of a general program to carry out its cruelly annihilating act. Yet at the same time, if we reject that enactment as simply or only a horrifying manifestation of the act and its abyss, we forego any chance of hearing whatever voice might have emerged within it—a voice, we must hasten to add, that now can *only* emerge from within such an enactment. This voice is always still waiting to make its slumbering message heard. At our own peril, we ignore it and the irredeemable loss of which it speaks.

Les Cenci, like Artaud's work as a whole, is overtly designed to kill and leave no survivors, drawing its audience within the madness of its act as both active participants and victims. Anyone who is touched by this madness has no defense against it. Denying the unspeakable act does not undo it, and rejecting such violence outright only repeats its crime by disavowing the possibility of any sleeping survivors (both among us and in ourselves) who are then irremediably abandoned to an endless nightmare. To avoid either of these reactions, the play demands a transfiguring recognition on the part of the audience, in which the Theater of Cruelty reveals itself simultaneously as a Theater of Dreams capable of registering its unspeakable act. Such a Theater, no longer driven by a theory of spectatorship predicated on de-individualizing violence but rather newly conceived through the dislocating and displacing position of a traumatic witness, would be the true inheritor of Artaud's legacy.

Silencing Violence: Repetition and Revolution in *Mother Courage and Her Children*

The Stage-Defining Act

Mother Courage and Her Children is frequently listed among Bertolt Brecht's most important plays, though in the English-speaking world it remains less well known than many of Brecht's other major works, and due to its staging challenges, difficult subject material, and large cast it is seldom performed (one notable exception is a 2006 production in New York's Central Park directed by George C. Wolf, with a script adapted by Tony Kushner, featuring Meryl Streep and Kevin Kline). The play was Brecht's first major production upon returning to Berlin after World War II, and there its enormous success catapulted Brecht almost instantly to celebrity status. Audiences were deeply moved by the play's depiction of war, which uniquely expressed the historical moment in which it was written. Brecht had authored the play years earlier while he and his family fled across Nazi-menaced Europe, on the edge of a global confrontation the likes of which the world had never before witnessed and could not yet fully imagine, but in its way foreseen in the scope and power of Brecht's script.

On the surface, the clearly given subject matter of the play is the life of the play's title character—Mother Courage and her singular trials, her private suffering, her ultimate failure to thrive eking through life as a petty profiteer during the Thirty Years' War—but as the play's title also suggests, Courage's life decisions are framed at all times by the larger context of their devastating effects on the lives of her three children. One by one, the children are initially shown not only persevering through the war but using it to achieve

modest success, with each child able to find a way within it to capitalize on his or her greatest human virtues. The eldest son's cleverness and bravery make him a formidable soldier, and enable him eventually to become the favorite of a general. The younger son's steadfast honesty allows him to become a regimental paymaster, which not only affords him a steady source of income but most importantly keeps him out of combat. And the daughter's loving care and kindness make her an attentive and customer-attracting server in her mother's canteen. However, these same virtues ultimately prove to be the agents of the children's tragic deaths. The eldest son mistakenly wages war during an armistice and is executed for murder. The younger son refuses to deliver his cash box when he is captured by the opposing army and is summarily killed. The daughter attempts to warn a town of an imminent attack and in the process is murdered by the attacking troops. All three of the children die while the attention of Mother Courage is engaged elsewhere by some ultimately trivial business transaction. In mirroring scenes, Courage not only proves herself unable to prevent her children's deaths, but demonstrates her deep complicity by profiting from the very acts of war that lead to them. This complicity is made especially obvious in the case of the younger son, who dies due to the fact that Courage attempts to haggle down his executioner's bribe even though she has enough money to pay the asking price for his life. Courage is less directly culpable for the downfall of her other two children, and yet she is conspicuously absent from the stage during their deaths and the key moments that lead up to them, precluded from interceding on her children's behalf and unable to provide any motherly comfort, once again drawn away by her endless need to take advantage of every trading opportunity. Together, these three instances suggest that

beyond their immediate causes the truly fatal responsibility for the deaths lies with Mother Courage, along with the zero-sum game of survival that wholly encompasses her and that ironically leaves her unable or unwilling to avail herself to her children when their lives are truly at stake. Their deaths express Courage's repeated, overarching failure as a parent to protect and preserve her offspring, and they function together in the play as an implicit commentary on Courage, her self-cannibalizing embrace of war and business, and the abject, wretched fate these things necessarily establish for all those who are forced to inhabit their stage.

In their implicit critique of Mother Courage and the world she simultaneously inhabits and helps constitute, the deaths of the daughter Kattrin and her brothers are all equally important to the play. However, Kattrin's death alone is also portrayed as an act of vital revolutionary resistance, and in this form it is positioned in the penultimate scene of the play as its climactic, defining event. Held by soldiers preparing a surprise nighttime assault on a nearby town, Kattrin fears for the innocent peasants and children who will be killed in the attack. In an attempt to save them, she climbs to the roof of an outlying farmhouse and beats loudly upon a drum to send an alarm. Tension builds in the scene as Kattrin defies the soldiers' increasingly panicked threats, desperately continuing her attempt to warn the townspeople of their danger even while the soldiers load a weapon and eventually fire it upon her. Kattrin is struck and slowly crumples in death, but her faltering drumbeats finally receive an answer in the town's echoing, defending cannons. The villagers have arisen; the attackers' attempts to silence Kattrin have proven futile; the town and its people are saved. A soldier explicitly admits Kattrin's victory (11.81).[16]

Whereas the brothers die as bewildered, dumb victims of the war, revealed in death to have been the pawns of arbitrary, anonymous forces beyond their knowledge and control, the play frames Kattrin's death as a heroic triumph—not an abject fall but a willed, purposeful end, claimed by Kattrin in her final, self-sacrificing act of resistance and used by her so that even her death comes to serve and safeguard life. This sacrifice is the one example in the play where any character with full knowledge of what she does and with full acceptance of her action's consequences seems to speak out against the forces of war and death and succeeds in defying them, and the play itself doubly underscores this apparent victory by positioning it as both its structural and emotional highpoint. As the agent of this apparent triumph, Kattrin rises above even Mother Courage in her overall importance to the play. She becomes juxtaposed against her mother and brothers alike, demonstrating herself to be uniquely capable of imagining a world beyond that of the perpetual, all-consuming war that frames their lives. On the one hand, she understands the reality of the dehumanizing violence into which she was born and which underlies all the play's previous interactions and relationships. Like Mother Courage, she knows only too well its trauma and its pain. And yet on the other hand, unlike Courage, out of this very insight Kattrin finally recognizes and, in her revolutionary act of resistance, attempts to realize a social world built on life-giving, selfless bonds of love. In that moment, saving a town of innocent children, Kattrin becomes the mother Courage could never be.

Previous scholarly work on the play has explored its explicit themes of war and business in the context of Brecht's Marxism, or has analyzed the play's structure and techniques of storytelling in relation to Brecht's theories of the stage. For example, Eric

Bentley in his translator's introduction to the play argues that its central problem is society's presupposed collusion with business and war, and reveals the revolutionary possibility of non-capitulation (18). John Fuegi in *The Essential Brecht* discusses the play's underlying confusion between man and beast as human beings become objectified instruments of war and trade (86-87). In "Mother Courage and Her Children," Robert Leach takes the play's overall critique of war and business more or less for granted, and uses the play to discuss Brecht's techniques of gesture and interruption (134-136). In *Brecht: Mother Courage and Her Children*, Peter Thomspon similarly finds the play's overarching theme to be war for profit, but like Leach he is ultimately more interested in Brecht's staging and directorial techniques (21-24). John Willet and Ralph Manheim, in their editors' introduction to the play, see the work as a warning message against war and a critique of our universal complicity in abetting it (xi-xvii). Despite these commentators' various points of emphasis and their differing final judgment of Brecht and his theories, all of them accept the play as a more or less direct and successful extension of both Brecht's avowed political views and his ideal concept of the stage.

In contrast to these standard readings, David Hare raises an issue in his introduction to the play that quite troublingly does not fit into any preconceived political or theatrical model. Hare recognizes the same themes as most other commentators—war, business, and revolution, revealed in the play's content as well as in its staging—but he is also acutely sensitive to a silencing force at the heart of the play that does not simply reduce to these other themes. It is silence itself rather than war, rather than profit, that Hare finally offers as the play's central, key issue when he suggests that an appropriate title would be "The

Silencing of Mother Courage" (ix). In a brief but fascinating reading, Hare especially notes that when Courage makes her final, bereft exit from the stage—penniless, loveless, childless, and now utterly alone—she at last falls speechless (x). Whereas she first entered merrily bellowing out in song, she is ushered off by haunting offstage voices that repeat and mock her refrain, but her voice now is lost.

Hare unfortunately does not expand in any great detail as to how Courage's lost voice and the silencing force of the play connect to its other main issues. For him, the relationships may be intuitively self-evident. Or it may be that he, too, is compelled to fall silent like that of which he attempts to speak. In the following pages, I will pick up at the point where he trails off. I will show that the play's portrayal of revolutionary force aligns with Brecht's Marxism insofar as it attempts to reveal the injustices of history and liberate what is most alienated within the human being. At the same time I will argue that this revolutionary power does not stem from the inherent inequity of class struggle. Rather, it arises in the performative power of speech, first and foremost seeking to liberate the human voice from those forces of trauma that render it silent. In this, Kattrin is uniquely situated by the play as a kind of mediator through which its two social worlds—the one defined by death figured through war and business, and the other defined by life and love figured through a revolutionary, self-sacrificing call to resist—are filtered and ultimately delivered to the audience. These two worlds broach one another in the play's climactic moment of Kattrin's self-sacrificing death. According to the play, such a revolutionary sacrifice must lie at the origin and end of all social bonds, as well as the origin and end of any subject those bonds constitute. And yet as I will show the play's apparent affirmation of

life also comes at a terrible cost, which it denies in its moment of revolution, and which it thus once again relegates to silence. In this moment, the mode of witnessing Brecht theorized as *Verfremdung* ("alienation" or "estrangement") becomes most vital.

I fully consider Kattrin's sacrifice and its various implications at the end of the essay. What Kattrin and the play actually succeed in accomplishing in their seemingly life-and-voice-assuring performance is an urgent matter, the lessons of which apply far beyond the bounds of the play. However, to contextualize the Kattrin's climactic act and what it puts at stake, I must first introduce her role throughout the play, paying special attention to the key theme of silence specifically established by and through this most essential character.

Kattrin's Silence

What makes Kattrin's climactic, life-saving message to the town especially remarkable is that she is literally mute, and throughout the preceding action she is repeatedly portrayed unable to share any meaningful communications at all. In fact, during each set of events that lead to the death of her brothers, Kattrin proves unable to deliver an urgent, vital message that would have saved their lives if it had been recognized by its intended recipients. The first such un-received message occurs in the opening scene when, unbeknownst to Mother Courage and against her wishes, her oldest son is about to be led away by an army recruiter who has convinced him to become a soldier. A few pointed words could warn Courage of what was happening and enable her to intercede, but Kattrin can manage only hoarse noises that her mother then ignores (1.108-109). By the time Courage turns from her business transaction and realizes her son is being led away she is

too late to prevent it. His fate has been sealed. In the following scenes, a second failure of communication similarly dooms Kattrin's younger brother. Kattrin realizes that an enemy informer has discovered her brother's identity as paymaster, but her subsequent attempt to warn him with frantic, frightened gestures is completely lost. He shrugs her off, commenting, "Wish I knew what you're trying to say. Sure you mean well, poor creature, just can't get the words out. … Too bad you can't speak" (3.97). He then exits the stage to where enemy soldiers await, obliviously incriminating himself and allowing himself to be captured and eventually killed. These twin failures position Kattrin's speechlessness at the very crux of the play's early tragedies. Though the initial, overt cause and ultimate culpability for the brothers' deaths still remain tied to Mother Courage and her failure as a parent, nevertheless the two killings are born out due to all the characters' joint inability to hear any message in Kattrin's silence. "Too bad you can't speak" ("*Wenn du redenkönntest*")[17] ironically sums up the play's key, repeated theme, and its patronizing, dismissive tone unwittingly expresses the play's central problem. If the people around Kattrin had been able to understand her—if they had been open enough to hear the message(s) that she was desperately attempting to convey from her silence instead of preemptively consigning her to the status of a "poor creature" ("*armes Tier*"), that is, to the status of a loveable but pitiably dumb animal excluded from mutual discourse—then even the most devastating catastrophes of the play could have been subverted. As it is, the characters who surround Kattrin are unable to receive the latent meaning of her expressive gestures and sounds, and this fatal deafness is what finally condemns them. On the surface, the characters' collective failure to recognize Kattrin as a speaking subject seems to have

little in common with Courage's failure as a mother. Courage's ineptitude readily implicates her in an overarching collusion with the forces of war and death, whereas the characters' inability to grasp Kattrin's intended message(s) arises from the fact that they unthinkingly foreclose all potentially meaningful, communicative content in her muteness, and in its place hear only voiceless silence. Though extreme, this preemptive insensitivity at first indicates nothing more sinister than the characters' thick, rigid obtuseness and utter lack of imagination. However, this same obtuseness is the one perceivable symptom of a much deeper problem, a problem that, in itself, is insidiously invisible. Concealed beneath the characters' wholesale inability to recognize any significance in Kattrin's silence is their inability or unwillingness first to confront the traumatic non-meaning that her silence itself expresses. Kattrin's voicelessness makes concretely manifest an underlying history of literally unspeakable, traumatic violence, and it is this silencing message of war and death prior to all others that the characters around Kattrin together refuse to hear.

Silence as the Enactment of Cut-Out Experience

The traumatic origin of Kattrin's muteness is not explicitly presented in the play as a central issue. The only direct reference to it comes in a single line delivered by Mother Courage in a moment of anger and frustration as she lashes out against the war, "She [Kattrin]'s only dumb from war, soldier stuffed something in her mouth when she was little" (6.68) ("*Stummistsieauchnurwegendem Krieg, ein Soldat hat ihralsklein was in den Mundgeschoppt*"). Though Courage's plaint is seemingly tangential, and is concealed among many others in a long harangue as if it were not especially important, the comment is one

of the most revealing lines in the play. It simultaneously shares the traumatic origins of Kattrin's silence and shows Courage's response to that trauma. In a moment I will address the implications of Courage's audaciously matter-of-fact tone. First, however, I wish to focus on the explicit content of her statement, in order to determine what, despite her extreme succinctness, she nevertheless reveals.

In its brevity, Courage's statement indicates precisely all that is and can be known of the terrible physical and psychic rape at the heart of her daughter's speechlessness. Courage—and we—can only imagine the various possible scenarios that nevertheless all lead to the assault's single outcome, and give form to the ambiguous "something" that was so violently shoved down Kattrin's throat—whether a bloody, vomit-soaked rag, a splintered pike staff, a primitive rifle, a knife blade, a penis. Yet any horrors we might possibly conceive are only shadows of the real violence inflicted upon Kattrin. This violence has sealed itself beyond our attempts to know it in any meaningful way. Kattrin was the one potential witness to the crime, the one person who might have asserted her presence to the atrocity and submitted a record of what occurred into discourse, thereby providing access to the event—but she has been left literally speechless by its overwhelming, silencing force. In Kattrin's case, this silencing is objectively physiological. Her vocal cords were damaged to the point of becoming useless as tools for articulated communication. However, Kattrin's physical silencing makes manifest the essential, underlying character of all traumatic violence. In the face of trauma, speech becomes irrelevant and obsolete, wholly unable to convey the shocking force of an event that, however unspeakable and unthinkable it thus proves to be, nevertheless occurred.

In their book *History Beyond Trauma*, psychoanalysts Françoise Davoine and Jean-Max Gaudillière express the unspeakable force of trauma with the term *cut-out*. They describe the "cut-out impressions" of their patients which, opposed to the substantive content of memories and emotions, supply a kind of non-memory or non-emotion—an emptiness in the place where feelings and thoughts should be, but instead were annihilated, wiped clean by an act of such terrible violence that all substantive experience was precluded (61-62). Similarly, Davoine and Gaudillière refer to the "cut-out unconscious" of trauma survivors—not the unconscious of repression that registers and retains all the material of the mind, whether that material is wanted or unwanted, but rather that aspect of the unconscious that breaks free and takes the place of an event that was unable to be registered by the mind at all (47). In both instances, Davoine and Gaudillière use the term *cut-out* to attempt to convey the unthinkable, unspeakable status of an event that has been radically excised from the fabric of experience—an event that, in itself, subsumes and replaces the lived experience of any subject caught within its void by a boundless, all-annihilating field of death. Just as a hollowed-out crater in the earth tells of an annihilating bomb blast, or a strangely deserted village tells of a massacre there carried out, the void of trauma mutely testifies to the horrifying violence that created it. And yet this void cannot share any concrete, present-at-hand memory of the terrible atrocities that must have occurred. The survivor's silent testimony bears witness only to the aftermath—that is, to the conspicuous emptiness that has consumed all meaningful content, an emptiness that requires inferences to be made precisely because it indicates the loss of nothing in particular, and thus succeeds only in invisibly covering over the radically

unmarked and irremediable loss of those sensations, emotions, thoughts, and lives that were wiped clear, and which are now and forever precluded from all memory.

Kattrin's voicelessness embodies the silent void of her trauma, and in that form alone its force is presented to the world. Yet the characters around Kattrin are either unwilling or unable to register the traumatic implications of her silence. At no point do they provide any healing recognition of Kattrin's lost voice, even (and especially) when their lives depend upon it. Instead, their inert insensitivity condemns them to repeat the silencing force of the assault by preemptively disavowing its original and continuing violence.

Mother Courage is particularly guilty of perpetuating such preemptive silencing. Her tendency to forestall subjective pain by presenting it in the most cavalier of terms is noted shortly before she reveals the origins of Kattrin's muteness. Her then travelling companion, an ex-army chaplain, comments that she has a "dry way of talking" that "conceals more than just a warm heart" (6.52) ("*Sie mit ihrem nüchternen Reden nicht nur eine warmherzige Natur verbergen*"). The chaplain's comment is somewhat ambiguous in the play, as he has a complicated and conflicted relationship with Courage based on unrequited feelings. What is certain is that he believes Mother Courage adopts a brusquely impersonal, emotionally detached tone in order to protect what he imagines must be a deeply tender and vulnerable interior self. According to the chaplain's reading, Courage pretends not to be affected by the atrocities around her because in reality they affect her so deeply. He takes the very absence of subjective feeling in Courage's words as proof that such feelings must exist beneath them. This is a plausible interpretation, and its simple

symmetry and romantic sentimentality doubtlessly have a seductive hand in the chaplain's feelings for Courage. In the end, however, the chaplain's narrative proves to be a complete fantasy. Its underlying sentiment plays him for a fool when he is eventually rejected by Mother Courage and pushed from her side by another man. In imagining Courage's tender, fragile soul in need of his love and protection, the chaplain does little more than fill the void of her words with his own projected content, displacing the hollowed out, unfeeling nature of her speech and yet ultimately building on and over that very emptiness. Like everyone else in the play, he is unable to recognize such unvoiced emptiness in the place of a subject as the cut-out, unfelt void of trauma. He cannot entertain the possibility that Courage or anyone else might respond to violence by feeling nothing of it, by instead preempting the subjective dimension of life in which such things actually matter. And thus he is deaf to Courage's blunted affect and underlying numbness, even though under the thin guise of irreverent vulgarity she announces them plainly.

In the context of Courage's blunted affect, her statement, "She's only dumb from war, soldier stuffed something in her mouth when she was little," provides a model for how she and her various companions gloss over the traumatic aftermath that defines their world. On its surface, the comment appears to function as the very opposite of yet another silencing repetition. With her words, Courage explicitly uncovers the original crime and articulates it in language, apparently returning to speech that which had been cut from it. At the same time, the words function as a strong emotive expression, displaying Courage's frustrated anger and indicating that she must appreciate only too well how deeply significant this terrible event was and is for her daughter. For a moment, Courage seems to

speak as a witness providing testimony, as one who has felt her daughter's traumatic enactment and has thus become personally invested, then and now made present to the force of a crime that itself becomes present in the force of Courage's testifying words. However, this potentially profound gesture of emotive recognition is undermined by the abrupt, matter-of-fact tone of Courage's description. Like a police report, Courage's statement provides an objectively accurate, neutral account of what occurred. Courage indeed delivers this neutral account with feeling, as though such feeling were its essential quality. Yet Courage's display of emotion is belied by the inescapable fact that only her statement's formal, objective detachment enables it to enter into language a crime that is subjectively unspeakable.

Courage's excision of subjective feeling hinges particularly on her use of the word "something" ("soldier stuffed something in her mouth when she was little"). On the one hand, "something" serves to indicate the literally unthinkable, unspeakable nature of the crime by pointing to the factually uncertain details of the event. "Something"—the weapon and the circumstances of its use—remain unknown and lost to collective knowledge. As an impersonal statement of fact, the word is thus absolutely appropriate and even necessary. Few if any other signifiers so precisely name the objective existence of a thing and nevertheless allow the thing itself to remain unnamed and undefined. Yet, on the other hand, this unquestionably accurate and seemingly innocent appropriation of the event in objective terms entirely preempts its subjective dimension. The very fact that this was an unspeakable atrocity emerges in speech only by way of the most coldly impersonal language, as though nothing in it still remains unspeakably lost, or as though nothing had

been irremediably cut from spoken experience in the first place. Courage's description angrily apprehends that "something" which is radically ulterior to language, and delivers it up to discourse in an emotive, meaningful way. And yet by that very fact, this disassociated, abstracted "something" necessarily displaces the unknowable, meaningless horror of the real-world event it claims to describe. In itself, the still-unspeakable event is no more or less lost to knowledge than it was before and yet now that loss has been entirely glossed over or dismissed, and deprived of its lasting subjective force. In a different context, Courage's audacious, matter-of-fact tone might possibly serve as an appropriately backhanded acknowledgment of her words' subjective excision, in much the same way that dark jokes can function by tacitly revealing how they necessarily—and violently—cover over whatever trauma lies at their heart. Yet in the play, Courage's words presuppose an opposite understanding of reality. At the crux of their audaciousness is the fact that, seemingly, they cover nothing at all.

The devastating, deadly effect of Courage's response to her daughter's trauma is made clear in the larger context of the play. Courage reveals her daughter's childhood assault following a new attack on Kattrin that repeats the initial trauma, both in terms of the silencing force of the crime and in the crime's subsequent re-silencing by all those who come into contact with it. This new incarnation of Kattrin's assault occurs midway through the story, after Courage sends her out alone into the dangerous, lawless camp of soldiers and refugees on an errand to collect trade goods. Kattrin returns to the canteen with a horrible, disfiguring wound across her face. Clearly, as in her youth, she was brutally

attacked and possibly raped, but there are no witnesses able to attest that any crime occurred, let alone report its details.

This second attack on Kattrin shares an uncanny resemblance with the assault in her youth. Almost too obviously, Kattrin and her mother are caught together in a traumatic repetition of the earlier crime, replaying its inassimilable, lost violence but once again inevitably affirming that loss in its new incarnation. On the surface, the self-evident similarity between the two attacks implies that those same violent acts, in and of themselves, must be the object(s) of the repetition, and the isolated source(s) of the trauma. However, the crime that is then allowed to play out unnoticed is Mother Courage's foreclosing reaction to this trauma, which reifies its silencing force by preemptively sealing it off.

Following the assault, Kattrin initially attempts to share through her cries and gestures what has just happened to her, and even succeeds in confirming to Mother Courage that she was attacked (6.60). However, when Kattrin then begins to break down in overwhelming, unmediated emotion, Courage instantly demands that she mute her tears and inarticulate cries. In their place, Courage enters into a long running monologue that, though completely absorbed in the attack and its own display of rapt concern for Kattrin, leaves no space open for Kattrin to communicate any more of her actual experience:

> Calm down. Didn't clerk come back with you? That's because you're respectable, they don't bother. Wound ain't a deep one, won't leave no mark. There you are, all bandaged up. You'll get something, love, keep calm. Something I put aside for you, wait till you see.*She delves into a sack and*

> *brings out Yvette's red high-heeled boots.* Made you open your eyes, eh? Something you always wanted. They're yours. Put 'em on quick, before I change me mind. Won't leave no mark, and what if it does? Ones I'm really sorry for's the ones they fancy. Drag them around till they're worn out, they do. Those they don't care for they leaves alive. I seen girls before now had pretty faces, then in no time looking fit to frighten a hyaena. Can't even go behind a bush without risking trouble, horrible life they lead. Same like with trees, straight well-shaped ones get chopped down to make beams for houses and crooked ones live happily ever after. So it's a stroke of luck for you really. Them boots'll be all right, I greased them before putting them away. *Kattrin leaves the boots where they are and crawls into the cart.* (6.62)

Courage's entire speech is designed to displace the incident rather than confront it, while at the same time displacing Kattrin's silence with its own dissembling commentary. First, Courage lies to her daughter about the extent of her visible injury. Then she attempts to engage Kattrin with a deeply insensitive and utterly inappropriate gift of red, high-heeled boots previously worn by the camp prostitute. And finally she invents reasons why the attack was in fact a good thing, with only positive results. If Courage's goal is to draw attention away from the assault, she fails miserably. Her various attempts at misdirection are clumsily obvious, and they ultimately serve only to highlight the violence they seek to cover up. But if Courage's goal is to draw attention away from her own inability and unwillingness to avail herself to Kattrin and her silence, her method is insidiously perfect. The incident-dismissing content of her words becomes their entire focus, and subsumes

their unspoken, cascading, response-precluding force. In equal parts with the attack(s), Courage's reaction repeats the silencing violence of the trauma, and aligns with it in finally depriving Kattrin of her voice.

Kattrin's unresponsiveness during and after her mother's speech is the one indication of how thoroughly Courage succeeds in once again silencing her daughter. When Kattrin crawls into the cart alone, exiting the stage without sign or signal and leaving her mother's heartless gift untouched, the unmarked emptiness that displaces her and that remains behind is not simply that of her own continuing silence. The voiceless void of her mother's words also remains. In those words, the radical, silencing force of the assault persists on, reaffirmed and renewed, irremediably precluding any attempt to register and acknowledge those things that are unspeakably lost within it. This response of Courage to her daughter's trauma is neither innocent nor inadvertent. Courage's dissembling monologue amounts to a last-line defense against a direct and potentially catastrophic confrontation with the trauma, and it indeed diverts that force by so effectively participating in it. Yet it turns aside the assault's violence only by once again forcing it back onto Kattrin. Courage's twisted display of motherly care makes Kattrin's voicelessness function as a silent background, like the white-gray setting of a blank page, transforming it at last into something that is neither expressing nor withholding, neither revealing nor concealing, conveying no more and no less than value-neutral insignificance.

Silence as Uncontested Death

Courage's response to her daughter's trauma participates in a fatal, fateful mode of survival that precisely repeats the silencing crime it attempts to subvert, and in fact repeats the crime *by* attempting to subvert it. In a terrible paradox, Courage's survival desperately depends upon her ability to subsume herself and her voice, along with those of her family and all those other characters in the play who thereby persist at the margins of war. Whatever they have managed to preserve—all they have and all they are—is sustained only by not speaking out. Mother Courage articulates this general point of view with her **"**Song of the Grand Capitulation**,"** which argues that one has no choice but to comply with power rather than vainly rail against it. This song has the immediate effect of silencing a hot-headed young soldier who intends to lodge a complaint about his superiors (4.27-29). Courage makes an identical argument for silence through pointed references to Kattrin. With her typical flippant tone hiding the deadly seriousness of her words, she sums up a lifetime's worth of advice to her daughter by saying, "Lie doggo, girl, it can't be that hard, once you're born dumb" (1.95) ("*Halt dich immer recht still, das kann nicht schwer sein, wo du doch stumm bist*"). Later, speaking again to Kattrin, she suggests that her daughter's inability to speak alone protects her from devastating heartbreak. "Be thankful you're dumb, then you can't contradict yourself and won't be wanting to bite your tongue off for speaking the truth; it's a godsend, being dumb is" (3.25) ("*Sei froh, daß du stumm bist, da widersprichst du dir nie oder willst dir nie die Zunge abbeißen, weil du die Wahrheit gesagt hast, das ist ein Gottesgeschenk, Stummsein*"). Finally, later in the same scene Courage once more attests to the protective, preserving power of silence, saying of her daughter, "Let her

be like a stone in Dalecarlia, where there's nowt else, so folk say 'Can't see that cripple', that's how I'd lief have her. Then nowt'll happen to her" (3.94)[18] ("*Wenn sie ist wie ein Stein in Dalarne, wos nix andres gibt, so daß die Leut sagen: den Krüppel sieht man gar nicht, ist sie mir am liebsten. Solang passiert ihr nix*"). According to Courage, those who manage to persevere in the face of the world's inescapable killing silence are those who remain silently obscured themselves, and thus paradoxically cheat the killing potential of silence through its own force. By this logic, the degree to which Kattrin falls victim to her own absolute abjection is inversely related to her potential for surviving beyond its violence.

However, by so utterly committing herself and her family to the killing force of silence—by presupposing this killing force as the fundamental, inescapable condition of their very lives—Courage simultaneously disallows any existence beyond its purview. Consequently, she can neither witness nor counteract the killing power of silence as it seals them all, one by one, in unresolved, traumatic deaths. On a concrete, practical level, Courage misjudges the key events that lead to these deaths, and thus she does nothing to stop them. Even more importantly, when these deaths occur Courage does nothing to mediate their annihilating force by acknowledging it or expressing her own terrible loss. Just as she is unable to register the silent annihilation at the heart of Kattrin's trauma, she is similarly precluded from registering the deaths of her children. Where a mournful recognition should be, she instead condemns them to fade into unremarked silence as though they had never existed at all.

Courage's first and most blatant foreclosure of mourning occurs after her youngest son is executed. In an attempt to trick Courage and Kattrin into revealing their relationship

to the dead young man, an enemy sergeant parades the youth's corpse before them. To protect themselves, the two women must show only indifference for this supposedly anonymous body, swallowing their grief and simultaneously renouncing any claim to their beloved son and brother as he is dumped unceremoniously into a mass grave:

> *Sergeant*. Here's somebody we dunno the name of. It's got to be listed, though, so everything's shipshape. He had a meal here. Have a look, see if you know him. *He removes the sheet.* Know him? *Mother Courage shakes her head.* What, never see him before he had that meal here? *Mother Courage shakes her head.* Pick him up. Chuck him in the pit. He's got nobody knows him. *They carry him away.* (3.174)

In his book *Death of Tragedy*, George Steiner describes what then occurs on the stage in Brecht's original Berlin production. "As the body was carried off, Weigel [Courage] looked the other way and tore her mouth wide open. The shape of the gesture was that of the screaming horse in Picasso's *Guernica*. The sound that came out was raw and terrible beyond any description I could give of it. But, in fact, there was no sound. Nothing. The sound was total silence. It was silence which screamed and screamed through the whole theater so that the audience lowered its head as before a gust of wind" (354).

In order to survive, Courage publically disavows her son's death. She not only leaves him unmarked in this particular moment, with his name unlisted on the sergeant's registry, but she profoundly demonstrates that this failure to mark death carries no lasting weight, being ultimately precluded by the always more urgent needs of life. On the one hand, Courage cannot bring herself fully to renounce her son. She speaks no words, proving

herself neither willing nor able to articulate a negation of him, her feelings, and herself. On the other hand, it is this same heartbreaking attempt to preserve her son and herself from silent death that nevertheless inadvertently and perfectly conveys its obliterating force, through a wordless gesture of negation so pitifully weak and abject that it prevents itself from being officially registered as a negation of anything at all. It was the sergeant's cruel and sadistic design that put Courage in such a position originally. And yet, in the end, Courage stood willing to confirm the absolute betrayal of her son, owing her life not to a memory of his irremediable absence, but to an assertion that in what should have been his one reserved place there is now not even an absence, not even nothing, not the terrible silence charged with meaninglessness that Courage then enacts with her haunting, silent scream. The silence to which she commits herself—the only silence here allowed—is anonymous, neutral, and indifferent.

Courage is equally disassociated from the death of her older son. After being court-martialed for murder the son is led across the stage one final time, having been allowed in his last brief moments to see his mother again (8.122).Courage is not on the stage, however. She has left the camp to pursue a trade opportunity, and by the time she returns her son has been taken away. The responsibility then falls on Mother Courage's companions to share what they have witnessed, and although they convince themselves that they will tell her at some later date, in the end they offer her none of what they have seen and heard (8.145-158). On the surface, the characters' emotional weakness and cowardice are immediately to blame for their silence. They have no ability to face either the death or the crushing pain it is sure to unleash upon Courage. Nevertheless, their silence

also responds to an intense need on Courage's part. She exists only by maintaining a fiction of her family's life persevering beyond their world of death. This fantasy precludes the actual terms of their lives and deaths from being acknowledged, and to present them to her in the undeniable truth of her son's execution would introduce the fatal flaw in her world, and risk its catastrophic failure. Unwilling to unleash such a traumatic force, Courage's comrades instead become its silent agents, complying with Courage's unspoken, desperate design to conceal the annihilating power upon which their lives are built.

Later, without companions to shield her, Courage is fully confronted by the annihilating force of her daughter's death, but even then the terrible fiction of her world maintains her and binds her to it. Far beyond the boundaries of reason and rational thought, Courage's grief takes the form of a softly sung lullaby, as though Kattrin were only drifting off to sleep, or as though this were all simply a bad dream from which Kattrin and the other children were about to awaken. Courage affirms this mad intention of her gesture with the further comment, "Now she's asleep" ("*Jetzt schlaft sie*") much to the dismay of a witnessing peasant woman who senses an urgent need to contradict her (12.4-5).Whatever comprehension Courage has of her daughter's death remains wrapped in her self-consoling enactment that dulls the force of the death by translating it into something other than itself. The lullaby's content repeats this displacing gesture. It tells of a child who wants for nothing, thereby confusing the nothingness of Kattrin's death with an idyllic state of satisfied tranquility (12.2). Even more importantly, beyond the song's spoken content it expresses the deadened, unspeakable emptiness of a mother who survives through this

event intact only by shutting herself off even from her own numbness. As with her other two children, Courage cannot acknowledge any loss.

Here, at the end of the play, sealing herself off completely from her children as well as her own thoughts and feelings, Courage finally realizes her most perfect vision of survival. “Like a stone in Dalecarlia, where there’s nowt else,” Courage fades alone into the anonymously undifferentiated background, one among the voiceless, dispossessed many. She has proven herself willing to sacrifice everything in order to preserve her life, but by that very fact her life is now entirely subsumed by a displacing force of death. Objectively, Courage lives on, but only at the cost of her subjective existence, emotions, and experience. She cannot see the unspeakable reality that she now embodies, nor can she hear the hidden meaning in her own terrible metaphor of the stones. In her words, what might have been, but is not, a field of mournful, marked graves appears instead as a field of boulders and rubble wiped clear of epithets and names, marking nothing at all. Courage appears in this field of death only insofar as she accepts an unrecognized role as her own empty, unmarked tomb. Previously, she imagines herself and her children able to use the killing force of silence in their defense, wielding it as a tool or weapon and turning it back against itself. However, as Courage becomes one with the play’s underlying, unfelt world of living death, it becomes finally obvious that the killing force of silence functions independently of any possible subjective appropriation. The subject Courage supposes capable of using silence for its own ends is a figment of her defenses projected after the fact, falsely claiming, rationalizing, and justifying actions that occur without any subjective agency,

reason, or meaning whatsoever. Silence is not used by Courage and her companions. Rather, they are used by it for no ends other than itself, that is, for no ends at all.

A Deadly Revolution

Mother Courage unknowingly (but not innocently) participates in the silencing violence she attempts to excise, and thus she is ultimately consumed in silence along with her children. From within the cut-out void of Courage's world—tacitly accepting the terms of traumatic silence and presupposing its force—such an ending is inescapable. However, I will now argue that in defiance of its seemingly inevitable conclusion, the play presents what appears to be an alternate, counteracting power through Kattrin's climactic self-sacrifice. As a plot point, Kattrin's revolutionary act of resistance successfully defies the forces of war and death by saving a town of innocent peasants and children. At the same time, in its theatrical performance this climactic act recreates the same revolutionary force it depicts by attempting to release on its stage the living, transformative power of speech. The play thereby offers itself as a model site of resistance. It calls forth the revolutionary power of which it speaks by calling on its audience members to hear and recognize its cry, and finally claim that cry as their own. Nevertheless, the play's attempt to overthrow once and for all the killing force of silence by restoring Kattrin's cut-out voice troublingly presupposes a silencing excision of its own, and invisibly reinstitutes the central violence of the play. Like Mother Courage, the revolutionary climax of the play as a whole thus potentially colludes with the silencing force it attempts to subvert while simultaneously inviting its audience to participate tacitly in the same silencing operation. Whether or not

this silencing gesture then becomes the final, lasting effect of the play depends almost exclusively upon the staging decisions employed by the director and actors as well as the personal sensitivity of each individual audience member.

Kattrin's sacrifice constitutes an immediate, objectively practical victory against the enemy soldiers. Thanks to Kattrin, the townsfolk awake from helpless slumber and realize their ability to defend themselves from what otherwise would have been a mass slaughter. Yet the true victory of Kattrin's act lies on the subjective level, in its unprecedented liberation and validation of her individual voice. As has occurred continually throughout the play, from the void of her silence Kattrin offers a vital, potentially lifesaving message to the world. And initially, as in every time before, the characters around Kattrin match her cry with an even more powerful silencing force. In this case, however, Kattrin's final drumbeats receive an answer in the reports of the town's cannons, and this reply proves that the meaningful content of Kattrin's message has been impossibly heard, understood, and (most importantly) translated directly into a force of action and change in the living world. Kattrin's sacrifice thus seems to provide demonstrable, unequivocal proof that a triumph of the voice over silent death can be realized, and indeed, must already be prefigured as the underlying, ultimate possibility and truth of human experience. Out of death's obliteration, Kattrin's life nevertheless continues to resonate. Instead of mute meaninglessness, her sacrifice creates lasting, literally undeniable significance. Where a victimizing murder seemed to have taken place, her resolute acceptance of her action's consequences takes possession of her death and gives it purpose and reason. And where dumb, animal voicelessness seemed to reign, Kattrin's original and final message rises from

the place of death itself, so that even deadened silence can and must finally speak out in the service of ever-persistent life.

The play underscores the life-and-voice-affirming force of Kattrin's final act by announcing it in the subtitles of the scene with the powerful, portentous words, "The stone begins to speak" ("*DER STEIN BEGINNT ZU REDEN*").The use of a metaphor in this moment is especially significant given the fact that nowhere else in the play's many subtitles is figurative language utilized. It is deployed in this key moment in order to counteract directly the central, repeated problem of the play. Where events and people have been cut from articulated experience, and literal speech serves only obtusely and insidiously to reaffirm their excision (as is proven when Mother Courage speaks of the "something" that was shoved down her daughter's throat), the use of figural, poetic language potentially draws attention to language's failure and, in a way, indicates what has been cut from it.

However, the play's metaphor does not simply reveal that an unknowably irremediable loss may have occurred. As a revolutionary act it goes one step further, and attempts to use its power impossibly to call Kattrin from her unspeakable death. Functionally, the play's metaphor accomplishes this revolutionary task by referring to Mother Courage's earlier metaphorical reference to the stones of Dalecarlia. Once again, like and as a stone, Kattrin is presented as the embodiment of a deadly, silencing power. In Courage's original reference, however, that silencing power ultimately obscures the identity of Kattrin and later that of Courage in a field of unrecognized, unmarked graves. Now the same metaphor is repeated so that the direction of its force can be reversed. Just as Kattrin attempts to call out to the sleeping villagers, the new metaphor attempts to call

forth Kattrin precisely by *not* naming her, so that now she might emerge in her singularly unspeakable being from the empty field of effaced, displacing gravestones and displace *it*. In this way, the play attempts to supply precisely that cut-out material that was earlier shown to be foreclosed. "The stone speaks" asserts such a promise, declaring that despite her death Kattrin's voice once again and for all time is heard. What is more, the very act of making this promise seems to prove the assertion true, insofar as it effectively performs the revolutionary act it metaphorically describes by renaming and reclaiming the seemingly cut-out material in figurative terms. Again, as in Kattrin's warning cry, the agent of revolutionary liberation as well as the object being liberated are revealed to be identical: the human voice, with its performative, potentially transformative power, operating as a force of definition and change capable of accomplishing even the fantastically impossible.

The insight into revolution Brecht here displays may very well be perfect. Regardless of what various meanings different ideologies might ascribe to any given particular revolution, on the most basic subjective level they all must aspire to carry out **a** resistant cry that alone would be capable of calling forth the foreclosed subject and overthrowing the force of silent death that otherwise subjugates humanity. However, to accomplish this essential revolutionary task the play repeats a deception that equally belongs to all revolutions insofar as they, too, must claim wholly to break from their history of death and silence. In the play's revolutionary enactment, the townsfolk embody innocent heroes, their cannon blasts become heralding drums of victory, enemy soldiers function as empty, comic caricatures, and Kattrin rises over the stage on her rooftop transfigured into an everlasting angel of revolutionary power. And yes, silence magically transforms into

speech and death miraculously transforms into life. Yet this metaphorical displacement of death retains and repeats the very violence it claims to overthrow. There is no revolutionary triumph over death if the audience recognizes that the townspeople survive only by willingly participating in and perpetuating the war. Or if they hear Kattrin's drumbeats revealed as an echo of mindless machines of mass slaughter. Or if they pause to recall the lost names and faces of all those enemy soldiers who appear nowhere on the stage but who must nevertheless have been ordered to advance into the cannon blasts, as well as the field of corpses that must have been left behind and eventually plowed under. And above all, the play's revolutionary act absolutely disallows any lasting impression in either the world of the play or the world of the witnessing audience of the terrible, unspeakable loss of Kattrin. "The stone speaks" seems finally to refer to her, naming her in and as a memorial to her own and all our traumatic pain. And yet in this supposedly memorializing reference, Kattrin's name remains unspoken, here as ever eclipsed by silence, just as her actual death—her silent death—is eclipsed by the displacing metaphor of her speaking voice rather than her voice itself. As powerful as this metaphorical promise proves to be, it cannot return that which has been lost. Like Mother Courage, it can only cover over the loss again and again. And in this displacement, the play as a whole, like its individual characters, exhibits disturbing insensitivity to the underlying violence it transmits. If unchecked, this insensitivity is then passed on, in a most un-Brechtian mode of unexamined catharsis and revolutionary fervor, to what then becomes an equally unfeeling, equally self-numbed audience.

Verfremdung as Witnessing

On the one hand, the play provides all the necessary tools to recognize the silencing violence embedded in its staged revolutionary act. Both before and after the event, the play recognizes that the war persists, that the villagers have survived only by becoming complicit in its violence, that they live now only silently to die another day, and that the one truly heroic, loving act in the play—Kattrin's attempt to preserve the children of the village from war—futilely drew them into the war nevertheless. On the other hand, at the moment of Kattrin's death all the play's enormous rhetorical power is bent on rendering these troubling facts mute and meaningless, and compelling its audience similarly to validate and participate in the grand illusion of a revolution that would finally, for now and all time, silence even silence itself.

The ethical burden of the play then falls on those who perform it , as well as the audience who witnesses it, in order to transmit its traumatic silence in a way that does not simply and only repeat its crime. Neither Courage nor any other character is sensitive enough to feel the terrible non-significance of Kattrin's silence, and they thus prove unable to realize her trauma's unmarked loss and receive her precluded message of pain, horror, and death. However, where they perceivably fail the audience is then potentially made privy to the killing power of the performed scene, and by recognizing that power—*if* the audience recognizes that power—they reveal that they too are implicated by and in its annihilating force. In that case, whether they wish it or not they are shaken from their position as disassociated observers and instead join the scene as witnesses, implicitly

accepting a role in the enactment in the same instant that they accept a share of its trauma and stand with Kattrin in shouldering its burden.

Brecht fully recognizes this potential witnessing function latent in all theatrical enactment. It is not by chance that in his essay *The Street Scene* he figures actors and audience members as witnesses of a car crash, where all have the joint goal of replaying, relating, and receiving what is known of the terrible event (*Brecht on Theatre*, 121). Brecht was acutely aware that audiences can assume the vital role of witnesses only if they are simultaneously shaken from all pretenses of false complacency, and throughout his work, using the term *Verfremdung,* he continuously theorizes how best to unlock the alienating or estranging potential of theatrical performance and staging.

In either case, however—whether the actors and audience of the play avail themselves to the enactment and participate in it as active witnesses or negatively sustain its deadened repetition through no personal investment at all—these attending others will implicitly reproduce their version of Kattrin's silence and impose it upon those around them. Such a force is always only repeated and enacted, but it is never undone. If *Mother Courage and Her Children* thus provides a single lasting message, it is that even though we can always fail to witness the enactments of which we are unwittingly made part, we can never fail to repeat them. This recognition—a recognition that is lost in the revolutionary act—alone enables a social world to be based on life and love in the desolated aftermath of war and death.

The Name of Saavedra

The Traumatic Captivity of Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra

In 1575 Miguel de Cervantes ended five years of military service and prepared to return to Spain. As a soldier he had participated in several Mediterranean campaigns against the Turks. Especially distinguishing was his bravery in the bloody Battle of Lepanto, where he suffered three harquebus wounds, one of which deprived him of the use of his left hand. After his experiences in war, and approaching middle age, Cervantes was apparently ready to begin the next stage of his life. From Naples he procured passage in a homeward bound fleet, but after a few days at sea the galley carrying Cervantes was separated from its companion ships in a storm. This lone vessel was captured by pirates off the Spanish coast, and all its passengers were taken to Algiers to be ransomed or sold into slavery. For the next five years, Cervantes was held under a constant threat of death in the nightmarish world of the Algerian prison houses. He believed his situation was so desperate and hopeless that he participated in four escape attempts despite the extreme dangers facing runaway slaves and the unthinkable, often fatal tortures that awaited them if they were recaptured. Over the course of these failed escape attempts Cervantes was forced to witness the killing of several of his companions, but for reasons known only to his captors he was repeatedly spared the severest punishments. Eventually, aided by charity and luck, his family was able to secure enough money to pay for his release, and finally, in 1580, Cervantes was allowed to return to Spain.

Although the exact date remains unknown, almost certainly within the first year of his return to Madrid Cervantes began work on what would be his first major literary undertaking, the play *El trato de Argel* (*Life in Algiers*).[19] In vivid detail, the play portrays the atrocities and travesties of life that Cervantes had witnessed firsthand during the years of his captivity. The play is painfully raw, both in form and content. Like the first writing of many great authors, its text is less polished than Cervantes' later work, and it possesses none of the layered self-commentary, subtlety, and ironic humor for which Cervantes, as a fully mature artist, subsequently became so popular. Yet this first play is no less powerful and influential than the works that followed it, precisely because of its raw force. On the one hand, it tapped into a source of pain and dread that had not yet been given an adequate voice on the stages of early modern Spain, and (as María Antonia Garcés argues compellingly in her fascinating book *Cervantes in Algiers* [129]) invented the captivity play as a popular, new dramatic genre. On the other hand, on a more personal level, we can speculate that the very act of writing the play proved vitally important to Cervantes himself, not only because it facilitated his growth as an artist, but, even more importantly, because it provided a vehicle through which he could simultaneously share his traumatic story and reemerge productively into society after his years of war and imprisonment.[20] The most telling sign that the play served this vital role for Cervantes is that he eventually adopted the surname of one the play's most important characters, Saavedra, the character who, based on several eye-witness accounts, most closely aligns with the role Cervantes seems to have played amongst the real-life captives of Algiers.[21]

Garcés provides an extensive reading of *El trato de Argel* in her book. Basing her analysis partly on detailed historical research and partly on her insightful interpretation of the text, Garcés presents the play as an attempt to witness the repeated traumas of Cervantes' captivity. Garcés is especially sensitive to the two-sided ambiguousness of the play's traumatic testimony (152, 156-161). On the one hand, unspeakably horrific events are portrayed. On the other hand, as I will later discuss in greater detail, these portrayals reaffirm the irreconcilable, unspeakable loss of the events they attempt to articulate and reveal. In accordance with this double gesture, Garcés at times reads the play both as a symptom—an escapist, defensive fantasy (160)—but also as an expression of deep insight that simultaneously transmits a trauma and finds in that trauma a source of artistic creation (161-165). As a further extension of her analysis, Garcés is particularly interested in Cervantes' use of doubles as the organizing principle of his play—almost every major theme and character is juxtaposed against mirroring others that share a deep or uncanny bond beyond that of a simple opposition (154-155, 174). Most importantly, Garcés is interested in those characters who potentially double Cervantes himself, and she explores deeply Cervantes' adoption of the name Saavedra. Citing the work of Robert Jay Lifton and Sándor Ferenczi, Garcés argues that trauma arises as a site of psychic shattering and disintegration (196). She suggests that by taking on the name of the character charged with his traumatic annihilation, Cervantes ultimately seeks to reconcile his post-traumatic identity with his lost, split and shattered self (197).

With Garcés' extensive historical research, theoretical sophistication, and personal sensitivity, she provides the foundational reading for any subsequent interpretation of *El*

trato de Argel. Guided by Garcés' insights, I believe there is good reason to explore in even greater depth how the play expresses and witnesses the shattering of Cervantes' experience. Like Garcés, I believe Saavedra is the key to *El trato de Argel*. As a stand-in for Cervantes himself, Saavedra is the character through whom Cervantes' story is ultimately told—the character whose presence permits the telling of any story at all, in whom Cervantes potentially gains access to the events through which he survived, and through whom he reveals his place in those events (both to himself and to his audience). Yet, as the play's cascade of doubles suggests, there is also a disturbing flipside to these gestures. If Garcés' reading is correct—and I am convinced it is—the character of Saavedra is precisely not a fictionalized, autobiographical version of Cervantes. Rather, Saavedra is the character who removes Cervantes from the play utterly, effectively displacing Cervantes and preventing him from taking any part in his own story by standing in what should have been his place, first on the stage and then apparently in real life. As Garcés suggests, this displacing character might be retroactively claimed by Cervantes as his own identity, but such a move does not necessarily express a healthy, mediating recognition of Cervantes' lost experience of trauma. Just as likely—just as necessarily—it replicates Cervantes' traumatic excision and reaffirms his self-alienation by replacing his traumatized self with a fabricated mannequin identity.

With this concern in mind, my reading explores Saavedra's role in the play in order to show how Cervantes' namesake character figures his crisis of identity and reveals the hinge upon which this crisis depends, as either a necessary and healthy recognition of his trauma or a reactive repetition of its force. Either way, embedded in Cervantes' response

lies a catastrophic failure of his proper name to establish his singular place, and I suggest how Cervantes' reaction to this failure lays the foundation for his recovery, as well as his subsequent psychic and social life. As I demonstrate, the crisis of the name is not particular to Cervantes. Every one of us at some level sooner or later must face its catastrophic failure, and Cervantes' act of reasserting the name's function and place potentially reveals the essential, defining act of our private and collective worlds.

Uncertain Resolution

To understand the unique role Saavedra must have played in the life of Cervantes, it is first necessary to situate the character more generally through his role and overall function in the play. Structurally, Saavedra is not positioned as the play's most important character. In fact, Saavedra is not even present in the main plot. The play's primary antagonist is Aurelio, a young captive knight who, separated from his beloved and believing her to be dead, nevertheless struggles to remain faithful in love until he is finally reunited with her and wins their freedom. Aurelio delivers both the play's opening soliloquy and its final apologetic lines; literally from beginning to end, he is positioned as the character who frames the story, contextualizes it, and serves as its marked spokesperson. The various stories of Saavedra and the other slaves initially appear only in the margins of Aurelio's love story, from where they serve to punctuate and contextualize the main plotline but also appear ancillary to it. However, from their pre-given subsidiary position the stories of Saavedra and his fellow slaves slowly but relentlessly encroach upon the main action,

culminating in a final scene when the slaves of the play together appear onstage and join Aurelio in sharing the play's climactic triumph.

Despite the play's darker themes, Aurelio's love story delivers a finally optimistic message and strives to resolve all previous conflicts with a satisfying, classically happy ending. Aurelio and his young wife manage to stave off despair and temptation, persevering in their trials against the amorous physical and spiritual advances of their captors. Eventually, when their situation appears most grim, the twisted machinations of Algerian lust, greed, and tyranny finally turn on themselves, and (due to an incredible turn of events that will be discussed in detail below) the couple is miraculously set free. In a single instant, Aurelio's lost love is regained, the couple's virtue is duly rewarded, and cosmic justice is served.

On a structural level, the story's reassuring ending is itself assured by narrative conventions. Particularly in the case of a romantic love story, a happy resolution requires that harmonious order be disturbed only insofar as it is then restored. The underlying presupposition of order in the content of Aurelio's plot is underscored by the obviously orchestrated, artificially symmetrical composition of its structure. Before the play even begins, the lovers have each independently survived a terrible naval battle and have been taken captive; then, by unlikely chance, each is unknowingly purchased by the same slave lord; following this, in a wholly unrealistic turn of events, they each become the beloved favorite(s) of the master and mistress of the household, who not only remain oblivious to one another's adulterous designs but also inexplicably conscript the lovers into secret service each against the other; finally, when the couple reunites, a chance event leads them

to be claimed by the ruthless king, who, acting both out of spiteful hate for Aurelio's former owner and in order to satisfy his own incredible greed, recognizes Aurelio's oath-bound nature, trusts that he will repay his debt, and so makes the calculated—though bewilderingly dubious—decision to let the couple go. Presented with this incredible plot, an audience member or reader has no possibility of willingly suspending disbelief. On the contrary, the fantastically unbelievable nature of the composition is precisely its point. The plot's symmetrical design illustrates not the physical reality of the natural or social world, but rather the structural reality of the couple's love. It shows their equal stake in their mutual affection, and contrasts this transcendent relationship with their captor's mirroring but self-degrading, self-condemning attempts to find real human contact. Similarly, the plot's impossibly unlikely storyline does not try and fail to indicate actual, realistic events, but rather illustrates the fact that truly impossible forces indeed conspire against love, thus also showing the equally impossible—or fantastic and miraculous—status of love's final deliverance and triumph. And most importantly, this highly structured plot highlights the very fact of narrative order in itself, positing the structured establishment of meaningful relationships and asserting, first and foremost, that structured order does indeed frame existence.

As mentioned above, at intervals throughout the play the carefully orchestrated main plot is interrupted by episodic scenes that depict the horrors of slave life in Algiers, but even these interruptions are designed to serve and reaffirm the play's overarching assertion of order and its tone of hope. Through them, the main story receives additional dramatic and emotional tension which its final, grand gesture then appears to resolve,

further enhancing its triumph and its dramatic effect. One episode shows captured family members being separated from each other and sold individually into slavery. In a following scene the family's two estranged sons meet again, but the younger brother has subsequently adopted the ways of his captors and treats his former brother with scorn and contempt. Another scene introduces a slave who has survived his captivity by accepting an Algerian patroness who, in exchange for his promises of affection and sexual favors, provides him with protection and an allowance of money, food, and clothing. In another scene, a slave who is cruelly tormented and unable to pay his ransom plans a desperate overland escape. Later, he or some other like him is shown being hunted down as an animal. In a following scene, yet another captive prepares to flee by sea, but carrying out his plan requires him to renege publically and betray his fellow prisoners. In every instance, a seemingly insurmountable threat of despair and death is offset by a more-or-less explicit promise of redemption. Frequently, when the slaves' situation is at its darkest and all salvation appears in doubt, one of the characters offers an outright, reassuring reminder that, despite all they have experienced, divine redemption is preordained. For example, in one scene a slave despairs to his companions that he will never be set free, but lest this despair utterly take him a fellow quickly answers to the entire company, "God holds the way of remedying us, / brothers: take heart, / for He who made us / will not have us be forgotten. / Let us pray that, like a Father, / He turns us to our betterment, / […] / for, through such sacred means, / our wellbeing is assured" (4.537-546). ("Dios nos ha de remediar, / hermanos: mostrad buen pecho, / que el Señor que nos ha hecho, / no nos tiene de olvidar. / Roguémosle, como a Padre, / nos vuelva a nuestra mejora, / […] / porque, con

tan sancto medio, / nuestro bien está seguro.") Similarly, in the scene of the slave auction, a mother anguishes over the loss of her children, but her husband simultaneously comforts and admonishes her by saying, "Calm your heart, dear lady; / for if my God has ordained / us to be placed in this state, / He knows why it has been done" (2.169-172)! ("¡Sosegad, señora, el pecho; / que si mi Dios ha ordenado / ponernos en este estado, / Él sabe por qué lo ha hecho!") Another slave, lost and dying alone in the desert, asserts through his prayers that even or especially on the edge of death he is in the hands of God: "…Send respite, / deliver me from despair, / for it is your great task / to extend your hand to the wretched downcast! / Amongst these brambles I intend / to hide myself, because in the day / I hope to die here. / Most Holy Mary, / in this bitter stupor, / body and soul are left in your charge" (4.33-42). ("…Enviadme rescate, / sacadme deste duelo, / pues es hazaña vuestra / al mísero caído dar la diestra! / Entre estas matas quiero / asconderme, porque es entrado el día; / aquí morir espero. / Santísima María, / en este trance amargo, / el cuerpo y alma dejo a vuestro cargo.) In these and various other contexts, characters repeatedly rely on the same tautologically flawless conception of divine creation/salvation: since God is the maker and keeper of all things, everything that occurs must accord to His design and will ultimately be reconciled within it. Most or all of the slaves struggle with the certainty of this promise of salvation. As in the main plot, characters fight with temptation in the face of despair and suffering, weighing the cost of compromising themselves and their core ideals to alleviate their pain, and seeking strength even in their moments of greatest torture through the ultimate saving power of friendship, faith, loyalty, and love. Some captives are able to maintain their integrity, and some betray themselves and their fellows

to various states of physical and spiritual ruin. Yet in the end a possibility of salvation is maintained for all. In the final scene, a captive suddenly appears onstage bringing Aurelio the happy news that a ship from Spain has unexpectedly arrived at the docks laden with treasure donated to save as many as possible of those hapless prisoners unable to pay their own ransom (4.513-521). The many slaves shown throughout the play then once again take the stage, and close the performance with prayers of mercy, praise, and thanksgiving for the ultimate saving grace of God.

In form and content, *El trato de Argel* makes good on its promise of happy resolution, and seems to finally affirm what many of its characters have asserted all along: redemption is a foregone conclusion. Still, whether statements like the ones above are viewed as individual comments or the repeated message of the play as a whole, the play's many self-assurances are reason enough to give a reader pause. Such bold strokes are excessive and redundant if, as the play's substance and structure duly attest, the restoration of divine order is not actually in question. Similarly, there is no need for a rigidly contrived plot to maintain a show of order if such order is never in doubt.

The play has good reason to express anxiety over its redemptive promise. Though its disturbing portrayals of slave life are positioned to serve its vision of final redemption, the episodes do not remain quietly bounded within their structurally pre-given, ancillary position. They take up nearly half the action (and potentially much more, depending on how the text may be edited in performance). And their uncontrolled, unpredictable sequences are forceful enough to confound and confuse the orchestrated formalism of the initial story rather than compliment it. For example, the first intruding episode includes a

narrative monologue that brings the action to a complete standstill (1.489-686). This single, unbroken speech is, astonishingly, nearly two-hundred lines—almost half as long as the entire play preceding it. Especially at its early point in the play, with the story's main themes and characters still un-established, such a mind-numbingly long speech has a catastrophic effect. Narrative continuity is completely disrupted, leaving an audience or reader without any certain markers as to who the important characters are and what their key conflicts might be. Later episodes unsettle the main narrative in a very similar way using opposite means. The visceral power of a family being impassively inspected and separated at a slave auction instantly surpasses the emotional force of the surrounding love plot. The non-comprehending dread of the children, the parents' empty show of strength, their breakdown and cries, their last, desperately urgent and cut-off words, their disallowed embrace (2.245-261)—after being forced to witness such a scene, any further storyline (or for that matter any storyline at all) becomes irrelevant. Generalizing about the function of the episodes in the play, one can say that, as in the main plot, the structure of the episodes is as important as their content in relaying an overall message, but in their case no clear order can be discerned. Their disconnected and seemingly random distribution, their lack of resolution, their general absence of consistent characters, their rejection of clear organizing principles and disregard for any larger narrative purpose, all express the underlying realities of existence when abject terror, betrayal, arbitrary violence, and death become its presupposed norms. This deep disturbance of experience resists the neat resolution the play attempts to provide, and as such emerges through the episodes in various hidden yet palpable ways.

The play's overarching narrative, with its final, grand gesture of redemption, is thus far more complicated and far less happy than it first appears. Its reconciliatory nature covers over, rather than successfully resolves, a rupture at the most basic, foundational level of structure and meaning. Such a rupture might function in the life of a subject the same way it functions in the narrative of Cervantes' play. Though originally concealed and/or relegated to the margins, it nevertheless turns its stage inside out, so that what should be a story of romantic love instead becomes a story of survival touched by an irreversible, undisclosed foreclosure of the self.

The Device of Cervantes' Salvation: *Deus ex Machina*

A closer examination of the climactic final scene reveals exactly how the play's misleading assertion of deliverance operates, and uncovers in greater detail the key issues at stake in the play.

Of all the improbable coincidences that make up the main story, the sudden arrival of the Spanish galley at the end is the most thematically important. This single event ties the love story of Aurelio to the stories of the other slaves, and resolves them all together in one grand, climactic gesture. The entire play builds to this moment, and uses it to deliver a final message of communal hope. Importantly, from a narrative standpoint the galley's arrival is also the most fantastically unbelievable occurrence in the story. There is no prior discussion to indicate that Trinitarian monks engage in charity work on behalf of the slaves and occasionally send vessels, no foreshadowing of an approaching ship. For both the slaves in the play and the audience watching it, the news of the Spanish galley is a sudden,

shocking departure from all expectations, diverting what previously appears to be the captives' terrible but logically inevitable course of perpetual enslavement.

Viewing this truly miraculous ending, any audience member or reader is hard put not to recognize instantly the operation of a *deus ex machina*. The phrase literally refers to an ancient machine of stagecraft, which utilized a system of ropes, pulleys, and cranes to lower a divine figure onto the stage, a figure who would then set right whatever terrible wrongs had been committed in the play's story. As a literary device, it refers to a seemingly insurmountable conflict being solved through unbelievably improbable means, whether a chance occurrence, an un-foreshadowed windfall, or literally some manner of divine intervention. Even in antiquity this kind of device was recognized as one of the clumsiest and least satisfying forms of narrative resolution, and a general critique of its use occurs in Aristotle's *Poetics* (1454a33-1454b9) and Horace's *Ars Poetica* (191-192).

Extrapolating from the arguments of Plato and Horace, use of a *deus ex machina* is inappropriate for two main reasons: first, it thoroughly reveals its artificial, contrived nature, and second, its protagonists have no hand in their own triumph. These seemingly undesirable narrative qualities are clearly visible in the ending of *El trato de Argel*. The never-before-mentioned ship, the dubiously serendipitous timing of its arrival, and its ability to conveniently and tidily resolve all outstanding issues indicate that narrative resolution is being imposed artificially on the plot rather than being discovered organically in the events themselves. And the play's heroes all appear conspicuously un-heroic in what should be their moment of triumph. Aurelio does not so much win his freedom as find it arbitrarily granted to him, and none of the other slaves have even a nominal hand in their

own redemption, relying instead on the unexpected charity and labor of the Trinitarian monks. Furthermore, the play's final moments underscore these qualities of its plot. The play does not even maintain a pretense of believable realism when the slave appears onstage bringing Aurelio the happy news of the ship's arrival. All coherency of time and place suddenly falls away. An instant before Aurelio was speaking to the king, presumably in the palace, in the presence of guards and an appropriate court. And yet, though the play provides no indication that this retinue leaves the stage, the king and his people nevertheless quietly recede into the background, as though fading away, as one by one the slaves begin to enter. From this moment on, the scene can be neither that of the palace, nor the prison house, nor the docks, nor the desert. The multitude of characters is neither wholly together nor apart. When they begin their prayers—which explicitly affirm their abject status, their utter inability to protect and preserve themselves—they neither simply address God, nor each other, nor the audience. The incredible power of this ending has nothing to do with a realistic portrayal of events. In fact, just the opposite is true: through the embrace of a *deus ex machina*, a rightly unbelievable, impossible miracle is established as the essential point of the play.

Horace, critiquing the *deus ex machina*, suggests humorously that "a god not intervene, unless a knot show up that be worthy of such an untangler"(191-192). Cervantes' use of the *deus ex machina* suggests that he takes this line at its literal word, and thereby sets its embedded ironic critique on its head. Apparently, the central conflict in *El trato de Argel* is of a radical type—not the kind of crisis that readily lends itself to being circumscribed within narrative conventions, and that allows itself to be used and put to

rest by a well-mannered, satisfying story. On the one hand, the miraculous ending clearly marks itself as a fantasy. Yet on the other hand, rather than be dismissed as a contrivance of clumsy storytelling, this clear artifice should be recognized as proposing a series of very troubling questions: What is the status of a rupture that is so radically irreconcilable that *only* a miracle could ever resolve it? What kind of act could ever create such a rupture? And can the necessary healing miracle ever actually occur, in this or any other form?

Viewed in these terms, the *deus ex machina* functions through a kind of two-sided ambiguity. Although it portrays the sort of miraculous redemption that alone could refigure the slaves' reality and deliver the slaves from the lasting scars of their physical and emotional torment, it simultaneously reveals the artificial nature of the miracle it presents, thus indicating that the traumatic core of the slaves' experience still remains unaddressed and unresolved anywhere in the play. The slaves' prayers express that they, like the play, are torn in this double gesture. On the one hand they offer praise and thanksgiving for their salvation, which thus seems to have been already granted and/or is certain to occur, but on the other hand, simultaneously, they plead for salvation with a tone of desperation and urgency that implies their deliverance has not yet arrived and perhaps never will. In full, the prayers encompass nearly fifty lines and are shared between five different characters, but one prayer in particular provides a sense of their overall content and tone: "Turn, Most Holy Virgin Mary, / your eyes which offer light and glory to heaven, / to the wretched who cry night and day / and soak the earth with their tears! / Comfort us, blessed, pious Virgin, / lest this mortal, corporeal veil / be left soulless in the earth / and bereft of using a grave" (4.549-556). ("¡Vuelve, Virgen Santísima María, / tus ojos que dan

luz y gloria al cielo, / a los tristes que lloran noche y día / y riegan con sus lágrimas el suelo! / Socórrenos, bendita Virgen pía, / antes que este mortal corpóreo velo / quede sin alma en esta tierra dura / y carezca de usada sepultura.") These lines are delivered as though from two grammatical positions simultaneously. Initially, the speaker refers to all the slaves who remain cut off from hope and redemption as though he were grammatically separate from them and in a position to speak on their behalf, but he then abruptly switches his position to include himself amongst them ("comfort us"). From both these positions, the speaker begs and praises the one he posits as the agent of his salvation, the Holy Virgin, and accordingly names her with adoring adjectives. However, the impetus behind his requests and adoration must be very different depending upon which of the two points of view is used to interpret his words. On the one hand, beyond the grip of tortured enslavement the triumph of salvation appears preordained. If viewed in these terms, the prayer functions as a polite affirmation of respect and gratefulness, such as one expresses when redundantly asking permission to take something that is already being freely offered. On the other hand, within a horizon of trauma and despair, salvation appears as an impossible fantasy. From this point of view, the prayer expresses a desperate, vain cry to a non-existent interlocutor, seeking comfort and respite precisely because these things have no chance of being granted. Each of these possible interpretations excludes the other, and yet, in itself, the prayer articulates both at once. I would suggest that this split expresses deep emotional ambivalence on the part of the speaker. It conveys, on the one hand, his profound and heartfelt joy at freedom, but on the other hand it shows his equally profound sense of loss, grief, and guilt regarding the slaves who remain in Algiers. As his grammar

attests, he is simultaneously cut off from his fellows, and yet he remains bound to them: though he escapes, he leaves part of himself behind in the prison house; though they remain, a part of them is pulled forward with him who has left them behind.

Garcés argues that this kind of self-cancelling ambiguousness comprises the essence of the play's traumatic testimony. Only a double gesture of this sort can convey the unspeakable force of trauma by expressing the fact that something has not been—and cannot be—expressed (160). As Garcés suggests, this kind of figuration in a way enables the trauma to be recognized and shared by others, which both opens the path for a therapeutic process of healing and also comprises an essential act of healing in its own right. As though beyond its purview, the speaking aloud of the prayer performs the redeeming acts for which it pleads and offers thanks. "Turn, Most Holy Virgin Mary, / your eyes," begs the prayer, expressing the need for a witness capable of acknowledging and registering the atrocities that occurred. Yet the double gesture of the prayer supplies the necessary figure for that very act of acknowledgement, by trying and failing to express the unspeakable reality of the trauma and thus revealing its irreconcilable nature. The prayer does not go so far as to supply its own witnessing other—that is the one thing it cannot do—but it posits a place for this other, and expresses the conditions through which her act of witnessing could take place. "Comfort us, blessed, pious Virgin, / lest this mortal, corporeal veil / be left soulless in the earth / and bereft of using a grave," the prayer cries, conveying the real danger of un-mourned, unmarked death. Yet again, paradoxically, by trying and failing to convey the horror of un-witnessed death, the prayer potentially succeeds in transmitting its unmarked power. Corresponding to the climactic arrival of the

Spanish ship, the witnessing force of the double gesture is offered by the play as the only true agent of deliverance—the true miracle, the true *deus ex machina*. And yet this miracle is severely curtailed in its majesty and scope. Its redemptive quality largely depends upon blurring the distinction between the ones who are saved and the ones who remain abandoned to their un-witnessed, unmarked death, and yet the prayer asserts that distinction in the same moment it attempts to undo it.

Incredibly, the biographical events of Cervantes' captivity seem to validate in real life the salvation supplied by the *deus ex machina*. In the fifth year of Cervantes' enslavement Cervantes' captor was relieved of his position in Algiers and began preparing to return to Constantinople with all his possessions, including all his slaves. For Cervantes, this would mean a lifetime of captivity: so far from the frontier there was virtually no chance of ransom or escape. A Spanish ship had arrived with treasure for captives, and over the course of several months the Trinitarian monks on board had successfully negotiated the release of over one-hundred slaves. However, Cervantes' captor believed incorrectly that he held an important, wealthy gentleman, and he unwaveringly demanded almost twice as much money as Cervantes' family had been able to gather over the entire five years of Cervantes' captivity. All attempts to reason with Cervantes' captor proved futile, and the time for negotiation passed. Quite possibly Cervantes was even loaded on board the galley to Constantinople. However, at the final moment Fray Juan Gil, chief of the monks (a man named and praised in the last scene of Cervantes' play), took it upon himself to make up the difference with money that had been set aside for captives who had not yet

appeared. In a real life *deus ex machina*, where all hope had been lost, Cervantes suddenly found himself miraculously set free.

An astoundingly unbelievable reversal of fortune reveals itself in Cervantes' lived experience just as profoundly as it does in his narrative, and in real life it functions exactly the same way as in his fiction: it appears jarringly fantastic because it impossibly misaligns with the underlying, presupposed order of existence and its seemingly inevitable outcome. This is an example of that rare event we human beings sometimes call a miracle. A phenomenon occurs that cannot be made to accord with the predictable laws of natural or society, and thus must rather be the consequence of an orchestrated design imposed from the outside, as though by the correcting pen of some great unseen author. On the one hand, this kind of event can be taken as evidence of an all-encompassing divine plan. Such a point of view is consistently adopted by the characters of the play, as the various quotes above make abundantly clear. One might point out, however, that if this is an example of God's divine authorship, it follows rather disturbingly that He apparently has to rely on the same sort of narrative devices and subterfuge as Cervantes. Like a hack author writing himself out of a bind, a God who has to intercede in such a clumsy and obvious way must do so not because He is in control of His story, but because He has no control over it at all. On the other hand, what is much more likely is that this narrative structure is not imposed artificially by God, but by human beings projecting order and meaning onto empty phenomena. What appears as an impossible occurrence within Cervantes' life story results from the fact that the fabricated structure we use to organize it radically misaligns with the underlying reality that provides its raw material. The former determines an ending that

the latter conspicuously fails to provide; the world of words and meaning splits apart from the world of things. Ironically, the profoundly arbitrary "ending" that then occurs—the mixture of dumb luck, chance events, and unplanned, desperate decisions that all lead to Cervantes' release—appears, precisely for that reason, to be necessarily the most preordained, preplanned, non-arbitrary event of all.

Either way, however, whether this real life *deus ex machina* derives from humans or the divine, it is based on an essentially narrative structure—it derives from narrative conventions and plays with narrative expectations—and thus it troublingly repeats the same double gesture as its fictional counterpart. Just as the slaves of the play assert their individual and collective salvation only by blurring the distinction between themselves and the companions they have left abandoned to their fate, Cervantes' life story can be written as one of triumph and deliverance only insofar as we and he gloss over and forget the friends and comrades he left behind. This problem must have pressed on Cervantes with particular acuity given the terms of his release. Cervantes was spared only because funds set aside to save other men were at the last instant diverted to him instead. It is very easy to justify and rationalize this decision, or bury it in abstractions. The other men could not be found; there was little or no hope for them; most likely many of them were already dead or had become renegades. And the decision was not even Cervantes' own, but was made solely by Fray Juan Gil on his own authority. Yet none of these arguments in any way alters the fact that Cervantes' survival ultimately depended on the terrible sacrifice of others—just as Cervantes left his place on the galley vacant for some unknown and unnamed other prisoner to occupy, his life in freedom was literally paid for by the life and death of other

captives. From a biographical standpoint, we have good reason to suspect Cervantes was deeply troubled by this issue. Going back to the guiding question of this essay, we know he for some reason felt compelled to take another's name, which at the very least is linguistically equivalent to taking the other's place. The play supplies further evidence that Cervantes was troubled by his survivor's role. His characters, in their moment of deliverance, are so ambivalent and concerned about the status of their un-saved brethren that they seek to collapse their mutual separation, as though they were exchanging places with their companions who have died or who remain in captivity. Yet at the heart of this rhetorical performance lies concealed a terrible non-coincidence between the two groups, a gulf that irredeemably separates those who managed to survive their enslavement from those who did not.

In the play, concealed within the *deus ex machina*, a dark and formless gulf separates survivors from non-survivors. There is no connection between the two, and no meaningful, discernible content is offered to bridge the gap. Instead, beneath the slaves' attempt to reconcile the two extremes, in exactly the place where a relationship between survivors and non-survivors should be unequivocally affirmed, the slaves' rhetoric positions them not in communion with non-survivors but taking their place. This is a powerful gesture, insofar as the survivors are thus able to speak on behalf of their lost comrades, and even in a way act as vessels through which their comrades' lost voices can finally be heard. However, as Cervantes' biography indicates, to live on only in and through another's place simultaneously conceals a deadly, unrecognized sacrifice. In the next section, I will show

that this terrible sacrifice lies at the heart of the play, invisibly unmarked and yet presented for all in plain sight.

The Ghost in the *Machina*

Towards the end of the play, the action of the main plot is interrupted by a lone slave entering the stage. His clothing is tattered and torn. He appears to be exhausted, famished, and suffering from exposure. He later suggests that he is in the process of losing his mind—"Already I've lost my senses," he cries (4.19) ("He ya perdido el tino")—and he may be far more correct than he knows. As he stumbles forward, he prays aloud, announcing that he is attempting to escape his enslavement in Algiers by making the dangerous overland trek to the nearest Spanish outpost at Orán. Yet in the vast desert wasteland all hope has left him. He has run out of food and water, and is hunted my man and beast alike. Now, in desperate torment, he wishes only to lie down and die (4.37-39), and after articulating this final wish he collapses into sleep. Soon afterwards a lion appears. For a moment it seems this animal is one of the bloodthirsty wild beasts of which the man speaks in his prayer. Yet rather than attack the helpless man, the lion lays down next to him, as though watching over him while he sleeps. When the man awakens he finds the beast still beside him. Filled with awe and thanksgiving, he then speculates that his animal companion was heaven-sent with the purpose of guiding him to safety—in fact, he now realizes he is almost to Orán—and the two set off together to finish the journey. Yet in the middle of all this, while the man still sleeps, an alternate story plays out on the stage. A second escaped slave enters, so like the first that he explicitly follows in that man's

footsteps and even correctly imagines that his counterpart lies invisibly hidden somewhere nearby, as he too would like to be (4.53-55). Yet their identical, shared stage provides this second man with no concealment and no companionship, despite his equally ardent prayers. He thus presses onward, followed closely by shouting, gleeful hunters. Whereas the scene ends with the first slave finding his way to freedom, the second slave is recaptured and returned to Algiers where he is tortured and executed.

Garcés provides a detailed analysis of this scene. She argues that the two slaves present two incarnations of a shared identity, divided across the chasm of an equally shared traumatic event (155). According to this reading, the men offer two versions, or two sides, of a single story. On the one hand, their story reveals a radical end of experience, a figural and literal death. On the other hand, it shares the aftermath of survival. The two halves overlay perfectly, but there is no point of contact between them. Of particular interest to Garcés is the miraculous, fantastic manner of the first fugitive's escape, and although she does not use the term *deus ex machina* to describe this miracle, she identifies it as an equivalent, double-sided structure. In what she refers to as "escapist figuration," the unreal, illusory nature of the impossible event reveals itself precisely as a fantasy, and thus indicates a troubling counter story beneath its overtly happy content (160). The lion's role is that of a heaven-sent agent of salvation—literally, a guardian angel—and the fantastic nature of this narrative device self-reflexively indicates itself as artificial. In its defiant affirmation of life, love, faith, saving grace, and the healing power of a guardian, witnessing other, the scene does not show what was present in the terror of the desert, but what must have been excised utterly. For Garcés, the scene thus ultimately indicates its

own profound failure to present the trauma at its heart, thereby illustrating the further vital insight that at the point of trauma not only has something gone un-transmitted, but something remains that cannot possibly ever be transmitted (160-161).

Garcés further suggests that the scene's unspeakable core directly expresses Cervantes' own traumatic experience. Like the final scene of the play, the episode in the desert has startlingly autobiographical overtones. In one of Cervantes' escape attempts, he, along with a small party of other slaves, secretly gathered supplies and arranged for a guide to lead them to Orán. The escapees must have been at least partly aware of the great danger they were facing. Just as the play indicates, in addition to the constant threat of exposure and dehydration, the track to Orán was beset with marauders and bandits on the lookout for runaway slaves, and the wilderness was filled with man-eating lions and hyenas (40). The slaves' journey began successfully, but several days out from Algiers the guide in whom Cervantes and his companions had placed their faith abandoned them. In desperation, facing certain death in the desert, the party had no choice but to return to the city where torture and possible execution awaited them (41-42). From these events, Garcés quite justifiably suggests that the twin protagonist(s) of the similar episode in the play act as both a mirror and a screen for Cervantes himself, and together indicate the fact that salvation conspicuously failed to occur in his case (153).

The interpretation Garcés proposes emphasizes the positive, potentially witnessing function of the scene. According to this reading, once again the essential gesture of the play is revealed in a *deus ex machina*. Through the self-revealing fantasy of the miraculous, saving lion, the narrative simultaneously presents and reconciles Cervantes' two halves,

but maintains their irreducible split. The evidence for this reading is immensely powerful; the scene builds towards its fantastic ending, and with the incredible spectacle of the lion and a long speech of astounded thanksgiving offered by the awakened slave, it doubly underscores both the miracle's central importance and its fabulous nature.

However, as was darkly glimpsed in the identical gesture of the play's final scene, the *deus ex machina* here once again performs a terrible act of misdirection, and this misdirection goes wholly unrecognized in Garcés' reading. Looking past the *deus ex machina* in order to make sense of the events in the scene without any narrative presuppositions, a reader can arrive at only one possible interpretation, and it is quite shockingly *not* the interpretation offered by the awakened slave in his commentary. Rather than the misleading lion, the true agent of salvation in the scene is the second man, whose flight covers the tracks of his double and wholly absorbs the attention of their joint pursuers, leading them away from the helpless sleeper. This act of sacrifice unites the two men; the one's life was spared only insofar as the other inadvertently diverted the fatal strike onto himself. By traditional narrative standards, the second slave should occupy the highest heroic role of the play—unknowingly, he nevertheless proves that even death can be forced to serve life, and assumes responsibility for a primal, unbreakable commitment to his fellow. Yet the scene does not present the man's act as a noble sacrifice. In fact, the scene does not mark the act in any way. It occurs on stage, but it carries no force even as a missed encounter. It would be nice to say that his act was too great, too powerful, too terrible in its force and consequences to be registered or acknowledged. But that sentimentality is powerless; whatever strength the sacrifice might and should have

imparted is displaced by the false saving grace of the lion. In the void of the missing acknowledgement, the lion's fantastic spectacle emerges to simultaneously fill the emptiness and draw attention away from what must not and cannot be seen. Through this fatal displacement, the two men's lives and deaths are excised of the mutual recognition and meaning that the man's sacrifice alone might have provided—as is the play. The men now exist only in the void of each other's fantastic imaginings: one lost in the other's half-mad, waking dreams, and one in the other's impossible prayers. Yet the silent void of their lost primal bond must nevertheless makes itself felt as a terrible, invisible imperative carried by the survivor. That man is disallowed from recognizing the other's gift of life, but always beyond his knowledge he accepted that life nevertheless. The very fact of remaining alive is thus proof of his guilt—proof that he must have cravenly accepted death's bargain and allowed another man to die in his place, that he raised himself on the unburied corpse of his fellow, that he owes his continued existence now and forever to the other's capture, torture, and execution. In place of the missing sacrifice, the story the scene provides only in silence is that of a façade of life built over a radically unmarked killing.

The one who is lost in this unknown, unnamed killing supplies an infernal double to the divine figure of the *deus ex machina*. This lost, unknown, unnamed and unnamable other haunts the play's promise of redemption like a ghost: a soul rendered invisible in the cold, blinding light of salvation, necessarily unrecognized by the survivor who usurps his place to live on, but who then forever carries the burden of his fate. This haunting other is not unique to Cervantes' traumatic experience. Beyond every trauma, the aftermath of ambivalence and self-recrimination known as survivor's guilt attests to the same central,

intractable loss and its impossible debt.[22] It expresses the fundamental yet latent problem with which they all in their own ways wrestle, not as a troubling intellectual dilemma but as a force suddenly concrete and real, free from structural abstraction or playful pretense, without a deferring double gesture or a concealing veil, revealed only in faceless horror and in the unmarked loss of those actual people who become its victims both in life and in death.

In Place of the Other

As stated earlier, Saavedra is not present in the main plot of the play, and he is not a particularly important character even in the various sub-episodes. His role is rather small. Most all he does is talk to his companions about their questionable decisions. For example, his major scene is a long dialogue wherein he admonishes his friend Peter for acts of betrayal and deceit, and dissuades him from committing similar acts in the future (4.123-333). Furthermore, Saavedra is not a particularly likeable character. He is morose; wordy, critical, blunt. He annoys at least one of his friends with his unwelcome reproaches, and is unflatteringly accused of being a "predicador"—a preacher (1.367). In fact, with his seemingly righteous, moralizing tone, it is quite easy to initially dismiss Saavedra as a flat character who functions primarily as yet another self-assuring mouthpiece for the play's promise of redemption. For all these reasons, Saavedra makes a strikingly odd choice for a namesake and alter ego, if either choice or ego were in any way relevant.

However, if the problem of sacrificial replacement is recognized as the central issue of the play, then this seemingly minor and uninteresting character suddenly becomes

vitally important. In Saavedra's constant advocating for his friends' wellbeing, his essential role is one who takes his friends' part, as though stepping into their place in order to speak on their behalf, even or especially against his friends themselves. In this, Saavedra's role mirrors the role of the slaves in the final scene, when, through the *deus ex machina*, they rhetorically claim to share the voice of their enslaved fellows, yet Saavedra speaks without any tone of triumph or salvation, and without ever claiming to actually speak in his fellows' place and in their voice.

The dialogue between Saavedra and Peter illustrates the central issue at stake. Saavedra recognizes that Peter is betraying himself in a moment of weakness, and so speaks out on his friend's behalf:

> SAAVEDRA. So you wish to renege?
>
> PETER. Yes I wish it, but I understand what I am doing.
>
> SAAVEDRA. Deny yourself however you wish,
>
> yet this is a great evil and horrible fault,
>
> and you badly correspond with being who you are.
>
> (4.193-197)
>
> [SAYAVEDRA. ¿Renegar quieres?
>
> PEDRO. Sí quiero, mas entiende de qué hechura.
>
> SAYAVEDRA. Reniega tú del modo que quisieres,
>
> que ello es muy gran maldad y horrible culpa,
>
> y correspondes mal a ser quien eres.]

Following these lines is a discussion regarding the dangers Peter will face by publically denying his moral and spiritual center while attempting to maintain that center internally, but Saavedra's opening makes clear that hypocrisy, as such, is not his deepest concern. His real fear is that, driven by despair and desperation, his friend is compromising himself on his most fundamental level of being. Saavedra tells him flatly, "You misalign with being who you are" ("Correspondes mal a ser quien eres"). Literally, Peter is not in his place. On the one hand, the threat Saavedra perceives in Peter's non-coincidence with himself is radically ontological. Peter's very existence is called into question, not perhaps in the physical world but in the spiritual and psychic ones. On the other hand, the threat that Peter might lose his place must lie somehow beyond any possible question of ontology, insofar as existence must simply presuppose the place of everything within it. The danger, then, is not simply that Peter is effectively ceasing to be; if his self-displacement succeeds, it will be as if he never was. This unthinkable occurrence would be the great evil (the "gran maldad") of which Saavedra ultimately speaks, and which he attempts to subvert by reasserting Peter's place both for him and against him. In this, Saavedra is kind to his friend, but he nevertheless remains highly critical of him, and offers very little in the way of empathy, sympathy, or consolation (none of which Peter needs, as it turns out). Instead, Saavedra acts as his proxy or advocate—one with the legal authority to act and speak on Peter's behalf as though he were Peter himself, in a situation where Peter is unable to speak and act for himself.

Saavedra's dialogue with Peter seems to present an ideal counter to the *deus ex machina* and its hidden sacrifice. It mirrors the *deus ex machina*'s displacing double

gesture—Saavedra indeed takes Peter's place—but in doing so Saavedra apparently reverses the original displacement and so cancels out its violence. This happy reversal is demonstrated most practically in the play by the fact that Saavedra ultimately proves successful in defending Peter. At the end of their conversation, Peter once again aligns with himself—to paraphrase the slave in the desert, he returns to his senses, recognizing the wisdom and urgency in Saavedra's words and agreeing that he must struggle on against the forces that threaten to displace him (4.325-333).

However, although Saavedra's gesture appears much more modest and realistic than that of the *deus ex machina*, it nevertheless contains a similarly invisible, similarly violent sacrifice. The difference is that, in this case, Saavedra is able to limit the violence by taking it wholly upon himself. He speaks as though in Peter's place, but it is not then he who dispossesses Peter—rather, he silently allows Peter to dispossess *him*. Saavedra, as his friend's advocate and keeper, acting and succeeding as a functionary placeholder for his fellow, cannot coincide with Saavedra who acts in his own place, as the individual whose stodgy sense of caring and compassion leads him to take on that role to begin. As a character speaking and acting, we only ever see the second role. And yet Peter's return to himself could only have been facilitated through the first. The force of Saavedra's ever invisible self-displacement thus must be present in the scene—beyond ontology, beyond our ability to witness it or register it in any way, and certainly beyond the knowledge of either Peter or Saavedra—and yet in that force Peter must have been saved just as Saavedra must have been lost.

Quite happily for Peter and all the other slaves who Saavedra quietly sustains at one point or another, none can possibly truly comprehend the incredible gift of life that Saavedra gives them, or the terrible debt it bestows. Yet whether or not Saavedra's companions realize they need him in this role, whether or not they want him to be there, their survival depends upon him. I hasten to add that he needs them as well, just as they need each other. Any one of them can fill the role Saavedra fills, and at some point someone must sustain Saavedra the way he sustains them. As a character in the play, however, that sustaining role belongs to Saavedra alone.

"Ser Quien Eres" (To be Who You Are)—Naming Oneself As the Other's Loss and Sacrifice

Based on *El trato de Argel* and what we know of Cervantes' life, I believe there are two possible ways to read his adoption of the name Saavedra.

What we can know is this: by displacing himself out of his own survivor's story, Cervantes repeats the displacing sacrifice upon which his survival depends. Another man takes his place in the play the way he took another man's place in life. The flipside of this repetition must then be equally true. Cervantes take his usurper's name because *his* name no longer holds the place of anyone who possibly exists. Whoever the man was who lived under that name was lost to himself in the prisons, in the desert, and on the docks of Algiers.

Yet the character of Saavedra opens the possibility of reading Cervantes' act of self-renaming in a way that does not simply reduce to a traumatic repetition. By giving his lost other a name—Saavedra, he who selflessly and unthinkingly takes the place of others—

Cervantes potentially defies the very falseness of that designation, and so cries out against the void wherein all names are lost and the one to whom literally everything is owed can never be acknowledged and repaid. When Cervantes then applies that false name to himself, it becomes the sign of his renewed covenant to that other and to his own impossible debt. Like Saavedra standing as though in Peter's place, Cervantes through his new name attempts to stand in place of the one who is lost to him. If so, the gesture expresses a deep wish, as well as a great inability, to return the favor that this unknown and unknowable companion must nevertheless have granted him—an unwillingness to ever let go of that other, to ever leave him or her abandoned, to ever cease holding open a place for this one who first held a place for him.

[1] See Derrida, "Signature Event Context" (16-21).

[2] See Felman.

[3] All quotations of *Hamlet* in this text are taken from the New Folger Library edition of the play, and defer to the editors on issues of textual accuracy.

[4] The task with which Hamlet charges writing can be placed in the context of Derrida's lifelong exploration of inscription (sections of *Of Grammatology* and *Archive Fever* are particularly relevant to the question of memory), or Freud's model of psychic inscription in "Notes on the Mystic Writing Pad."

[5] In *History Beyond Trauma* psychoanalysts Francoise Davoine and Jean-Max Gaudillière conceive madness not as a structural problem of the mind, always already caught in the figurations of language, but as an enactment of that which is precisely unspeakable.

[6] Artaud subtitled his play *Tragédie en quatre actes, d'après Shelley et Stendhal*. For more on the play's source material, see Taylor (v).

[7] For a detailed history of the production, including discussions of its public reception and its place in the trajectory of Artaud's life and works, see Barber (69-77); Goodall (113-133); Jannarone (135-176). For a collection of private letters, production notes, publicity articles, reviews, and photos of the show, see Blin.

[8] The common critical response to *Les Cenci* has been to view the work as a failure on all levels. See Jannarone (136, 161-162); Scheer (4). For a general critique of the term *failure* in its scholarly application to Artaud and his work, see Goodall (2-4).

[9] For a discussion of the contradictions between Artaud's ideal theater and the actual performance of *Les Cenci*, see Jannarone (161-162).

[10] Artaud's original article appeared in the review *La Bête Noire*, No. 2, May 1, 1935.

[11] Goodall conceives "madness" as that which a given society determines as unthinkable and thus backhandedly delimits, contains, and dismisses (5-6).

[12] See Davoine and Gaudilliére (8-11, 59-63, 170, 192-194, 245).

[13] Artaud alludes to the same seemingly paradoxical status of language in various contexts throughout his work. See *The Theater and Its Double* (37, 46, 54, 110).

[14] The English version of the play quoted here and throughout the essay is Simon Watson Taylor's standard 1969 translation. All references to the original French text quote Artaud's *Oeuvres Complètes*, Vol. IV.

[15] See also Artaud's further use of dream imagery in *The Theater and Its Double* (92-93).

[16] Bertolt Brecht, *Mother Courage and Her Children*, trans. John Willett, ed. John Willett and Ralph Manheim. Text references are to scene and line of this edition. In preparing my reading of the play I frequently consulted alternate translations of *Mother Courage* by Eric Bentley and David Hare, but the translation of John Willett most accurately and

consistently expresses the key rhetorical and grammatical features of Brecht's original text in the passages upon which I focus.

[17] Bertolt Brecht, *Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder*. Wherever quotations from the original German text have been provided to supplement Willet's translation, they have been taken from the corresponding line(s) of this edition.

[18] Dalecarlia (also known as Dalarna) is a province of central Sweden.

[19] The exact date of *El Trato de Argel* is contested. See Garcés (11, 127).

[20] For an extended reading of the force of trauma in Cervantes' later works, especially in *Don Quixote*, see Davoine.

[21] See Chapter 2 of Garcés (66-118) for a detailed contextualization and assessment of primary historical sources relating to Cervantes' captivity.

[22] Various theorists working from radically differing points of view have nevertheless directly or indirectly presented the problem of sacrifice as the condition for human experience. For a discussion of the vital function of sacrificial gifts in cementing social bonds, see Mauss, Bataille. For sacrifice conceived as a necessary encounter with alterity, see Derrida (*Writing and Difference*, 261). For death in sacrifice as constitutive of the psyche, see Freud, Lacan.

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