

CHAPTER 1

SPATIAL AMBIGUITY
AND THE EARLY MODERN/
POSTMODERN IN *KING LEAR*

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I am not quixotic enough to argue here that *King Lear* is an unequivocal work of postmodernism.¹ Rather, my ambitions in pairing early modern Shakespeare with postmodern poetics are more modest. The first aim of this study is to illustrate a unique metatheatrical strategy at play in the so-called Dover cliff scene of *King Lear* concerning spatial ambiguity. Should we believe Edgar who tells Gloucester that he has been climbing for some time and now stands at the top of a perilous cliff? Or ought we to believe the blinded Gloucester who is doubtful? How are these opposing verbal claims each supported by Renaissance traditions regarding verbal scene painting and nonrepresentational minimal staging? Out of this moment of spatial indeterminacy comes a metatheatrical doubling

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1 that replicates Gloucester's perceptual uncertainty and causes a parallel
2 disorientation for the audience. The effect of this doubling is a struc-
3 tural reflection on the usual theatricalizing work undertaken by audi-
4 ences in the creation of fictional worlds. In this pronounced moment of
5 ontological uncertainty, a metatheatrical reading of the episode serves
6 to underscore the innate performative situation pertaining to the cogni-
7 tive organization of theatrical space. My second aim is to take up the
8 implications of such a metatheatrical preoccupation with the characteris-
9 tic indeterminate ontology of theatrical space and show how a persistent
10 self-reflexive interest in contingent and competing fictional worlds finds
11 kinship with the poetics of postmodernism.

12 Peter Brook writes, "I can take any empty space and call it a bare
13 stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is
14 watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be
15 engaged" (11). By saying "I," Brook appropriates to himself the power
16 to enact an arbitrary naming that transforms ordinary space, endowing
17 it with theatrical potential. Josette Féral likewise sees the "reallocation
18 of the quotidian space" (97) as central to the activation of theatricality.
19 However, significantly, she shifts the nominative power away from the
20 foreign but seemingly omnipotent speaker "I" and reassigns it to some-
21 one else who is a contributing and included participant in the theatrical
22 process, specifically to the "someone else" who is watching. According
23 to this view, theatricality arises out of the perceptual dynamic between
24 the watcher and the watched. It cannot be summarily mandated from
25 outside this communicative pairing. A theatrical intention expressed by
26 the performer is one part of the theatrical equation. The second and
27 dominant role is that of the audience who takes up this invitation to
28 understand what is shown as theatre. Privileging the audience perspec-
29 tive, "theatricality seems to be a process that has to do with a 'gaze'
30 that postulates and creates a distinct virtual space belonging to the
31 other, from which fiction can emerge" (Féral 97). Through this specifi-
32 cally theatrical postulating gaze, the spectator purposely carves out an
33 "other" space separate from that of the quotidian, effectively setting
34 apart the fictional world from the actual world. Thus, theatricality is the

result of an action (specifically, a division in the perceiving attitude) 1
 performed by the spectator positioned between the quotidian and the 2
 imaginary. 3

The act of spatial distinction described by Féral generates a doubled 4
 view of persons and objects inside the newly created fictional world, 5
 allowing the audience to perceive in a kind of binocular vision both 6
 the imagined fiction and the quotidian material of its creation. One sig- 7
 nificant quality of thus designated theatrical space is that it steals from 8
 actual space to create fictional space. So in this respect, space within has 9
 a doubled quality. From the perspective of the dividing boundary, the 10
 world of the fiction is nominally “inside” while the quotidian world of 11
 the audience is nominally “outside.” Yet inside that boundary, the two 12
 worlds commingle since actual-world materials are co-opted by the fic- 13
 tional and are used to populate that fictional space. Actual-world peo- 14
 ple become characters and so assume citizenship in the fictional world. 15
 Likewise, actual-world chairs become fictional-world chairs. And in this 16
 way, actual-world objects of all kinds participate in the interior fictional 17
 world acquiring a phenomenological duality. Without this perceptual 18
 duality, there can be no theatre. Of course, the theatrical duality inherent 19
 in the ostention of these staged objects applies equally to the abstractions 20
 of space and time. In the process of dividing quotidian space to create 21
 fictional space, that new space still expresses its underlying actuality. It 22
 cannot shed its actual-world material origins, and so it also possesses the 23
 key theatrical quality of ontological doubleness. Again, as with staged 24
 objects, the space of a fictional world may be entirely different from its 25
 pretransposition materials; that is, the spatiotemporal situation of a play 26
 set in France in the thirteenth century is markedly distinct from the place 27
 and moment of its later Renaissance production. Or the play world may 28
 be immediately contemporary, striving to be synonymous with the here 29
 and now of performance, like the chair that becomes another superfi- 30
 cially identical chair. Thus, fictional worlds are brought into being out 31
 of actual worlds through the phenomenological attitude of the audience, 32
 which distinguishes the ontologically singular outside actual world from 33
 the inner duality necessary to theatricality. 34

1 Under the influence of this interpretive condition, the here and now of
2 the play world will always possess a different ontic status from the here
3 and now, which houses its performance and which is inhabited by the
4 audience. In their systematic listing and protesting of theatrical conven-
5 tions, the speakers in Handke's *Offending the Audience* perversely insist
6 that, "These boards don't signify a world. They are part of the world.
7 These boards exist for us to stand on. This world is no different from
8 yours" (9). By marking this perceptual orientation toward space and
9 toward the constitutive materials of the world as worthy of objection,
10 the speakers underline its ubiquity and its power. In a manner similar to
11 other stage objects displayed to theatrical perception, the stage boards as
12 a fiction do signify a world. They are not part of a unitary actual world.
13 The world onstage is different from that of the audience. In phenomeno-
14 logical terms, this is the fictional noema² of space. But on the other hand,
15 and in a different way than applies to other theatricalized objects, theatre
16 space is to some extent synonymous with the world of the audience. This
17 is the correlative noema of the actual space.

18 Space on the stage is perceived by the phenomenological audience-
19 subject according to these two distinct views of its ontological status.
20 Theatrical space oscillates as it is shifted in perception between the
21 actual space of the stage and the fictional space colonized by the play
22 world. This correlation is composed of more than the simple objectival
23 noematic pairings of actual boards with fictional ground and actual flats
24 with fictional walls—although that is part of it. In the phenomenologi-
25 cal reduction that enacts the creation of fictional space, the world of the
26 play as event is bracketed from consideration, and the volume of the
27 stage space as a whole is altered from "here" to somewhere else—"not
28 here"—as an abstraction, from downstage centre to the court of Elsinore.
29 Yet to a phenomenological description of dual theatrical space, the imme-
30 diate "here" is ineffaceable, being provisionally absent and yet always
31 copresent. What makes this relationship of the spatial noemata unique is
32 that originary situation of the fictional world being partially carved out
33 from the larger fabric of actual-world space. It is both housed within and
34 created from the space of the stage and from the time of the performance

event. The performance event is an actual-world object and as such is 1
 inhabited by both the actors and the audience. So, in one important way, 2
 the world of the play is the same as that of the audience. In terms of 3
 actual space, the actual-world noema of the theatre extends beyond the 4
 stage into the house. But in terms of fictional space, the perceptual bar- 5
 rier that makes the audience an audience by setting them apart from the 6
 actor-characters also functions as the border between two worlds, setting 7
 the fictional world of play as play apart from the actual world of the play 8
 as event. This is the division that Féral posits as essential to theatricality. 9
 Likewise, this is the boundary that the resolutely antitheatrical speakers 10
 of *Offending the Audience* paradoxically deny. 11

This characteristic phenomenological duality of fictional space and 12
 the objects within that space gives rise to a self-aware metatheatrical 13
 perception that is ubiquitous and deeply ingrained in the elemental 14
 fabric of the theatrical system. Deviating from the conventional under- 15
 standing of metatheatre, which is concerned primarily with dramatic 16
 enactments of the *theatrum mundi* metaphor,³ Polish theorist Sławomir 17
 Świontek instead focuses on systemic aesthetic conditions pertaining to 18
 the construction of theatrical art and to the subsequent camouflage and 19
 revelation of that constructive process. He begins by describing dramatic 20
 dialogue as having a dual communicative purpose.⁴ On the one hand, 21
 dialogue is spoken to someone; that is, dialogue that is spoken within a 22
 fictional world passes from one character to another. Dialogue along the 23
 stage-stage vector is a fictional-world action in imitation of ordinary dia- 24
 logue in the actual world. On the other hand, that same utterance is for 25
 someone; that is, it delivers information about the context and content of 26
 that fictional world for the audience (Świontek 21). This dialogue that 27
 crosses the boundary between fictional and actual worlds along the per- 28
 pendicular stage-house vector is performative, doing work with every 29
 word. Not only does it render the inner fictional world comprehensible 30
 to the eavesdropping audience, but it also actively brings that world into 31
 being. With this basic model of dual-role dialogue in place, Świontek 32
 neatly defines metatheatre as occurring any time the audience becomes 33
 aware of the secondary performative vector, any time the fictional world 34

1 is revealed to be an actual-world construction, any time the theatre
2 comments on its own existence as theatre. In the articulation of this
3 metaenunciative approach to metatheatre, Świontek limits his area of
4 interest to dramatic language, focusing on linguistic aspects such as the
5 handling of exposition, the role of playwright figures and devices such
6 as asides, soliloquy, and direct address. However, extrapolation of this
7 dialogic model to theatrical space is straightforward. Theatrical space,
8 like theatrical language, also expresses a characteristic ontological dual-
9 ity with dominant and copresent fictional and actual aspects. Thus, fol-
10 lowing this approach, spatial metatheatre will be triggered whenever the
11 audience becomes conscious either of the actual space that forms the
12 obverse foundation of theatrical space or of the *noetic*⁵ process of per-
13 ceptual division that initially generated that space.

14 With respect to theatrical space, more so than with any other per-
15 formance element, revelation of the actual lies particularly close to the
16 surface. The principal reason for this sensitivity to metatheatre is that
17 whereas actors and stage properties undergo their transpositions, acquir-
18 ing the necessary theatrical duality, on the stage at a distance from the
19 audience-subject, space envelops the subject. This is the most significant
20 difference in the lived experience of theatrical space from the experi-
21 ence of theatrical objects. People and objects placed upon the stage are
22 “over there”—apprehended from a distance and given to consciousness
23 as phenomena of sight and sound. They appear on the far side of the
24 barrier that divides stage from house, and also the inner fictional world
25 (world^b) from the outer actual world (world^a). Space is not amenable,
26 however, to this kind of segmentation and separation. Although the per-
27 ceptual barrier stands between the world of the play on the stage and
28 the world of the event in the house, permitting the division of space into
29 two worlds, the world of the play as event in space extends beyond the
30 barrier onto the stage and so the actor and the audience share the same
31 space. It is of a piece for both. It has the same spatial quality across the
32 barrier—the quality of presence, of being here. Space encompasses both
33 the apprehending subject and the objects of its apprehension. The embed-
34 ded situation of the subject radically alters the nature of apprehension

because, rather than an external, detached apprehension of these shared qualities through the senses, there is an ineffable intimate bodily knowledge of always being in space. 1
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Maurice Merleau-Ponty incorporates the characteristic corporeal embodiment of consciousness to revision the phenomenological perspective of that consciousness and its powers of apprehension. He associates the innate humanity of consciousness with its chiasmic situation as both a virtual subject that apprehends the world and an embodied body located in that world. Perception, then, cannot be an autonomous mental act. It is inescapably intertwined with the physical situation of the eye and the mind and this spatial relationship colors all understanding: "To perceive is to render oneself present to something through the body" (*Primacy of Perception* 42). One cognitive outcome of the location of the eye in the body, which houses the apprehending subject, is that the seeing body sees itself; that is, the mind and the eye as an agent of that mind are imprisoned in a corporeal body that it can partially see. The body, then, is both a vehicle for the subject-consciousness and an object of the world that can be apprehended by that consciousness: "Visible and mobile, my body is a thing among things; it is caught in the fabric of the world, and its cohesion is that of a thing. But because it moves itself and sees, it holds things in a circle around itself" (*Eye and Mind* 163). The subject as a seeing eye and an apprehending consciousness is located at the zero point of space. This is a significant departure from Edmund Husserl's description of the isolated ego-subject that brackets the world and exists as a subjective consciousness outside of the world. And so, through this phenomenological bracketing (*epoché*), Husserl maintains a distinction between consciousness and the contents of consciousness. Merleau-Ponty, however, rejects the possibility of a complete *epoché* and posits consciousness as inseparable from the world of which it is conscious. The result, therefore, of Merleau-Ponty's model of subjective consciousness as also an object in the world is that the apprehending subject is always already temporalized and spatialized; its lived experiences of time and space cannot be shed or set aside. 4
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1 By extension, the theatrical audience as phenomenological subject
2 is also affected by the particular perceptual view characteristic of an
3 immersed consciousness. As a subject caught in the fabric of actual space
4 and time, the audience is unavoidably embedded in the same object that
5 is itself undergoing transposition. From this position within the matrix of
6 the transposition, the audience-subject must grapple with its relation to a
7 secondary arrangement of fictional space and time manifested in the aes-
8 thetically constructed setting of the dramatic presentation. And so, for
9 the audience member inextricably embedded in actual space, the neces-
10 sary transposition of that space from here to not here is always some-
11 what restricted. A complete and persuasive shift to the fictional world
12 is impossible. And so, since the fictional noema never entirely displaces
13 the actual noema, there remains a constant nagging reminder that the fic-
14 tional space of the world of the play is an arbitrary construct. Thus, one
15 might argue that the particular perceptual situation of theatrical space is
16 always and necessarily a trigger to metatheatrical commentary.

17 If theatrical space is especially sensitive to metatheatrical reflection
18 through the perceptual strength of the actual aspect of space as perceived
19 by the spatialized audience eye/I, the process of perceptually realizing
20 fictional space on Shakespeare's predominantly bare, early modern
21 stage marks an even more tenuous balance between the fictional and
22 the unhelpfully empty actual. By providing visual cues to facilitate the
23 reading of fictional space, representational or iconic scenery facilitates
24 the theatricalizing transposition, enabling an actual chair to become a
25 fictional chair and a scenery tree to become a fictional tree. But as the
26 representational style of scenery slides down the spectrum away from a
27 naturalistic staging, the interpretive gap between the actual pretranspo-
28 sition material and its projected fictional correlative grows wider. And
29 with this wider perceptual gap, more work is required from the audience
30 to effect the transposition. In the case of Renaissance staging, fictional
31 worlds receive meagre visual support through physical scenery and must
32 be conjured out of little more than words.

33 In such a theatre tradition without extensive scenery, the audience
34 depends on the verbal scene-painting convention in order to manage

the spatial transposition. A player when he enters “must ever begin with telling where he is, or else the tale will not be conceived” (Sidney 174–175). In his *Defense of Poesy*, Philip Sidney exaggerates the case somewhat since scenes are frequently played without difficulty in neutral unspecified spaces. However, when needed, the audience is notified as to the nature of the fictional world by a character who announces the location of the scene. Shakespearean examples of scenic declaration abound. In *Twelfth Night*, upon her arrival on land, the shipwrecked Viola asks the natural question, “What country, friends, is this?” and receives her answer: “This is Illyria, lady” (1.2.1–2). In *As You Like It*, the same question, although it is rhetorical for the character, provides essential information to the newly arrived audience. Oliver asks his brother, “Know you where you are, sir?” To which Orlando replies, “O, sir, very well; here in your orchard” (1.1.40–41). Although the hermeneutic situation of the theatre as theatre indicates that some transposition has been effected, it is only at this moment that the audience is admitted to the particular nature of the spatial change. Forests frequently require identification:

ARCHBISHOP: What is this forest call'd?
 HASTINGS: 'Tis Gaultree forest, and't shall please your Grace.
 (2 *Henry IV* 4.1.1–2)
 SIWARD: What wood is this before us?
 MENTETH: The wood of Birnan. (*Macbeth* 5.4.3)

Battlefields likewise call for naming. “Here pitch our tent, even here in Bosworth field” (*Richard III* 5.3.1) or “They mean to warn us at Philippi here/Answering before we do demand of them” (*Julius Caesar* 5.1.5–6). Sometimes one character is ignorant of his location and asks a companion: “Where are we?” Sometimes redundant information known to all the characters is repeated for the edification of the audience. By alerting the audience to the specific nature of the transposition, the very fact of the operation of the transposition itself is highlighted. To this perspective, the verbal scene-painting convention of Shakespeare and his contemporaries serves to comment metatheatrically on the basic theatrical division and

1 transposition of space. Every use of this convention operates, in my
 2 extension of Świontek's model, perpendicularly as communication for
 3 the audience, rather than primarily to the character, and therefore implic-
 4 itly indicates the actual vector of theatrical constructedness.

5 A. C. Sprague's *Shakespeare and the Audience* contains an excellent
 6 section on exposition conventions concerning time and place, in which he
 7 records several examples of the poetic description that took the place of
 8 scenery. He includes among Shakespeare's notable locations the "moon-
 9 flooded wood in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*," "that other enchanted
 10 wood of Arden," Macbeth's castle, "so tranquil in the late twilight" and
 11 "the 'dreadful summit' of Dover Cliff" (26). The descriptive speech con-
 12 cerning the cliffs at Dover, although a powerful expository word picture,
 13 is not like the others Sprague selects. At no time in *King Lear* are the
 14 characters actually at Dover Cliff. It is not a setting in the play. Instead,
 15 Edgar's "cure" of his father in act 4, scene 6 functions as metatheatre
 16 on the verbal scene painting convention. The scene is first set when,
 17 in act 4, scene 1, Edgar disguised as Poor Tom leads his blinded father
 18 at his request to Dover where "there is a cliff, whose high and bend-
 19 ing head/Looks fearfully in the confined deep" (4.1.73–74). Gloucester
 20 states that from that place he will need no more leading. When the father
 21 and son return in scene 6, they have arrived at their destination:

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 23 GLOUCESTER: When shall I come to th' top of that same hill?
 24 EDGAR: You do climb up it now. Look how we labour.
 25 GLOUCESTER: Methinks the ground is even.
 26 EDGAR: Horrible steep.
 27 Hark, do you hear the sea?
 28 GLOUCESTER: No, truly. (4.6.1–4)

29 Edgar persists in his description of this setting as the top of a great cliff
 30 with the beach and "murmuring surge" (4.6.20) below. For an audience
 31 accustomed to the convention of trustworthy verbal scene painting, the
 32 disagreement between the two characters as to the location is a puzzle.
 33 It is not until the moment before Gloucester kneels in preparation for his
 34 fall that the ambiguity is resolved. In an aside, Edgar says, "Why I do

trifle thus with his despair/Is done to cure it" (4.6.33–34). Confessing 1
to his "trifling," Edgar alleviates uncertainty about the location. We are 2
not at Dover. The ground is indeed even and the sea not audible nearby. 3
Ironically, it is the blind Gloucester who is in the right in his correct per- 4
ception of the setting of this scene. Then after Gloucester "falls," Edgar 5
makes a definitive statement about the deception that he has perpetrated: 6
"Had he been where he thought, /By this had thought been past. Alive 7
or dead?" (4.6.44–45). This last sentence, "Alive or dead?", is not part 8
of Edgar's musings; it is a jocular question to Gloucester. For the audi- 9
ence, Gloucester is lying face down on the stage, having toppled not 10
very far from kneeling. There is no question of his being alive or dead; 11
he is alive. With the audience now firm in its sure comprehension of the 12
scene's location, there follows a second repetition of the scenic debate. 13
Edgar takes up again his refrain that there is a cliff here, and we are now 14
at its foot. During this transition, while the audience has been disabused 15
of its doubt, Gloucester has been converted from doubt into belief. He 16
asks once: "But have I fall'n, or no?" (4.6.56) and afterward accepts the 17
miracle of his safe descent. The section ends with both sets of perceiv- 18
ers, both sets of seekers of information about space—Gloucester and 19
the audience—moved from doubt to certainty, but to two different con- 20
clusions. Although the audience comes late to its identification of the 21
correct setting of this scene, there is finally no doubt that this scene is 22
intended to be played on a flat stage, which represents a flat piece of 23
ground.⁶ But it is the pervasive feeling of doubt and the resulting ambi- 24
guity that characterizes the scene prior to this epiphany. The ambigu- 25
ity at the heart of this metatheatrical trick is only made possible by the 26
scenic *tabula rasa* of the Renaissance stage. Any stage which has been 27
rendered perceptually vacant by virtue of the lack of representational 28
scenery possesses this capability of indeterminate blankness. Being 29
characteristically without scenery or indicative props (except on occa- 30
sion), the professional London stage of the era of *King Lear* typifies this 31
potential for scenic ambiguity. It is the innate ability of the stage to be 32
superficially nowhere in particular that provides the key to this scene in 33
performance. 34

1 Because the ambiguity of location is so critical, it is interesting to
2 consider how this scene is treated in various film versions of *King Lear*.
3 As a generally more fully fleshed medium than theatre, film fills much
4 of the indeterminacy innate to theatre that is a principal source of per-
5 ceptual ambiguity. For this reason, the cliff scene poses a particular
6 challenge to filmmakers. Whereas Gregori Kozintsev's film omits this
7 scene altogether, Peter Brook's version attempts to recreate the scenic
8 uncertainty of the audience by shooting Edgar and Gloucester walking
9 from a low angle, showing only the unparticularized sky behind them. It
10 is only after Gloucester "falls" that Brook switches to a high overhead
11 angle which reveals for the first time a flat landscape (Holland 60). An
12 analysis of Jonathan Miller's staging of the Dover Cliff scene by James
13 P. Lusardi and June Schlueter focuses particularly on how Miller first
14 dismisses but then recovers ambiguity about fictional space. The scene
15 begins with Edgar and his father in a seemingly high place amid a rocky
16 and barren landscape, thereby lending plausibility to Edgar's descrip-
17 tions. However, as the focus gradually narrows on the two figures,
18 limiting the view of their surroundings, ambiguity is reclaimed. At the
19 moment of his supposed fall, Gloucester throws himself out of the frame
20 as the camera remains fixed on the space he formerly occupied (5). Like
21 Brook's *Lear*, Miller uses the selective focus of the camera to mimic
22 in film the essential indeterminacy and potential for ambiguity latent in
23 theatrical space.

24 Through the influence of the perceptual situation of the theatrical
25 frame and the governing audience stance, the actual space of the stage as
26 stage is provisionally transposed into an "elsewhere." But without addi-
27 tional information, it remains an unparticularized dramatic space. Signifi-
28 cantly, this unparticularity is a quality that is unique to fictional space.
29 Actual-world space cannot be unparticular. We are always somewhere.
30 Although the details of actual space may be obscured from perception by
31 darkness or blindness or fog, the determined nature of actual space can-
32 not be effaced. On the other hand, fictional space may actually be indeter-
33 minate, as it so often is. And so, the potential for ambiguity, which arises
34 out of this characteristic of unparticularized fictional space, is a central

distinguishing feature of the transposition from actual space to fictional 1
space. “It may also happen that ambiguity is sustained in a number of sen- 2
tences with a certain consistency; then this opalescence applies to entire 3
spheres of objects, so that, in a manner of speaking, two different worlds 4
are struggling for supremacy with neither of them capable of attaining 5
it” (Ingarden 254). This is precisely the situation in *King Lear*, where a 6
kind of perceptual fog surrounds the beginning of act 4, scene 6. Without 7
specific visual scenic indicators, the audience is like Gloucester—blind 8
and in need of guidance from a more privileged seer. The debate between 9
Edgar and Gloucester as to the steepness of the land and the proximity to 10
the sea recreates the normal perceptual oscillation of space experienced 11
by the audience. Conflicting phenomena compete for priority. The flat 12
unadorned boards of the stage apprehended by the eye oscillate with the 13
phenomena of scenic description given to consciousness by the ear. Like- 14
wise for Gloucester, his own body experience suggesting flat land is in 15
competition with the detailed picture of the rising cliff vouched for by 16
his sighted guide. As Gloucester tries to determine his location, a meta- 17
theatrical play is practised on the audience as it also strives to determine 18
the landscape and evaluate Edgar’s cliff. The noemata dance as Edgar’s 19
insistence is countered by Gloucester’s doubt. The nonexistent cliff so 20
vividly described oscillates with the flat ground where Gloucester falls 21
and the unparticularized flat stage. The virtuosity of Edgar’s vertigo- 22
inspiring description plays in its extravagance into the metatheatre of the 23
basic convention. Ambiguity and perceptual ambivalence are central to 24
the oscillation which is itself essential to the theatrical experience. Rather 25
than arresting the oscillation and unbalancing perception to reveal the 26
underlying actual as metatheatre often does, the metatheatricality of this 27
scene depends on the doubling of the oscillation itself. 28

In one sense, the three locations—cliff, flat ground, and flat stage— 29
comprise three spatial levels of nested reduction, parallel to the levels 30
of fictionality in a play-within situation. Through the normal audiencing 31
process, the first reduction brackets the reality of the stage (space^a) and 32
permits it to be transposed to a flat area of ground (space^b). To this view, 33
Edgar’s cliff can be understood as a space-within (space^c), establishing 34

1 itself as another fictional world within the initial world-within of the
2 field. The secondary metatheatrical reduction attempts to displace the
3 newly real field with the fictional play-within of the cliffs at Dover. But
4 because of the perceptual ambiguity of space at the level of the first
5 fictional world, this nested model is not entirely accurate. Crippled by
6 the audience's lack of confidence in Gloucester's description, the spa-
7 tial noema of flat ground (space^b) does not fully resolve in perception at
8 first. As a result of the perceptual weakness of the place of level ground,
9 the interim noema of the unparticularized space persists, deferring its
10 realization to a specific locus. And at the same time, taking advantage
11 of this indecision, the noema of the cliff attempts, not to shift its own
12 ontological status by slipping inside the first fictional world as a space-
13 within, but aims to displace it altogether. Instead of targeting the proxi-
14 mate relationship of the oscillating noemata as phenomenal objects of
15 consciousness, this particular metatheatrical event directs its attention
16 to the noetic process of that competitive relationship. It is the oscillation
17 itself that is reflected by the additional reflexive layer. Ambiguity is a
18 fundamental quality of the oscillation providing a fulcrum across which
19 the two noemata are balanced. A secondary ambiguity arising from the
20 special unparticularity of theatrical space aligns itself with the perceptual
21 ambivalence of the audience stance. The result of this coincidence is that
22 uncertainty, doubt, and ambiguity mark the metatheatre of space, which
23 meditates on this perceptually open characteristic of staging. The blank
24 quality expressed by the stage that permits unparticularity is not found
25 to the same degree in staged people or objects. A transposed person or
26 object necessarily carries a certain amount of determinate particularity
27 in its material aspect, an aspect that is difficult to shed. However, an
28 empty stage may retain a significant indeterminacy in the transposition,
29 becoming simply "elsewhere," that is, "not here," and it is precisely this
30 ambiguity that attracts metatheatrical comment.

31 Metatheatrical play targets this general characteristic of ambiguity and
32 indeterminacy associated with the resolution of fictional space. And it
33 is through specific self-reflexive play with the contingent ontology of
34 fictional worlds that Gloucester's journey to the cliff might be described

as postmodern. Brian McHale (*Postmodernist Fiction*) argues that
 whereas modernist fiction “practices a poetics of the epistemological
 dominant...the dominant of postmodernist fiction is ontological” (10).
 This dominant focus on ontology manifests in fictional works through
 a persistent preoccupation with probing the limits of being with onto-
 logical instability and indeterminacy. With regard to fictional worlds, the
 postmodern interrogator asks not only “What kind of world is this?” and
 “How is it constituted?” but “What happens when worlds fail to become
 fully actualized or when they come into conflict with other worlds?” The
 viability of fictional worlds and the violation of the boundaries that secure
 fictional worlds are defining themes for postmodern fiction according to
 McHale. If, following Świontek, metatheatre is understood as the revela-
 tion of the constitutive communicative processes that create theatricality,
 then metatheatricality of space, which concerns itself with the creation
 and viability of fictional worlds, counts as postmodern—not in its poli-
 tics or by virtue of its date of composition, but through its consistency
 with a postmodern poetics that is also preoccupied with the ontology of
 fictional worlds.

Extending this line of thinking with regard to spatial metatheatre,
 I might be tempted to throw caution to the wind and suggest that all
 theatrical experience is postmodern in this respect. As argued above, the
 characteristic relationship of the apprehending audience as an embodied
 eye/I rooted in actual space to the fictional space of the play world pro-
 motes a strong tendency to maintain awareness of actual space and of the
 noetic processes involved in carving out fictional space from that actual
 space. In this way, the theatrical experience has, at least in this subtle way,
 a structural affinity for postmodern meditations concerning the ontology
 of fictional space. Likewise, the characteristic potential unparticularity
 of stage space and the *tabula rasa* renaissance stage space in particu-
 lar contribute to increased awareness by the audience of the performa-
 tive processes they undertake to bring fictional worlds into being. Again,
 this awareness fosters an implicit reading of the space as postmodern.
 Thus, the situation of the embodied spectator eye/I combined with the
 marked unparticularity of theatrical space foster what might be thought

1 of as a passive theatrical postmodernism. That is, theatre is interested in
2 the ontology of fictional worlds by virtue of its being theatre—an interest
3 innate to its nature as a machine given to the creation of fictional worlds.
4 Other art forms create fictional worlds, of course, but the unique relation-
5 ship of fictional space carved out from actual space and the audience
6 situated in that shared spatial matrix create special conditions which give
7 priority to self-reflections on contingent spatial ontology.

8 If this passive kind of postmodernism is pervasive in the lived experi-
9 ence of theatrical space, by contrast, more active and explicit postmod-
10 ernist play with regard to the ontology of space is especially rare. As a
11 single moment of metatheatrical play reflecting on the innate ambiguity
12 of theatrical space through a restaging of that ambiguity, the cliff scene
13 from *King Lear* is virtually unique. There are no other similar dramatic
14 instances of which I am aware. Given that the transposition of actual
15 space into fictional space to create fictional worlds of theatre lies at the
16 core of the theatrical process, it is curious that this primary constitu-
17 tive characteristic of theatricality is not targeted by metatheatrical play
18 more frequently. I think the reason for this paucity lies exactly in the
19 primacy of spatial perception in the creation of those fictional worlds.
20 Even in this example, the tenure of perceptual uncertainty is relatively
21 brief, lasting only forty lines. Eventually, the scene does solidify and the
22 world of the not-cliff resolves into a stable authenticated fictional world.
23 The brevity of the scene is of a piece with its uniqueness. Opalescent,
24 unresolved fictional space like that described by Ingarden is difficult to
25 present and difficult to maintain for any length of time. The transposition
26 of space is already a fragile perception due to the situation of the embod-
27 ied audience and the empty stage, both of which encourage awareness
28 of the actual and increase resistance to the realization of the fictional
29 as dominant. Whereas an inset world (world^c or lower) may collapse
30 leaving higher order fictional framing worlds intact, persistent and sus-
31 tained ambiguity permits neither creation nor collapse, thus stranding the
32 basic theatricalizing process related to the designation of space of that
33 originary fictional world (world^b) in a kind of limbo. When the primary
34 fictional world does not sufficiently resolve itself through authentication

and remains adamantly ambiguous, the whole theatricalizing process is at risk. Theatricality depends on this clear division of space and without it there can be no theatre.

In this way, the cliff scene from *King Lear* assails the processes of theatrical creation, laying siege to the incipient fictional world, but quickly capitulating in the face of complete collapse. Edgar abets his father's attempted suicide with the therapeutic aim of rebirth and a rebalancing of his outlook. Likewise, the competing worlds of the cliff and not-cliff press *King Lear* to a kind of suicide, attempting to collapse the actual theatre event from within. For the audience, this near-death experience serves to direct attention to those processes that bring birth and a balanced noematic perspective to fictional worlds. The metatheatricality of space, manifested here through a reiterated spatial ambiguity, intersects with a poetics of postmodernism to consider both the primacy of theatrical space and its fragile contingency.

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ENDNOTES

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1. See Hunt and Goldberg.
2. *Noema* (pl. *noemata*) is the term assigned by Edmund Husserl (*Cartesian Meditations* sec. 15; see also *Ideas* sec. 88) to the virtual sense impressions given to consciousness. A single physical object may express a cluster of associated noematic correlatives depending on how the object is viewed. An apple may be “red” and “round,” “a fruit” etc. I use “fictional noema” and “actual noema” to distinguish the dual and equivalent impressions of staged objects.
3. See Abel; Calderwood *Metadrama, Shakespearian Metadrama* and *To Be; Righter*.
4. A fuller description of Świontek’s metatheatrical theory can be found in his book *Dialog—Dramat—Metateatr: Z problemów teorii tekstu dramatycznego*. A French language précis of the book’s main ideas appeared a few years later: “Le dialogue dramatique et le metathéâtre.” In English, see my translation of excerpts from that article accompanied by an introductory critical essay: “Meta-enunciative Properties of Dramatic Dialogue” 121–150. Świontek is also the translator of the Polish edition of Patrice Pavis’ *Dictionary of the Theatre* (Wrocław [Breslau]: PAN, 1998).
5. *Noesis* is a reflexive action performed by consciousness when apprehending its own sense impressions. In the immediate moment, it is described by verbs involved in the mental processes of observing and noticing the present world as given. However, noesis is not limited by presence and can also be described by verbs that do not participate in immediate experience like *remembering*, *hoping*, and *imagining*. In the theatrical situation, the principal overarching noetic process is that of audiencing.
6. The dominant performance tradition is to have Gloucester stand on a flat unadorned stage and to jump or fall forward onto the same level. An informal survey of the seven productions of *King Lear*, mounted by the Stratford Festival of Canada between 1964 and 2002, reveals a consistent adherence to this tradition. In several productions where levels were incorporated in the unit set, Gloucester first walked down to the lowest level before setting himself to fall. Only one production, directed by Robin Philips (1985) had Gloucester fall from a small height, toppling forward off a platform raised perhaps only 8 inches. Taking a radical contrarian

view, Waldo F. McNeir argues for Gloucester falling 6 or 8 feet from a makeshift booth stage. Nevertheless, in spite of the fact that many critics including Jan Kott and G. Wilson Knight find the scene grotesque and absurd, it seems that it makes the most sense to be played on a flat and level stage surface.

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