

## Lear and Eurydice

### Religious experience, crisis and change

*Rowan Williams*

‘**W**HO IS IT THAT CAN TELL ME WHO I AM?’ King Lear’s baffled and angry cry comes as he begins to realize that what had hitherto ‘told’ him who he was – the attitudes of those around him, the visible trappings of power – had vanished. We rely on all sorts of things to tell us who we are; and when the tangible cues or pointers begin to disappear, the question becomes a source of real pain. I need to have something that I can reasonably say about myself, some way of presenting myself; and for this I need cues from outside myself, or so it has normally seemed. Lear’s anguish is an individual’s; but Shakespeare, as usual, speaks for more than an individual’s catastrophe. *Lear* is itself a play about a whole society, in which the classical cues for understanding who we are have been eroded. Nobody knows quite what human beings are, what their obligations to each other are. What seemed to be self-evident bonds and regularities are breached, and the breach is powerfully metaphorized in the devastating storm at the play’s heart. It is as if Shakespeare were looking at the social and religious upheavals of the Tudor era and reflecting them as a kind of rupture in the natural order. Edgar’s apparently random ejaculations and rantings in fact owe much to a pamphlet about exorcisms performed by Jesuit clergy in the North of England in the old Queen’s reign; change has allowed *possession* to come in; the mind itself is fractured by social revolution and can have no internal coherence, no consistent way of speaking about itself. It is owned now by warring and alien forces. Edgar’s assumption of the role of madman involves not only the stripping off of his clothes but the stripping away of a speech that is his own. Neither he nor anyone else can say who he is:

But madness, of course, is the most extreme response to crisis. There are other strategies, and the people of Shakespeare’s era knew a lot about them. You could reassemble an identity by sharpening the disjunction between your visible and your invisible life. The social order no longer effected what John Bossy has called the social miracle, the possibility of harmonious discourse that could outflank

rivalry.<sup>1</sup> Therefore the thing to do was to find or create a secret identity, an alternative world. The modern student may be bewildered or shocked by the overlap in Tudor England between Catholic circles, the world of espionage, the covert networks of homosexuality and the freemasonry of something very like atheism; but they are all alternative worlds, risky and shadowy, yet endowed with the glamour of an assurance that you would be *recognized* by others, that you were not left to pursue a course in which your only hope was to protect your interests by the untiring manipulation of a newly fluid social calculus. Tudor England was in important respects a paranoid society; the secret association (Catholic, freethinking, sexually dissident) both intensified the general climate of suspicion and promised a new and deep warmth of reassurance about who you might be.

### *Seeing what God sees*

But this throws the emphasis in finding who you are very much upon the *willingness* to sustain an identity that is not provided for you simply in virtue of being born into this time and place. Identity becomes something in which you appear to have a more active stake than before. You find who you are by separating yourself from what society offers – since this now appears empty or fails to deliver a sense of self solid enough to last. And when you put it in such terms, it ought to be clear that the Christian enterprise itself has some investment in this notion of an identity that is in some way ‘willed’, or at least voluntarily appropriated, *seen* to be true and compelling and then taken on. Christian identity in the first days of the Church involved a clear repudiation of social identities (as member of the Jewish community or citizen of the Empire or slave bound in to a particular scheme of property law or whatever) so as to assume a new but secret selfhood. The gospel tradition itself reinforced this by appeal to doing right in secret, or to the reasons of the heart, deep beyond what is concretely done or omitted in public activity. Christian identity and its integrity is presented (notably in Matthew’s Gospel and in much of Paul) as something for which external criteria are not straightforwardly available: what matters is what God sees, what is ‘within’.

It is no surprise, then, if, at times of dramatic change in the social sphere, one of the most familiar Christian strategies is to appeal to the *interior*. In terms of a certain kind of Christian theology, periods of publicly obvious stability in which Christians learn who they are

from belonging to unproblematically defined Christian institutions are abnormal. And, while there are problems of other kinds (as we shall see) with appealing to the interior realm, the instinct that finds some difficulty with drawing Christian identity from stable structures is a sound enough one. The crises of religious history are regularly about how the identity provided by earlier structures has become an identity inaccessible to the true and frightening reality of God: the mission of Jesus is to do with the possibility of an identity shaped by an awareness of God's absolution and welcome, prior to all considerations of acceptability and satisfying conditions. The monastic movement in both the patristic and the medieval periods assumes that the divine image in us can only be recovered by standing away from the ecclesial institution in some of its more obvious external manifestations. Luther's protest, building on the legacy of the Dominican teachers of the Rhineland, is about the domestication of the terror and darkness of the cross by systematic and controlled piety. If we are what we are created to be only in relation to God, and if our God is truly inaccessible to manipulation and conceptual finality, there is something odd about looking for Christian identity in a pattern of corporate life that will tell you exhaustively who you are and what you are to do.

### *Self-knowledge, introspection and a hidden Other*

But this is where problems begin to appear – and they appear with special intensity in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. For a variety of reasons, the shift away from the finality of the given structure becomes unprecedentedly radical. Hitherto there might have been ruptures in the life of institutions and communities, but the ambient culture had nonetheless continued to take for granted that the universe itself was stable and knowable according to certain categories; that the created subject occupied a place within a metaphysically assured environment, whatever might be the upheavals in grasping how you made contact with that environment. Self-knowledge was always first and foremost about knowing where you stood in the scheme of things; introspection would tell you a little about how you were at odds with or distanced from your proper place in the world, but it did not of itself tell you what your identity was. But, by the end of the sixteenth century, the examination of your history and feelings had come to be seen as offering unique evidence as to your nature and even your destiny.

Michel de Certeau's formidably complex treatment of this issue<sup>2</sup> contrasts the ancient and medieval discipline of self-knowledge with the emergence in the sixteenth century of a question that might be expressed as 'Who else lives inside of you?' or 'To whom do you speak?' Within the life of the speaking or thinking subject there is a hidden other, a reality to be unveiled and drawn into the speech of self-awareness. In the older tradition, you looked at what was proposed for your contemplation: God and God's world; and you looked at your memory of how you had acted and desired in the light of this. In the new style of the sixteenth century, you looked at yourself as the site of pain and of pleasure; at the phenomenology of your desire. You learned to narrate a history of *your* observation and appropriation of things (and of God), a view from this unique and unrepeatable site. In the theology of a Luther or the mystical self-description of a Teresa of Avila, the unique site of the self was, of course, located in relation to God; it was not in itself sufficient finally to 'plot' your true position. But, according to de Certeau, the characteristically modern self begins to emerge as God begins to recede in this picture. With the primary interest fixed upon this new kind of self-narration, the story of how it looks and feels from *here* (which will not be how it looks and feels from *there*), it is natural that God will, philosophically and culturally, come to be thought about as an item within this subject-focused landscape; and because God is never a determinate object in the landscape, the obvious next step is to translate God into some sort of function of the self. We are on the way to Kant's regulative ideas. And the self is left without definitive location, infinitely desirous, aware centrally of its unfinished and homeless character; it pursues itself, trying to detain itself in conversation, the endless reflexivity of (finally) the post-modern imagination. But the interlocutor, like Eurydice, retreats infinitely into darkness.

'Who is it that can tell me who I am?' In some sense, in the light of this history, you might say that this question, in its modern form, is the nemesis of Christianity's own logic. The turn inwards, the interest in 'experience' as a source of truthful insight, all this flows from the unsettlement introduced by Christian belief into a world in which the political and the religious converged or even coincided with little or no tension. By proposing the picture of a self whose citizenship did not fall under the control of a visible *polis*, Christianity made the self more radically than ever a problem to itself. It was to find a mirror for itself not in the deliverances of a

civic practice of the ordinary kind, but in something less obviously 'mediated' – the direct apprehension of God's grace, whether by reformed faith or by intense contemplative experience; this, at least, is where the Christian enterprise had led by the end of the Middle Ages. It is an intriguing but complex task to trace how what Hannah Arendt famously called the 'worldless' dimension of Christian commitment developed towards this point.

*The search for self: the need for reassurance*

The result, though, in the modern cultural and religious environment, is a none too happy picture. The turn to the subject in our understanding of Christian identity can lead to at least two distinct religious styles, neither of them sitting easily with anything much like classical Christianity. The more obviously problematic is the simple search for what induces positive experience – the 'spirituality' of self-nurture, with the self to be nurtured defined primarily in terms of a consciousness eager for reassurance. Gregory Jones, in a sharp critique of some modern American writing about 'the care of the soul', notes the difficulty of developing such care independently of any conviction about a *telos*, a specific goal for the enterprise of being human: the particular writer under review, says Jones, 'substitutes the random rituals of a religious tourist' for the tradition of disciplined growth.<sup>3</sup> In the absence of a real *other* in religious life, an other not amenable to control, not defined by the meeting of my needs, all that can happen is the mobilization of immanent resources in the subject – the hidden resource that therapeutic ritual, calm and quiet can uncover. The elusive partner sought for restlessly by the modern subject, the Eurydice in permanent flight, is lured gently back into the circle of awareness, consolingly filling the particular need or emptiness of the active subject: an inner god or child or male or female or whatever. And the clear implication is that to be in any sense told who you are or might be by a *concrete* other, finite or infinite, to be defined by a commitment from and to such an other so that you are always awkwardly responding to, not drawing in the life of the other, is unwelcome and probably unintelligible – which in turn lays heavy stress upon the individual's welfare and occludes whatever might be involved in the forging of a *common* language of aspiration and flourishing. The good of any particular other is likely to become a happy adjunct of my own inner arrival at a state of spiritual equilibrium and non-violence; but it is not likely

to be seen as *intrinsic* to the very definition of my own final well-being.

***The search for self: typologies of temperament and psyche***

This is the 'soft' side of contemporary spiritual self-nurture, an atmosphere in which there is probably little commitment to any theoretical structure. But there is also prevalent a style that purports to offer harder theoretical categories in the recapture and taming of Eurydice. Typologies of temperament or psyche are familiar enough in the history of our attempts to make sense of ourselves, from the four humours of classical and medieval medicine to the less reputable patterns of astrology. They have always been tolerably good servants and very bad masters. The contemporary fascination with typology (Myers-Briggs, the Enneagram) is little different; in terms of supposedly scientific validity, our modern types rest on no less fragile a basis. Good servants, in some circumstances (though, on an unsympathetic analysis, the question would have to be put as to whether any one would serve as well as any other); bad masters not so much (though this can be a problem) in encouraging wooden and static description and self-description as in the undercurrent of sheer fascination with the self that they foster. Wittgenstein memorably observed<sup>4</sup> that Freudian psychoanalysis appealed not because of its empirical toughness and experimental conformability (which are not in great supply) but because of the 'charm' of being shown to yourself as an actor in a complex and ancient drama, the charm of being told that you are more interesting than you thought, that your acts and words encode great things. Something of the appeal of modern typologies might be traced in the same way. It is charming to be told that we are interesting; it is (rather paradoxically) delightful to be assigned to categories, because then our motivations appear as more than arbitrary. We can be read, interpreted – not in terms of external structures into which we fit, but in terms of internal economics, the psyche's given resources. And the tools of such an analysis are reassuringly transferable; you can refine the analysis for yourself, and do so with greater and greater detail.

***Learning how to speak of self***

At best, this can help to reinforce the sense that no individual exhausts the range of human skill and resource; at worst, it can supply an admirable alibi for self-criticism ('This is how I am'). In either case, it nudges to the margin consideration of how I *learn* to

speak of myself, the structures of power that give or fail to give me room to talk in certain ways. If I am going to recognize the sense in which I am not and cannot be the creature of the structures around me, I need a more not a less acute diagnostic skill in looking at what in fact *does* condition or define me. The message that 'all along' I had within myself the resources to define myself more truthfully is not necessarily good news, if it fails to take any account of those events, those shifts in relations in the material and social world, that might activate change in how I am able to see myself (and others).

The primitive Christian appeal to interiority was inseparable from belonging in a radically different kind of community, in which worth was not measured by the visible. Here the 'inner', hidden character of what matters most is not what justifies a retreat from sociality or a relativizing of corporate existence; it is what justifies and makes historically possible a community that is not immediately the victim of its own competitive and therefore violent conventions of recognizing worth. By appealing to the groundless and 'invisible' invitation extended by God, it blurs or breaks frontiers that depend on performance, and is in *that* sense sceptical of 'appearances'. Its appeal is not to what lies inside us, hidden in some elusive but finally identifiable pattern, some decipherable script, but to what is strictly and absolutely not available for inspection – the act of God's grace. Thus, from such a primitive Christian point of view, the interiority of modernity and postmodernity is not interior enough: by fixing our attention on the disappearing Eurydice, or trying to bring her back into conversation, the contemporary constructions of selfhood attend to an idol of possible visibility, not to the real absence of God from all image and definition, to what most strictly does not appear – the 'secret Father' of the Sermon on the Mount, who sees but is not seen.

***The body: marking the limits of freedom***

But, in an age in which the legacy of Lear's anguished unknowing has become so acute, how do we escape the seduction of 'experience' and the turn to the consolations of modern and post-modern interiority? Perhaps what we most need to reacquaint ourselves with is the *bodiliness* of this 'site' of experiences of pain and pleasure. Whether we recognize it or not, the self that converses with itself and looks for the hidden conversational partner in its depths is already placed, simply as a material organism. To be

aware of your body is necessarily to be aware of the passage of time which is marked in the body, and so of the inescapable temporality of your identity. There is always a 'before' to who and what I am; I am not a psychic unit in a void, and my questioning about who I am cannot but arise from the time that my body *embodies*. To be aware of your body is also to be aware of your vulnerability – not simply to experiences of pain or pleasure, but to a world of resistant objects which I must learn my way around. To be aware of the body is to be aware of the limits of will.

The body is, for the Christian, precisely the place 'between' the externality of performance, the satisfying of conditions for acquiring or maintaining a 'proper' identity, and the interior of fantasy and privacy. The body's materiality in a world of material processes marks the limit of social freedom – the limit of what any given order in community can change. We all speak; we all die. At the same time, it marks the limit of what can be said about the inner liberties of the psyche. We all grow; we are all taught to negotiate the world. What's more, it marks the ineradicable differentiation within humanity. We are all gendered, – and thus also we are all desired and desiring in one way or another, our differences are realized as lack and – sometimes – love. This 'site' is a more complicated affair than the virgin territory of the experiencing subject within, but it is the site that has begun to attract rather more theoretical attention in some quarters (from European feminist philosophers, for instance). And all this suggests that a spirituality for our own times of crisis and change will need to have firmly in view the language and rhythms of bodiliness. 'Who is it that can tell me who I am?' Perhaps the answer to that will lie in the appropriation of our flesh – learning how to be still and to breathe, how to move or gesture with meaning; very much what another religious tradition calls mindfulness.

*Becoming engaged where grace is really felt*

And this is itself a theologically significant business. To become aware in this context of my fleshliness and mortality is to see this mortal flesh as 'desired' by grace. That is: to be deliberately and mindfully in the world, within limits, is to acknowledge that the self has frontiers, in the otherness of other subjects and other material realities, but also in what is other to all others, the world's context or ground. Some philosophers have written about the 'experience of contingency'. This may be to give hostages to the very experiential



fortune we are trying to challenge; but it expresses something of what is going on when we take up occupation of the site of our bodies in stillness before God. We are *granted* a place to be, simply in virtue of being there as material beings made by God: the physical act of drawing breath becomes an affirmation of my receiving of the gift of my place, an acknowledgement that I am 'wanted' by God in my fragility, my time-bound being which depends for its continuance on the physical environment. What is more, the Christian adds to this general acknowledgement the conviction that mortal flesh has become the carrier of divine meaning without reserve, in the history of Jesus Christ; to appropriate one's identity 'in the flesh' is also to appropriate an identity in Christ. That is to say, the complex of relations and acts (social and material) which binds us to Jesus will tell us who we are – not in virtue of our belonging in a visible institution, but in virtue of the way in which that institution, with appallingly uneven success, mediates that relation with the God of Israel as *Abba* which grounded the human identity of Jesus, the relation in the light of which all other criteria by which human identities are shaped will be judged.

We need, then, in our present time of crisis, to preserve real scepticism about alleged openings for spirituality and interiority in various quests for meaning or reassurance, even in various supposed rediscoveries of the sacred. Probably the most significant fact in popular religion today is its resurgent physicality – flowers at the site of a murder or fatal accident, candles and 'votive offerings' (remember Kensington Palace last autumn): the desire to do something material, to put your body somewhere and to leave a record of that being-somewhere is the beginning of a recognition that who I am is not a matter to be settled either by appeal to everyday social belonging (less than ever these days, when the patterns of belonging are fluid and vague) or by the retreat to the interior. It finds some sort of answer at the frontier that is the body – always a concrete 'site', always responding to what is there before, always engaged; always where grace is really felt, not as an 'experience' (a word that so often here means an emotionally coloured thought or self-description), but as what touches the skin and the lungs: earth, water, air, fire.

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## NOTES

1 John Bossy, *Christianity in the West, 1400–1700* (Oxford, 1985), chapter 4.

2 Michel de Certeau, *The mystic fable, volume 1: The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries* (Chicago and London, 1992), especially pp 195–200.

3 L. Gregory Jones, 'A thirst for God or consumer spirituality? cultivating disciplined practices of being engaged by God', *Modern Theology* 13.1 (1997), special issue on 'Spirituality and social embodiment', pp 3–28; quotation from p 15.

4 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Lectures and conversations on aesthetics, psychology and religious belief*, ed Cyril Barrett (Oxford, 1970), pp 24, 51.