King Lear, Mandel's *Station Eleven*, and the Shakespearean Apocalypse: Meditations on Pandemic and Posthumanism

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Abstract | From the end of World War II through the late 20th century, the Shakespearean vision of apocalypse—of *King Lear* as harbinger of the Holocaust—predominated in intellectual culture. Whereas postwar critics could speak of "Shakespeare our contemporary," the 21st century has carried us beyond the world depicted in his drama. Drawing vocabulary from Marxist literary historian, Raymond Williams, this essay offers an epochal analysis of Shakespeare's early modernism, drawing contrasts with Emily St. John Mandel's postmodernism. Shakespeare's *Lear* and Mandel's *Station Eleven* both depict world-shattering catastrophe, though through different literary-cultural lenses. Writing as an early-modernist, Shakespeare continues to mirror aspects of our current lifeworld. But he could not anticipate the technocultural developments that have reinvented the structures and machinery of capitalism, communication, transportation, information, and energy supply, and how these have reshaped and enhanced the embodied human subject. For late 20th century readers, Shakespeare's *Lear* prefigures the terrors of Auschwitz and nuclear Armageddon. But the play fails to envision the biological and technoscientific forces that have transformed us in the 21st century, carrying our species into realms of the posthuman. As cyborg assemblages, our lives are electrified and "plugged in" to a global energy grid. And, as a biological corollary to the cyborg, the human body has been reconceived as an "interspecies" organism, "a transversal entity, fully immersed in and immanent to a network of non-human (animal, vegetable, viral) relations" (Braidotti 193). Hence, *King Lear* fails to anticipate our current lifeworld in its advanced technologies, bodily enhancements, and emerging crises. A viral pandemic—Mandel's fictive version as well as our own COVID-19—gives the proof.

Keywords | Apocalyptic Literature, Pandemic, Dystopian Literature, Epochal Analysis, Postmodernism, Posthumanism, Technoculture

It may be that, after more than 300 years, the novel is finally starting to exhaust Shakespeare's potential. […] As the canon of literature written in English continues to branch out into competing traditions […] the role of Shakespeare seems likely to diminish further. But this possibility does not deny the extraordinary resource that the Shakespearean canon has offered to narrative fiction. Nor should we underestimate the importance of the agon between Shakespeare and the novel in the latter's development as an innovative, politically engaged, and culturally inclusive literary form.

<div align="right">Marianne Novy, "Shakespeare and the Novel" (294)</div>

The Symphony performed music—classical, jazz, orchestral arrangements of pre-collapse pop songs—and Shakespeare. They'd performed more modern plays sometimes in the first few years, but […] audiences seemed to prefer Shakespeare to their other theatrical offerings.

"People want what was best about the world," Dieter said. He himself found it difficult to live in the present […].

<div align="right">Emily St. John Mandel, *Station Eleven* (37)</div>

Emily St. John Mandel's novel, *Station Eleven*, presages ruin at the hands of a virus: the Georgia flu, one far more devastating than the COVID-19 Coronavirus we live with in the year 2020, though it may well prove a warning blast for the future. The novel opens with a stage performance of *King Lear*, in which Arthur Leander (the actor playing Lear) dies in earnest onstage—of a heart attack, not the virus—though the viral pandemic strikes that same evening. In mere weeks, it wipes out 99% of the human populace worldwide. Thrown into a near-feral existence, Mandel's survivors are left to rebuild civil society.

The subtitle, "Meditations on Pandemic and Posthumanism," gives the occasion for this essay. Over the past several months, our lifeworld has changed, though the extent of that change is yet to register. Much like the London theaters of Shakespeare's plague years, my own nation's theaters and arenas—and universities—have closed. I began writing in mid-March, not at school but while "sheltering at home." On that day, the U.S. president declared federal disasters in the states of Washington and New York. If schools were in session, I'd have taught the first act of *King Lear* in an undergraduate Shakespeare survey; I'd have shown students the opening scene of Peter Brooks's nihilist masterpiece, his 1971 film adaptation of *Lear*. But, instead of classroom prepping, I started writing.

Following Jan Kott (among other mid-20th century critics), I used to speak of "Shakespeare our contemporary." As Marjorie Garber has noted, "it is one of the fascinating effects of Shakespeare's plays that they have almost always seemed to coincide with the times in which they are read, published, produced, and discussed" (xiii). This has been especially true of *King Lear*, whose "'meaning' […] began to change in response to cataclysmic world events like the exploding of the hydrogen bomb, political turmoil in Eastern Europe and Cuba […] and the start of the Vietnam War" (Garber 231). The play then becomes "Shakespeare's bleakest and most despairing vision of suffering, all hints of consolation undermined or denied" (231). Alongside the Book of Job, Elie Wiesel's *Night*, and Mandel's *Station Eleven*, I have included Shakespeare in coursework on Literature and Apocalypse, teaching *Lear* as a harbinger of the Holocaust. World war, the Nazi death camps, and Hiroshima: these remain the great crises of mid-20th century modernism, to which Shakespeare would lend his voice and tragic vision.

But crises pile on crises. In 1993, Brian Massumi writes, "what society looks toward is no longer a return to the promised land but a general disaster that is already upon us, woven into the fabric of day-to-day life" (11). He adds,

> The content of the disaster is unimportant. Its particulars are annulled by its plurality of possible agents and times: here and to come. What registers is its magnitude. In its most compelling and characteristic incarnations, the now unspecified enemy is infinite. Infinitely small or infinitely large: viral or environmental. (11)

His words have proved prophetic. And now, two decades deep into the 21st century, we are left to ask: How much of our current lifeworld is mirrored in *Lear*? "New problems indeed arise," notes Peter Erickson, "but they are not Shakespeare's problems, nor does his work contain the materials for all the possible options" (144). We do need Shakespeare's insights into human suffering; yet our epoch has entered a phase that we don't yet comprehend, one that needs desperately to be questioned. It is not Shakespeare, really, nor Mandel, nor the literature of apocalypse that this essay is trying to come to terms with. The aim of this essay, ultimately, is to find a name for the world that has come upon us, surprising us by its force. In epochal terms, I'll call it posthumanist; in literary-cultural terms, I'll call it post-Shakespearean.

Drawing vocabulary from Raymond Williams, this essay offers an epochal analysis of Shakespeare's early modernism, drawing points of comparison/contrast with Mandel's postmodernism. Both offer representations of world-shattering catastrophe, though through different literary-cultural lenses.[1] This essay then turns to explore Mandel's appropriation of Shakespeare, which, as I read it, is in turn celebratory, nostalgic, and critical. In *Station Eleven*, the Traveling Symphony—a ragged troupe of

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[1]As a precursor to the following, Mark West reads *Station Eleven* through the experimental genre of salvagepunk, "in which salvage is the work of uncovering apocalyptic revelations hidden in the rubble of catastrophe in order to make a new world" (2). While my own analysis focuses on the failure of "expert systems" in technoculture, West reads Mandel as the collapse of "global capitalism" (20). Also, what I describe as a four-century transit through the "stages of modernism" is, in West's broader terms, both beginning and end of "the age of the Anthropocene" (22). One further point separates West's analysis from my own: In the world in which I'm writing, pandemic is not a trope merely. And, as we're beginning to see, the threats to "global capitalism" have become far more than the stuff of fiction.

actors and musicians who move from settlement to settlement across the U.S. Great Lakes region, entertaining survivors—includes Shakespeare in its repertoire. A member of the troupe, Kirsten Raymonde, had played Lear's stage-daughter on the night of the pandemic. Some twenty years later, we're told, "She'd been thinking lately about writing her own play. […] She wanted to write something modern, *something that addressed this age in which they'd somehow landed*" (288; emphasis added). Mandel's narrative continues:

> Survival might be insufficient, she'd told Dieter in late-night arguments, but on the other hand, so was Shakespeare. He'd trotted out his usual arguments, about how Shakespeare had lived in a plague-ridden society with no electricity and so did the Traveling Symphony. But look, she'd told him, the difference was that they'd seen electricity, they'd seen everything, they'd watched a civilization collapse, and Shakespeare hadn't. In Shakespeare's time the wonders of technology were still ahead, not behind them, and far less had been lost. "If you think you can do better," he'd said, "why don't you write a play and show it to Gil?"

> "I don't think I can do better," she'd told him. "I'm not saying that. I'm just saying the repertoire's inadequate." (288)

"[T]he repertoire's inadequate": with these words Mandel declares Shakespeare's distance from our own pandemic-riven 21st century. For postwar critics like Jan Kott, Maynard Mack, and R. A. Foakes, Shakespeare's *Lear* prefigures the terrors of Auschwitz and the atom bomb. But it fails to envision the technocultural innovations that transform us into cyborgs, carrying the human species into realms of the posthuman. Such is the thesis of this present essay.

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> The postmodern is […] the force field in which very different kinds of cultural impulses—what Raymond Williams has usefully termed "residual" and "emergent" forms of cultural production—must make their way.

> Frederick Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (6)

At any moment within any given epoch, the dominant culture authorizes, institutionalizes, and polices norms and practices. But, despite its powers and authority, the dominant culture contains within itself alternative (or oppositional) norms and practices lingering on from previous ages; these "residual beliefs" (122), as Williams terms them, remain viable culturally (and esthetically), though embraced by a minority. At the same time, some practices will be "emergent," showing where culture is heading; and many in the dominant culture will embrace these emergent beliefs, trends, and technologies, even as others will resist them. Within late 20th century Western culture, Williams lists organized religion, "the idea of rural community," and monarchy as "predominantly residual" (122). In contrast to these concrete examples, his discussion of emergence rests—necessarily, perhaps—in generalizations:

> By "emergent" I mean, first, that new meanings and values, new practices, new relationships and kinds of relationship are continually being created. But it is

exceptionally difficult to distinguish between those which are really elements of some new phase of the dominant culture […] and those which are substantially alternative or oppositional to it: emergent in the strict sense, rather than merely novel. (Williams 123)

Though residues of the medieval remain in *King Lear*, the play still strikes as modern in questioning the feudal order, cosmic hierarchy, and divine justice. These it invokes, as if putting them on trial.

More germane to this essay is "the problem of emergence" (124), that is, of the extent to which Shakespeare anticipates us in our own belated lifeworld. "Shakespeare is out ahead of us," writes Harold Bloom in 1998, he "enables us to see realities that may already have been there but that we would not find possible to see without him" (487). Laying aside the critical controversies surrounding *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (1998), we can make use of Bloom.[2] Though not "the human" *per se*, it's the 'ethos of modernity' that Shakespeare "invents."[3] As for the limitations within Shakespeare's understanding of our humanness—particularly as the "category of the human" continues to evolve through the 21st century—these limitations can be glimpsed in our technocultural transit through postmodernism to posthumanism, wherein "genetically recombined […] animals and vegetables proliferate alongside computer and other viruses, while unmanned flying and ground armed vehicles confront us with new ways of dying" (Braidotti 187). As Rosi Braidotti notes, within these emergent forms of biotechnology, "humanity is re-created as a negative category, held together by shared vulnerability and the spectre of extinction, but also struck down by new and old epidemics, in endless 'new' wars, detention camps and refugee exodus" (187).

Though Williams's Marxist analysis of dominant-residual-emergent practices takes class-consciousness as its focus, the focus of this present essay rests in postmodern technoculture, with its "breaching of the distinction between technology and nature" (Mansfield ch. 11). Writing in the mid-1970s, Williams could not have envisioned the full impact of the then-nascent technologies that would reinvent the structures and machinery of capitalism, communication, transportation, information, energy supply, and even the embodied human subject. As Nick Mansfield puts it, the cyborg (part cybernetic machine, part living organism) has become "commonplace in postmodern life, and must be recognized as one of the products of multinational, militaristic capitalism—a result of the inventions and strategies developed to fight the Cold War" (ch. 11). In her "Cyborg Manifesto" (1985), Donna Haraway writes: "by the late twentieth century […] we are all chimeras, theorised and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs. The cyborg is our ontology; it gives us our politics" (190).[4]

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[2]For the critical response to Bloom, see Desmet and Sawyer.

[3]"The plays," Bloom writes, "remain the outward limit of human achievement; aesthetically, cognitively, in certain ways morally, even spiritually. They abide beyond the end of the mind's reach; we cannot catch up to them. Shakespeare will go on explaining us, in part because he invented us" (pp. xvii–xviii). For a balanced discussion of Bloom's thesis, see Mustapha Fahmi, "Shakespeare: The Orientation of the Human."

[4]Mansfield elaborates: "It is only from where we are now, cyborgs in a technologised world, that our politics can begin, not from reference to some distant dream of our eternal nature that we imagine will save us from the debased present" (ch. 11).

Williams could not have known how technology would restructure the 21ˢᵗ century lifeworld, including the very category of the human; and neither could Shakespeare. And the Georgia flu, as described in Mandel's *Station Eleven*, shows us what a post-pandemic, post-Shakespearean world might look like. In appropriating Shakespeare, Mandel picks up where the bard leaves off: Shakespeare's ending is Mandel's beginning. But, before exploring their competing versions of catastrophe, we must situate Shakespeare in his time.

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He was not of an age but for all time!

<div align="right">Ben Jonson, "To the Memory of … Mr. William Shakespeare" (line 43)</div>

But to the cold war generation and the postwar art world, [*King Lear*] seemed like a prescient vision of the present moment. […] [I]t was not so much because of the pathos of its title character […] but because of the worldview the play seemed to body forth—a bleak, bombed-out landscape of nihilism.

<div align="right">Marjorie Garber, *Shakespeare and Modern Culture* (241)</div>

In declaring him "for all time," fellow playwright Ben Jonson expressed sentiments that linger residually to this day: that Shakespeare's art is universal and transcendent, loosed from time, place, and epoch; that he captures the unchanging, essential spirit of human nature; that he reaches the highest aesthetic while sounding both the warning voice of conscience and a clarion call to our noblest nature. In the 18ᵗʰ century, the mantle of bardolatry fell to Samuel Johnson: Shakespeare's characters, writes Johnson, "are not modified by the customs of particular places" or "by the accidents of transient fashions or temporary opinions" (11). Rather, "they are the genuine progeny of common humanity, such as the world will always supply and observation will always find" (11–12).

By the 19ᵗʰ century, the "Shakespeare industry" had gathered up its full cultural capital (Taylor 197); and while claims of universalism continued (these being useful in an age of colonialist expansion), claims of Shakespeare's cultural dominance began shifting from "timeless classic" to modernist.[5] In America, it was Ralph Waldo Emerson who announced the new Shakespeare. "It was not possible to write the history of Shakespeare till now," declares Emerson in 1850, "Now, literature, philosophy, and thought, are Shakespearized. His mind is the horizon beyond which, at present, we do not see" (194–95). In sum, "he wrote the text of modern life" (201).

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[5]The so-called "Shakespeare industry" is a complex web of performance and commodification promoting the cultural hero-worship of Shakespeare and his character-creations. As N. V. Zakharov and B. N. Gaydin describe it, the Shakespeare industry includes the dissemination and reappropriation of his works in "theatrical, cinematographic and TV stagings," as well as the "commercial exploitation of the playwright's image and those of [his] characters" in "gift production […] on T-shirts, cups, key rings, magnets, etc." ("Shakespeare industry"). It also includes the "intellectual tourism" of "places where the playwright lived and created his masterpieces [and] where his famous characters lived their lives (e.g., the actual house at Stratford-upon-Avon, or the fictitious balcony of Juliet's in Verona)" ("Shakespeare Industry").

Since Emerson's declaration of Shakespeare's modernity, it's more common to keep Shakespeare grounded in history, albeit in a "prescient" way, particularly in works like *King Lear*. With apologies to Ben Jonson, Shakespeare *is* "of an age," in that the epoch in which he wrote initiated our own—or, rather, our own *through the end of the 20th century*. His works carry us into the cultural, political, ethical, epistemological, psychological, and existential realities of "early modernism," in that the cultural energies unleashed in his plays were "emergent" in his time. Many of the same energies remain "dominant" in our own age, though some have become "predominantly residual." Four centuries have passed since the 1608 publication of *King Lear* in quarto. During those centuries, Western culture has transited through several stages of modernism, passing from theocracy to secularism, from religious certitude to epistemological skepticism, from feudalism to the nation-state, from horse-drawn wagons to jumbo jets, from wood-burning furnaces to steam engines to cyclotrons. (And, one might add, from wool to polyester.) If Shakespeare is early-modernist, then we can call Mandel postmodernist in the when and the how of her writing. Couched in these period terms, their works stand as bookends to the grand epoch of modernism.

In the aftermath of world war, Western artists and intellectuals were thrown into a crisis of self-reflection. And in that self-reflection, what did they come to acknowledge? That the old cosmic order (which kept God in command of created nature) could be replaced by a thoroughly human history. That experimental science could "master" and transform the material world. That, culturally, the landscape would evolve into the megalopolis cityscape, creating an urban ethos. And that politics (of a European stripe) would pursue nationhood as identity and destiny—ingredients, we know now, of racism and colonialism. *These are the works of modernism*, and they come to an exclamation point in an explosion over Hiroshima and an opening of the gates at Auschwitz and other death camps, out of which as many as 100,000 living skeletons stepped out, the bodies of some 6,000,000 others having been incinerated, their ashes scattered over fields nearby.

Such is the mid-20th century context in which *King Lear* came to be read: "After two world wars and Auschwitz," writes Maynard Mack in 1964, "our sensibility is significantly more in touch than our grandparents' was with the play's jagged violence, its sadism, madness, and processional of deaths, its wild blends of levity and horror, selfishness and self-lessness" (25). The technological, political, social, and psychological energies of modernism had gathered like storm clouds over Hiroshima and Auschwitz. Catastrophes such as these belonged to the generation of my parents, who lived through economic depression and world war; and in that generation's response to such catastrophes as these, the seeds of postmodernism were sown.

As a reader of *Lear*, I confess that I've identified with Edgar, son of the blinded Gloucester, whose last words seem to invoke my parents' generation and its hardships:

EDGAR
    The weight of this sad time we must obey;
    Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.
    The oldest hath borne most; we that are young
    Shall never see so much nor live so long.

(*King Lear* 5.3.329-332)[6]

They—my parents—become "the oldest" of whom Edgar speaks; and I would never have presumed to "see so much" as they, in that the world during my lifetime could never come close to theirs in its share of suffering, anxiety, deprivation, and terror. Now, I'm not sure. And I'm left to ask: Can we still declare Shakespeare "our contemporary" if we've arrived somewhere else? How far into the 21st century can Shakespeare's *Lear* carry us, if its lifeworld stops at the gates of the Nazi death camps? The play bears witness to the howling of victims, but its ending gives no answer as to what comes after. It teaches us to rage and to mourn, but not how to move on, not how to survive.

Williams has warned us of "the problem of emergence" and the difficulties of naming. Emergent forces are transforming late 20th century postmodernism into something else: Call it digimodernism, metamodernism, post-millennialism, or post-postmodernism. Whatever you call it, it suggests that further change is upon us. Unsurprisingly, its points of transit lie in postindustrial capitalism and technoscience; its world organization is multicultural and multinational; its productions are not of glass and steel, but of electrons and photons. Ours has become an age, not of material production but of information: Silicon Valley has replaced Motor City and the Midwest industrial Rust Belt. Ours is an age of social media, whose living human face is replaced by an avatar. And ours is an age of black-boxing and "expert systems," of artificial intelligence, virtual reality, human prosthetics, and genetic engineering. And in this cyborg age, writes Haraway,

> "Integrity" and "sincerity" of the Western self gives way to decision procedures and expert systems…. No objects, spaces, or bodies are sacred in themselves; any component can be interfaced with any other if the proper standard, the proper code, can be constructed for processing signals in a common language. (163)

So, to the post- in post-postmodern, shall we add post-Shakespearean? Having anticipated the answer to this question, we might observe more closely what Shakespeare taught postwar, post-Holocaust culture about catastrophe.

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> And I saw another sign in heaven, great and marvelous, seven angels having the seven last plagues; for in them is filled up the wrath of God.

> Revelation 9.6 (KJV)

> KENT
> Is this the promised end?
> EDGAR
> Or image of that horror?

> William Shakespeare, *King Lear* (5.3.268–69)

Beyond *King Lear*, Shakespeare and Mandel share a second text in common, the Book of Revelation: a book of providential history, wherein the Christian God has written the final, as-yet-to-be-enacted chapter. Within this apocalyptic text, the world is destroyed

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[6]I quote from Bevington's *Complete Works*.

and remade. And yet, despite its Scriptural invocations, *Lear* does something that few, if any, works in English dared do before: It pits raw nature against divine justice and asks, Where is God when the Holocaust comes? Literary medievalism (that is, most lifeworld representations before Shakespeare) affirms that evil, in the end, will be revealed and punished, and that the good, though they suffer, shall have their reward. Shakespeare's *Lear* destroys that pretty notion by creating characters whose innocent suffering mocks all claims of divine justice. Bloom is right: "For those who believe that divine justice somehow prevails in the world, *King Lear* ought to be offensive…. You have to be a very determined Christianizer of literature to take any comfort from this most tragic of tragedies" (493). In this specific sense, Shakespeare's *Lear* offers a rehearsal of Auschwitz:

> The death of Lear cannot be an atonement for us, any more than it serves as an atonement for Edgar, Kent, and Albany. For Edgar, it is the final catastrophe, his godfather and his father both are gone, and the contrite Albany (who has much to be contrite for) abdicates the crown to the hapless Edgar, Shakespeare's most reluctant royal successor. […] The remorseful Albany and aged Kent, soon to join his master Lear in death, do not represent the audience: Edgar the survivor does, and his despairing accents send us out of the theater unconsoled. (507)

In this play, "the gods" are not yet dead; what dies, rather, is the conviction that heaven has any interest in administering justice or mercy.[7] After *Lear*, humanity must take its case directly to nature: It is not as an immortal soul, made in God's image, but rather as a rational animal, that humanity must seek its identity and work out its salvation.

While rejecting the play's apparent nihilism, Mandel embraces its secularism. In *Station Eleven*, belief in a God-governed, providential universe is treated as a form of insanity. Tyler, son of Arthur and his second wife Elizabeth, reads from the Book of Revelation; his mother teaches him to do so. Of the survivors who seek refuge in the New Severn airport, they alone interpret the pandemic in apocalyptic terms:

> "Right now he's over by the quarantined plane," Clark said, "reading aloud to the dead from the Book of Revelation."
>
> "Oh." [Elizabeth] smiled, and resumed her knitting. "He's a very advanced reader."
>
> "I think maybe he's picked up some strange ideas about, well, about what happened." He still had no words for it, he realized. No one spoke of it directly. […]
>
> "He thinks the pandemic happened for a reason," Clark said. […]
>
> "Everything happens for a reason," she said. She didn't look at him. "It's not for us to know." (260–261)

Tyler has learned his mother's catechism well:

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[7]Jacobean blasphemy laws denied Shakespeare the right to refer to the Judeo-Christian "God," so it's to pagan and presumably pre-Christian "gods" (4.1.41–42) that the characters in *Lear* make their complaints.

> "Everything happens for a reason," Tyler said. […] "That's what my mom said," he added when everyone stared at him.
>
> "Yeah, but that's because Elizabeth's a fucking lunatic," Garrett said. […]
>
> "In front of the kid?" Annette was twisting her Lufthansa neck scarf between her fingers. "That's his mother you're talking about." (253)

Years later, having established his doomsday cult at St. Deborah by the Water, Tyler preaches to the Traveling Symphony in similarly apocalyptic terms:

> "My people," the prophet said, "earlier in the day I was contemplating the flu, the great pandemic, and let me ask you this. Have you considered the perfection of the virus?" […]
>
> "There was the outbreak of 1918, my people, the timing obvious, divine punishment for the waste and slaughter of the First World War. But then, […] then came a virus like an avenging angel, unsurvivable, a microbe that reduced the population of the fallen world by, what? […] [S]hall we say ninety-nine point ninety-nine percent? […] I submit, my beloved people, that such a perfect agent of death could only be divine. For we have read of such a cleansing of the earth, have we not?" (59–60)

In his skewed reading of Revelation, Tyler sees himself as an agent of this "cleansing." Shaken by his sermon, the Symphony packs up and heads out, quickly.

Thoroughly and unambiguously, Mandel rejects divine agency as a cause of pandemic. And in her characters' response to human suffering, we note a further point of contrast between *King Lear* and *Station Eleven*. As I've suggested, the play teaches its audience to rage and to mourn, but not how to survive. And rage, or the lack thereof, separates Shakespeare's characters from Mandel's. Lear is driven by it: "Howl, howl, howl!" (5.3.262). No one in Mandel expresses anything approaching it. Their response to "the collapse" (145), as characters in *Station Eleven* come to call it, is fear, disbelief, confusion and, above all, sadness. A friend from Arthur's youth, Clark Thompson is among the survivors at New Severn. Turning seventy "in Year Nineteen," "he wasn't specifically sad anymore, but he was aware of death at all times" (276). Excepting those few crazed and patently evil cultists—followers of Tyler—who see "an avenging angel" in the virus, Mandel's characters learn to accept present conditions and resolve to live as best as they can, with art replacing religion as consolation for life's relentless suffering.

In bringing humankind to the brink of biological extinction, "the collapse" (145) marks the failure of postmodern technoculture, whose "expert systems" had carried humankind into realms of the posthuman. Mandel may be right in her prediction: The impending catastrophe of the 21st century may well come with the defeat of technology by an avenging nature. In *Station Eleven*, it begins with a strain of influenza. But it's not medical science alone that falls before the virus. A further catastrophe follows, and this second strikes at the heart of postmodern technoculture—the pulsing electronic body of the global energy grid. The Black Plague depopulated medieval Europe but did not

destroy its technologies, such as they were. In Mandel's world, it's the destruction of technoculture that throws humanity back into a Hobbesian "state of nature."[8]

Paradoxically, the viruses that kill us are not, themselves, alive. On their own, "they are inert strings of protein, incapable of any action whatsoever, including self-replication. Placed inside a living host, however, they spring into action and replicate" (Baumlin 16). What is a virus, if not a coded sequence of genetic information? And what is a computer virus, if not a coded digitized sequence of information? Haraway notes the homology between virtual and viral pandemic: "The diseases evoked by these clean machines are 'no more' than the minuscule coding changes of an antigen in the immune system, 'no more' than the experience of stress" (74). She goes further in describing the human cyborg—a biotechnic "assemblage" part cybernetic machine and part living organism—as a data-driven biotic system:

> It is not clear who makes and who is made in the relation between human and machine. It is not clear what is mind and what body in machines that resolve into coding practices. In so far as we know ourselves in both formal discourse (for example, biology) and in daily practice […] we find ourselves to be cyborgs, hybrids, mosaics, chimeras. Biological organisms have become biotic systems, communications devices like others. There is no fundamental, ontological separation in our formal knowledge of machine and organism, of technical and organic. (Haraway 82)

Of a sudden, we find ourselves peering beyond postmodernism, anticipating a lifeworld in which "the boundaries between living and nonliving, human and nonhuman, biological and engineered, have dissolved" (Baumlin 16).

If the pre-modern world is God-made, and the modern world is human-made or materially engineered, then the postmodern world is made of what? Streams of electrons? Strings of protein? And of the human being, what shall we say? Of what stuff are we made? More than structure or biotechnical assemblage, we are "a process *of becoming*" (30; emphasis added), as Pramod K. Nayar puts it, an aggregate of "connections and mergers between species, bodies, functions and technologies" (30-31).[9] Though the cyborg emerges in late 20th century discourse, its cultural presence remains largely unacknowledged (except in sci-fi films and college classrooms) and unseen. When the dominant culture comes at last to recognize our becoming-posthuman, we shall have peered beyond postmodernism itself. As a biological corollary to the cyborg, the posthuman body describes an "interspecies" organism (Braidotti 193), "a transversal entity, fully immersed in and immanent to a network of non-human (animal, vegetable, viral) relations" (193). Within posthuman theory, the body can no longer be conceived

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[8]By no means am I preaching against postmodernism and its technological enablements; these, as Mansfield notes, offer "a new strength wrought by prosthetics or genetic avant gardism, a new reach of human movement produced by both long distance and cyber-transport, a new pleasure brought by infinitely proliferating entertainment technology and a new social life offered by more efficient management of resources and time" (ch. 11). Postmodernism offers these lifestyle enhancements, *but only so long as the power grid works*.

[9]In posthumanist theory, "two terms recur: 'assemblage' and 'becoming-'—the latter hyphenated, in that it rejects essentialist definitions while anticipating further evolution in bodies, lifeworlds, and lifestyles" (Baumlin 14).

as a single, unified organism living independently of other biological life; our physical being, rather, subsists within colonies of many millions of symbiotic/parasitic microbial "companion species" (Nayar 126), one of which, in Mandel's fictive lifeworld, is the Georgia flu virus.

Let us work our way back now, from computer viruses and the Coronavirus to Mandel's appropriation of Shakespeare.

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Russian Hackers Attacking US Power Grid and Aviation, FBI Warns

Bloomberg News headline (15 March 2018)

Self-Driving Uber Car Kills Pedestrian in Arizona

New York Times headline (19 March 2018)

"God, why won't our phones work?"

Mandel, *Station Eleven* (242)

The complete social collapse that Mandel imagines is caused not simply by a natural disaster, a viral pandemic that carries off most of the global human population. It is caused, additionally, by the postmodernist division of information into "expert systems" that made human survivors incapable of repairing or restarting the black-boxed technologies upon which they relied. This is shown poignantly in the airport near the town of New Severn. At the onset of Georgia flu, when technicians left the airport for their homes, the travelers didn't know how to maintain the airport's emergency generators. The strength—as well as the Achilles' heel—of postmodernism lies in the increasing complexity of its technoculture. Cars nowadays can park themselves, though their human owners can't fix a dashboard light. Our information systems, which seem to need no human supervision, have become so sophisticated that expertise over them must be dispersed. *No one person possesses the information that can hold all these systems together*. It would take an almighty omniscient being to possess all the information and know how to use it, thus keeping technoculture "powered," in effect alive.

Following one of Bruno Latour's thought-experiments, I'd ask readers to glance around the room in which they might find themselves, noting the extent to which today's lifeworld has evolved into realms of the posthuman.[10] The information and expertise

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[10]"Look around," writes Latour: "Consider how many black boxes there are in the room. Open the black boxes; examine the assemblies inside. Each of the parts inside the black box is itself a black box full of parts. If any part were to break, how many humans would immediately materialize…?" (162). The human embodiment of nonhuman technologies turns agents into "actants," as exemplified by an overhead projector:

> Take, for instance, an overhead projector. It is a point in a sequence of action (in a lecture, say), a silent and mute intermediary, taken for granted, completely determined by its function. Now suppose the projector breaks down. The crisis reminds us of the projector's existence. As the repairmen swarm around it, adjusting this lens, tightening that bulb, we remember that the projector is made of several parts, each with its role and function and its relatively independent goals. Whereas a moment before the projector scarcely existed, now even its parts have individual existence, each its own "black box." In an instant our "projector" grew from being composed of zero to one to many. How many actants are really there? (161)

upon which this world and its technologies are built (and that includes the word-processing computer used in composing this essay) lie outside of our powers. This world doesn't ask us to monitor or maintain its systems. But there's a twist. Mandel's novel does not depict the postmodern condition in its technoscientific completion or fulfillment; rather, it depicts the aftermath of its catastrophic failure. The virus is merely the first blow: The North American power grid fails because its "expert systems" still require a human interface. A fully postmodern world would serve its human inhabitants, but it should not need those human inhabitants in order to function. The automobile—the car-as-actant, to use Latour's phrasing—should drive itself. The lights should turn themselves on and off and on again as we move from room to room.

In a fully realized postmodern technoculture, shouldn't the power grid be capable of maintaining itself? Why should a self-regulating nuclear or hydroelectric power plant ever shut down? Again, the transit from medievalism to modernism to postmodernism is a transit from divine providence to human reason to artificial intelligence, the ultimate destination being a technology whose computational systems evolve independently of human consciousness and human agency. But Mandel's novel catches our species unprepared, while its AI technologies remain incomplete—a work-in-progress. Put baldly, the nonbiological constructs of cyborg technoculture still need human cultivation and oversight. And then there's the virus. Its effect in Mandel is to pull the surviving population back into a pre-modern state, where the technologies enabled by modernism are rendered inoperable.

> This was how [Clark] arrived in this airport: he'd boarded a machine that transported him at high speed a mile above the surface of the earth. This was how he'd told Miranda Carroll of her ex-husband's death: he'd pressed a series of buttons on a device that had connected him within seconds to an instrument on the other side of the world, and Miranda—barefoot on a white sand beach with a shipping fleet shining before her in the dark—had pressed a button that had connected her via satellite to New York. These [were the] taken-for-granted miracles that had persisted all around them. (233)

More than inoperable, these "taken-for-granted miracles" of technology *could no longer be understood*, since no single person ever understood them in their totality anyway. Beyond the technicians who programmed the computer or who ran the emergency generator, the objects of an electrified world become so many black boxes (Latour 161–62), "opaque" in their internal workings and, for that reason, incomprehensible. Which brings us back to the airport near New Severn and Clark's post-pandemic Museum of Civilization.

Once their "use" (or energy supply) is lost, the Museum of Civilization's pre-pandemic artifacts can be displayed as art—that is, as pure form lacking function:

> BY THE END OF Year Fifteen there were three hundred people in the airport, and the Museum of Civilization filled the Skymiles Lounge. In former times, when the airport had had fewer people, Clark had worked all day at the details of survival. […] But there were many more people now, and Clark was older, and no one seemed to mind if he cared for the Museum all day. There seemed to be a

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For further discussion of Latour, see Baumlin (12–13).

limitless number of objects in the world that had no practical use but that people wanted to preserve: cell phones with their delicate buttons, iPads, Tyler's Nintendo console, a selection of laptops. There were a number of impractical shoes, stilettos mostly, beautiful and strange. […] Traders brought things for Clark sometimes, objects of no real value that they knew he would like: magazines and newspapers, a stamp collection, coins. There were the passports or the driver's licenses or sometimes the credit cards of people who had lived at the airport and then died. Clark kept impeccable records. (258)

Having been thrown into a dark age worse than anything Shakespeare's plague-ridden world would have experienced or imagined, Mandel's survivors are left to recover the power supply necessary to rebuild their information systems and technologies.

Having described the technocultural contexts of postmodernism and the interspecies biology of posthumanism, we return to the theme of apocalypse. This next point is perhaps obvious, but it marks the chasm separating Mandel's novel from Shakespeare's play: *King Lear* ends in unmitigated catastrophe, whereas *Station Eleven* begins with it. Shakespeare offers death without consolation, whereas Mandel focuses on survival. Mandel's novel lacks the tragic-nihilistic vision that Kott, Mack, Foakes, and other postwar critics have found in *Lear*. And this contributes to the differences in their literary modes as well as their lifeworlds: Whereas *Lear* presents an early-modernist version of apocalypse, *Station Eleven* begins in crisis and works its way toward melodrama. As Mandel describes it, *Station Eleven* is neither sci-fi nor dystopian in genre. "Hopeful" is the word she has used to describe it, and her choice of ending reinforces this sentiment:[11]

"I know you're tired," [Clark] said. "[But] there's something I think you'd like to see." […] [Kirsten] wasn't in the habit of following strangers, but he was elderly and moved slowly and she had three knives in her belt. "Where are we going?" "The air traffic control tower." […]

On the ninth landing, Clark rapped a pattern with his cane on a door and they were admitted into an octagonal room. […] James, may we borrow the telescope?" James moved the tripod over and Clark peered through, the lens aimed just below the dim spot in the sky. […] "The telescope's focused," he said. "Don't move it, just look through." Kirsten looked, but at first she couldn't comprehend what she was seeing. She stepped back. "It isn't possible," she said. "But there it is. Look again." In the distance, pinpricks of light arranged into a grid. There, plainly visible on the side of a hill some miles distant: a town, or a village, whose streets were lit up with electricity. (311–12)

So the power comes back on, after all. Civilization is saved. And so the novel, *Station Eleven*, offers prospects for a happy ending to the three characters—Jeevan, Clark, and Kirsten—who bear most of the narrative.

I'd call attention to a further point of contrast between *Station Eleven* and *King Lear*, one pertaining to the relation between Kirsten, Arthur's stage-daughter, and Tyler,

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[11]Mandel, "An Evening." Early reviewers agree, seeing hope in the novel (West; Barnett; Tripney).

Arthur's natural-born son. Tyler's cult has been chasing the Traveling Symphony ever since a young girl (chosen to be Tyler's fourth wife) escaped, stowing away with the Symphony as it passed through St. Deborah by the Water. So, some twenty years after the pandemic, Kirsten and Tyler meet at last. In a climactic scene, Arthur's stage-daughter kneels on the ground while the son stands over her, his rifle aimed at her head. Others from Tyler's cult, including a disaffected young boy, stand in the near distance, their weapons raised.

In Shakespeare, Gloucester's bastard son Edmund puts Lear's beloved Cordelia to death. In Mandel, it's the son who dies: An unnamed boy—a malcontent in Tyler's cult—kills Tyler and then himself. In committing suicide, the boy provides Mandel with her scapegoat. *He's* the one who carries out what Shakespeare's Gloucester had sought in attempting suicide: to be freed from seemingly meaningless violence and suffering. The novelist's decision as to "who lives, who dies" can be read without reference to any Shakespearean source or analogue. Still, whether ironically or unconsciously, Mandel diverges from Shakespeare in allowing the stage Lear's daughter to live, even as the actor's natural son dies. In the novel's first chapter, Kirsten is onstage, playing a phantasm—Lear's memory of his daughter as a child. In Shakespeare's play, the daughters, when grown up, all die: Cordelia by hanging, Regan by poisoning, Goneril by suicide.

Perhaps the greater irony lies in Shakespeare's own act of revision. As Samuel Johnson famously writes, "*Shakespeare* has suffered the virtue of *Cordelia* to perish in a just cause contrary to the natural ideas of justice, to the hope of the reader, and, what is yet more strange, to the faith of chronicles" (161). Deeming it a play "in which the wicked prosper, and the virtuous miscarry" (161), Johnson's sense of decorum led him to prefer Nahum Tate's 1681 adaptation over the 1608 original. Preserving the lives of Lear, Gloucester, and Cordelia—whom he marries off to Edgar—Tate's version dominated the Restoration and 18th century stage. In his "Epistle Dedicatory," Tate claims to have been "racked with no small fears for so bold a change, till I found it well-received by my audience" (Tate). And Johnson placed himself among that appreciative audience:

> In the present case the publick has decided. *Cordelia*, from the time of *Tate*, has always retired with victory and felicity. And, if my sensations could add anything to the general suffrage, I might relate, that I was many years ago so shocked by *Cordelia's* death, that I know not whether I ever endured to read again the last scenes of the play till I undertook to revise them as an editor. (161–62)

In *Holinshed's Chronicles* (1586), Cordelia is reunited with her father, arrives with a force from France, defeats her wicked sisters, and restores Lear to the throne. The more literate of Shakespeare's audience would have known the story and its ending, *which he rewrites*. And Shakespeare's revision defies the moralizing tendencies of traditional, "exemplary" literature. A justice premised in *lex talionis*—an eye for an eye—presumes that when evil is manifest in the world, its measure will be taken and the price that it exacts will be nothing less, *nor should it be more*, than an equal measure of good. Unless and until the good pay that price, evil remains unchecked. In *King Lear*, the suffering of the good seems in excess of the evil unleashed by Goneril, Reagan, Cornwall, and Edmund. Far more than Mandel's novel, Shakespeare's play leaves one to meditate on unmitigated evil and the innocent suffering that follows.

In Judeo-Christian tradition, an apocalypse records both the destruction *and recreation* of the world. Apocalypse leads, paradoxically, to a happy ending, however terrifying the path toward that ending. As projected in Shakespeare—and illustrated in the mid-20th century by Hiroshima and Auschwitz—apocalypse reduces to destruction merely. Riven Barton distinguishes apocalyptic literature from literary dystopias, which "signify a continuation of life *after the apocalypse has already happened*" (6; emphasis added). For, "regardless of how horrible it may be, dystopia is not an end, but a struggle for continuation. They are shadow projections of current society, hyper-exemplifying problems and potential fears that already exist" (Barton 6). In contrast, Heather J. Hicks sees post-apocalyptic and dystopian as "essentially synonymous" terms:

> In some respects, dystopian content is symptomatic of the distinction between the Christian apocalyptic tradition, which culminates in the utopian New Jerusalem, and the secular post-apocalyptic genre, which, without fail, imagines the destruction of modernity as leading to a state of at least provisional suffering and oppression. (5)

Hicks's list of the conventions of "post-apocalyptic genre fiction" mirrors *Station Eleven*: "ragged bands of survivors; demolished urban environments surrounded by depleted countryside; defunct technologies; desperate scavenging; poignant longing for a lost civilization, often signified by the written word; and extreme violence […] enacted by roving gangs of outlaws" (6; see also Heffernan). As Carmen M. Méndez-Garcia suggests, the term post-apocalyptic does seem to suit Mandel's novel:

> There is often, in the postapocalyptic genre […] a "promise of reconfiguration, of resetting and rebuilding a society unencumbered by the problems of the world that was destroyed" [Smith 291] that is certainly present in Mandel's text. *Station Eleven* is a fantasy mostly about goodness and decency in human nature, and the possibility of communal creation of little cells of camaraderie, a kind of preservation of the best of culture, society, and previous models of civilization. Even the mandatory evil cult leader, the Prophet, seems clichéd, in a move that I would argue does not only adhere to generic rules, but is also intentional as it emphasizes the optimism of the text. (113–14)

As this essay comes to a closure, it is noted that much remains unexplored in Mandel's appropriation of Shakespeare. I do not criticize Nahum Tate for revising Shakespeare's revision of the chronicle history; Tate was, after all, adapting an old play to new tastes and circumstances. In charting the interpretive history of *Lear*, it has been shown how the play came to mirror the crises of mid-20th century postwar, post-Holocaust intellectual culture, as well as how a contemporary novelist like Mandel questions the bard's continuing relevance into the 21st century. In Mandel's depiction of a postmodern, post-pandemic lifeworld, we're simply told that "the repertoire's inadequate" (288). Posthumanism reaches beyond Shakespeare: "His mind" is no longer "the horizon beyond which […] we do not see" (Emerson 195).

I do agree with Bloom: "Suffering," he writes, "receives its full reality of representation in *King Lear*, hope receives none. Hope is named Cordelia and she is hanged at Edmund's command; Edgar survives to battle wolves, and to endure a heroic

hopelessness. And that, rather than ripeness, is all" (Bloom 506). That's not Nahum Tate's message. And that's not the message of *Station Eleven*.

In the year 2020, in the midst of viral pandemic, for all our postmodern belatedness, we need still to bear witness to the truth of suffering; we need *King Lear*.

But hope, too, is needed at this time.

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