

## In response to George H. Jensen's "The 'Truly Shakespearean' Trump: Reading Fascism in *Project 2025*"<sup>1</sup>

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<https://ellids.com/archives/2024/10/6.2-Response-Baumlin.pdf>

I appreciate Dr. Jensen's exploration of the ways that we seek to interpret and respond to (in effect, "to read") our times through the patterns of narrative (call them *mythoi*) expressed in literature. In *Attitudes Toward History* (1937), Kenneth Burke interpreted his own historic moment—one marked by the rise of Hitlerian fascism—through contrasting lenses of comedy and tragedy. As Burke writes, "the progress of human enlightenment can go no further than in picturing people not as *vicious*, but as *mistaken*" (41; emphasis in original). To read American politics today through the *mythos* of comedy is to assume that its "players" have good will and are capable of correction; in which case, laughter might offer a curative to an opposing side's "mistaken" beliefs. One might mention satire here as a more militant version of comedy, wherein mockery and caricature replace laughter as antidotes to an opposing side's folly. In comedy, both sides learn to laugh together, reconciling; in satire, one side seeks to shame the other into submission. (In this respect, the satiric "correction" is cruel, *but not deadly*.) In contrast, to read politics through the *mythos* of tragedy is to see viciousness only: The crime of an opposing viewpoint demands scapegoat-punishment ranging from banishment to death. There's one further *mythos* to mention: that of epic, which celebrates the violent victory of one side over an enemy. In this fourth *mythos*, the ultimate act of heroism rests in that enemy's destruction.

In my original essay, I ascribed "the Shakespearean moment" to an ironizing awareness of the hypocrisies rifling through current political discourse. I still believe that aspects of contemporary politics *can* be read and editorialized or responded to "in Shakespearean manner." Irony (and its more militant deployments in satire) do offer a defense against folly. But Jensen is right: The mere declaration, "How Shakespearean!" "can also be a substitute" for living critical discourse, "allow[ing] us to think we

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Jensen's work, in turn, was written in response to my paper, "'The Shakespearean Moment' in American Popular/Political Culture: Editorializing in the Age of Trump," published in *Language, Literature, and Interdisciplinary Studies*, vol. 6, no. 1.

understand something we don't want to think about." Rather, "it can end discussion" (2.2). The danger lurking in such facile editorializing is that it fails to acknowledge the nearness of tragedy. The personal foibles of the likes of Trump are easy to mock, but the potential consequences of their fascism cannot raise laughter.

Shall we learn the lessons of history as taught by Burke, Arendt, and Jaspers, wherein the rise of European fascism led to the incommensurable mass suffering of the Holocaust? Indeed, the ideology currently promoted under the guise of *Project 2025* is no laughing matter. It is impermeable to ironizing, because its world-vision is totalizing, totalitarian, and—in all its bureaucratic banality—profoundly one-sidedly literal. In its literalism, Jensen discloses that singular aspect of the MAGA-fascist mentality which makes it immune to irony: Its ideology (that is, its underlying narrative or *mythos*) sees only evil in its political opponents—and it's an evil that must be eradicated at all costs. There is, in fact, a mythologizing narrative underlying the MAGA movement as a whole, whose most radicalized adherents imagine themselves as a crusading army meant to crush secularism, progressivism, and "wokeism" (Toke; "Woke"). It's not an exaggeration to declare its *mythos* apocalyptic: Win or lose electorally, the Christian-nationalist makers of *Project 2025* aim for nothing less than an enforced ideological "cleansing" of the nation.

For example, we're told that "the next conservative President must make the institutions of American civil society hard targets for woke culture warriors" (*Project 2025: Presidential Transition Project 4*):

This starts with deleting the terms sexual orientation and gender identity ('SOGI'), diversity, equity, and inclusion ('DEI'), gender, gender equality, gender equity, gender awareness, gender-sensitive, abortion, reproductive health, reproductive rights, and any other term used to deprive Americans of their First Amendment rights out of every federal rule, agency regulation, contract, grant, regulation, and piece of legislation that exists. (4–5)

We know what a "hard target" is. A term from modern military doctrine, it describes heavily-fortified installations—embassies, military compounds, government centers—that prove difficult to take down and destroy. The language here pretends to be defensive, aimed at protecting "American civil society" against progressive (i.e., "woke") policies. But, as the authors note, "this starts with" the cleansing of all politically progressive language, law, and policy (and, implicitly here, of the government institutions themselves, along with their career civil servants). Clearly the project's creators are preparing for battle legally, ideologically, and otherwise.

Though it was conceived in 2022, public scrutiny began the year after, with the start of presidential campaigning. The admonitory title of a web article by the Global Project Against Hate and Extremism (GPAHE) reads as "Project 2025: A Heightened Threat of Christian Nationalism and Authoritarianism." In late 2023, when media outlets began reporting in earnest on the project, the connection between Christian nationalism and MAGA-style extremism was already clear. Published 13 November 2023, the article begins: "[T]oday [the GPAHE] released its deep-dive analysis into the '2025 Presidential Transition Project' (*Project 2025*), led by the far-right Heritage Foundation and supported

by more than 80 organizations, many well-known for their extreme positions and for pushing hate and Christian Nationalism" (GPAHE). It continues:

"Our country is facing an authoritarian threat from far-right extremists and Christian Nationalists in a new, unique, and frightening way," said GPAHE co-founder Wendy Via. "Voters, political figures, and the media must be on alert that Project 2025 is an authoritarian roadmap to dismantling a thriving, inclusive democracy for all."

GPAHE released its analysis roughly a year out from the 2024 elections, arguing that this plan for the "next conservative president" would, under the guise of religious freedom, impose on all Americans policies pushed by Christian Nationalists, including draconian and reactionary measures when it comes to sexual health and reproductive rights, LGBTQ+ equality, racial equity, public education, the climate, and preference an exclusionary interpretation of Christianity, stripping rights from other communities.

While readers might accuse the GPAHE of a strong progressivist bias, the same should not be said of National Public Radio (NPR) and its interview of Tim Whitaker, founder of *The New Evangelicals*. Published 14 February 2023, the NPR title reads, "More than half of Republicans support Christian nationalism, according to a new survey" conducted by the PRRI/Brookings Institute. "'We need to understand that the world of Christian nationalism largely rejects pluralism, which this study shows,' [Whitaker] said. 'Most Christian nationalists—either adherents or sympathizers—either agree or strongly agree with the notion that they should live in a country full of other Christians'" (Lopez). The web article continues:

Whitaker said he has faith that most Americans will continue to reject these ideas when they hear them, but he's worried about the outsized influence these views have in the Republican Party.

"The reality is that a lot of these folks—especially the adherents—are very militant in this belief that God has given them a mandate to rule over the nation," he said. "And so for them, I think that compromise is a sign of weakness and [the Republican Party] needs to understand what they are dealing with." According to the survey, adherents of Christian nationalism say they will go to great lengths to impose their vision of the country. Jones with PRRI said they found adherents are far more likely to agree with the statement: "true patriots might have to resort to violence to save our country."

"Now is that everyone?" asks the PRRI/Brookings spokesperson. "No," Jones adds, "but it's a sizeable minority that is not only willing to declare themselves opposed to pluralism and democracy—but are also willing to say, 'I am willing to fight and either kill or harm my fellow Americans to keep it that way'" (Lopez).

We have seen this attempt at cleansing before. Self-styled as epic, the Hitlerian-fascist myth of an Aryan Third Reich ended in unspeakable tragedy. This brings me to Jensen's further point. "Is the Holocaust," he asks, "beyond human understanding" (2.3)? As Arendt writes to Jaspers, "We are simply not equipped to deal, on a human, political level, with a guilt that is beyond crime and an innocence that is beyond goodness or virtue." In Jaspers' response, the Holocaust defies representation, literary or otherwise:

“a Shakespeare would never be able to give adequate form to this material” (qtd. in Jensen 2.3).

Elsewhere, I’ve argued that Shakespearean tragedy gives us a harbinger of the Holocaust. It’s in *King Lear*, though I admit that even this most terrifying of plays falls short in its representations of terror. But it has something to teach us, still. The slaughter of millions may lie beyond rational comprehension, but not beyond human feeling. What the character of Lear teaches us is the failure, not so much of human understanding, but rather of human language in confronting the horrors of Holocaust. In the end, Lear witnesses the defeat of the French army and death of his daughter, Cordelia: “Howl, howl, howl!” are the guttural, animalistic moans that escape his throat in response. As Shakespeare teaches us, *there are no words*. The play’s survivor, Edgar, speaks last, and his speech reinforces this fact:

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. (qtd. in Baumlin, “*King Lear*,  
Mandel’s *Station Eleven*” 19–20)

We live in a time when scholars, teachers, and intellectuals generally must take a stand. If the new-old fascism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has its way, our scholarship, our teaching, our freedoms as intellectuals will suffer. Though the true full horrors of Holocaust lie beyond human telling, still we can stand in silent witness to its victims while declaring our own strength of will against fascism, vowing “never again.”



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