Every time I read *King Lear* I am startled by the moment when the characters recognize they have forgotten Lear and Cordelia:

Kent. I am come
      to bid my King and master aye good night;
      Is he not here.

Alb. Great thing of us forgot!
    Speak Edmund, where’s the king? and where’s
    Cordelia?
    Seest thou this object Kent?

[The bodies of Goneril and Regan are brought in..

Kent. Alack! Why thus?

Edm. Yet Edmund was belov’d:
      The one the other poisoned for my sake,
      And after slew herself. (5.3.232-40)

The Arden edition suggests that this forgetting should not be surprising because “there is no reason why Albany should suspect that Lear and Cordelia were in danger; and he has plenty to occupy his mind” (p. 200). But this seems almost as serious a myopic statement as the play’s forgetting King Lear and Cordelia. If we are concerned only with the action of the play this footnote might be right. But why then would the play call attention to the forgetting?

Shakespeare could have been lazy and just decided to get back to Lear in the easiest available way. But he also could have been the typical Shakespeare of the tragedies and had something surprising and powerful in mind in insisting on the distance between the practical world of struggle for the other characters and the kind of space that Lear and Cordelia create for one another. Once we attend to that possibility we are likely also to notice that the forgetting does not end with Albany’s recognition. The play insists on the contrasts involved by immediately switching attention again. Albany asks Kent to see “this object,” the bodies of Goneril and Regan. It is only when the play turns to the dying Edmund’s intention to do “some good” (242) that it gets around to recognizing something must be done for the prisoned pair. And Edmund by this point in the play is in many ways no longer part of the action. He shares more with Lear and Cordelia than with Edgar and Albany.

The basic critical challenge posed by the end of *King Lear* is probably the need to characterize the kind of world Lear and Cordelia come to inhabit. We know that this space is composed by the power of their love for one another. But how are we to judge the relevance of that love for those who must obey “the weight of this sad time”? Is it a figure of transcendental grace, or does it force Lear to self-delusion in order to maintain that sense of difference after Cordelia is dead? I want to propose a third possibility that
may occur only to a modernist, and that requires a mode of abstraction that does not entirely satisfy me. Yet it does explain the possible philosophical energies at work in this conclusion at work primarily in the negatives and the contrasting imperatives.

If we ask what links all the villains in the play, clearly the answer is that they all commit themselves to various versions of Edmund’s faith in something like raw nature. And the storm plays its role in reinforcing this texture of correspondences. The crucial step here is to recognize that Edmund’s naturalist metaphysics is of a piece with the Machiavellian ethics that he brings out as the yet unrealized potential of Goneril and Regan. Naturalism deals with desires and ambitions as also pure facts that are caught up in wills to power and resist any moral constraints, which in nature seems mere weakness and cowardice.

So far nothing I have said is news for Renaissance scholars. And it is not at all incompatible with a Christian reading of the play. But the case gets more complicated when we have to place the good but ineffectual characters like Kent, and Gloucester, and even Edgar. They are not Machiavellian. But they have no power in a world that encourages and reward Machiavellian behavior. And they have no alternative world on which to look for power: Gloucester’s despair and Edgar’s sheer dogged coping are logical responses to their situation. Christian explanations can handle this, but with some strain since they seem condemned to the order of nature rather than choosing it. There seems no redemption for them.

Not so Lear and Cordelia who have learned to occupy a different world, where Edmund’s death is plausibly just a “trifle” (5.3.294). That world is defined largely by the great speech when they must go off to prison. The focus there is not on eternal salvation but on the particular state of two persons who now have suffered enough for Lear simply to offer a repeated series of negations of Cordelia’s depressed acceptance of the need to see again Goneril and Regan:

No, no, no, no! Come, let’s away to prison;
We two alone will sing like birds I’ the cage;
When thou doth ask me blessing, I’ll kneel down,
And ask of thee forgiveness: so we’ll live,
And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh
At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues … (5.3. 8-13)

The negatives are motivated primarily by the space Lear’s reunion with Cordelia opens for his imagination. That space is not devotional. Rather it is experienced as the permission to explore a logic of parataxis radically opposed to the logic of imposed contradiction facing the other characters. Lear sees himself and Cordelia entering a world where possibility flows into adjacent possibility for pleasure and fulfillment. Something about the world they share warrants an attitude very different from the versions of scarcity economics that his daughters impose on Lear and society imposes on the daughters to compete to be the one wife of Edmund. This new world of
freedoms is a place where one can, as Cordelia does, utter without paradox the claim that finally she is completely recognized by her father, “And so I am, I am” (4.7. 70).

But what can this assertion of identity entail since she has so little time to live. This is one basic question that demands a response to Lear’s final speech. What can he see that he demands we also observe:

And my poor fool is hanged! No, no, no life!
Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life,
And thou no breath at all? Thou will come no more,
Never, never, never, never, never!
Pray you undo this button: thank you, Sir.
Do you see this? Look on her, look, her lips,
Look there, look there! (5.5.304-09)

Christian salvation provides one such story. But I think that model would have been too easy for Shakespeare. It is not an accident that \textit{King Lear} is set in a world where the gods have no bonds to humans; in that world the secular would be the best the characters could get. Everything else might be demonic. So we need to be more abstract, and possibly thereby more concrete. What kind of life can Cordelia have still after all these negations? I propose that she has the kind of life that can live at least in memory as something simply different from the order of nature that defines life and death for the other characters. The relation between father and daughter exemplifies something not subject to nature, even if it also may not secure transcendental life.

So rather than turn to Christian thinking I want to invoke almost its opposite—the tradition of Positivist thinking that tried to stabilize what we could know about nature when we completely expunge it of all transcendental elements. But I want to view these Positivist demands under the distinct project of Wittgenstein’s \textit{Tractatus Logicus Philosophicus} that paid careful attention to what becomes of our values when we see they have no place in nature. Wittgenstein’s is by far the most compelling version of the Positivist spirit for me because his by far the most appreciative of what cannot be thought or found in the world where empiricist values prevail. Machiavellian principles are not quite the same as Positivist ones, but given Edmund’s grounding them in a theory of nature, they are more consistent with empiricism than one might think. And by using Wittgenstein we can recast Manichaen theology into the absolute conflict of a domain of fact ineluctably divided from a domain of value. This enables us to take Lear’s sense of a space in which Cordelia still lives as not just an escapist failure of character showing that he has learned nothing from his adventures except perhaps better manners to his servants.

I need from the \textit{Tractatus} only two statements. Then I can return to one more feature of the play that these quotations establish as central to its power. First there is Wittgenstein’s most general statement about the incompatibility with values in the same
way that a language capable of picturing the world is incompatible with one that expresses a personal stance:

6.41 The sense of the world must lie outside the world. In the world everything is as it is, and everything happens as it does happen: in it no value exists—and if it did it would have no value.

If there is any value that does have value, it must lie outside the whole sphere of what happens and is the case. For all that happens and is the case is accidental.

What makes it non-accidental cannot lie within the world, since if it did it would itself be accidental.

It would lie outside the world. (Tractatus, p. 145)

I am not arguing that Edmund believed anything like this formulation. The case is more interesting than that. Positivism offers a strange reversal of Christianity with much the same force. In the Christian world, value is stable, fixed by the incarnate Word, while the truth of the senses are unstable and unreliable. In basing his life on the senses Edmund denies the stability of value. For Wittgentstein the stable world is oddly the world of accidents because that is the world of natural law. Logic deals with accidents because there is no reason facts are as they are: logic displays what is given not what is justified by purposes. But even though there are opposed pictures of what is stable, these traditions share an absolute divide between naturalism and the domain of values. From the perspective I am developing Edmund causes such trouble because he wants to treat values as if they were merely facts, as if they were accident subject to human will rather than goals which promise meaning for that will. Because Edmund comes to dominate the world of facts, and because the human economy in the play is shaped by the horrors of valueless existence, there is considerable pressure on the audience to treat as sentimentality any claim about distinctive values established by or for the play—gorgeous and noble sentimentality but sentimentality nonetheless. Hence the critical history of criticizing Cordelia for her unwavering goodness and the corresponding sense of Lear as figure of ultimate pathos. There is no escaping history and the perspectives it establishes.

But that does not mean the historic-empirical perspective is always the only one we can take. If we stand only within history we can only ironize Shakespeare’s obvious heroizing of Lear at the end—from his caring behavior to others to his heroic killing of the man who killed Cordelia, to the sentiments that flow from his identifying Cordelia as his daughter despite his madness (4.7.68-69)? But if we are driven to ask how his heroism can be taken seriously as something other than sentimentality, we can also focus on how they in part shift the drama onto a plane where sheer value seems to work out its own imperatives. One can see the relationship between Lear and Cordelia as their learning through extreme suffering that “the sense of the world must lie outside the world.” The man who could imagine “We two alone will sing like the birds i’ th’ cage” is
capable of seeing something at the margin of the world, especially when he repeats his 
imperatives to “Look” at the end of the play.

We cannot be sure he sees anything real or even sees anything beyond his need to have something to see. But “Look” is an interesting imperative in part because it does not necessarily connect to a proposition that will bind itself to the world of fact. Looking can be content with appearance, or content with a world in which something might be discovered or pursued even though it yields no clear objective manifestation. “Look” asks us to observe Cordelia not just as this dead body but as this being given matter and spirit by the play. So while we cannot be sure Lear’s sees anything at all, we can wonder what the cost is of our determining that we must reproduce the object in order to believe in the importance of the seeing.

The play forces a choice, and suggests that the best answer is to maintain both poles of the choice. The choice is whether to accept the empirical stance in which we only responding to “Look” if the observer provides proof, or to accept the possibility that there is a scene of seeing subject to other conditions of response. We have to see the logic arguing for the first option. But we risk impoverishing ourselves if we do not also sympathize with Lear’s call at the end of the play for keeping some principle of value alive because Cordelia still responds to it, or responds to what love makes it possible to see. Lear’s repeated imperatives suggest that there is something significant just in the spectacle that Cordelia becomes in the end, framed by her love and fidelity and honored by his capacity to enter into the space that his love and fidelity have the strength to compose.

This is where my second borrowing from Wittgenstein becomes appropriate: “There are, indeed things that cannot be put into words. They make themselves manifest” (6.522). This inaugurates an extended mediation throughout Wittgenstein’s career on what has to be displayed rather than described. Ultimately the fullest appeal a person can make is not to ethical principle but to what confession displays that cannot be grasped by reason’s universals:

The criteria for the truth of the confession that I thought such and such are not the criteria for a true description of a process. And the importance of the true confession does not reside in its being a correct and certain report of a process. It resides rather in the special consequences which can be drawn from a confession whose truth is guaranteed by the special criteria of truthfulness. (PI p. 222.)

The domain of human value here cannot be encompassed within “a true description of a process” because the language of value is not something we find or argue for. It is something we display and hope that an audience will see into the display what reason cannot establish.

Lear offers no confession. But he does make a total unguarded commitment to his speaking at the end that serves very much the same purposes. Suppose then that Lear’s repeated imperative to “Look” leads beyond the dramatic situation to Shakespeare’s reflection on the possibility that the role of spectacle might recuperate
for this play something fundamental to drama that was at risk of being lost as playwrights tried to make its home in Edmund’s world. There have been countless studies of the motif of seeing and blindness within this play. But how many of these worry about the play itself as something to be seen as different from what realism dictates as our mode of viewing. Minimally the spectacles of Lear denying Cordelia in public and then being humiliated by his begging and raging on the heath in a kind of recompense bring the play into a domain of intense feelings pulling at the ontology that calls for understanding in realistic terms. In fact by this understanding Goneril and Regan are largely right about their father in his dotage. And by this kind of understanding Gloucester almost deserves his punishment for how he treats Edmund. It is spectacle that dignifies suffering and makes sympathy overrule what judgment might be tempted to conclude. And it is ultimately spectacle that makes Lear’s display of seeing something in Cordelia sufficiently believable that we look for a world in which that might be possible. That world “must lie outside the whole sphere of what happens and is the case,” but it may be no less central for our sense of being human.

\[\text{i} \quad \text{Wittgenstein concludes this statement with one more sentence: “They are what is mystical.” I drop it from my argument because it is easy to mistake what Wittgenstein means by the mystical. He does not mean anything transcendental. His view is summarized by a statement a page back, “Feeling the world as a limited whole—it is this that is mystical” (6.45). Ultimately what is mystical is the fact that the world can fit logical form that gives shape to propositions. And because we would have to use logic to describe logic, there is no way to get outside of logic. The force of logic can only be displayed. Perhaps that is also true of theater at its most intense and demanding.}\]

\[\text{ii} \quad \text{The passion behind this formulation emerges in Wittgenstein’s private writing:}\]

\begin{quote}
The Christian Faith—as I see it is a man’s refuge in this ultimate torment. Anyone in such torment who has the gift of opening his heart, rather than contracting it, accepts the means of salvation in his heart. Someone who in this way penitently opens his heart to God in confession lays it open for other men too. In doing this he loses the dignity that goes with his personal prestige and becomes like a child. … A man can bare himself before others only out of a particular kind of love. A love which acknowledges as it were, that we are all wicked children. We could also say: Hate between men comes from our cutting ourselves off from each other. CV, 46
\end{quote}