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To Forsake, to Forswear

The Freedom of Abandoning the Oath
within *King Richard II*

Abby Thatcher

“The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his eyes. ‘Whither is God?’ he cried; ‘I will tell you. We have killed him—you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun?’”

—From Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 181

Readers familiar with *The Life and Death of King Richard II* will remember its deposition scene. King Richard has arrived at Westminster Abbey, and Bolingbroke, Northumberland, and other members of the court receive him. Officials bearing the symbols of monarchical power—the crown and the scepter—accompany the King. By Act 4, Scene 1, it is no longer a question of *whether* Richard will give up “tired majesty” through “the resignation of [his] state and crown / To Henry Bolingbroke” (4.1.170–81). Rather, critical waters continue to churn with explanations as to *how* and *when* the resignation takes place within the scene. How does Richard unking himself? Through and by self-reference. “I will undo *myself*” (4.1.203, my emphasis). Self-referentiality, a feature of both the Austinian performative and Schmittian model of absolute sovereignty,

suspends. In the case of J. L. Austin's performative, sense and meaning are suspended; in the case of Carl Schmitt's state of exception, emergency and convention are suspended. Both put the speaker/sovereign forward as the decisive fact. In this moment—a king undoing his kingsness—Richard suspends convention and meaning through the performative utterance.

Utterances and their power are central to *King Richard II* because it is a play about the making and breaking of oaths. Richard's feudal court fails because of broken oaths and empty words. The tragic king mourns the tragedy of failed oaths, misplaced trust, and loyalties unraveled upon the Welsh beach as he says, "Of comfort no man speak" (3.2.144). Richard, upon the news of deserted oaths and failed promises of military support, recognizes that to place faith in words is misguided and to seek comfort from promises is futile. The crown is rendered hollow in the scene and cast aside as not merely a recognition that power has been stripped for him, but as an awareness of uncovered realities—his monarchical might relies most heavily upon sworn fealty and a bodified corporation bound by their word. Richard's crown is hollow because the words of those who have sworn loyalty are hollow. With their failed oaths, his kingdom falls into the hands of another.

Richard's loss of faith in the efficacy and surety of words—more properly, the purposing of words alongside appropriate conventions as oaths—makes the deposition scene all the more surprising, as Richard liberally bestows words of his own upon his unfaithful court. Richard's spoken listing of what he gives up, and by what authority, reads at first speech-wact glance as precisely that: a prolonged speech act that holds "I wash away . . . give away . . . [and] deny" to be illocutionary utterances with deposing force—Richard effectively speaking away his power. However, I argue that Richard is doing more than the commonplace performative. He follows his stated intention to undo himself with spoken surrender. When he says, "With mine own breath release all duteous oaths. / All pomp and majesty I do *forswear*"¹ (4.1.209–10, my emphasis), Richard does not break oaths, and thus signifies a break with the patterns established by others in his infelicitous court. Richard is performing something far more radical: the *forsaking* of the oath, and, by so doing, the transcending into a realm of total, agentic freedom.

1 To forswear is "to abandon or renounce an oath in a manner deemed irrevocable" (*OED* 1a); it is, quite literally, an anti-oath, as the prefix "for" means "away, opposite, completely" and indicates loss or destruction.

In my essay, I will argue that there is first, motivated breaking of oaths performed throughout *Richard II*, revealing an awareness of their sociopolitical affordances; that Richard, being burned by the oath's false sun, performs a radical forsaking of the system of the oath, effectively "unchain[ing] his earth from its sun" (Nietzsche 181). Richard's forsaking enables a reading of Schmittian sovereignty as intensely performative and predicated upon transcendence of ideological systems rather than God-man theological authority. Further, I suggest that the heart of Richard's tragedy is comic, that forsaking triggers a comic release, and that the grandiose campaign to achieve monarchical power is reduced, by Richard as prophetic madman, to a game of bluffing only. Lastly, I argue that although Richard's ability to access total freedom may seem productively anti-Schmittian, the unkinged king's final act problematizes the felicity² of unchaining oneself, ultimately illustrating the deleterious effects of self-negation and hyperbolic kenosis. Richard, in the end, succeeds fully in "undo[ing] [him]self" (4.1.203) to his agency's detriment.

I: Perceiving the False Sun, or the Tragic Light

Christina Squitieri's article concerning Aumerle's treasonous plot seeks to return gravitas to problematic readings of Act 5, Scenes 2 and 3 by recentering the conversation upon feudal law and "the play's anxiety [concerning] . . . the connection between a man's oath and his life" (32). She suggests that these readings, which reduce the scenes to gendered squabbles and farced comedy at the expense of the Duchess's dignity and the Duke's honor, are in fact Shakespeare's dismantling of perceived political stability and the false steadfastness of oaths. While Squitieri finds political vulnerability—brought about by the breaking of feudal promises—*despite* the best efforts of those who seek to make felicitous bonds, I wish to work with those within the play whose efforts are directly targeted at the breaking of oaths, the failure of their word. Certainly, the enacting of felicitous performatives is a perilous endeavor, especially when the murky waters of intentionality churn and

2 J. L. Austin labels a successful performative utterance as "felicitous" and an unsuccessful performative utterance as "infelicitous." I will use terms such as "felicity" to convey such performative success.

when swearing fealty attempts to place mortals at the immortal place where words and actions coincide.³ But looking toward the oath-breakers within *Richard II* as self-aware agents reveals two new phenomena. One, the motivated breaking of oaths is performed *through* the best efforts of the oath-makers and shows the sociopolitical affordances of manipulating oath's binding form. Two, Richard does not break, but rather forsakes, the entire oath-making system, as he is self-aware prey to the oath's tragic, inherent infirmity.⁴

Certainly the "tragedy" of the king's two bodies, as said by Ernst Kantorowicz and carried forward by critics of his work, is well-documented. Richard's kingly tragedy illuminates the failure of Kantorowicz's *corpus reipublicae mysticum* and polity-centered kingship as, no longer an incorporated God-man by the "plurality of persons collected in one body" (310), his mythic "bodified" body becomes as hollow as his crown. Further, the role of the genre tragedy as disillusioning tool and transhistorical form with sociopolitical affordances has been argued by Franco Moretti and Caroline Levine, respectively. Moretti claims "English tragedy [to be] nothing less than the negation and dismantling of the Elizabethan World Picture" (12), and that tragedy deprives the monarch of its central mythological bastion: "power . . . founded in a transcendent design, in an intentional and significant order" (9). Levine posits the tragic form to be transhistorical, capable of "ordering, patterning, or shaping . . . sociopolitical realities" (3), revealing upon closer

3 The Anselmically conceived God, or God as the place at which words and actions perfectly coincide. From Anselm: "There is, then, so truly a being than which nothing greater can be conceived to exist, that it cannot even be conceived not to exist; and this being thou art, O Lord, our God" (54–5).

4 In the early modern sense, I work from tragedy or tragic as written in an elevated style and dealing with sorrowful or disastrous events, typically the downfall or death of a powerful or important person and opposed to comedy (*OED* 1a). I note comedy's definition here as a point of comparison and a further qualifier of "happy" or, more pointedly, felicitous: "comedy, n., in the Middle Ages: a narrative poem intended to entertain the hearer or reader and having a happy ending" (*OED* 1a). To return to tragedy, I also make mention of the modern, or more general sense, of tragedy being simply "any literary or dramatic work dealing with serious themes and having an unhappy ending" (*OED* 1b). In either case, in light of the speech act, I take "unhappy" or tragic as synonymic with infelicitous, or the unsuccessful performative. To uphold conventions and to enact the performative utterance with the intention to keep it (Austin's messy gamma conditions) is to bring about a felicitous ending; to fail to do so is to bring about an infelicitous, *tragic* ending.

inspection the values of a given performing society. Moretti's deconstructive use of the tragic form—toward “dissolution” and the “overthrowing of old ideas” (7)—describes the precise movement of tragedy through historical moments and cultural imaginaries.

I find that the oath once more is overlooked in arguments regarding the tragedy of the king's two bodies, the form of tragedy as somehow separate from the failure of conventions and infelicitous endings, or, as in Moretti's case, tragedy's “degradation of the cultural image of the sovereign” (9). In watching his kingdom fall around him, Richard sees that it is man's word and perceived bonds of fidelity that hold the pieces together in its own “intentional and significant order” and that upon their failure to keep oaths, his world shatters. The tragedy recenters itself in Richard's mind upon the word, as in the close of the Welsh beach sequence, as he says, “Let no man *speak* again to alter this, for counsel is but vain . . . He does me double wrong / That wounds me with the flatteries of his tongue” (3.2.213, 215–6). I suggest that Moretti's reading of the tragedy as breaking apart myths of divine investiture, leaving a nude emperor in its cutting wake a la David Norbrook's article, holds the most critical traction if it is the breaking of oaths—“unhappy” or infelicitous, *tragic* breaking with convention—that is the underpinning performative to such radical upheaval of the conventional world order, rather than tragedy more generally. Further, while the play does perform the degradation of Richard's court and world for audiences willing to see it, or, as in Lorna Hutson's “Imagining Justice: Kantorowicz and Shakespeare,” willing to democratically *perform* it, I find that Richard also experiences the disillusionment Moretti credits singularly to the “entire political body” (10). Richard's tragedy is nothing less than the negation and dismantling of the Oath as Bond World Picture, but counter to Moretti's theorization of tragedy, the dismantling happens *only* in the eyes of the failed king. Richard unchains the earth of his kingdom from the old, false sun by the light of tragedy's form. Henry, the Duke of York, and Northumberland continue to live within the Elizabethan World Picture, unable—perhaps unwilling, as I shall soon discuss—to let go of the oath as Ptolemaic center in a heliocentric reality.

II: Circling the False Sun Still, or Richard Unchains Himself

There is a surprisingly swift reassembly of formal feudal oaths and a sworn court for the newly kinged Henry IV. Although Henry has witnessed the dissolution of oaths surrounding Richard, he is the beneficiary of the same broken-oath-makers then making oaths of loyalty to him. Rather than acknowledging reality—the inherent indefensibility and utter instability of feudal oaths, or of oaths generally (he himself an oft-time breaker of oaths made to God, king, and country)—by breaking faith with the oath system, Henry reestablishes the oath as ideological binding agent in his kingdom. Henry’s awareness of the sociopolitical affordances of the oath, despite its tragic shortcomings and dynamic vulnerabilities; his willingness to continue to be hailed and answer, time and again, the oath as God’s interpellating call; and his own breaking of faith to oaths betokens a fidelity to the form of the oath. To break an oath is still to acknowledge the oath’s binding power—that it can be broken at all tells us that it existed in the first place—and to recognize a construct that can demand guilt, shame, and recompense from, and punishment unto, the person who swore falsely. Pseudo-sacralizing the word for sociopolitical ends, the oath can be broken only when, and as, subjects continually answer its interpellating call.

How, then, is Richard’s forswearing any different? For at first glance, it appears to be a breaking of oath, as he effectively promised upon coronation to be king until death, but now he willingly deposes himself. I suggest that Richard abandons the system entirely. To be Althusserian, Richard does not respond to its hailing call. He performs a Lucretian swerve when he *forsakes*, rather than breaks, the oath. When he releases himself from the so-called binding power of words, he signifies a break with the patterns that hold together his world order. Richard is thus provided with the “free will which living things throughout the world have . . . whereby we step right forward where desire / Leads each man on” (Lucretius 251, 253–4). Richard transcends—what I suggest as being the true center of Schmitt’s model of sovereignty—into a sphere of total, agentic power. I say agentic to indicate a person not only self-organizing and proactive, but also self-reflecting and

self-referential, suspending the conventional order of things and putting themselves forward as the final reality.⁵ It is to reify the state of exception in oneself, and to declare that no authority exists outside of the self.

Here, I turn to Schmitt's words on the sovereign of state being modelled after the "value of the church." "The value of the state is that it makes a decision, the value of the church is that it is the last unappealable decision" (42). The church as a structure has no higher authority than God, or no higher mortal authority, and therefore stands sovereign in matters of theocratic power. Schmitt theorizes the sovereign's appeal to a higher power in terms of transcendence: no one is a higher power, for the "essential thing is that no higher authority [in the state] reviews the decision" (43). Instead of word-bound, law-made oversight, Schmitt's political theology centers around a sovereign with the power to determine the exception by virtue of his not needing approval from any but a God. Even then, if God is believed to be one and the same—in effect, the self-referencing fact—as the King, the King becomes God as far as lacking anyone higher than him in the epistemological and ontological hierarchies of the here and the beyond. Assuming such a perfect identity—again, King as self-referencing sovereign God—enables a passing "through the metaphysical, political and sociological ideas and [a postulating of] the sovereign as a personal unit and final creator" (35). Schmitt's historical context—writing in the death throes of the Weimar Republic toward a nascent dictatorial end—illustrates well the devastating power of the transcendent sovereign ideological paradigm. Like any ideology, it does not acknowledge its constructed, motivated nature; it is a means to an end, namely, the retaining of power and the maintenance of a hierarchical structure that enables unilateral decision making under the auspices of transcendent, unchecked by all but self, authority.

Subjects within the ideology, including the king himself, are subject to a colonization of consciousness informed by ideological state apparatus of religion and sacral language. Richard's forsaking swerve is a reclaiming and reshaping of Schmittian sovereignty, as he acknowledges sacral word as only word, declares the crown and its undergirding support of the oath to be hollow—only an ideology, nothing more—and transcends the "political and

5 Giorgio Agamben speaks of the same in his *Sacrament of Language*: "That is to say, the performative substitutes for the denotative relationship between speech and fact a self-referential relation that, putting the former out of play, puts itself forward as the decisive fact" (Agamben 55).

sociological ideas” of his time to become most fully “sovereign as a personal unit and final creator” (35). Continuing his seeming tragedy’s disilluioning arc, which reaches an apex of poetic mourning in Act 3 (Act 4 being but an acting upon his new, negative paradigm), at the point of deposition Richard has abandoned any stock or faith in the oath’s power to bind, and further, has recognized the oath as *only language*. Ideological power stems from answering interpellation. Richard, in a proto-Bartleby stance, prefers not to be hailed, abandons the hollow word with his hollow crown—the hollowness of the words the cause for the crown’s void—and, at the culmination of his deposition, stands free of all “care,” including responsibility that only he can give to a system of language he no longer believes in.

III: “The Sun Did Make Beholders Wink,” or the Comic Release

In effect, Richard shockingly mimes atheism in a system placing the sworn word as the highest, transcendent power, an atheism such as Stathis Gourgouris wishes there to be, an “atheism that will have emancipated itself from” the belief system in power, thus rendering “the matter of belief or nonbelief in [its power] irrelevant, or, more significantly, would recognize it as a matter of performance” (44). In short, Richard sees oath-making as a matter of performance only, laughably enacted with great “pomp and majesty.” The oath is stripped of its *sacris verbi* regalia. The emperor’s new clothes are seen to be but fiction. In truth, the desacralization of the oath is a comic release, with Richard the only one aware that all great figures of sovereignty—“Glory,” “Sovereignty” itself, “Majesty,” and “State”—have been redressed as comedic peasant tropes: “For I have given here my soul’s consent / T’undeck the pompous body of a king, / Made Glory base and Sovereignty a slave, / Proud Majesty a subject, / State a peasant” (4.1.248–52). Though Henry and his court would deny it, and are unwilling to see it, they have killed the god of the oath and unchained the sun around which their medieval world order turned. With every breaking of an oath that, in its breakage, shows its frailty and utter impotency to bind men effectively, the play moves toward a comedy that only Richard can appreciate, as he

stands alone as madman in the town square to announce that they have all “crack[ed] the strong warrant of an oath” (4.1.235). In the tragedy of the unkinged king, only Richard has nothing “grieved” (4.1.216).

To make his forswearing complete, Richard calls for a mirror:

Give me that glass, and therein will I read.

[Takes *looking-glass*.] . . .

O, flatt’ring glass,

Like to my followers in prosperity,

Thou dost beguile me. Was this face the face

That like the sun did make beholders wink?

Is this the face which faced so many follies,

That was at last outfaced by Bolingbroke?

A brittle glory shineth in this face—

As brittle as the glory is the face! [*Shatters glass*.]

For there it is, cracked in an hundred shivers. (4.1.276, 279–89)

I emphasize a few words to reckon with the power of Richard’s swerving forsaking. First, while Richard asks for a mirror, Bolingbroke summons a “looking-glass”; the stage direction also uses “looking-glass” over “mirror.” While the same in connotation and established meaning—a looking-glass is never defined as something other than a reflective surface in which to see the self—I suggest that “looking” glass speaks also to a matter of perspective, a mode of looking at the world, a lens through which to perceive reality: in short, an *ideology*.

Further, Richard declares this ideology beguiling, or deceptive, to himself and those who will follow. Second, he reflects at length upon “face.” Face is used as both noun and verb: “was this face the face / That like the sun did make beholders wink” (4.1.281–2) and “is this the face which faced so many follies” (4.1.283). Face as transitive verb is to confront, thus “which faced so many follies” is most readily understood as confronting mistakes or dangers. But “face” as intransitive verb can mean “to bluff” or “to show a false face, maintain a false appearance,” as in *1 Henry IV* (1616), “Suffolke doth not flatter, face, or faine” (5.5.98), or in earlier Roger Ascham’s *The Scholemaster* (1570), “To laughe, to lie, to flatter, to face: Foure waies in Court to win men grace” (I.f.15). If read with this sense, “was this face the face / That like the sun did make beholders wink” and “is this the face which faced so many follies” are Richard’s acknowledgements of the trick of royalty held up by

words, in short, the false appearance of the unassailable king, a monarchical bluff on a kingly scale.

My close reading of “face” may seem a bluff itself, if not for the second witness: “outfaced,” in line 286 as transitive verb is to disconcert, silence, or defeat by a display of confidence or arrogance; its earliest use was to boast in a game, as in John Skelton’s *Bowge of Courte* (1499), “Fyrste pycke a quarrel and fall oute with hym then, / And soo outface hym with a carde of ten.”⁶ The mirror scene thus is Richard’s Nietzschean madman soliloquy as he reflects on the face, or bluff, that has been defeated by Bolingbroke’s outface, or better, gambit—but both are only bluffs, or empty, dead words. When Richard says, “A brittle glory shineth in this face [read: bluff] — / As brittle as the glory is the face [bluff]” (4.1.287–8), he makes clear that the *glory* is as brittle as the bluff of language, the bluff of the oath. The monarchical bluff—that glorious monarchy is strong, invulnerable, founded upon lasting loyalties held in inviolable place by *iuramenti*—is called. Richard shatters the illusion, the deceptive ideology. The world view as seen through *this* ideological looking-glass is splintered into unrecognizable and alienated pieces, “cracked in[to] an hundred shivers” (4.1.289). Just as he calls out the comic nature of the feudal oath, Richard here speaks to language’s game-playing, acknowledging that, when the cards are down, to win the king’s hand is only a matter of “outfacing”—outbluffing—all others at the table, and nothing more.

IV: Without a Sun, or Richard Indefinitely Unchained

I have referenced Nietzsche’s Parable of the Madman while dressing Richard, the traditionally Christological figure, in the sartorial trappings of a sacralized language atheist; an easy parallel is found between Richard’s shivering of the mirror and the madman’s reaction to his listeners’ silent

6 See also Portia’s aside to Nerissa in *The Merchant of Venice* (1600): “Thou mayst; I warrant we shall have old swearing / That they did give the rings away to men. / But we’ll *outface* them, and outswear them too” (4.2.15–7); and Iden to Cade in *Henry VI, Pt. 2* (1616): “See if thou canst outface me with thy looks” (4.9.45).

astonishment and defiant incomprehension: “at last he threw his lantern on the ground, and it broke into pieces and went out” (182). Certainly, the philosophical implications of the parable hold merit in a discussion of such radical awareness—on Richard’s part—that the Lancastrian world spins around an empty void. Akin to the Copernican Revolution, begun in 1542 with Nicolaus Copernicus’s *On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres* and offering an alternative model of the universe to Ptolemy’s geocentric system (serving here as a contemporaneous text to *Richard II*’s period of publication rather than its historical context), Richard unchains monarchy’s earth from its previous “sun” or center around which perceived reality revolves. There will never again be a monarchy bounded by an unaware, language-determined, and fixed ideological horizon.

This sounds remarkably and, if I may be bold, productively anti-Schmittian: sovereignty to be held by those willing to entirely forsake, and thus transcend, the current systems of power, opening up a Butlerian lacuna within which resignifying acts may occur, destabilizing false-sunned models of oppression—such as Schmittian dictatorship—with the power of forswearing. Indeed, Richard may seem in Act 5 to be a fully tragic hero, if indeed “tragedy is that which ‘eternally negates’” (Moretti 10); he is fully emptied, hyperbolically and almost painfully kenotic. Certainly, there are grounds to read Richard’s negation as constructive, even within the Middle Ages’ practice of negative thinking. Richard Helgerson writes of “the negative other, the not *x*” as “an unworldly and nonhuman divinity—an other that served to define by opposition the general human condition rather than the condition of some particular social order” (102). By the time of Shakespeare and the Jacobean dawn, “the axis of negative thought rotated from the vertical to the horizontal, from theology to social criticism” (102). Negative thinking had become “a game, but a game that erupts from the confines of its own playfulness to become a powerful force in another, larger game, coextensive with culture itself. You cannot play one without playing the other” (118). In Act 5, Scene 5, Richard engages in playful language, puns unlocked, poetics unfettered by earlier kingly cares. He lives in the comic space he discovered in Act 4, Scene 1, but he plays a different game. Whereas before Richard faced and was outfaced at the game of bluffing king, he now plays at being nothing: he is “eased / With being nothing” (5.5.40–1).

7 Like unto Nietzsche’s parable: “we have unchained this earth from its sun” (Nietzsche 181).

His negative thought creates a true—and destructively total—suspension between sense and meaning, as, unwilling to enter any system that would bind, he spins out alone, fully “undo[ing] [him]self” (4.1.203). To paraphrase and extend Helgerson’s line of thought, “by putting the sign of negation on the world [he knows], [Richard] open[s] the way to another world” (102) but *fails to join it*.

Instead, Richard vacillates⁸ in inaction: “Thoughts tending to ambition, they do plot / Unlikely wonders” (5.5.18–9) that Richard never acts upon: “Thus play I in one person many people / And none contented” (5.5.31–2). Richard is bound only by Time, which has “made [him] his numb’ring clock” (5.5.50), and with death, is unbound by even Time’s “outward watch” (5.5.52). He practices negation and kenosis to a paralyzing degree, continually calling all into question and reckoning with being utterly alone.⁹ Richard’s problem is not that he isn’t free, but that he is *too* free. He has divorced himself from every commitment which would ground him, even those that he, in full agency now, could select with open eyes, and thus, finds his agency limited again: this time because he has removed himself from every system within which he *could* choose to act. The realm of human affairs, writes Hannah Arendt, “consists of the web of human relationships which exist wherever men live together” (1173). Richard has transcended the realm of human affairs, even before death, by forsaking every binding form. In so doing, he loses the ability to bind together his self-identity, to have a name to act—for how to have a name in the gap between systems if one never answers to an interpellating call?

8 From Nietzsche: “Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any way up or down? Are we not straying as though through an infinite nothing?” (181)?

9 When no one follows Richard into the forsaking void to spin freely away from the bluffed center of the oath, Richard appears to do as the madman in Nietzsche’s parable does: he goes to inhabit the tomb of his dead gods. Richard begs the Queen to “think I am dead, and that even here thou tak’st, / As from my death-bed, thy last living leave” (5.1.38–9), thus transforming his once dualled God-man self into a tomb, a husk of its former self. In essence, Richard asks what an unkinged king is if not the tomb and sepulcher of its power. Nietzsche’s madman replies nothing after being dragged from empty churches but, “What after all are these churches now if they are not the tombs and sepulchers of God” (Nietzsche 182)?

Thus, while there is freedom in the forsaking of the oath, it is only freedom insofar as it enables an agent to access a place of greater freedom; it is only freeing if it frees the sight—by shattering the “looking-glass” so that one becomes aware it was a glass, not the real, all along—such that one can knowingly engage in the world around with greater meaning and more total ontological commitment. Richard is shivered into a hundred pieces when he abandons his old-world order; he does not “redo” himself post-shattering, and instead dies fractured. In the end, Richard finds that his indefinite state of exception is paralyzing. Unable to move forward onto new ideological ground and unwilling to go back to the worlds he once knew, Richard finds absolute, transcendent sovereignty to be paradoxically and deathly limiting.

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