

## Stalin's Face: On History and its Deconstruction in Howard Barker's *The Power of the Dog*

Stephen Weeks

The first scene of Howard Barker's *The Power of the Dog* (written in 1981 and produced in 1984), titled "A Great Man Hallucinates," depicts a wartime conference between Churchill and Stalin. Presided over by a Scottish comedian named McGroot—a hilariously de-familiarizing presence—the scene is both parodic and disturbing. At one point, Stalin thinks he sees a waiter rubbing the image of his face with a pencil. "Why is he rubbing my face with a pencil? [. . .] why is he rubbing me out?" Stalin asks. Then he imagines a terrifying excision:

It's scissors he's got! For cutting me out of the films . . .  
the man with the miniature paintbrush is turning my face into  
sky . . . a lifetime's work, painting Stalin out of every frame . . .  
one idle moment, dreaming of cunt in the archives, and I slip  
by—there, I saw him, behind Lenin, don't blink! It was Stalin!<sup>1</sup>

The representation of his face and the haunting vision of its erasure preoccupy Stalin throughout the play. In Barker's final scene, a focal point of this essay, Stalin says: "It is very difficult to photograph Stalin as he is. Who is Stalin? One day he was in a film, and the next they rubbed him off" (56). He recognizes his face as the signifier of his identity and historical destiny; his quest is to capture its authentic image, but the nightmare of being rubbed out, of having his face turned into sky, shadows that quest at every turn.

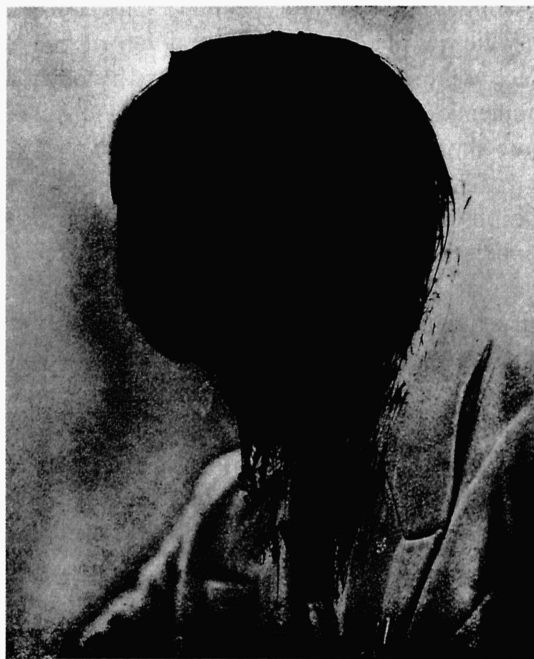
Through this imagery of erasure/effacement, I wish to link certain deconstructive gestures associated with Jacques Derrida with the mechanisms of oppression associated with Stalinism. My broad intention is to read the play in post-structuralist terms and to situate it in relation to the ongoing debate over post-structuralism and the question of the political. *The Power of the Dog* compellingly stages some of the characteristic concerns of post-structuralism and deconstruction; indeed, it is a play that clearly belongs to the post-structuralist moment of the early 1980s. But it is also a play ahead of its time. It seems to anticipate Stalinism's final moment in the collapse of the Soviet empire in 1989 as well as developments in the debate over post-structuralism's access to, or relevance to, the political. To explore the anticipatory elements of Barker's play, I will consider the direction

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Stephen Weeks is the Chair of the Theatre Department at Lewis & Clark College in Portland, Oregon. He has also taught at Brown University and the University of Washington. He writes on contemporary British theatre, on dramaturgy, and on intercultural theatre.



The artist Alexander Rodchenko defaced his own copy of the album Ten Years of Uzbekistan, which he had designed. After 1937, Stalin purged many Uzbek Party bosses, and Rodchenko responded by blotting out, cutting out, and blocking out their images. This one is of Akmal Ikramov, shot to death in 1938, after a show trial. From The Commissar Vanishes by David King. By the author's permission.



Another image from Rodchenko's album, this time of a woman, D. Abidova. Her exact fate is unknown. From The Commissar Vanishes by David King. By the author's permission.



The top photograph is from the Uzbek edition of Ten Years of Uzbekistan, published in 1935, showing an array of Party figures. The bottom photograph is from the Russian edition, belonging to Alexander Rodchenko, published in 1934. The Uzbek edition deleted the figure on the bottom right, because of an early purge. Rodchenko blocked out additional images after the purges of 1937.

From The Commissar Vanishes by David King. By the author's permission.



A detail from a photograph in the Soviet archives showing Mikhail Tomsky (standing), a member of Stalin's Politburo, and other comrades. Tomsky was denounced by Stalin and later shot himself. The photograph was defaced by persons unknown. From The Commissar Vanishes by David King. By the author's permission.



Derrida's work has taken in the 1990s. The atmosphere of restlessness—or perhaps exhaustion—that characterizes Western political thought since the end of the Cold War has produced new attempts to theorize the political, including Derrida's recent approach to the problems of law and justice. The perception of deconstruction as a practice confined to textual play, lacking either political or historical purchase, has begun to change, and it is changing in ways that make a Derridean reading of Barker seem apposite and timely, even necessary. Conversely, Barker's particular way of illuminating Stalin and the historicity of Stalinism allows us to read the latent political content of deconstruction more clearly.<sup>2</sup>

Before continuing, let me briefly summarize key elements of the play. The action unfolds near the end of the Second World War, around 1944. There are two settings—the Kremlin and the battlefields of Poland—and three major groups of characters: Red Army soldiers at the Polish front, Stalin and his entourage at the Kremlin, and two Hungarian photographers, Victor and Ilona, who have been photographing war atrocities. The soldiers and the photographers continuously interact, but the only time a character from the front interacts with Stalin and the Kremlin group comes in the final scene when Ilona is singled out for the onerous task of taking Stalin's official portrait.

#### Totalitarian Erasure

Stalin's paranoid hallucination in the first scene derives from one of the most ominous mechanisms of historical Stalinism—the fabrication of history according to the dictates of ideology and the material results of the Terror. That history-making should be driven by ideology is hardly noteworthy, but new to the world was the scale of the effort, and the efficiency with which historical representations of all sorts were made and remade. David King's recent book *The Commissar Vanishes* documents the falsification of photographs and art in Stalin's Russia:

Everything contrary to Stalin's cult was criminalized or expunged from history, especially all non-Stalinist and insufficiently Stalinist Communists who had previously led the revolutionary party and the new Soviet state.<sup>3</sup>

The commissars were simply made to vanish.

Falsification could take place through addition or subtraction, but subtraction followed the logic of the purges and became the method of choice. The airbrushed erasures on the photographs corresponded to the more brutal erasures within the body politic. For example, Mr. King shows a photograph taken of Stalin and three comrades in 1926. King shows the same photograph reproduced in a history book from 1940, but cropped so that only two comrades remain. In a biography of Stalin from 1949, the same photograph is used, but showing only one comrade, the others

having been purged. In the most famous image derived from the original photograph, an oil painting made in 1929, Stalin stands alone.<sup>4</sup> Examples of this sort abound in King's book.

Of course, Barker's Stalin is prescient; in the post-Stalinist era, Stalin's own image would be subject to erasure. In 1947, for example, the painter Vladimir Serov produced a large portrait titled "Lenin Proclaiming Soviet Power at the Second Congress of Soviets" for which he received a Stalin prize. In 1962, in the midst of de-Stalinization, and under pressure from Khrushchev, the painter entirely redid the work. In this second rendering, Stalin, who had been standing behind Lenin in the original, was painted out.<sup>5</sup>

There is another sort of phenomenon documented by King that is more disturbing, and stranger, than the falsifications produced by "official" erasure. "Soviet citizens," King reports, "fearful of the consequences of being caught in possession of material considered 'anti-Soviet' or 'counterrevolutionary', were forced to deface their own copies of books and photographs, often savagely attacking them with scissors or disfiguring them with India ink."<sup>6</sup>

Defacement in the name of Stalinist orthodoxy was not so much the erasure or falsification of history as its truest indicator. The images of defacement are eerie. Reproduced here are some taken from the home of the artist Alexander Rodchenko. He had been asked to design a photographic album called "Ten Years of Uzbekistan" that would celebrate a decade of Soviet rule in that state. The Russian edition appeared in 1934, but three years later Stalin purged the Uzbekistan party leadership. At that point "Rodchenko was compelled to deface his own book."<sup>7</sup> Rodchenko obscured the images by blotting them out, blocking them out, and cutting them out by turns. But he only did with perhaps greater artistry what many Soviet citizens were doing. Also reproduced here is a detail from a photograph in the Soviet archives, defaced by persons unknown.<sup>8</sup>

### Deconstructive Erasure

Let me pause a moment on the word defacement. The OED lists more than six separate meanings, testifying to the word's density. But to begin with the literal and fundamental: defacement is about the face, the landscape or territory of the face, the presentation of the face to the world. Faces that are defaceable are generally public ones. In the context of Stalinism, defacement is an act of public signification. Of course, representation of the face must precede defacement (or effacement, as Stalin imagines it), and the action that brings Ilona, the Hungarian photographer and model, to Stalin in the final scene is Stalin's quest for yet another photographic portrait. "It is possible I do not actually know my face," he tells her, "and being presented with it, I may become enraged" (56). And then: "It is not a face I have here, it is a history" (57). So between Stalin's vision of erasure in the first scene to this face-off with Ilona in the last, Barker tangles us in images of the face which

have historical, theoretical, and psychosocial implications.

One of the semantic shifts we can find in the word "deface" is a movement away from a literal marring or disfiguring of a face to a blotting out, or erasure, especially of writing or other marks, as the OED puts it. Accordingly, I want to shift here, to writing, and writing about writing. I am thinking of Derrida and his appropriation of erasure as a deconstructive device.

In *Of Grammatology* Derrida argues that concepts from the history of metaphysics should be put "under erasure" (*sous rature*). His well-known graphical indication of this erasure, which he borrows from Heidegger, is an X placed over the problematic word or concept, so that it is both visible and crossed out at once. Thus Derrida writes the phrase "the sign is that ill named thing," crossing out both the word "is" and the word "thing."<sup>9</sup> For Derrida, the mark of erasure indicates what is provisional and inadequate, but also what is necessary: provisional in view of his critique of metaphysics and the always absent origin; necessary in that we must use and work within the language and the philosophical tradition we have been given. Discussing Heidegger's use of the "mark of deletion," Derrida comments:

That deletion is the final writing of an epoch. Under its strokes the presence of a transcendental signified is effaced while still remaining legible. [. . .] In as much as it de-limits onto-theology, the metaphysics of presence and logocentrism, this last writing is also the first writing.<sup>10</sup>

Thus "erasure" takes its place within that constellation of terms--trace, differance, supplement, and so on--that are the instruments of Derrida's deconstruction of metaphysics and the transcendental signified, the instruments that foreground "writing" as the contaminant of presence.

We are dealing, then, in this linkage of Stalin and Derrida, with images of presence(s) and absence(s), indicated by certain graphical marks. Derrida puts key terms in the history of metaphysics under erasure—with an X, the mark of a simultaneous legibility and effacement. Stalin, through the falsification of the photographic record, puts the history of the state under erasure. Soviet citizens, crudely duplicating the airbrushed erasures of official portraits, deface photographs with scribbles, scratch-marks, and Xs, obscuring the images without completely removing them, giving them a ghostly legibility. The presence of the face remains, but as a reminder of an absence, as a threatening vacancy. Totalitarian erasure and deconstructive erasure: a totalizing system set against a de-totalizing practice, a system that gathers all force to the center against a de-stabilizing practice at the margins. Juxtaposing them makes possible a reading of Barker through Derrida, and a reading of Derrida through Barker—with Stalinism as the common

denominator.

There are objections that might be raised against this approach at the outset. One is the charge that Derrida's work is inherently a-political and has little to say to the real-world event-ness of Stalinism. I will take up this objection later in the paper. A related objection may be even more fundamental: to the implication of a relationship between an anti-totalizing practice whose primary field is the text and a totalitarian practice whose primary field is the body. Here the tangled terrain of argument regarding Western philosophical totalities in relation to 20th century totalitarian practices comes into view.

Albert Camus defined "totality" as "nothing other than the ancient dream of unity common to both believers and rebels, but projected horizontally onto an earth deprived of God."<sup>11</sup> Martin Jay, in his study of the discourse of totality, notes the long list of positives the Western tradition associates with this dream ("coherence, order, fulfillment, harmony, plenitude, meaningfulness, consensus and community") as well as the negatives with which it is said to contrast ("alienation, fragmentation, [and] disorder").<sup>12</sup> It is this "ancient dream of unity" that Derrida locates within foundational texts and deconstructs.

Stalin is the emblem of a totalizing political system, but we label it totalitarianism, denoting a form of power combining absolutist state bureaucracy with a cult of personality. Some view Stalinism as a possible endpoint, and perhaps *the* endpoint, of "totality" as a philosophical and social desideratum within the Western tradition. More specifically, the claim has been repeatedly made that Stalinism is the "logical" result of Marxism.<sup>13</sup> Camus himself famously connected Marxism and state terror.<sup>14</sup> Yet these linkages remain controversial. Fredric Jameson scorns what he calls the "shibboleths of a faddish post-Marxism" that have contributed to the "stigmatization of the concept of totality and of the project of totalizing thought."<sup>15</sup> He finds the notion of some "direct line [. . .] from Hegel's Absolute Spirit to Stalin's Gulag" akin to cold-war sloganeering.<sup>16</sup> Jay is more measured. He notes that the assorted failures of socialism in this century, including the revelation of Stalin's Gulag—and even more recent disasters—have made it difficult to think of totalitarian forms without considering the totalizing principles inherent in Marxist theory and its related philosophical traditions.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, Alvin Gouldner, while disputing the "mechanical" view of a straight-line logic from Marxism to Stalinism, suggests that Marxist theory, and the Bolshevik commitment to it, is unavoidably implicated in later developments: "We cannot act as if Stalinism was simply a myth invented to slander Marxism."<sup>18</sup> Later in the paper, we will return to the linkage of deconstruction, totality, and Stalinism from Derrida's point of view. For now let me observe that the relationship between "totality" and "totalitarianism" remains a matter of significant debate, particularly in the aftermath of deconstruction and the events of 1989. While these terms are not identical or causally-connected, except by a vulgar reduction, they are

nonetheless central to our understanding of 20th century history including our understanding of postmodernism.

It is in the midst of all of this, as it were, that we find *The Power of the Dog*, written just after the dissemination of post-structuralist practices through Derrida and just before the collapse of the Soviet Union and the liberation of the East European states. Barker reinforces the connection between totality and totalitarianism and stages the scene of their mutual deconstruction.

#### Barker and the Post-Structuralist Scene

Barker imbricates totality and totalitarianism in part by infusing the script with Hegelian overtones. The play continuously implies the connection between Stalin and Hegel's great philosophical totality, thereby invoking the "direct line" that Jameson dismisses. Like many historical dramas of the past, *The Power of the Dog* examines the capacity of the individual to influence historical events. This is the territory of the Hegelian "world historical individual"—as Barker says, the "Great Man"—who embodies the transformative social forces of an age. Put in another light, the play investigates the Marxist contradiction of individual hegemony within, but also above, the totalitarian apparatus of the State. The play's dialectical subtitle, "Moments in History and Anti-History," fulfills itself in a scene structure that alternates between the Great Men of history—Stalin and Churchill in the first scene, Stalin alone thereafter—and the patients of history, in this case the soldiers and hangers-on along the Polish front. Barker travesties these Great Men, particularly in the first scene, but also gives them their due. For indeed, when were the powers of the individual leader/dictator more strongly applied, with more devastating results, than during World War II? One of the play's key images is that of a hanged woman, a death that stands in for the millions. Barker's method juxtaposes catastrophe and suffering on the front against Stalin's moody isolation in the Kremlin. In Scene Four, for example, he ponders his role in History and the prospect of his own death:

*Of course I will die eventually!* [. . .] But when? There must come a proper moment, a moment when History will say, it was right that Stalin ceased to exercise the dictatorship of the proletariat then, but when? The problems seem to get worse, not better. Imagine if I died now, it would be a disaster! I have four hundred divisions on the Oder, this is a crucial moment in the history of the world! (28)

The tone of Stalin's self-assertion here, depending as it does on our growing distance from these monolithic historical agents, is both comic and horrifying. It is a tone that characterizes the play's frequent invocations of History with a telos, in either



its Hegelian or Marxist incarnations.

But if the play employs the Hegelian notion of the great man, the world-historical individual, embodying History with a capital H, it also explores its dialectical opposite, what Barker calls Anti-history. Anti-history in this play is most closely associated with Ilona, the Hungarian photographer. It is her Antigone-like quest to bury the body of her hanged sister and to deal with the ideological and romantic coercion of the Russian lieutenant Sorge that binds together the six scenes set in the Polish front.

Ilona has been a fashion model and now roams Eastern Europe with her companion Victor in search of war atrocities to document. Their photographic style is unusual, in that Ilona poses next to many of the atrocities, often in fashionable attire. When Sorge takes an interest in the fact that the photographs may provide incriminating evidence of collaboration, he notes that many of the images "form a background for [her] face." "I like my face," she replies. Swayed by her, he admits: "You have a beautiful face. I merely wondered why you choose to decorate these pictures with it" (31).

So Ilona's face becomes as much an issue in the play as Stalin's. She chooses to interpolate her own image into the record of atrocity. There is nothing in the play that accounts for this decision in any literal way. What seems plausible is that she is engaged in a project of self-assertion, in which the life force of her individual identity counters the absurdity and horror the war has engendered. Barker, in his collection of essays titled *Arguments for a Theatre*, refers explicitly to Hegelian categories by calling her collection of photographs the "willed creation of private history" and a form of "resistance to world-historical forces (an appalling category if ever there was one) [. . .]." <sup>19</sup>

Ilona's method, in these terms, is not to deface in the sense of blotting out, but to outface—the first meaning of which is to overcome with a look or stare, the second meaning of which is to defy or resist. In a Derridean turn, the OED recognizes outface as a possible meaning of deface. Thus there is a sense of resisting, defying, even outshining, that is embedded in a term that normally suggests disfigurement, erasure, or extinction. The meaning of the term "deface" is deeply ambiguous or, as Derrida might have it, "undecidable." Ilona inhabits the territory of defacing as outfacing, as surely as Stalin inhabits the territory of defacing as erasure. This is one way of reading the subtitle: *Moments in History and Anti-History*.

What Barker works toward structurally is the meeting between Stalin and Ilona in the final scene. Stalin has requested another portrait and another photographer, and through the indefatigable workings of the state, Ilona has been plucked off the battlefield to do the honors. Victor has by this time been shot and Sorge has been trundled off to the Gulag. Ilona meets Stalin alone.

At first she succeeds in outfacing him. When Stalin tells her that even to photograph him is "fraught with risks," she responds: "Isn't it a face like any

other?" (56). When he states that other photographers have doctored his portraits by erasing his pock marks, she tells him that "every pock will be included" (56). Eventually Stalin undermines her composure and announces that the session is over. In a series of fraught moments in the final half page of dialogue, Ilona first asks Stalin to save Sorge from the Gulag. She struggles with herself, then retracts the request. Finally, she asks if she is to die. "Who said anything about dying?" Stalin responds (59). He extends his arms to her. Beleaguered, she falls into them. The play ends as Ilona repeatedly asks, "Are we safe?" as McGroot, the comedian, driven to the brink of madness, tries desperately to make a joke (59-60).

One might say that drama's primal scene is the encounter of the self with the other, but *The Power of the Dog* stages this encounter in a way that evokes some of the issues of post-structuralism and postmodernism. The Hegelian encounter with the other is the *Aufhebung* that suggests annulment as well as a lifting-up. Hegel was concerned with "the union of union and nonunion and the identity of identity and difference"—that is to say, the absorption of difference into higher and higher forms of identity.<sup>20</sup> In the final scene of the play, for the first time, Ilona and Stalin face off. The geography of the scene structure emphasizes Ilona's otherness: she is from the Polish front, from the margins; Stalin is at the Soviet center, Moscow. She is female, he is male. The history she represents is private and idiosyncratic; it combines a history of suffering along the front with her own willful refusal to become another victim. The History he represents is rhetorically and self-consciously a totality in-the-making and retains a "world-historical" glow. Ilona is not an agent in these terms; hers is a history "from below," strategically directed at avoiding the mad dog of power as best she can.

The ending of the play may be read as fundamentally pessimistic. An audience member may easily conclude that Ilona is steamrollered by Stalin's History, that is, by a totalizing history that is also totalitarian. In her face off with Stalin, her particular kind of strategic resistance, a defacement-as-outfacing, seems to succumb to defacement-as-erasure, the fate that both she and Sorge may reasonably expect to share. However, despite Stalin's threats and Ilona's tightrope maneuvering between courage and capitulation, nothing at the end of the play is finally decided. Barker maintains his ironic attitude toward the Hegelian elements he has evoked, and the lights go out on these figures strangely intertwined. To the extent that we can imagine these characters in "real" historical time, Ilona is vulnerable. But in Barker's theatre, the dominant impression is one of stalemate. There is no sense of *Aufhebung*. Because the differences between them are vividly presented and reinforced by the scene structure of the play, any union or resolution involving the two seems preposterous, dramatically unfeasible, obscene. Barker gives this face-off a dialectical label, but he has little faith in dialectical progression—a not untypical stance for a British political dramatist in the 1980s.

In *Arguments for a Theatre* Barker reiterates his distrust of moral consensus,

ideology, and metanarrative. Familiar elements of the post structuralist project, particularly its neo-Nietzschean tone, reverberate throughout the essays. "Every play is provisional, just as every statement must be provisional," he says.<sup>21</sup> The theatre must derive "its meaning precisely from the dissolution of coherent meaning."<sup>22</sup> The post-structuralist distrust of totality is displaced onto the consenting audience. Agreement, solidarity, unity of thought: in a "braver theatre" all this would be dismantled in favor of debate, ambiguity, and fragmentation. The actor becomes

the figure who encourages the audience to abandon its moral and intellectual baggage and permit itself the greater freedom of an imaginative tour, essentially a de-stabilising experience. The proposition of a moral posture, and its immediate demolition [. . .] has the effect of loosening ideology, implying the absence of objective truths, and forcing the audience to make its own decisions about the actions shown or described.<sup>23</sup>

Barker is more than a disaffected socialist. In scorning monolithic ideologies and totalities of knowledge, in seeking to demolish common moral propositions, in asserting the provisionality of truths, in pursuing the de stabilizing and resistant moment, in creating histories rather than History, he demonstrates his affinities with post-structuralist interests and methodologies. These are the elements that inform his anti-Hegelianism and his approach to a scene in which, in the encounter of the "stable" historical self and its other, movement seems impossible.

Derrida helps to contextualize such a moment with his continual reminder that the sign is constituted by the repression of difference, of the completely other, which leaves behind only its trace. This is the "violent" hierarchy of the sign, which Derrida also finds in the oppositional structure of Western philosophy. Deconstruction aims to de-stabilize this hierarchy by locating those crucial "undecidable" moments of ambiguity, those aporias, that threaten to collapse the system of meaning a given text constructs. The pursuit of the other is crucial to this operation. If we read the play's final scene in grammatological or deconstructive terms, Stalinism serves as an emblem of presence, or the center. He represents a totalitarian regime that Barker links with both Hegelian and Marxist totalities: with History. Ilona functions as the de-stabilizing alterity that is always already present. She is summoned to Stalin in the first scene and arrives, always late, in the final one. Her alterity is dramatic, both in terms of Barker's structural strategy, and in terms the emphatic sense of difference she brings to the scene. She is the margin that has escaped the center until now. She is both the contaminant of the system and its necessary constituent. Bringing her together with Stalin capitalizes on the several meanings of defacement and de-stabilizes the center by revealing

the myth of self-presence. In grammatological terms, she is analogous to that "feared writing" within metaphysics--a "debased, lateralized, repressed, displaced theme [. . .] A feared writing must be cancelled because it erases the presence of the self same [*propre*] within speech."<sup>24</sup> In this sense she dictates Stalin's provisionality, putting him under erasure, just as Derrida puts all the terms of presence under erasure.

We confront again a certain question of audacity. In "historical" time, Stalinism maintained itself through the political erasure of the purge. Barker's Stalin draws on this history-as-event, on the graves of the millions. In the play his power is veiled, yet implicit in every gesture, every glance. Hence he commands the most minute attention from every other character. In the final scene, Stalin never resorts to direct intimidation; yet the atmosphere of threat is so palpable, Ilona nearly faints. If we are to see this scene in terms of deconstructive erasure, of Barker's staging of an encounter that falls within the rubric of post-structuralism, we must rely on the terms set by Derrida's analysis of the sign. I have argued that we are encouraged in this reading both by what I would call Barker's post structuralist affinities and by the textual play in Barker's meditation on "defacement." But to what extent are these two practices, circulating around defacement and erasure, commensurate? To what extent are the political valences of "repression" compatible with the linguistic ones? To what extent is it permissible to bring deconstruction to bear on historical tragedy?

#### Derrida and the Political

The cross-hatchings and scribbles that deface the photographs of the commissars, even more than the airbrushed ellipses of the official portraits, are the signifiers of the Stalinist Terror in all its irreducible materiality. The Xs of Derridean erasure, at least within their original context, specify a linguistic operation that preserves the terminology of metaphysics in a tactical sense, while undermining its arche-teleological claims. The passage from the linguistic operation (however great its philosophical import) to the historicity of the Terror may seem vexed, itself a kind of aporia. Critics of Derrida have tended to view him in precisely this light—as having little to say to either politics or history and as moving solely within the infinite play of language. From this perspective he is unable to offer more than relativism with respect to the interpretation of texts and withdrawal, as a species of nihilism, with respect to the politico-historical realm.

Consider again Derrida's use of the word "violence." The term recurs throughout Derrida's work. In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida considers the "originary violence" associated with writing, called forth by the "desire for a speech displacing its other and its double and working to reduce its difference." Writing "*threatened* the desire for the living speech from the closest proximity, it *breached* living speech from within and from the very beginning"<sup>25</sup> [emphasis mine]. In a later passage

he considers the relationship of this originary violence to our "common concept" of violence:

Out of this arche-violence, forbidden and therefore confirmed by a second violence that is reparatory, protective, instituting the "moral," prescribing the concealment of writing and the effacement and obliteration of the so called proper name which was already dividing the proper, a third violence can possibly emerge or not (an empirical possibility) within what is commonly called evil, war, indiscretion, rape [. . .]. It is on this tertiary level, that of empirical consciousness, that the common concept of violence (the system of moral law and of transgression) whose possibility remains yet unthought, should no doubt be situated.<sup>26</sup>

This hierarchy would seem to lead from language to event. Nonetheless, within this particular text, the connection from the originary violence to the "common concept of violence," the third violence, remains of peripheral interest. As an example: in the first essay of Part II, "The Violence of the Letter," Derrida takes up Levi-Strauss's linkage of writing/literacy with power/enslavement. Without utterly denying this linkage, Derrida deconstructs this view of "violence" by revealing its dependence upon the myth of presence ascribed to speech, in which the "originary violence" of writing-as-difference is always already situated.<sup>27</sup> His consideration of the tertiary, as filtered through the texts of Levi-Strauss, simply returns the discussion to its primary theme: the constitutive and originary repressions of language.

In his essay on Emmanuel Levinas in *Writing and Difference*, "Violence and Metaphysics," Derrida describes Levinas' conviction that "the entire philosophical tradition, in its meaning and at bottom, would make common cause with oppression and with the totalitarianism of the same."<sup>28</sup> The language here is essentially political in ways that would seem to make synaptic contact with the "third violence," but again there is considerable restraint. Derrida uses Levinas as another text (although a privileged one, given Derrida's well-known affinities with Levinas' thought) through which he explores an economy of violence functioning *within the resources of language and metaphysics*. Let me cite one more passage from his early work. In *Positions*, a set of interviews from 1972, he discusses the deconstruction of classical binaries in these terms:

In a classical philosophical opposition we are not dealing with the peaceful coexistence of a vis-a-vis, but rather with a violent hierarchy. One of the two terms governs the other [. . .] or has the upper hand. To deconstruct the opposition, first of all, is to

overturn the hierarchy at a given moment. To overlook this phase of overturning is to forget the conflictual and subordinating structure of opposition.<sup>29</sup>

Again his language strikingly employs a political vocabulary: "peaceful coexistence," "violent hierarchy," "governs," "overturn," "subordinating structure." One feels that Derrida could simply race through his own hierarchy at will, from "originary" to "second" and "third violence," energizing this political vocabulary and enabling a politics of deconstruction in the process. Yet at this stage in his work, such connections remain latent and under constraint. For many readers, the politics of deconstruction, as emerging (or not) from Derrida's work from the 1960s to, let's say, the early 1990s, were problematic if not entirely far-fetched. "Violence" remained enclosed within the mechanisms of the sign and therefore within a circulation of texts. In 1972, in *The Prison-House of Language* (the Nietzschean phrase resonates for many of Derrida's detractors), Fredric Jameson, although not dismissive of Derrida, described his project as feeling its way "gropingly along the walls of its own conceptual prison."<sup>30</sup> In 1978, Hayden White memorably summed up Derrida as a "minotaur imprisoned in structuralism's hypostatized labyrinth of language."<sup>31</sup> In the same year Edward Said accused him of reducing "everything we think as having some extratextual leverage in the text to a textual function."<sup>32</sup> More such examples could be easily adduced.

Derrida frequently defended himself against the charges of linguistic self-imprisonment. And others, like Christopher Norris, have sought to frame his work in terms of positive contributions within the tradition of rational critique.<sup>33</sup> The debate continues. But from the late 1980s onward, it became somewhat more difficult to maintain the "prison-house of language" position, if only because Derrida's writing took such a marked swing toward the political—if I may abbreviate the complexity of the discussion. In a series of works "beginning," for the sake of convenience, in 1989 with a lecture titled "Force of Law: 'The Mystical Foundation of Authority,'" Derrida took up a cluster of terms—law, justice, democracy—that he had not previously foregrounded.<sup>34</sup> In short, he began to theorize justice. In his lecture he acknowledged the reticence apparent within his own record: "Deconstruction, while seeming not to 'address' the problem of justice, has done nothing but address it, if only *obliquely*, unable to do so directly."<sup>35</sup> The notion that deconstruction has "done nothing but address it" has become something closer to a literal truth in the 1990s. It is well beyond the scope of this essay to address the intricacy of Derrida's thought as it has developed in recent works such as "The Force of Law," *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today's Europe* (1992), *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International* (1994), "Foi et Savoir: Les Deux sources de la 'religion' aux limites de la simple raison" (1996), and *Politics of Friendship* (1997). However, a few brief remarks

about the themes of this "turn" to justice are in order.

In "Force of Law," violence is redeployed as the originary moment of authority and law. But in this context the term more easily elides with the "common concept of violence," or at least a recognizable politics, as in this sentence: "As you know, in many countries, in the past and in the present, one founding violence of the law or of the imposition of state law has consisted in imposing a language on national or ethnic minorities regrouped by the state." This sort of connection to the materiality of world politics becomes a feature of his work. In *Specters of Marx*, there is a remarkable passage, distinctive for its lack of reticence:

No justice—let us not say no law and once again we are not speaking here of laws—seems possible or thinkable without the principle of some responsibility, beyond all living present, within that which disjoins the living present, before the ghosts of those who are not yet born or who are already dead, be they victims of wars, political or other kinds of violence, nationalist, racist, colonialist, sexist, or other kinds of exterminations, victims of oppressions of capitalist imperialism or any of the forms of totalitarianism.<sup>37</sup>

Later in the book, Derrida goes on to list the ten "plagues of the 'new world order,'" all topical, ethico-political concerns: unemployment, homelessness, the spread of nuclear weapons, and so on. All of this suggests that what might be viewed as a latent political vocabulary in Derrida's earlier work is no longer latent, and that the second and third tiers of the hierarchy of violence referred to in *Of Grammatology*, have taken a more central position in his thinking.

Derrida's turn to justice does not result in anything programmatic, however. Justice is linked to the experience of the impossible, and it "remains, is yet, to come, a *venir* [. . .] the very dimension of events irreducibly to come."<sup>39</sup> For that reason, "one cannot speak directly about justice, thematize or objectivize justice, say 'this is just' and even less 'I am just', without immediately betraying justice."<sup>40</sup> The tension between Derrida's willingness to offer a descriptive view of injustice in the "new world order," in contradistinction to his theorizing of justice (and democracy) as that which is to-come, and that which cannot be spoken of except obliquely, has prompted considerable debate. Moishe Postone, for example, questions the adequacy of Derrida's social critique in relation to his deconstructive premises,<sup>41</sup> while Fredric Jameson views Derrida's return to Marx in generally favorable terms.<sup>42</sup> He does question Derrida's evasiveness with respect to materialism; nonetheless he is inclined to see "spectrality" in material terms and to view it as a (possibly) trenchant criticism of late capitalism.<sup>43</sup> Mark Lilla, in a review of six of Derrida's most recent works, rehearses the old argument that an

impassable divide between language and reality imposes itself in Derrida's work, adding that his notion of politics is so evanescent and non-programmatic as to be indistinguishable from a dream.<sup>44</sup>

In any case, Derrida's work in the 1990s, to the extent that it is affirmative (if not programmatic), to the extent that it responds to, in Derrida's words, "an ethical and political imperative" rather than a "taste for the void,"<sup>45</sup> has altered the dialogue on deconstruction. Richard Beardsworth's book-length study of Derrida's refashioning of the "political," asserts that Derrida has recast the terms in which "all institutional violence" is to be thought.<sup>46</sup> As it has adjusted its orientation from a more restricted concern with Western metaphysics to a more open engagement with the problem of justice, deconstruction has opened a space for an analysis of Stalinism and totalitarianism. The question of propriety in setting deconstructive erasure against Stalinist erasure becomes less of an issue as the putative distance between the two practices diminishes.

This distance narrows further still when we consider the evidence for a direct connection between Stalinism and deconstruction that Derrida increasingly acknowledges. In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida revisits the atmosphere of the 1950s, characterized, as he says, by the "apocalyptic tone of philosophy" in which "the eschatological themes of the 'end of history', of the 'end of Marxism', of the 'end of philosophy', of the 'ends of man', or the 'last man' and so forth were [. . .] our daily bread."<sup>47</sup> He identifies this period, then, with the intensive reading and analysis of "the *classics of the end*." In addition, the period was about

on the other hand and indissociably, what we had known or what some of us for quite some time no longer hid from concerning totalitarian terror in all the Eastern countries, all the socio-economic disasters of Soviet bureaucracy, the Stalinism of the past and the neo-Stalinism in process. . . . Such was no doubt the element in which what is called deconstruction developed—and one can understand nothing of this period of deconstruction [. . .] unless one takes this historical entanglement into account.<sup>48</sup>

Here Derrida shifts our perspective away from deconstruction's engagement with foundational texts. Commensurate with his recent effort to deconstruct our political traditions (not in order to "depoliticize," as he says, "but in order to interpret differently the concept of the political"),<sup>49</sup> he offers, albeit in abbreviated form, an account of the political conditions out of which deconstruction arose. And these conditions have much to do with Stalinism. Of course, revelations about Stalinism were ongoing. Martin Jay discusses the impact during the 1970s of Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago*.<sup>50</sup> Once the implications of the Gulag could no longer be evaded, he suggests, totalizing accounts of history, including the most sophisticated



forms of Marxism, lost favor. Thus over a period of years, new perspectives on Stalinism and the Terror came to light and shaped the political ecology that provided for deconstruction's birth and development.

In Derrida's essay "Back from Moscow, in the USSR," inspired by his own trip to Moscow in 1990, he considers travel narratives depicting visits to the Soviet Union, including Walter Benjamin's *Moscow Diary* and Andre Gide's *Back from the USSR*. Noting the mythic resonance of the Soviet revolution for the Left, Derrida interprets the subtext of such journeys as nothing less than a quest for the Grail, rendered as "the quest for the universal, for universally human meaning" and "absolute human culture."<sup>51</sup> In speaking of Benjamin's *Moscow Diary* and his distinction between the language of "expression" (denoting presence and authenticity) and "communication" (denoting the semiotic and therefore a "dethronement" of authentic language), Derrida argues:

But of course, the ideal language he dreams of for his text on Moscow, the one he has no choice but to renounce, is a purely expressive language that would let the thing itself speak, the thing then known and manifested in its name [. . .] as if, in this very singular moment of history, in this 'present moment', what is happening in Moscow could restore a supralapsarian experience of language, a sort of redemption from sin.<sup>52</sup>

The longing Derrida finds in this narrative (and others in the same genre) is therefore a familiar one: the desire for the universal, for presence, logos, and authenticity. It is the desire for transparent "speech." Of course, these narratives also articulate deep disillusionment as the promise of the revolution goes unfulfilled. This disillusionment again ties Stalinism to a range of intellectual projects initiated in his wake. For Derrida, the notion of "coming back from Moscow" is not just a fact of geography, but an act of deconstruction. To come back from Moscow is to let go of the desire for pure presence. Moreover, this "coming back from" proves to be not only or simply a project for Western intellectuals who had observed Stalinism first hand or who had been influenced by the promises of the Soviet state. It becomes a material fact experienced by the Soviet Union itself—through *perestroika* and then through actual political dissolution. Derrida notes, in his typically circumspect way, that *perestroika*, usually translated as 'construction' or 'reconstruction', has had another meaning:

I would not myself have dared to say 'deconstructed' if certain of my interlocutors of the Institute of Philosophy of Moscow's Academy of Sciences had not told me in all seriousness that in their eyes the best translation, the translation that they were using

among themselves for *perestroika*, was "deconstruction." [. . . ] a Soviet colleague said to me, scarcely laughing, "But deconstruction, that's the USSR today."<sup>53</sup>

Deconstruction is thereby linked to post-Stalinism by those responsible for rebuilding Russian society.

To summarize: as the font of revolution, the Soviet Union became a locus for a dream of plenitude and presence. But from the 1930s onward, when the dream began to dissolve, the task was to awaken: to return from the dream and to destroy, destructure, and deconstruct what it had produced. For those engaged in *perestroika* and its aftermath, that task, that deconstruction, was material and political. For Derrida, coming of age in the shadow of Stalinism, struck as a young man by its failures (after reading Gide), that task became, in the first place, profoundly philosophical. But in either case, the totalitarian logic of Stalinism and the experience of the Soviet Union was deeply implicated in the project of deconstruction and in the undoing of Western totalities that has been the main feature of Derrida's work. The return from Stalinism as a form of social deconstruction has been partner to the return from presence as philosophical deconstruction.

These linkages, always latent in his work, have come to the foreground only in Derrida's more recent writing. In Barker's *The Power of the Dog*, these linkages are brought together in a particularly potent form that anticipates the dialogue about politics and post-structuralism, totalitarianism and totalities, that would begin in earnest and in an affirmative key, in Derrida and elsewhere, ten years or more later. What Barker shows us, in part, is the necessity of bringing Stalin on-stage during the post-structuralist moment. In the face-off with Ilona, in his confrontation with the other he cannot escape or subsume, we see how totalitarian erasure returns as deconstructive erasure, insuring not only the impermanence of Stalin's face, but of the ground upon which he stands: destabilized and made endlessly provisional, defaced by that crossing-out (or rubbing out) that so haunts him. As Derrida would later say of Marx, what counts is not ontology, but "hauntology." Stalin's fears are finally not a matter of mere poetic justice, if what we mean is that his attempt to glorify his own image in history (while effacing the images of his enemies) must eventually become the vehicle of his own expurgation. Something more profound is at work—not simply a demotion within the Soviet pantheon enacted by Khrushchev and his successors, not just political and historical revaluation, but that fundamental reviewing of the Western tradition that erases the very terms by which "History" and "Stalinism" were conceived and implemented. Stalin's fear of defacement in the play ultimately describes a very wide arc of thought, one that derives from Barker's intense engagement with his cultural moment and with the issues that post structuralism has precipitated and continues to debate.

### The Question of the Postmodern

Mark C. Taylor identifies Derrida's postmodernity with his production of uncertainty through the solicitation of the other:

By attempting to de-construct both the constructive subject and the horrifying world it has created Derrida points beyond the certainty of absolute knowledge to the uncertainty of postmodernity. Always arriving late, forever, coming second, and never returning on time, deconstruction repeatedly demonstrates the impossibility of modernity by soliciting the other which, though never present, "always already," haunts presence. As the end of modernity, deconstruction is postmodern.<sup>54</sup>

The "horrifying world" created out of the "constructive subject" of modernity is very much Barker's territory. He calls it "Catastrophe." Barker's response to this world is to create characters who resist absolute knowledge (for Barker, ideology) by all means available. "The unpredictability of the human soul," he says in his essays, "resistant to ideology and the tortures of logic, [becomes] a source of hope."<sup>55</sup> Certainly Ilona illustrates this unpredictability; she survives in part because she is unafraid of contradiction, becoming by turns compliant and steely, indulgent and with holding, passionate and skeptical, courageous and cowardly. It is not ill advised to invoke Shakespeare in describing her rich ambiguity as a dramatic character and her resistance to easy continuities. Indeed, Barker's commitment to characterization—to the individual subject preserving itself within and against the blandishments of ideologues and Great Men—distinguishes his post-modernism from the sort Elinor Fuchs identifies with the "death of character."<sup>56</sup> Even Stalin in *The Power of the Dog* emerges as a compellingly human, individualized figure. When Barker stages the confrontation between Stalin and Ilona, between what I have called a totalizing presence and its other, it is the radical difference between the two that resonates and prevents closure. Barker has in effect "solicited the other" precisely to introduce this de-stabilizing difference. It should be noted that this difference is not merely an abstraction or strategy of reading; it is felt, in performance, through the actors' engagement with Barker's splendid characterizations.

Barker's postmodernism, then, aligns itself with Derrida's. But there is another point to make: through their solicitation of the other, both Derrida and Barker move—with great circumspection and tentativeness, and without anything resembling a program—toward an affirmative stance. Derrida, as we have seen, has been accused of relativism and nihilism; Barker of pessimism. Nonetheless, Barker suggests in one of his essays that the reward for the "complexity and pain"

the audience must experience in the theatre of "Catastrophe" is an "imaginative ambition" in which lies "the possibility of reconstruction."<sup>57</sup> We might approach such a possibility in *The Power of the Dog* from the perspective of Derrida's theorizing of justice.

It is generally agreed that Derrida has moved closer to Levinas' position (already influential in Derrida's work) that the ethical relation to the other subverts the ontology of presence and creates the possibility of justice. In an interview from 1994, Derrida approvingly cites Levinas' definition of justice: "justice is the relation to the other."<sup>58</sup> In moving toward this position Derrida has activated the ethical relation to the other as a key component of his work. "Deconstruction," as he says, "is not an enclosure in nothingness, but an openness to the other."<sup>59</sup> It is in these notions of responsibility and respect to the alterity of the other that Derrida moves toward justice, even if framed as a justice to-come, an opening to a future that cannot be anticipated. The summoning of Ilona as an irreducible alterity before Stalin, echoes these themes. Ilona is the unheard voice that must somehow be heard; she is, in Derrida's terms, the "singularity," that must be taken into account. In this sense, Barker's final scene bridges two worlds. It looks backward at the modern tragedy of Stalinism and the shadow of the purges, but forward toward a postmodern reckoning. The demands of Ilona's otherness create a moment in which a postmodern politics might be seen to take shape, a moment when the "possibility of reconstruction" begins to emerge.

Read from the affirmative stance suggested by Derrida's exploration of justice, then, the play's final moments may be seen to transcend the sense of exhaustion and stalemant that envelops the characters. The face off between the oppressor and his victim elides into a face-to-face relationship with the other that contains within it, as a seed, the potential of justice. We may then remind ourselves that faces need not be condemned to erasure and defacement, and need not function solely as emblems of oppression or as signs of the West's catastrophe(s). They may also be the vehicle of an "ethical rapport" (as Levinas says) that encourages us to think the future.<sup>60</sup>

## Notes

1. Howard Barker, *The Power of the Dog*, in *Collected Plays*, vol. 3 (London: Calder Publications, 1996) 13. Subsequent page references appear in the body of the text.

2. Although both are constructions, Barker's Stalin and the historical Stalin, of course, need to be distinguished. We should imagine quotation marks around the name of Barker's character, whenever this "Stalin," not the historical Stalin, is at issue.

3. Stephen F. Cohen, preface, *The Commissar Vanishes*, by David King (New York: Henry Holt, 1997) 7.

4. King 104-106.
5. 188-189.
6. 9.
7. 126. For additional examples of Rodchenko's haunting erasures, see pp. 126 -137.
8. King 109.
9. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1974) 19.
10. Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 23.
11. Albert Camus, *The Rebel* (1951; New York: Knopf, 1974) 233.
12. Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality: Adventures of a Concept from Lukacs to Habermas* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1984) 21.
13. Alvin W. Gouldner, *The Two Marxisms* (New York: Seabury Press, 1980) 6.
14. Camus 241.
15. Fredric Jameson, "Cognitive Mapping," *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1988) 353-354.
16. Jameson, "Cognitive Mapping" 354.
17. Jay 532-533.
18. Gouldner 24.
19. Howard Barker, *Arguments for a Theatre* (London: Calder; New York: Riverrun, 1989) 79.
20. Mark C. Taylor, *Deconstruction in Context* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1986) 8-9.
21. Barker, *Arguments* 82.
22. 54.
23. 80.
24. Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 270.
25. 56-7.
26. 112
27. 135.
28. Jacques Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas," *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: U Chicago P, 1967) 91.
29. Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1981) 41.
30. Fredric Jameson, *The Prison-House of Language* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1972) 186.
31. Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U P, 1978) 280.
32. Edward Said, "The Problem of Textuality: Two Exemplary Positions," *Critical Inquiry* 4 (1978) 692.
33. Christopher Norris, *Derrida* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1987) 169-170.
34. Jacques Derrida, "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority,'" *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, ed. Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld, and David Gray Carlson (New York: Routledge, 1992).
35. Derrida, "Force of Law" 10.
36. 21.
37. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994) xix.

38. 81-84.
39. Derrida, "Force of Law" 27.
40. 10.
41. Moishe Postone, "Deconstruction as Social Critique: Derrida on Marx and the New World Order," *History and Theory* 37.3 (1998) 380-381.
42. Fredric Jameson, "Marx's Purloined Letter," *New Left Review* 209 (1995) 73-109.
43. Jameson, "Marx's Purloined Letter" 103.
44. Mark Lilla, "The Politics of Jacques Derrida," *The New York Review of Books* 45.11 (June 25, 1998) 40.
45. Derrida, *Specters of Marx* 30.
46. Richard Beardsworth, *Derrida & the Political* (London: Routledge, 1996) 10.
47. Derrida, *Specters of Marx* 14.
48. 15.
49. Jacques Derrida, "The Villanova Roundtable: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida," *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, ed. John D. Caputo (New York: Fordham UP, 1997) 18.
50. Jay 532.
51. Jacques Derrida, "Back from Moscow, in the USSR," *Politics, Theory, and Contemporary Culture*, ed. Mark Poster (New York: Columbia UP, 1993) 212.
52. Derrida, "Back from Moscow" 229.
53. 222.
54. Taylor 33-34.
55. Barker, *Arguments for a Theatre* 49.
56. Elinor Fuchs, *The Death of Character* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1996). Fuchs also equates postmodernism with "an explosion of doubt about ontological grounding," (14) but she is concerned with a more radical bracketing of "character" than is the case with Barker.
57. Barker, *Arguments for a Theatre* 55.
58. Derrida, "The Villanova Roundtable" 17.
59. Jacques Derrida, *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers*, ed. Richard Kearney (Manchester, UK: Manchester UP, 1984) 125.
60. "To expose myself to the vulnerability of the face is to put my ontological right to existence into question. In ethics, the other's right to exist has primacy over my own, a primacy epitomized in the ethical edict: you shall not kill. . . . The ethical rapport with the face is asymmetrical in that it subordinates my existence to the other." Emmanuel Levinas, *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers*, ed. Richard Kearney (Manchester, UK: Manchester UP, 1984) 60.