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THE USES OF ADVERSITY

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IT has been useful to me to think of *As You Like It* and *King Lear* as versions of the same archetypal story belonging to human experience both before and after the plays. This is the story: in the instituted life of a society “things fall apart” because the people of power have grown selfish, cruel, and dishonest. The effect of this is centrifugal: the powerless and the disempowered are sent flying from their settled domestic lives into the wilderness or the world’s wildness—the state of nature. Thus deprived of civil society and exposed to the harshness of the natural world and its weather, they suffer correction, and their suffering eventually leads to a restoration of civility and order.

The outline of this story is clearly apparent in *As You Like It*. In *King Lear* the story is subjected to nearly intolerable stresses, and yet the outline remains unbroken; it is the major source of the play’s coherence and meaning. What I believe is the proper understanding of both plays depends on our ability to take seriously the assumptions of the archetypal story—how we answer the following questions: Do all human societies have in them the seeds of their failure? Are those seeds likely to be the selfishness and dishonesty of the dominant people? Does failure typically reduce the society, or persons in it, to some version of the state of nature? And is there something possibly instructive and restorative in this reduction?

For most readers nowadays these questions will be an unwelcome dose. We have read some history, and we do not doubt that other societies have failed, but we are not much inclined to credit the possible failure of our own, even though we are less and less able to deny the implications of our propensity to waste or to mechanical violence, or of our entire dependence on cheap petroleum. We have pretty much made a virtue of selfishness as the mainstay of our economy, and we have provided an abundance of good excuses for dishonesty. Most of us give no thought to the state of nature as the context of our lives, because we conventionally disbelieve in natural limits.

Another problem is that there is a considerable overlap between this archetypal story and the pastoral tradition. In the pastoral tradition, as Shakespeare was fully aware, there is a prominent strain of frivolity. What is frivolous is the sentimentalization of rural life, which is supposedly always pretty, pleasant, and free of care. The famous example is Christopher Marlowe's:

Come live with me and be my love,
And we will all the pleasures prove
That valleys, groves, hills, and fields,
Woods, or steepy mountain yields . . .

To this Sir Walter Raleigh justly and just as famously replied:

The flowers do fade, and wanton fields
To wayward winter reckoning yields . . .

What neither poet acknowledged is the possibility of a real need, as Robert Frost put it, "of being versed in country things."

Shakespeare knew, of course, the pastoral conventions represented by Marlowe's poem. But he was a countryman, and he knew the truth of Raleigh's admonition; he knew also the need of being versed in country things. He knew that "a true laborer" might have something to say to a courtier that the courtier might need to hear—because, for one reason, the courtier lives by eating country things.

Another obstacle between modern readers and the archetypal story underlying these plays is our popular, and uncritical, egalitarianism. To us, the order of the natural world is horizontal, and so, we would like to think, is the order of human society: Any creature is as important as any other; any citizen is as important as any other.

But to Shakespeare the order of the world, as of human society, is vertical, hierarchical. The order of created things descends in a Chain of Being from God down to the simplest organisms. In human society, order descends downward from the monarch. Every creature and every human has a place in this hierarchy according to "degree." Ulysses' discourse on degree in the first

act of *Troilus and Cressida* can serve as a clarifying prologue to a reading of *As You Like It* and *King Lear*:

O, when degree is shaken,
 Which is the ladder of all high designs,
 The enterprise is sick. How could communities,
 Degrees in schools, and brotherhoods in cities,
 Peaceful commerce from dividable shores,
 The primogenity and due of birth,
 Prerogative of age, crowns, sceptres, laurels,
 But by degree, stand in authentic place?

.....
 . . . right and wrong,
 Between whose endless jar justice resides,
 Should lose their names, and so should justice too;
 Then everything include itself in power,
 Power into will, will into appetite.
 And appetite, an universal wolf,
 So doubly seconded with will and power,
 Must make perforce an universal prey
 And last eat up himself.

This speech, by which Ulysses calls the “tortive and errant” Greeks to order, tells us precisely how to understand Orlando’s complaint at the beginning of *As You Like It*. Oliver, Orlando’s oldest brother, charged by their father, now dead, with Orlando’s education, has forsaken his duty. Orlando’s “keeping,” he says to his old servant Adam, “differs not from the stalling of an ox.”* As the younger brother, lacking the “primogenity . . . of birth,” Orlando is a man of lower degree than Oliver. But he is, even so, a man, his father’s son, and Oliver’s brother. Oliver’s mistreatment of him, as if he were no more than a beast, is an affront to order, both human and natural; it is a symptom of a sick enterprise.

The trouble, for Oliver as for the villains of *King Lear* and other Shakespearean villains, is that the human place in the order of

*Quotations are from *As You Like It*, The Pelican Shakespeare, edited by Frances E. Dolan.

things, between the angels and the animals, is precisely and narrowly delimited, and it is precarious. To fall from one's rightful place, to become less than human, is not to become an animal; it is to become monstrous. And so Oliver's mere dislike and neglect of Orlando declines fairly predictably to a plot to kill him, which forces Orlando into exile.

In scene 3 of act 1, a parallel estrangement occurs. The scene is in the palace of Duke Frederick, who has usurped the place of his brother, the carelessly named Duke Senior. Duke Senior, as we have already learned, is in exile in the Forest of Arden, where he and some "merry men," his followers, "live like the old Robin Hood of England." Duke Senior's daughter, Rosalind, has been permitted to remain in the palace as the companion of Celia, Duke Frederick's daughter. The two young women are not only cousins and companions, but are dearest friends. The two, Celia says, are "coupled and inseparable." She says to Rosalind, "Thou and I am one." And it is also Celia who, in attempting to console Rosalind, states one of the main themes common to this play and *King Lear*, that of affection or gentleness or generosity versus force: "what he [her father] hath taken away from thy father perforce, I will render thee again in affection." This affection is soon tested by Duke Frederick's determination to send Rosalind into exile: "Within these ten days if that thou beest found / So near our public court as twenty miles, / Thou diest for it."

His reason is that he does not trust her. His distrust originates, of course, in his knowledge that he himself is not trustworthy. His daughter and niece, by contrast, possess in full the trust and the trustworthiness now lacking in the court, and so they must leave. In proof both of their friendship and of Duke Frederick's failure to know them, they decide to disguise themselves as "Ganymede" and "Aliena" and run away to join Duke Senior in Arden.

Act 2, I think, is the paramount act of the play and is one of the greatest acts in all of Shakespeare. Both its poetry and its drama are exceedingly fine. It is also the crisis of the play for its readers, who have to decide here whether or not to take the play seriously. From what I have read and seen, some readers and directors have found it easy to understand the play as a pastoral diversion, merely

sentimental and “comic,” which I believe is an insult to the play and its poet.

The test comes immediately with Duke Senior’s speech that begins the first scene of act 2. The speech develops a standard pastoral theme: the honesty of the pastoral or rural life in contrast to life at court; it is the same theme expounded by Meliboe in book 6 of *The Faerie Queen*. The duke asks rhetorically, “Are not these woods / More free from peril than the envious court?” And we know the answer as well as his fellow exiles: These woods are free from the envy, jealousy, hypocrisy, power-hunger, and fraud that imperil the court or any other center of power.

There is an editorial crux in line five that we have to settle before reading further. The duke says, “Here feel we not the penalty of Adam.” I am quoting the new Pelican edition, in which the editor chooses the word *not*. But that usage, if it stands, reduces the speech to nonsense, and the duke to a fool. The problem with this reading is that the duke is *not* a fool, and the exiles, according to the play, are still subject to the penalty of Adam—that is, to mortality, discord, and the need to earn their living. And so the line necessarily is “Here feel we *but* the penalty of Adam.” The intended contrast is not between Eden and the fallen world, but between the unadorned life of the forest and the “painted pomp” of the court.

That “the icy fang / And churlish chiding of the winter’s wind” are not flatterers but “feelingly persuade me what I am” we may take without argument to be merely true. “Sweet are the uses of adversity” may oversweeten the point, and yet we know that adversity can be corrective, sometimes indispensably so.

For modern readers the largest difficulty in this speech may come in the last three lines, in which the duke proclaims that “this our life, exempt from public haunt, / Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks, / Sermons in stones, and good in everything.” To the modern ear this may sound naïve—an instance of the pathetic fallacy, an almost cartoonish sentimentalization of nature. And yet this is a play solidly biblical and Christian in its moral basis, and this is one of its passages that most insistently depends on our knowledge of scripture. The overarching concept is that of the “good in everything,” and the authority for this is

Genesis 1:31: “And God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, it was very good.”* As for “tongues in trees, books in the running brooks, / Sermons in stones,” Shakespeare may be paraphrasing Job 12:7–9: “Aske now the beastes, and they shal teache thee, and the foules of the heaven, and they shal tel thee: Or speake to the earth, and it shal shewe thee: or the fishes of the sea, and they shal declare unto thee. Who is ignorant of all these, but that the hand of the Lord hath made these?” And he could as well be alluding to the long tradition in which nature is seen as a second or supplementary revelation.

The third scene of act 2 parallels thematically the third scene of act 1. In the earlier scene Rosalind is confronted by Duke Frederick, sentenced to exile, and she and Celia plan to escape together in disguise. In 2.3 Adam, a servant loyal to Orlando, warns his young master that he, like Rosalind, must go into exile, for his envious and vengeful brother is plotting to kill him.

This play is not an allegory, but some of its characters have a semiallegorical or representative function: that is, they represent human qualities or kinds. Adam, for one, is “the old Adam,” the father of us all, the fallen humanity which we all share, but he is furthermore the old Adam redeemed by good and faithful service to his master. He was first the servant of Orlando’s father, the good Sir Rowland de Boys. In this scene, out of loyalty to the father and love for the son, he makes an absolute gift of his service and his fortune to Orlando, trusting that in his old age he will be comforted by him “that doth the ravens feed” and “caters for the sparrow.” Thus, as a true servant to good men, he understands himself as a true servant of God. Orlando reciprocates by saying, like Celia in act 1, that the two of them will join their fates: “we’ll go along together” in the belief that, before they have spent all of Adam’s savings, they will “light upon some settled low content.” The idea of a “settled low content” is the moral baseline of the play. It is what human beings most authentically have a right to expect and to achieve. It is what adversity most usefully and sweetly reveals. A settled low content is what Thomas Jefferson wished for America’s small farmers; it is what Henry Thoreau was seeking at Walden Pond.

*All scriptural quotations are from the Geneva Bible.

In scene 4, having arrived in the Forest of Arden, Rosalind and Celia encounter two other representative figures: Silvius, the young shepherd, and the old shepherd Corin. Silvius, classically named, represents what is most artificial in literary pastoral. He is an “uncouth swain” stricken by love into utter silliness and uselessness; wherever his sheep are, he is not going to think of them during this play.

Corin, by contrast as Englishly named as Spenser’s Colin Clout or Hardy’s Hodge, is strongly drawn as an individual and at the same time as a representative countryman. He is an “ideal character” of the same honest family as Chaucer’s Plowman, who was “a trewe swinkere and a good.” Another critical question that this play imposes on its readers and directors is what to make of Corin. Here I have to depart from the sequence of the action to quote Corin’s characterization of himself to Touchstone in 3.2: “Sir, I am a true laborer; I earn that I eat, get that I wear, owe no man hate, envy no man’s happiness, glad of other men’s good, content with my harm; and the greatest of my pride is to see my ewes graze and my lambs suck.” To many readers that last clause would seem fatally countrified; from them the best rating it could hope for would be “quaint.” Many Americans now would see this speech unhesitatingly as the utterance of a “hick” or a “redneck,” hopelessly “retro.” Nevertheless any husbander of livestock would recognize Corin as a good shepherd, and Thomas Jefferson would have appraised him highly. In his independence he is democratic, and in his charity, fortitude, and humility he is Christian. Shakespeare knew that the human world survives by the work and responsibility of such people, and Corin’s character is one of the standards by which we are to measure the other persons of the play.

In 2.4 Touchstone, assuming the role of sophisticated urbanite, sees Corin on their first encounter as a hick and addresses him accordingly: “Holla, you clown!” But Rosalind, as Ganymede, displaying her extraordinary good sense, recognizes him immediately for what he is: “Good even to you, friend.” And Corin replies with perfect courtesy: “And to you, gentle sir, and to you all.” Corin, offering hospitality to the strangers, is obliged to reveal that he is poorly paid:

I am shepherd to another man
 And do not shear the fleeces that I graze.
 My master is of a churlish disposition
 And little recks to find the way to heaven
 By doing deeds of hospitality.

This ungenerous master, moreover, is preparing to sell his flock and land. Rosalind and Celia arrange with Corin to buy “the cottage, pasture, and the flock,” Celia promising, “we will mend thy wages.” Receiving gratefully this offer of economic justice, Corin sounds again the play’s theme of the good servant: “I will your very faithful feeder be.”

A fourth representative character is Jaques, whose dominant trait is self-indulgence. “The melancholy Jaques,” as he is called in act 2.1, manages to be both sentimental and cynical. He is uselessly sensitive and intellectual, a dilettante of his own moods, a boastfully free-speaking critic who corrects nothing. In the same scene Duke Senior speaks of his proper regret at having to kill the deer of the forest for food. But Jaques, as his fellows report, sentimentalizes this regret, making the same equation between human beings and animals as some animal-rights advocates of our own day. And, like them, he offers no practicable alternative.

In 2.5, after Amiens has sung a song that closely paraphrases Duke Senior’s speech in 2.1, Jaques responds by supplying a verse of his own which suggests that the forest company are asses and fools. So far he has been a peripheral character, looking on and commenting from the margin as a fecklessly disapproving “chorus.” Presently he will serve the play’s meaning much more vitally, though still passively.

The next scene is brief, containing only two speeches, but to fail to take it seriously enough is again to be seriously in error about the play. Old Adam, weakened by hunger, cannot go on: “Here lie I down and measure out my grave. Farewell, kind master.” As a “fallen” man, Adam cannot save himself. Nor can he survive as the servant of Orlando. But *As You Like It* is a play of transformations, and this scene presents the first one. Adam has completed his servanthood. As a servant, he knows, he is as good as dead. His life now depends upon a change in Orlando. And Orlando changes; he becomes his servant’s servant—as Edgar in

King Lear, his father being reduced to helplessness, becomes his father's parent. Shakespeare is relying again on our knowledge of scripture, and the reference here is to Matthew 20:25–27: "Ye knowe that the lords of the Gentiles have domination over them, and they that are great, exercise autoritie over them. But it shall not be so among you: but whosoever wil be great among you, let him be your servant." The apparent lightheartedness of Orlando's reply must be understood as tenderness: his attempt to lighten the heart of old Adam and his pledge of service. His words also recall the measure of a "settled low content": "Live a little, comfort a little, cheer thyself a little. . . . For my sake be comfortable; hold death awhile at the arm's end. I will be with thee presently, and if I bring thee not something to eat, I will give thee leave to die." Here as elsewhere, and despite his allegiance to "degree," there is a strong democratic impulse in Shakespeare. But he is a democrat, not in the fashion of Jefferson, but in the fashion of Christ. "The least of these my brethren" also have their place in the order of things and their entitlement to be loved and served.

What is the relevance of this to the archetypal story that is my interest? Let us remember, to start with, that this play begins after the old state of things, the old power structure, has fallen. We don't know what the error or fault of Duke Senior might have been; we only know that he became so weakened—perhaps so misled by flattery—that he was driven into exile by his power-hungry brother. Also the good Sir Rowland de Boys has died and has been replaced by his selfish eldest son, Oliver. There is nothing more disorderly and disordering in civilized life than the selfishness of people of power—that is, their failure to be servants either to God or to their subjects. (Public servants, as they and we too often forget, are meant not to rule but to serve the people.) The corrective to this is begun in the exiles by their recognition of the need to serve. And, in exile, this need is insistently practical. Outcasts in the forest—or on the stormy heath—cannot survive by selfishness.

In the long seventh and final scene of act 2 the theme of the forest (or adversity itself) as the corrective to selfishness and misrule, the theme of the necessity of servanthood, and the theme of affection or gentleness versus force are all joined in the play's moral climax.

In my opinion this scene threatens also to be the play's dramatic climax—to be both more dramatic and more moving than anything in the three acts that follow. Shakespeare's problem (and I assume a director's also) is to make the rest of the play worthy in moral interest and drama of what he has done in the first two acts.

The seventh scene begins with a leisurely, bantering conversation at first about Jaques and then between Jaques and Duke Senior. Jaques, having encountered Touchstone in the forest, wishes that he too could be a fool, apparently without in the least suspecting that he already is one. If, he says, he were given the liberty of a fool—that is, if the duke should grant him an official tolerance, permitting him to speak the truth as he sees it—then he would prove himself so purgative a critic as to “Cleanse the foul body of th' infected world.” The duke says that as such a critic Jaques would necessarily be a hypocrite, “For thou thyself hast been a libertine.” Jaques thereupon discourses on the universality of sin and hypocrisy in a speech that prefigures a much better one by the maddened King Lear.

Jaques' speech is interrupted by the entrance of Orlando with his sword drawn, and the scene then gets serious. Dinner has been laid out in the camp of the exiles, and Orlando is desperately in need of food for Adam and for himself. His sword is drawn because, like Touchstone in his encounter with Corin, he is mistaken about the circumstances. He assumes as he will presently say, that he is in a “savage” place, and therefore will have to take the food by force. In his own savagery, then, he finds himself comically and wonderfully reprovved by the duke in the name of “good manners” and “civility.” Having fled from the failed civility of civilization, he has come into the presence of a civility reconstituted in the savage forest. Instead of drawing his own sword to defend his dinner, the duke welcomes Orlando as a guest: “What would you have? Your gentleness shall force / More than your force move us to gentleness. . . . / Sit down and feed, and welcome to our table.” Orlando, surprised, acknowledges his error and apologizes. He and Duke Senior then speak an antiphonal celebration of their common tradition of charity. Orlando says:

If ever you have looked on better days,
 If ever been where bells have knolled to church,
 If ever sat at any good man's feast,
 If ever from your eyelids wiped a tear
 And know what 'tis to pity and be pitied,
 Let gentleness my strong enforcement be;
 In the which hope I blush, and hide my sword.

And the duke replies:

True is it that we have seen better days,
 And have with holy bell been knolled to church,
 And sat at good men's feasts, and wiped our eyes
 Of drops that sacred pity hath engendered;
 And therefore sit you down in gentleness,
 And take upon command what help we have
 That to your wanting may be ministered.

But Orlando is not yet ready to sit down. He remains true to his promise to Adam, and he asks the company to "forbear your food a little while." When he speaks of Adam now his tenderness is forthright: "like a doe, I go to find my fawn / And give it food." There could be no more absolute expression of loving servanthood, and no more apt a simile.

While Orlando is away, Jaques, in response to no encouragement, delivers his famous speech on the seven ages of man. This is a dandy set piece, but it is also utterly cynical. It is the life history of a lone specimen, such as one might find in a modern zoology manual. The last age, which is described most heartlessly, "Is second childishness and mere oblivion, / Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything." What Shakespeare thought of this may be inferred from the stage direction that immediately follows: "Enter Orlando, with Adam." That Orlando enters carrying Adam in his arms we know from Duke Senior's next speech, which also seems a rebuke to Jaques: "Welcome. Set down your venerable burden / and let him feed." Far from "sans everything" old Adam has a young friend who is his faithful servant—and who, moreover, seeing that Adam is in his "second childishness," treats him with a mother's tenderness.

The scene ends with Duke Senior's recognition of Orlando, in which he implicitly affirms love as the right bond between generations and the members of a community: "Be truly welcome hither. I am the duke / That loved your father."

After act 2 *As You Like It* becomes a play of lovers, and the comedy of it, I think, is brilliant enough to follow worthily the eminent scene I have just described. The theme of transformation is worked out in greatest detail and most delightfully in the courtship of Rosalind and Orlando. In this courtship, which is both farcical and serious, Rosalind in the guise of Ganymede assumes the role of "Rosalind," so that Orlando, in the guise of his love-maddened self, may practice as a lover and so be "cured." The premise of this masquerade is set forth by Rosalind in 3.2: "Love is merely a madness"; and there is good sense in this. She and Orlando fell in love "at first sight" in act 1. Rosalind, who is as smart and resourceful as she needs to be, realizes that such a love requires testing. Lovers in the madness of new love are, as Albany says of Goneril in *King Lear*, "self-covered." Rosalind's "cure," as it turns out, is a trial for herself as well as for Orlando. It removes the "cover" of selfhood; it tests them and proves them worthy of each other and ready for marriage. It is important to notice that these lovers do not turn seriously toward each other and toward their marriage until each of them has explicitly rejected the company of the cynical and sentimental Jaques.

The issue, for Rosalind and for the play, is how to make a civil thing of the wildness of sexual love. The forest is the right place for courtship, which puts lovers in the state of nature. By the same token it is the right place to transform "mad" lovers, if they wish, into grownup lovers fully prepared for the marriage rite and the "blessed bond of board and bed" with which the play ends.

By the end of the play its "self-covered" villains also have been transformed: Oliver by becoming the conscious and grateful beneficiary of his brother's courage and forgiveness, and Duke Frederick by his encounter with "an old religious man" in "the skirts of this wild wood." Jaques even has resolved to go and learn from "these convertites." Duke Senior and his fellow exiles, as we know from act 2, will return from the forest to a domestic world far better than the one they fled, for they too have been changed,

renewed in their specifically human nature, their civility and charity, by their time of adversity in the natural world.

Thus by the play's end all of its principal characters have been changed, and for the better, by their time in the forest. Shakespeare saw, and wants us to see, that the forest can be corrective and restorative to disordered human life. But he goes further. At once explicitly and indirectly he invests the forest with a mysterious and even a mystical transformative power. Partly this is accomplished by Touchstone, speaking with implication apparently beyond his intention. In 3.2 he says to Rosalind, "You have said; but whether wisely or no, let the forest judge." And, twitting Audrey in 3.3, he says, "here we have no temple but the wood." Also Rosalind, in her masquerade with Orlando, alludes to "an old religious uncle of mine" and to "a magician" she has "conversed with." Orlando in 5.4 conflates the two when he speaks of Ganymede's uncle, "Whom he reports to be a great magician, / Obscurèd in the circle of this forest."

Is there, then, a great magician in the forest? Is the forest a holy place of judgment and magical or miraculous transformation? We must ask, but we must not answer. The play must not answer. As *You Like It* is not the voice out of the whirlwind. Once upon a time several people fled from a disordered and murderous society into a forest, and there they were profoundly changed. That is all we know.

II

In *King Lear* both the Lear story and the Gloucester story grow out of corruption at the center of wealth and power, as does the action of *As You Like It*. Initially, in *King Lear*, this is the corruption merely of selfishness: self-complacency, self-indulgence, self-ignorance, the lack of critical self-knowledge. From this selfishness grows, in turn, an infection of monstrous proportions that is described, though unwittingly, by Gloucester's bastard son, Edmund, in act 2, scene 2, as he works his deception upon Edgar, his legitimate elder brother: "unnaturalness between the child and the parent; death, dearth, dissolutions of ancient amities; divisions in state, menaces and maledictions against king and

nobles; needless diffidences, banishment of friends, dissipation of cohorts, nuptial breaches.”* Because Lear is king, his self-absorption becomes in effect state policy. Like any head of state he is able, temporarily, to invest his fantasies with power. His fantasy is a primitive instance of early retirement. He believes that by dividing his kingdom among his daughters he can free himself of care and responsibility while retaining the initiative and the privileges of his kingship. This will prove to be almost limitlessly foolish. He’s an “idle old man,” as his daughter Goneril calls him, “That still would manage those authorities / That he hath given away.” His daughter Regan also is right when she says of him that “he hath ever but slenderly known himself.” Because he does not know himself, he cannot know others. He has failed disastrously to know Goneril and Regan. He fails to learn of them in the play’s first scene what is obvious to everybody else: they are eloquent, clever, heartless, false, and greedy.

Having apparently determined already the portions of land that he will give to his daughters, Lear involves them pointlessly and cruelly in a contest in which they are to compete for his “largest bounty” by declaring their love for him. Goneril and Regan, good poets and good actors, give him precisely the groveling flattery he has demanded. Only his third daughter, Cordelia, who lacks neither sense nor eloquence, and who in fact truly loves him, refuses to tell him more than the plain truth: she loves him as she ought. She loves him *completely* as she ought, and the play will reveal this, but her refusal to participate in the love contest is entirely proper. It is a refusal to falsify her love by indulging her father’s frivolous abuse of his power, which she both disdains and fears.

Predictably infuriated, Lear disinherits Cordelia. In doing so, Martin Lings argues in *The Secret of Shakespeare* (1984), Lear banishes “the Spirit,” by which Lings means the Holy Spirit or “the pearl of great price.” I am unwilling so to allegorize the play, but I think nevertheless that Lings has pointed us in the right direction. In disinheriting Cordelia, in making her “a stranger to my heart and me . . . forever,” Lear has, in the face of great evil, estranged himself from goodness. He then deepens and ratifies

*Quotations are from *King Lear*, The Pelican Shakespeare, edited by Stephen Orgel.

this estrangement by exiling the Earl of Kent, who has dared to call folly by its right name.

Thus in *King Lear*, exactly as in *As You Like It*, corruption at the center of power sets loose a centrifugal force that ultimately will send the powerless and the defeated into the wildness of the natural world. But in the six or so years between the two plays Shakespeare saw a need to raise the stakes. This archetypal story is, after all, not necessarily a comedy. Selfishness does not necessarily involve one in a limited evil. Evil people are not necessarily relenting or easily converted. The state of nature is not necessarily the relatively hospitable Forest of Arden. The uses of adversity are not necessarily sweet. The terms and the affirmation of *As You Like It* now require a harsher test.

Shakespeare brought the earlier play to trial by imagining a set of villains who in the course of the play will reveal—and discover for themselves, to their cost—that they have limitlessly consigned themselves to evil. Lacking self-knowledge and too “self-covered” even to suspect that he does, Lear rids his court of love, goodness, and honesty, and thus in effect abandons himself to the purposes of Goneril, Regan, and Regan’s husband, the Duke of Cornwall. These three, like Lear, are selfish, but there is a difference. Lear, in his selfishness, is self-deluded: he thinks he is a loving and generous father, as no doubt he wishes to be. Goneril, Regan, and Cornwall, by contrast, are selfish by policy; there is no inconsistency between what they are doing and what they think they are doing. By dividing his kingdom, by isolating himself from Cordelia and Kent, Lear places himself in a deadly trap. Escape will cost him everything he has, or everything he thinks he has in the opening scene. In his quarrel with Kent he unknowingly foretells his fate: “So be my grave my peace.”

In outline, through 2.1, the Gloucester story exactly parallels that of Lear. Gloucester has two sons, Edgar and Edmund. Edgar loves his father as Cordelia loves hers. Edmund, the illegitimate younger son, is as contemptuous of Gloucester as Goneril and Regan are of Lear. Edmund, like those daughters, is a good actor and flatterer. He wants to cheat Edgar out of their father’s estate, and he succeeds in convincing Gloucester that Edgar is planning to kill him. Edgar is then forced to flee to save his own life.

By the beginning of scene 3 of act 2, when the fugitive Edgar transforms himself into Tom o'Bedlam, the villains are successful and in control; their schemes are working and they have what they want. Love, goodness, honesty, and fidelity have been directly confronted by evil, and evil so far has won. But this working of evil, by its very successes, has instigated a counter movement, and in parallel to *As You Like It* this movement is the work of good and faithful servants. The proscriptions against Cordelia, Kent, and Edgar have set them free to serve Lear and Gloucester.

Disguise in this play is just as important as in *As You Like It*, and more portentously so. Goneril, Regan, and Cornwall are "self-covered." Their better selves have been utterly and finally renounced. Edmund is only barely, but significantly, less self-obscured than they. Gloucester, like Lear, is a naïvely selfish old man. Neither is sinful or evil beyond the measure of ordinary human behavior, but both are obscured, obscured most consequentially to themselves, by foolishness and complacency. They are deluded and self-deluded. They are deludable *because* they are self-deluded. Goneril's husband, the Duke of Albany, for the time being is disguised to himself because of his hesitancy in recognizing and denouncing the evil character of his wife. In order to serve Lear and Gloucester in their time of greatest need, Kent and Edgar must serve in disguise. Of all the major characters Cordelia alone always appears, to us and to herself, only as she is. She is good, and her understanding of her goodness is constant, profound, and absolutely assured. Much of the drama and meaning of the play come from the actions of the characters in relation to their disguises, and we understand those actions by the measure of Cordelia's transparency, clarity, and candor.

In 2.1 the villains of the Lear plot, recognizing their own kind in Edmund, claim him as an ally. Cornwall tells him, with terrible import, "you shall be ours . . . You we first seize on." And so, early in the play, the party of evil, of power-lust and greed, recognizes superficially the usefulness of cooperation, and for a while they are a coherent force. By contrast the party of goodness—the party of Cordelia, Kent, the Fool, Edgar, and, finally, Albany—in its early defeat is widely scattered. As the play proceeds, however, the party of evil, because of the nature of evil, disintegrates while the members of the other party recognize one another and draw together.

Edmund's soliloquy in 1.2 introduces another set of contraries into the play as he subordinates his specifically human nature to nature:

Thou, Nature, art my goddess; to thy law
 My services are bound. Wherefore should I
 Stand in the plague of custom, and permit
 The curiosity of nations to deprive me,
 For that I am some twelve or fourteen moonshines
 Lag of a brother? Why bastard? Wherefore base . . . ?

 Legitimate Edgar, I must have your land.

If we are fair-minded, we must see the justice of Edmund's indictment of the prejudice against bastards as "base born," just as we see the justice of Goneril and Regan's perception that their father is foolish and intemperate. But evil characteristically supports and disguises itself by such partial claims of justice. In his dire intention to deceive his father and his brother, putting both their lives at risk, Edmund offends against moral law, specifically the fifth, sixth, eighth, ninth, and tenth of the Ten Commandments, and against the order of "degrees" as set forth in Ulysses' speech in *Troilus and Cressida*. Edmund understands "nature" as exclusive self-interest, which he by implication ascribes to all natural creatures. As a person self-consciously "enlightened," later in the same scene he rejects his father's astrological determinism, and so accepts full moral responsibility for what he is doing—and again we are tempted to sympathize. But, in rejecting his father's superstition, he defines himself as self-determined. By thus subordinating human nature to nature, he means that he accepts *no* subordination. By putting himself at the service of nature's law, he means, perhaps more absolutely than he intends, that he rejects all service to anybody but himself, and will honor *no* law. This speech of Edmund's is answered in 4.6 by the "Gentleman" who says of Cordelia in an apostrophe to Lear, "Thou hast one daughter / Who redeems nature."

And so the thrusting out of Lear and Gloucester into the wild world is as profoundly and purposefully thematic in this play as is the forest exile of the sufferers in *As You Like It*. When Lear

speaks of Goneril and Regan as “unnatural,” he means that they have, like Edmund, subscribed to nature’s supposed law of entire selfishness, as opposed to human nature’s laws of filiality and love. These virtually opposite uses of the word *nature* may be confusing, but the word in fact has this duplicity in our language, and Shakespeare exploits it fully, to serious purpose, in both plays.

By the unnaturalness of his bad daughters Lear is driven out into nature. Nature now is not the Forest of Arden, but the open heath in the midst of a “pitiless storm.” The pitilessness of the storm, which is set before us in its full extremity in the dialogue, is the measure of the pitilessness of Goneril, Regan, and Cornwall—though the pitilessness of the storm, unlike that of these familial villains, is not unkind, as Lear understands and says in 3.2. The heath and the storm belong to the moral landscape of the tragedy, just as the forest belongs to the moral landscape of the comedy. And Lear’s dreadful exile upon the heath in the storm and the darkness forces almost immediately a change upon his character. Even as he announces to the Fool that he is going mad—“My wits begin to turn”—he speaks for the first time unselfishly, in compassion and concern for the Fool’s suffering: “How dost, my boy? Art cold?” And so his wits are turning, we may say, not just to madness, but through his madness, which is the utter frustration and destruction of his sanity as of act 1, to a better sanity.

Lear’s adversity is not sweet but it *is* useful; it has made him tender; it has feelingly persuaded him what he is; it has reduced him from a king to a mere human, sharing the lot of other humans. And in 3.4 he speaks in compassion, confession, and repentance, his words recalling both Duke Senior’s speech on the uses of adversity and Rosalind and Celia’s act of justice toward Corin. These two themes of *As You Like It* recur, with heightened urgency and purpose, in *King Lear*. The disguised Kent, the faithful servant, has led the old king and the Fool to no welcome in Arden, but to a hovel that will provide them some meager shelter from the storm. At the doorway Lear says:

Poor naked wretches, wheresoe’er you are,
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,
How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,
Your looped and windowed raggedness, defend you

From seasons such as these? O, I have ta'en
 Too little care of this! Take physic, pomp;
 Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
 That thou mayst shake the superflux to them
 And show the heavens more just.

Lear's admission, "O, I have ta'en / Too little care of this!" is the turning point of his story. He has heretofore "ta'en care" mainly of himself; that has now become his calamity, and he knows it. His reproof, "Take physic, pomp," recalls Duke Senior's denunciation of "painted pomp" in *As You Like It*, at the same time that it takes up with greater force the earlier play's concern for economic justice. Recognition of the suffering of "poor naked wretches" leads directly here to the biblical imperative of charity to the poor, for as long as people are painfully in want there is an implicit cruelty in anybody's "superflux" of wealth. This theme is repeated in full by Gloucester in 4.1, after he has given his purse to Poor Tom:

Heavens, deal so still!
 Let the superfluous and lust-dieted man,
 That slaves your ordinance, that will not see
 Because he does not feel, feel your pow'r quickly;
 So distribution should undo excess,
 And each man have enough.

In revenge for his kindness and service to the king during the storm, Gloucester has been captured by Cornwall and Regan, who bind him and put out his eyes. He too is then thrust out, blind and (as his tormentors believe) alone, into the world and the weather—to "smell / His way to Dover," as Regan says in as cruel a speech as was ever written.

But, immediately after the terrible scene of his blinding, we find that Gloucester is not after all alone. He is helped first by an elderly servant who, in the little he tells of himself, answers exactly to the description of the old Adam of *As You Like It*: "O my good lord, I have been your tenant, and your father's tenant, these four-score years." And then he is helped by Edgar in the guise of Tom o'Bedlam or Poor Tom, who is in fact his father's faithful servant, guide, and teacher, and who at last "save[s] him from despair."

Cast out into the storm and the darkness, Lear too is accompanied—first by the Fool and then by Kent and then by Gloucester, at what cost we know, and then by Cordelia and Albany. These are the good and faithful servants of this play, and they continue here *As You Like It's* theme of service and, with it, the earlier play's theme of affection and generosity as opposed to force. But good service in *King Lear* is more costly than in *As You Like It*, also less effective, and thus it emerges in what Shakespeare must have concluded is its true character. Kent is exiled because he understands faithful service, not only as loyalty, as faithful help, but also as truth-telling, requiring even opposition. In this Kent is contrasted to Oswald who is a bad servant because he connives in the evil of his masters and does as he is told; and Oswald is again contrasted with Cornwall's first servant who opposes his master's cruelty to Gloucester, and dies for his insubordination.

By the time he wrote *King Lear* Shakespeare clearly had begun to doubt that it is possible to use by policy a little or a limited evil to serve some perceived good, and then to stop before the evil has enlarged to some unforeseen perfection of itself. This perfection, as Shakespeare saw it, was the destruction of the evildoers along with whatever else might be destroyed by them. (This is the tragedy itself of *Macbeth*, which was written in the next year.)

Self-destruction, after selfishness has been accepted as a policy, is merely a matter of logic, as explained in Ulysses' speech. The key insight is given by Cornwall in 3.7 when, before the blinding of Gloucester, he speaks of "our wrath, which men / May blame, but not control"; and again by Goneril in 5.3: "the laws are mine." If the laws belong to individual persons—if Goneril, as queen, does not rule "under the law"—then those persons are in effect lawless. The party of evil is by definition out of control from the start. Its members are out of control as individuals dedicated to self-interest. People who are united by the principle of unrestrained self-interest have inevitably a short-lived union. However large and however costly to their victims their successes may be, their failure is assured. But their espousal of evil as a deliberate policy assures also that they will be unrelenting while they last.

To this great force of relentless if self-doomed evil Shakespeare opposes the counterforce of good and faithful service. As Lear and

Gloucester are made powerless, poor, and helpless, the theme of help manifests itself in the presence and the acts of people entirely dedicated to serving them. But Lear and Gloucester in their selfishness are too vulnerable and the wickedness of their adversaries is too great to permit to the good servants any considerable practical success. They can give no victory and achieve no restoration, as the world understands such things. Their virtues do not lead certainly or even probably to worldly success, as some bad teachers would have us believe. They stand by, suffering what they cannot help, as parents stand by a dying or disappointing child. This assures only the survival of faithfulness, compassion, and love in this world—which is no small thing.

But this play refuses to stop at what the world understands of service or success. For Lear and Gloucester worldly failure is fully assured; it is too late for worldly vindication. What the good servants can do, and this they succeed in doing, is to restore those defeated old men to their true nature as human beings. They can waken them to love and save them from despair.

It is obvious by now that I have begun to argue against what we might call the “dark interpretation” of *King Lear*. The dark interpretation is well represented by Stephen Orgel, editor of the new Pelican edition of “the traditional conflated text,” who thus sums the meaning of the play: “The world is an instrument of torture, and the only comfort is in the nothing, the never, of death. The heroic vision is of suffering, unredeemed and unmitigated.” It is impossible to see this nihilistic reading of the play as valid, and hard to see it as heroic. There is a kind of modern mind that finds Hell more imaginable and believable than Heaven and nihilism more palatable than redemption. What is heroic to this mind is the courage to face the immitigable pointlessness of human experience. This is the same mind that, in default of any structure of meaning, finds all bad outcomes, political or economic or ecological, to be inevitable.

Before even approaching the issues of this play’s ending, one ought at least to give due consideration to the biblical context within which Shakespeare oriented his work. *King Lear* was written in reference to three passages in the Gospel of Matthew. Like

As You Like It, it alludes repeatedly, and more insistently and sternly, to the call to service in Matthew 20 that I have quoted. And more forcibly than in the earlier play it extends the obligation of service to “the least of these my brethren” (Matthew 25:40), for who more than Lear and Gloucester in their injury and helplessness could be counted as least? And, unlike the comedy, the tragic play broods constantly on the idea, in Matthew 10:39 and also in the other three Gospels, of losing one’s life in order to find it. This theme is stated plainly in 2.1, when the King of France says to Cordelia, “Thou lovest here, a better where to find,” and this strikes so nearly to the heart of the play as to be virtually its subject.

In 1.4 Kent, newly exiled and in disguise, says to himself: “If thou canst serve where thou dost stand condemned, / So may it come thy master whom thou lov’st / Shall find thee full of labors.” This is a literal description of Kent’s predicament in the play, if we read “thy master” as King Lear, and “condemned” as Kent’s exile. But it is also, and just as literally, a description of the human predicament and consequent obligation, if we read “thy master” as Christ and “where thou dost stand condemned” as the fallen world.

In 3.4 Edgar as Poor Tom, in his feigning madness, recites pertinent biblical laws, four of them from the Ten Commandments.

In 4.2, when Albany says to Goneril “Wisdom and goodness to the vile seem vile,” Shakespeare could be recalling Isaiah 5:20: “Wo unto them that speake good of evil, and evil of good.”

Cordelia’s sentence, lines 23–24 in 4.4, has the same ambiguity as Kent’s speech cited earlier: “O dear father, / It is thy business I go about.” This is either an apostrophe to Lear, or it is a prayer recalling Luke 2:49, in which Jesus says to his parents, “knewe ye not that I must go about my father’s busines?”

In 4.4 when Edgar, seeing Lear in his madness “bedecked with weeds,” exclaims, “O thou side-piercing sight!” he is recalling John 19:34: “But one of the soldiers with a spear pierced his side.”

Where Lear in his mad sermon in 4.6 says, “See how yond justice rails upon yond simple thief. Hark in thine ear: change places and, handy-dandy, which is the justice, which is the thief?” his words paraphrase Romans 2:1: “Therefore thou art inexcusable, O man, whosoever thou art that judgest: for in that thou judgest

another, thou condemnest thy self: for thou that judgest, doest the same things.”

Gloucester's prayer in the same scene—"You ever-gentle gods, take my breath from me; / Let not my worser spirit tempt me again / To die before you please"—is the daunting submission of the Lord's Prayer and of Christ's agony in Gethsemane: "Thy will be done."

Cordelia's lamentation over her father in 4.6, "and wast thou fain, poor father, / To hovel thee with swine and rogues forlorn" recalls the Prodigal Son who squandered his inheritance. She awakens Lear a few lines later in what he perceives as a resurrection. And her forgiveness of his offenses against her—"No cause, no cause"—is Christ's: not a mere human excusing or overlooking of an error, but the cancellation of its cause in Lear's fallen nature; his wrong no longer exists to be forgiven. The trumpets that sound in 5.3 must have sounded in Shakespeare's imagination, and to the ears of many in his audiences, like the trumpets of Revelation, for they are a summoning to judgment.

When Albany in 5.3 offers to "friends . . . / The wages of their virtue," the words evoke Romans 6:23: "For the wages of sinne is death; but the gifte of God is eternal life."

And when Kent, in his final speech, says, "My master calls me; I must not say no," he is confirming earlier suggestions of his impending death. But here we have again that term *master*, which in 1.4 we could take to be ambiguous, but which here we are bound to understand as referring to Christ. To assume that "master" refers to Lear is to assume that Kent thinks Lear will require his services in the hereafter, a sentimentality that puts Kent far out of character.

The play, furthermore, contains three references to the miraculous, always in circumstances of great misery, reminding us that Christ's miracles are almost always performed in behalf of those who are seemingly beyond help. Kent, in the stocks in 2.2, says, "Nothing almost sees miracles / But misery." And Edgar, after Gloucester's "suicide" in 4.6, says to him in the playacting of his "cure," but in fact urging the realization on him: "Thy life's a miracle." A few lines further on, he says, "the clearest gods who make them honors / Of men's impossibilities have preserved thee."

The foregoing list of biblical references may be incomplete or

otherwise at fault, but it is at least sufficient to show that Shakespeare thought of the action of this play as occurring in a context far larger than that of what we have come to mean by realism.

Anybody looking for meaninglessness or nihilism in *King Lear* can find it in abundance, but nearly all of it is in the acts and the implicit principles of the villains. There are, however, three statements in the play that are explicitly and pointedly nihilistic.

The first is in one of Lear's speeches in 3.4 when in the storm he is reduced, he thinks, virtually to nothing, and in his madness he adopts a fierce reductionism of his own: "Is man no more than this?" he asks of the nearly naked Edgar. And then, addressing Edgar, he says, "Thou art the thing itself; unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art." This, now under the weight of tragedy, is Jaques' conclusion in his seven ages speech: "unaccommodated man" is a lone specimen "sans everything."

A considerable part of the purpose of this play is to answer such statements, and this one is answered simply by the circumstances in which it is uttered. Lear's despair at this point is over the failure of a mere man to be successfully selfish. He cannot secure for himself his own wishes, and he cannot, alone, save himself even from the weather. But, as bad as his predicament is, as nearly hopeless as it is, he is not "unaccommodated." Like the old Adam of *As You Like It* he is not alone. Kent, the Fool, and Edgar are with him. A little later Gloucester enters with a torch to offer what help he can. With one most consequential exception the good people of the play are going to be with him, doing all they can for him, to the end. What they can do is not enough, but they stand nonetheless for all that is opposite to his trouble and his suffering, his rage, and his despair. They stand for the faithfulness that is opposed to treachery and the gentleness that is opposed to force.

The second expression of utter despair needing some comment is blinded Gloucester's accusation against "th' gods" in 4.1. This phrase *th' gods* is in keeping with a parliamentary proscription of the use of the word *God* on the stage, which the Puritans thought to be blasphemous. And so Gloucester was reduced to blaming the Greek and Roman deities: "As flies to wanton boys are we to th' gods; / They kill us for their sport."

Gloucester says this just after he has met Edgar-as-Poor-Tom. From now until Gloucester's death, Edgar's ruling purpose is to save his father from despair. Gloucester's sentence, while avoiding the appearance of blasphemy so fearful to the Puritan politicians, is authentically blasphemous, as Edgar understands. It is blasphemous, desperate, and perfectly self-centered. It is self-pity in extremis, driving him to say what he can hardly bear to say and cannot know. To save him from despair is to save him from the death of "a poor, bare, forked animal" reduced to the self-indulgence of self-pity. And by the end of the Gloucester story Edgar has led his father to a proper care for his life ("Thy life's a miracle") and to the proper submission to divine will that I quoted earlier. Edgar's service to Gloucester is clearly to be understood as redemptive, and he is not being frivolous when he says that his father died "smilingly" between the two extremes of "joy and grief."

My final exhibit in this line of nihilism is from a speech of Edmund's. Near the end of the play he sends a "captain" to follow Lear and Cordelia to prison with instructions to kill them. Here is his justification: "Know thou this, that men / Are as the time is." This is a crude, self-serving determinism, the counterpart of "It is inevitable." All the energy and passion of *King Lear* gather to refute this speech. *Some* men are as the time is, some always are, and they have always said so in self-justification. But Cordelia is not as the time is, Kent is not, Edgar is not, Albany is not, even the Fool is not.

And so these three assertions of hopelessness and meaninglessness are answered with three resounding nos that are passionately affirmative: No, "unaccommodated man" is not the type specimen of humanity. No, you cannot conclude that the gods kill us for their sport. No, all men are not "as the time is."

By the end of the play we can have no doubt that we have watched a deadly campaign in the battle between good and evil. We have watched the passage of tormented souls and a human community through profound disorder, in which they have been driven away from their comforts and customary assurances into the world's unaccommodating wildness. The consequences of this casting out are surely tragic and horrifying. The death of Cordelia, as Dr. Johnson and others have testified, is shocking; it is nearly

unbearable. The survivors are clearly in shock themselves, barely able to speak. And so we now must ask if in fact *King Lear* conforms to the archetypal story I outlined at the beginning. Are Lear and Gloucester in any sense reformed or redeemed by their great suffering? Is there any promise of a return to civil order? Does the play (to quote J. A. Bryant, Jr.) “satisfy the society’s impulse to renewal”?

Well, before concluding with the proponents of darkness that the play merely demonstrates the meaninglessness of suffering, we need to deal patiently with certain facts. The first of these is that by the play’s end every one of the villains is dead—and not one of them is dead by chance. The death of each has come as a logical consequence of the assumption that human nature can be satisfactorily subordinated to nature. This assumption has proved to be as uncontrollable as the storm on the heath. There is a right relation between nature and human nature, and to get it wrong is eventually to perish. Shakespeare does not present this as an issue of justice, for such wrongs may destroy the innocent as well as the guilty; he presents it as the natural result of unnatural (that is, inhuman) behavior. The conflict of the two natures is revealed in Edmund’s dying effort to redeem himself: “Some good I mean to do, / Despite of mine own nature.”

According to this view, it would be too much to expect a “comic” outcome, for great evil will victimize the good. But the good people, unlike the evil ones, are not inevitably destroyed. Another fact is that, as the play ends, Kent, Edgar, and Albany are still alive. Kent’s life is in doubt, but Edgar and Albany are young and will live on. In them is a reasonable hope for the restoration of civil order. And not only have those three survived, but in the course of the play, together with Cordelia and the Fool, they have grown ever greater in our respect and love, as has Shakespeare himself for imagining such people.

Another fact hard to ignore is the work of forgiveness. Both Cordelia and Edgar freely forgive their erring fathers, and by this forgiveness those fathers are made more truly and fully human.

Now we must deal with the reconciliation of the two plots. This is not really a problem, except that it has been made so by bad reading. The “problem” for the dark interpreter is that the Lear and the Gloucester stories are parallel, each enlarging our under-

standing of the other by resonating with it. The problem is that the Gloucester story is explicitly redemptive, for Edgar intends, as he says, to save his father from despair, and he succeeds, whereas the Lear story, according to the dark interpretation, ends in despair: "suffering, unredeemed and unmitigated." How can a play thus have two plots and two meanings that absolutely contradict each other and still deserve our respect? Mr. Orgel solves this problem by asserting that "Gloucester is effectively abandoned by the play." But this only raises a worse problem: why would Shakespeare have given so much of his play, and so much magnificent poetry, to a secondary plot that he later abandons? And why should we indulge or forgive his doing so?

Another, more sensible, way to deal with the supposed problem is to ask if Lear's story actually ends in despair, and thus in contradiction of Gloucester's story. To answer, we must look with the greatest care at Lear's final speech. It is possible, I suppose, to read or speak those lines as an unpausing scramble of outrage, grief, and despair. But the speech in fact has five parts, involving four profound changes of mind and mood. It begins with a complaint: "And my poor fool is hanged: no, no, no life?" This is tenderness, heartbreaking enough, but it bears still a taint of the old selfishness. Cordelia is "*my* poor fool"; her death here is perceived as Lear's loss, not hers. Then comes a natural outrage: "Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life, / And thou no breath at all?" All grief over the death of the young, especially the death of one's own child, must bear the burden of such a question. And only after that ineluctable and futile question, which also comes from his own loss, can Lear turn his thoughts fully to the dead girl in his arms, and, forgetting himself, speak to her of her death: "Thou'lt come no more, / Never, never, never, never, never." And then, turning to one of the bystanders, he says: "Pray you undo this button. Thank you, sir."

This is literally meant, of course. His clothes are somehow binding; he asks and receives help with a button. But the button is symbolic as well; it, or this small discomfort, is the last thing holding him to the world. This is not the renunciation of Gloucester's "suicide," but rather a profound submission and relinquishment of his will. At this point all the emotions of the preceding lines, and of his tragedy, pass from him, with the result that at last he *sees*

Cordelia: "Do you see this? Look on her! Look, her lips, / Look there, look there—"

Martin Lings, in *The Secret of Shakespeare*, understands Lear's story as at once a descent into Hell and a Purgatory, and he thinks that when Lear speaks these final two lines he is seeing Cordelia again, and this time in truth, as "a soul in bliss." I have no doubt that the play can be read or presented as Mr. Lings suggests. And yet I hesitate. The difficulty is that Shakespeare, as it seems to me, was not a visionary Christian; he was not Dante. The redemption he saw as possible for Gloucester and Lear did not come by way of an intercession from Heaven. It was earned, or lived out, or suffered out, in an unrelenting confrontation both with the unregenerate self, the self-covered self, and with the deliberate evil of others. The straight way was lost to Gloucester and Lear as it was to Dante, but it was recoverable to them by a self-loss more painful, and even nearer too late, than Dante's.

I am content to rest with the more literal understanding that Cordelia, the play's only wholly undisguised character, has been disguised to Lear until the end by his self-preoccupying pride, anger, outrage, guilt, grief, and despair; and that, when his vision clears at last and he can see her as she was and is, he is entirely filled with love and wonder. And so the play may be said to show us at last a miracle: that Lear, dying, is more alive than he has ever been until this moment.