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Introduction

. . . we must obey;
Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say . . .
(v, iii, 323–4)

Anyone who sets out to say what he makes of *King Lear* is soon likely to start wondering at his rashness. The further he goes, the less easy he finds it even to keep his critical balance. More perhaps than any other work – certainly more than any other of Shakespeare’s, I think – it impels us finally to ‘speak what we feel, not what we ought to say’. To ‘obey’ it is to answer with nothing less. And yet it also makes us feel that whatever we do speak, or could speak, is inadequate to everything else we are brought to feel – even, in some obscure way, a betrayal of it. The drama so engages us that to feel it adequately requires us in the end to become wholly open to, totally consumed in, the most painful and bewildering feelings. But because those feelings press toward release, toward some form in which we can name them and (to that extent at least) master them, to speak adequately requires us in the end to detach ourselves from our feelings, to withhold or withdraw some part of ourselves from the integrity with which we have to experience the drama. It is a difficult enough predicament for any reader or spectator; for the critic, who commits himself to expressing some coherent sense of the play as a whole, it is acute – and none the less so because (as I see it) this kind of predicament is largely what the play is about. It is hardly surprising that many accounts of *King Lear* strike a tone that somehow falsifies it. Some critics, for example, sound so idealistic, so emotionally effusive, so eager to find confirmation

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of their own values in it, that they seem to have missed how deeply and persistently the play is concerned to examine the nexus between values and personal feeling. Others sound so detached, so self-possessed, so 'objective', so fundamentally *undisturbed* in tone, that they seem to have missed how formidably the play questions such detachment and self-possession in the face of the human experience it gives us to witness and to share. Clearly, to speak about such experience justly is a peculiarly delicate business, and a peculiarly self-revealing one too; it is hard for anyone not to seem either too emotionally involved in it or too detached from it. To see the dangers is not necessarily to avoid them, and though I draw attention to them at the outset, it is not because I have much confidence that I avoid them myself. On the contrary; for it is part of my argument that probably nobody can.

As far as possible, I try to allow my argument to follow the logic of the play itself. I do so for two reasons. The first is simply that I cannot see any more adequate way of eliciting what the drama does make us feel, and why, nor any briefer yet still accurate way of stating it. The play is so tightly organized and so continuously self-qualifying that a reading of it can hardly avoid becoming close-knit and self-qualifying itself; and I should perhaps say at once that this essay is likely to disappoint the reader who wants of criticism a straightforward, clear-cut statement of a straightforward, clear-cut position. Extended as it is, my argument is conceived (as I hope it will be read) as a single whole. For although I believe *King Lear* has an integral meaning, I do not believe it consists in any easily formulable 'philosophy'. The play does not offer us anything like a single, straightforward, clear-cut attitude to life, or a guaranteed moral vantage-point, even if some of the characters in it seem to;

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part of its integrity, I would argue, is precisely that it does not. But when so many people think that it does, or think that if it doesn't it should, it seems to me better to err on the side of cautious advance and minute explicitness than of bold, readily grasped assertion. In the area of Shakespearean tragedy – where the integrity of our deepest feelings and values is challenged by what they must also judge – prompt, business-like attitudes are likely to be only a source of darkness.

The second reason for trying to follow the 'logic' of the play is a more general one, and calls for some preliminary explanation.

To use a word like 'logic' is to imply that the play has a structure that exists in time – in other words, that the play cannot be adequately described in 'spatial' terms. I think this is the case. It is true of any play – indeed, of any literary work – but it also has a special relevance to this one.

That *King Lear* has a 'temporal' structure, an action, seems plain enough; and as far as I know, nobody has ever doubted it. What the action consists in, however, and why it is important, are another matter. In the post-Bradleyan excitements about 'spatial' and 'organic' kinds of structure in Shakespeare, it was generally argued that these were more basic, more essential, than the 'temporal' action. The latter, it was generally supposed, was merely what the characters did and suffered – more particularly, what the protagonist did and suffered, the sequence of events in which his character was gradually revealed as his fate. The action being regarded only as a function of character, and character only as a function of the poetry, both, it seemed, could be treated as secondary or even left aside: Bradley had taken them as far as they could go, and probably further. The analysis of imagery, themes, symbolism, the 'atmospheric' texture of the verse, was thought to discover a

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deeper and more significant kind of structure – the structure not of the protagonist's character, but of Shakespeare's own imaginative insight, his 'vision' of the world.

The curious result of this has been to leave Bradley's conception of the dramatic action pretty much in command of the field – and especially with *King Lear* (for it was implicitly questioned with other tragedies). Even now it is still generally assumed, for example, that the action of *Lear* is what Bradley thought it was: the pattern of deeds, of events – in this case, primarily spiritual events – issuing from Lear's character and issuing back into it. True, this pattern is supplemented by the story of Gloucester and of the other characters; but the meaning of the play as a whole, in so far as it is gradually revealed to our sight, is thought to lie chiefly in the actions and consciousness of its hero. Analysis of the play's 'organic' or 'spatial' structure, of its use of traditional beliefs and symbols, of the effect of theatrical conventions, has really left untouched two basic assumptions of Bradley's reading: that the drama moves in time only in order to represent the spiritual history of Lear; and secondly, that as we identify with the hero, so we identify the end of his spiritual history as the meaning of the drama. The play is commonly thought to represent a man moving from blindness and folly, through the bitter lessons of his consequent suffering, eventually to see the truth. Whether or not this truth withstands what the terrible final catastrophe does to his spirit may be debatable; it is perhaps nothing less than a mystery. But about the vehicle by which Shakespeare's meaning is conveyed to us, and where we must therefore look for the last particle of it, there is (so it would seem) little doubt: it is what he makes his hero come to 'see', the ultimate state to which he brings the hero's consciousness.

Neither this general conception of a dramatic action, nor

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the usual view of *King Lear* based on it, seems to me wholly convincing. Clearly, they both contain more than a grain of truth; they would have collapsed very quickly if they didn't. But I think the general conception does nevertheless over-simplify the nature of dramatic 'character', and hence the relationship of the hero to everything else in the drama, hence our relationship to the hero, and finally, therefore, the connection between 'character', 'insight', and 'vision'. Applied to this play, where 'sight' and 'insight' are such crucial terms both for the characters and (in a somewhat different sense) for ourselves, such over-simplifications can become positively misleading. This is the reason for my rather theoretical digression in chapter 2; it is an attempt to clear the ground a little before trying to proceed. As for the usual view of *Lear*, it is in order to help clarify what I think the play's action does consist in, and why it is of central importance, that I try as far as possible to follow the play's own 'logic'.

For the usual reading does raise some awkward questions. How much does it matter, for example, that Cordelia has a touch of hard steel in her, or that Goneril and Regan have quite a good case against their father? Is there any real dramatic justification for the sub-plot? Does Lear really come to 'see the truth' during the storm and in his madness? If we look at what he says there with a properly critical eye, how can we accept it as marking a real spiritual progress in him? Again, why are the 'good' characters so often brought to affirm a clear moral pattern only for it to be subverted by the very next turn of events? Does any value at all in the play survive this sort of irony? If it is impossible to accept Lear's history as a spiritual progress, how can we avoid the conclusion that the play is utterly nihilistic, or alternatively, not a fully achieved success – that it is, as one critic has put it, 'radically incoherent'?

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Questions like these are surely inescapable, and so is the critical conclusion to which they point – if, that is, we grant the basic assumption about the action of the drama. But I don't think we should grant it; nor do I find the play either nihilistic or incoherent. Its greatness seems to me more securely founded than that.¹

¹ As there is little point in trying to note every agreement or disagreement with other critics of *King Lear*, I have kept such notes to a bare minimum. However, there are three recent and very pertinent discussions of the play I would like to mention here, since they came to my notice too late to use in developing my argument: Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* (New York, 1969), pp. 267–353; A. L. French, *Shakespeare and the Critics* (Cambridge, 1972), ch. 4; and Marvin Rosenberg, *The Masks of King Lear* (Los Angeles, 1972).

With each of these I found a hearteningly large measure of agreement in our interpretations of the play, even though approaching it from different points of view and reaching different conclusions about it. Mr French, for example, also criticizes the common 'Bradleyan' interpretation; but he seems to accept an essentially 'Bradleyan' view of the action. Evidently he can see no positive alternative; and so, finding the play prompting questions it cannot answer, he concludes that it is only a dubious success. Mr Cavell's general view of it, on the other hand, is more positive; and in some respects my own view comes very close to his, even down to using some similar terms of analysis and argument. Mr Cavell's engagement with the text, however, seems rather too selective, so that his account of it, suggestive though it is, becomes somewhat limited and inconclusive. Nevertheless, like Mr French's, it is both stimulating and usefully provocative.

Mr Rosenberg stays close to the text all through; indeed, his book is perhaps the best detailed commentary on it available. He proceeds scene by scene, noting the wide range of theatrical interpretations each has received; and again and again I found my own sense of the text generally corroborating his. Where it did not, the difference usually arose from what seems to me a limitation in Mr Rosenberg's method. No doubt it is only the defect of its virtue, but in one respect I think his book stays rather *too* close to the text. So attentive is it to all the details of the play and to their various interpretations, that it leaves unclear exactly how much each matters in the total sum. The commentary is always perceptive; but in being a meticulous running commentary, it somehow loses (or dissipates) any sense of the fierce, urgent, accumulating pressure under which the details are not only informed but shaped: the pressure, I mean, that originates in the *poetic* substance of the drama, that continually enforces 'obedience' to the logic of the action, and whose end is our own final need (and incapacity) to 'speak what we feel'.

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I

The opening terms

I

It is not hard to see why many people find *King Lear* so unbearable that they virtually reject it. Even Dr Johnson found he had to agree with most of his age in preferring Tate's version; and although the genius of the stage has still proved able to transform the play to suit the different sentimentalities of our own day – ethical, Christian, absurdist, 'revolutionary', or whatever – literary criticism has generally managed to relieve with 'interpretation' what the eighteenth century could only remove by surgery. Johnson at least faced the play honestly, and (as usual) he put his finger on the central difficulty it presents – the difficulty, that is, of accepting what it brings us eventually to feel. It fills the mind, he said, 'with a perpetual tumult of indignation, pity, and hope . . . So powerful is the current of the poet's imagination, that the mind, which once ventures within it, is hurried irresistibly along.' Where this current takes us – or ought to have taken us – is to 'this important moral, that villany is never at a stop, that crimes lead to crimes, and at last terminate in ruin'; and yet, he argued, in the process Shakespeare's imagination somehow overleaped one vital truth – a truth that is the foundation-stone of Johnson's objection: 'all reasonable beings naturally love justice'. Justice, he thought, is precisely what the play denies us, and his argument suggests that by doing this

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the play denies the tumult of our feelings their natural resolution.¹

It is characteristic of Johnson that he assumes our feelings work in an essentially passive way: they react to the given stimuli, as it were, rather than actively respond to and help shape the object. Nevertheless, his point is perfectly fair as far as it goes. Not merely have we wanted and hoped for justice throughout the play, but we have been subtly led to expect it. We witness acts that cry out for justice (and men crying out for it); we also witness the countervailing strength of goodness and love; and then, with a ruthlessness that seems gratuitous, Shakespeare suddenly subjects goodness and love not so much to human malignancy as to a malignancy or a moral indifference he evidently thinks inherent in the very nature of things. Cordelia's death shatters Lear, of course; but as Johnson saw, it also shatters the emergent pattern *we* have glimpsed, which gradually aroused and then seemed about to satisfy our desire for some vindicating design. And as Johnson quite fairly asked, why should Shakespeare do that? It is not for Johnson a question merely of realism: 'a play in which the wicked prosper, and the virtuous miscarry, may doubtless be good, because it is a just representation of the common events of human life'. Obviously, life is not calculable, nor is the kind of justice we look for – the manifestation of some significant order, some logic in events, which gains or even forces our deepest assent – the kind that anyone can find in the world merely by putting his head out of a window and glancing around. Johnson knew the vanity of human wishes, and realized often enough that 'celestial wisdom' may have to 'make the happiness she does not find'. As he saw it, the effort to make moral sense of our experience is a necessary

¹ *Johnson on Shakespeare*, ed. Walter Raleigh (London, 1925), pp. 159–61.

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part of a full humanity – an effort that should never capitulate either to the obstinate resistance of life or to its capacity to inflict gratuitous, savage counter-strokes. Behind his wish for a satisfying justice at the end of *Lear* probably lies the feeling that this is exactly what Shakespeare had done, and that it was a kind of weakness in him that he had. Merely to represent life may be only a way of giving in to it.

One reply to Johnson might well be that we want Shakespeare to show us the moral significance of the ending precisely because it is 'a just representation of the common events of human life'. If we were not convinced of that, we would not be so concerned to find some meaning in it; and it is no answer to the problem merely to remove it by substituting a different ending. But an age without so tense and unrelenting a will to dominate experience as Johnson's might also want to reply to him that there is a different but equal strength in the ability to yield to life – in a 'negative capability' of the spirit (the phrase actually comes from a letter in which Keats had been discussing *King Lear*): a positive power quite distinct from mere passivity or fatalistic resignation; and that in *Lear* Shakespeare is at least as much concerned with spiritual patience as with spiritual force. This was very much the direction taken by Bradley, for example, whose account of the play, confused as it is in some respects, is nowhere near as muddled or crudely sentimental as some of his twentieth-century followers'. Unlike them, he discovered no revelation of heavenly justice or harmony in the play, nor even the promise of any. Despite his talk about Lear's 'redemption', he sums up the final result as rather 'a consciousness of greatness in pain, and of solemnity in the mystery we cannot fathom'. Believing, as he put it in his first Lecture ('The Substance of Shakespearean Tragedy'), that all the terms of moral or poetic

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‘justice and merit or desert’ are ‘untrue to our [final] imaginative experience’ of any of the tragedies, and that whatever emotions it involves ‘the tragic position’ does not involve judgment, he saw *King Lear* as held by the tension of two characteristic, opposing tendencies in Shakespeare. On the one hand was the tendency to regard worldly power and prosperity as merely the breeding-ground of hardness, vice, and destruction, and certainly not the gods’ just reward for goodness – the tendency, indeed, to regard every outward circumstance, including misfortune and death, as the adversary *against* which the hero’s soul is tested and improved, but as ultimately irrelevant to the reality of the soul and its virtues. Thus all ‘error, guilt, failure, woe and waste’ could come at times to seem finally unreal, ‘illusive’. On the other hand, however, was the tendency to feel that ‘suffering and death do matter greatly, and that happiness and life are not to be renounced as worthless’, that some evil is equally real, and being real ‘apparently cureless’. In answer to Swinburne’s view of *Lear*, Bradley concluded that while Shakespeare does seem to have been so horrified at the power of evil that he was ‘forced . . . sometimes to yield to the infirmity of misanthropy and despair’ and to seek refuge in the thought of life as only a dream, nevertheless he also found in his art a way to help free himself of this perilous stuff, and to learn the ‘patience’ that this play, like *The Tempest*, ‘seems to preach to us from end to end’.¹

One obvious difficulty with this of course is what Bradley means by ‘patience’ (or what he thinks Shakespeare meant) – a question he does not press. The word can apply to very different states of mind, states that evade such broad, predetermined, and therefore unhelpful distinctions

¹ A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, 2nd ed. (London, 1952 [1905]), pp. 32–3, 278–9, 322ff.