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GRATITUDE, NATURE, AND PIETY IN *KING LEAR*

LAURENCE BERNS

And they go to trial on a charge on account of which men hate each other most, but go to trial about least, that is, ingratitude. And him who they know to be able to return a favor, but does not return it, they also punish severely. For they think that the ungrateful would also be most neglectful about gods, about parents, about country, and about friends; and what seems to follow upon ingratitude most of all is shamelessness, and it is this indeed which seems to be the greatest leader towards every baseness.

—Xenophon, *Cyropaedeia* [1.2.7]

I

In the fourth act of *King Lear* the cruelly blinded Duke of Gloucester is saved and guided by a man disguised as a mad beggar. The strangeness of beggar guiding duke is compounded by the fact that Gloucester's unknown guide is his son Edgar, who had assumed this wretched disguise to escape the sentence wrongfully laid upon him by his gullible father. Edgar serves not only as his father's eyes, he becomes his provider, the nurse of his broken spirit, his teacher, and the saviour of his life. He saves him from Oswald's murderous attack and from a more formidable foe, despair. He concocts what for Gloucester is a divine miracle, to arouse within him the strength to live; and he preaches the lessons that enable Gloucester to avail himself of that strength. Edgar fulfills parental offices, and more, for his father. The once masterful father, helpless as a babe, is, as it were, fathered, sustained, and educated by his own son. This unsettling reversal of normal stations is pitiful and thought-provoking.¹

Small debts of gratitude can be paid without much difficulty. But what recompense can be made to those who are the very sources of one's being? Does not every recompense fall short, is not every recompense simply disproportionate to what is owed? Since one is always in their debt, the command "Honor thy father and thy mother" can be invoked almost without any reservations.² Although this debt of gratitude is normally impossible to discharge, Edgar either did discharge it or came as close

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¹ Oedipus in a questionable way assumes his father's position through violence. Shakespeare's Edgar behaves as a father to his father with perfect justice. Cp. the beginning of this scene, 4.6, with *Matt.* 4.5-11, and with Prospero's "miracles" in *The Tempest*.

² Cf. Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 1161a 20 and 1163b 12-29.

to doing so as any man could. The story of Edgar and his father seems to have been designed to show what would be required for such a debt to be paid in full.

The mercantile aspect of the language of gratitude—debts, payments, owing—is vaguely offensive, but apparently unavoidable. Lear, raging in the storm, calls out:

. . . Spit, fire! spout, rain!
 Nor rain, wind, thunder, fire, are my daughters:
 I tax you not, you elements, with unkindness;
 I never gave you kingdom, call'd you children,
 You owe me no subscription: . . . [3.2.14-18].

The hunted Edgar, consoling himself with the thought that "The lowest and most dejected thing of Fortune,/Stands still in esperance," goes on to say:

. . . Welcome, then,
 Thou unsubstantial air that I embrace:
 The wretch that thou hast blown unto the worst
 Owes nothing to thy blasts [4.1.3-9].

Nothing good received, nothing owed.³ But what if just being itself is good?

Although we prosecute and punish those who buy or borrow and do not pay, such offenses do not evoke the gravest condemnations. But "sharper than a serpent's tooth it is to have a thankless child." And ingratitude is a "marble-hearted fiend, more hideous when thou showest thee in a child than the sea-monster." The seriousness of the wrong can also be reckoned roughly by its effect. Kent speaks of "how unnatural and bemadding a sorrow" is the filial ingratitude that Lear suffers. When that sorrow has nearly done its work, Gloucester addresses Lear as "O ruin'd piece of nature."

Gratitude is akin to grace and graciousness, as their etymologies indicate.⁴ Capacities or incapacities for gratitude seem to be direct reflections of character; the obligation when regarded as genuine is self-incurred. It becomes suspect when external compulsion is in the background, when it does not "come from the heart." To pay one's bills grudgingly is not gracious but does not violate the spirit of commerce. Can gratitude be paid grudgingly? Coming from within, it seems to be a natural movement in the sense of the Aristotelian distinction.⁵ In this way it is akin to love.

Gratitude might be thought of as being between justice and love. Like

³ Cf. 2.4.179 ff. and .252, 3.4.20, and Regan's (!) morally indignant words to Gloucester, "Ingrateful fox" (3.7.28). She probably means that he is ungrateful to his country: he is referred to as a traitor twelve times. All line numbers are from the Arden Ed., ed. Kenneth Muir, Harvard, 1959.

⁴ Cf. Aristotle *Rhetoric* 1385a 16-b 11, Cope ed., Vol. II, pp. 87-93.

⁵ Cf. Aristotle *Physics* 192b 7-23. Cf. 215a 1-5, 230a 19 ff., and 254b 12 ff.

commutative justice, which seeks arithmetic equality in exchanges of goods and services, gratitude involves an element of calculation.⁶ Gratitude should be proportionate to benefits or favors bestowed.⁷ But unlike the demands of commutative justice, these obligations are unenforceable, at least by any human court. Unlike commercial and contractual obligations, here there is no explicit promise to return an equal value for what has been received.⁸ What occurs depends entirely upon the grace of the benefactor. The beneficiary cannot be forced to pay this kind of debt, which is also a debt that he was in no way responsible for incurring. Whether he pays or not depends upon the kind of man he is. Is he to be held responsible for the kind of man he is? Gratitude then, in so far as its payment is unenforceable, in so far as it must be rendered willingly, and in so far as it reflects the character of those engaged in it, is like love.

Where benefits causing gratitude and where love depend essentially on the personal merits of the benefactor or the beloved, distributive justice, which concerns itself with the proportionality of rewards to personal merit, comes into consideration.⁹ Despite their connections or parallelism, gratitude and love, at least noble love, may be distinguished. Lear's failure to appreciate this difference seems to have been an important part of what led to his downfall.¹⁰

II

Lear introduces what has been called his love test with the following words:

Tell me, my daughters,
(Since now we will divest us both of rule,
Interest of territory, cares of state)
Which of you shall we say doth love us most?
That we our largest bounty may extend
Where nature doth with merit challenge¹¹ [1.1.48-53].

⁶ Xenophon's Socrates defines ingratitude as a certain kind of pure injustice: *Memorabilia* 2.2.3. See also *King Lear* 1.1.183.

⁷ Cf. Aristotle *NE* 1163a 10-24.

⁸ In circumstances where either rejection or acceptance is possible, acceptance could in some contexts be understood as implying such a promise.

⁹ Cf. Aristotle *NE* 1160b 23-62a 9, 1163a 24-63b 27, 1167a 15-22, 1167b 16-68a 27. The subject abounds in difficulties. Cp., for example, 1161a 20-23 and 1162a 4-9 (where it is shown why, in accordance with justice, children, like subjects in relation to their kings, should love parents more than parents should love children), with 1161b 18-30 and 1167b 16-68a 27 (where it is shown why, generally speaking, parents love children more than children love parents). Cf. *Eudemian Ethics* 1241a 35-b 11; and Thomas Aquinas *Summa Theologica* I-II, Q. 100, A. 5, ad 4. Cf. also Plato *Republic* 330c, 457c end-458b, 462a-e, 463c-465c, 472b 3-6.

¹⁰ Cp. Kent's love for Lear with Cordelia's. The love between Kent and Lear seems inseparable from "service." Cf. 1.4.4-7 and 1.4.92-93.

¹¹ The last line is difficult. Nature here could refer to filial or to paternal affection; merit correspondingly could refer to good deeds, that is, obedience and

He will give most, he says, to that daughter that loves him most, and the implication is, each daughter will receive a share of bounty proportionate to her love for her father. If Lear intended to test or to measure the amounts of his daughters' loves by their speeches, he would have waited till each daughter had spoken and each speech could have been compared with the others before making his distribution. But after each speech, before hearing those remaining, he disposes of a share in accordance with what appears to be and is once explicitly referred to by him as a prearranged plan (1.1.37-38). Moreover, the plan, which had been discussed with, or at least presented to, his advisors and council, seems to have been a sagacious one.¹² The love test then may first have been thought of by Lear as a mere formality, staged for the sake of a public ratification of a well-thought-out succession scheme. The question as to why this form was used still remains. It is through Cordelia's actions that the love test becomes decisive for Lear and for the play as a whole: For Cordelia's love and being sure of her love were, more than he knew, overwhelmingly important for Lear. Cordelia's experience in scene 1, in important respects, prefigures Lear's.

The Duke of Burgundy and the King of France are in Lear's court to sue for the hand of Cordelia, Lear's favorite daughter. When Lear strips Cordelia of all her inheritance, of her dowry, and of his paternal favor, the difference between Burgundy's and France's loves becomes plain. Burgundy will take Cordelia only with the portion first proposed by Lear. Lear says:

... Sir, there she stands:
 If aught within that little-seeming substance,
 Or all of it, with our displeasure piec'd,
 And nothing more, may fitly like your Grace,
 She's there, and she is yours.

Burgundy replies, "I know no answer." Lear intensifies his condemnation and urges France not even to consider his former suit. France wonders what Cordelia's offense could have been. She replies; and he addresses himself to Burgundy:

... My Lord of Burgundy,
 What say you to the lady? Love's not love

conformity in ratification of the settlement Lear here proclaims, or simply love of Lear. According to Muir, nature means "'paternal affection' and *merit*, in the context, means 'filial affection'" (Arden Ed., p. 6).

¹² 1.1.3-7. Cordelia and her consort, with Lear so long as he is alive, are to occupy the larger strategic center, balancing Goneril and Albany on the north and Regan and Cornwall on the south. Cf. Harry V. Jaffa, "The Limits of Politics: *King Lear*, Act One, Scene One," in *Shakespeare's Politics*, Allan Bloom and Harry V. Jaffa, Basic Books, 1964, pp. 118 ff. This present essay is, in a number of important respects, an attempt to develop points first stated by Harry Jaffa.

When it is mingled with regards that stand
 Aloof from th' entire point. Will you have her?
 She is herself a dowry.

After Burgundy applies to Lear again for her dowry, is rejected, and withdraws his suit, Cordelia says:

Peace be with Burgundy!
 Since that respect and fortunes are his love,
 I shall not be his wife [1.1.247-49].

France speaks again:

Fairest Cordelia, that art most rich, being poor;
 Most choice, forsaken; and most lov'd, despis'd!
 Thee and thy virtues here I seize upon:
 Be it lawful, I take up what's cast away.
 Gods, gods! 'tis strange that from their cold'st neglect
 My love should kindle to inflam'd respect.

"Inflam'd respect" might well serve to characterize noble love.¹³

After being stripped of the accoutrements of power, wealth, and favor, Cordelia does learn who loves her for herself, for herself and her virtues, as France puts it, and who loves her for what she possesses, whose love "is mingled with regards that stand/Aloof from th' entire point." The dismantling of "so many folds of favor," including the favor of gods and fortune, not only reveals the qualities of her suitors' loves, but, more importantly, reveals what she is herself, reveals her lovability. France, as Kent conjectures (3.1.28-29), may have some political reasons for wanting to marry Cordelia: these, however, need not be incompatible with those manifest reasons that lead him to love her for her own sake. To believe that she could have deserved the condemnation she received from Lear, France says, "Must be a faith that reason without miracle/Should never plant in me." Positively put, reason without miracle confirms Cordelia's virtue and her lovability. France's love then could be described as a kind of rational faith based on what he has learned about her character.

It is not easy for a king, a princess, or anyone with large and evident powers to bestow benefits and ills, to learn what people truly think of them. Lear finally learns who loves him and what those about him think of him, but like Cordelia, he must be stripped and must strip himself of the trappings of majesty first.¹⁴

¹³ In Cordelia's speech (1.1.248) respect probably means "looking again" or "looking back," *respectare*, to something else beside herself, to her fortune, that is, comparison and calculation. In France's speech (1.1.255) the word means honoring or esteem, but also involves an element of "looking," of calculation, or estimation, of personal worth. The sense of distance suggested by the admiration, estimation, and deference usually associated with "respect" makes the unusual conjunction with "inflam'd" all the more poignant. Cf. also 2.4.24.

¹⁴ Cf. 4.1.19-21, and n. to 1. 20, Arden Ed., K. Muir, ed.

III

Private and public interfere with each other for Lear: The very proposing of a love test evidences a certain confusion about the properly public and the properly private. To command public declarations or testimony in the execution of one's office is certainly appropriate for a judge, magistrate, or king; but Lear seems to have tried, as it were, to absorb the private into the public, to have confused what can be demanded and enforced by right of law and majesty with what can only arise naturally, what is beyond all external command or control.¹⁵

However one conceives of the Lear of the love test,¹⁶ his vulnerability with respect to Cordelia is crucial. Lear deserved gratitude from his daughters, perhaps especially from Cordelia. And gratitude, or thankfulness, should be proportionate to how much one has to be thankful for. But Lear demands professions of love. He fails to appreciate how demeaning it would be for Cordelia to allow her love to seem to be proportionate to the magnitude of the fortune he bestows on her. The preciousness of her love is tied necessarily to its proud independence from mercenary influences or threats. It cannot be bought, not with fortune, power, sensual pleasure, protection, or anything else less than virtue. Cordelia's refusal

¹⁵ See notes 5 and 9 above. Cf. Immanuel Kant, "The End of All Things," in *On History*, ed. Lewis W. Beck, Library of Liberal Arts, 1963, pp. 81-84. *Ausgewählte kleine Schriften*. Taschenausgaben der Philosophischen Bibliothek, pp. 89-92. [The end of the second paragraph, p. 82, Beck ed., should read: "for it is a contradiction to command someone not just to do something but also that he should like to do it" (auch gern tun sollte).] Should not the "love" referred to by Kant, p. 84, 1.5, be, more strictly, gratitude?

¹⁶ There is great division among the commentators. We may distinguish four alternatives:

1) Lear is a weak, senile, old man in his dotage. Can this be reconciled with the deep and powerful Lear of the rest of the play, with the man whose favorites had been Kent and Cordelia, who wisely favored Albany over Cornwall, who killed the man (probably a captain, 5.3.27) hanging Cordelia?

2) Lear is a sagacious, though not a wise, king. He is not altogether incognizant of his elder daughters' characters and hypocrisy; he never accuses them of violating their love oaths. He could have regarded the love test at first as primarily a ceremony to ratify and to sanctify the succession; but being particularly vulnerable in relation to Cordelia, he allowed "her most small fault" to wrench his "frame of nature from the fixed place." It was this vulnerability, he rebukes himself, "that let thy folly in, and thy dear judgement out." Why then did Lear in Act 2 seem to think that he could rely on his elder daughters?

3) Shakespeare simply took over the old story and did not concern himself with consistency here.

4) There is no inconsistency: A man can be a weak, foolish dotard and under great suffering reveal heretofore untapped great depths of passion and powers of insight.

The argument of this essay is most compatible with the second of these alternatives.

to participate in Lear's ceremony, her disobedience (and Kent's also), is correctly diagnosed by Lear as rooted in pride.¹⁷ Lear, however, fails to see how that pride with its occasionally offensive honesty, necessarily goes along with the love for which he craves. In its critical pride such a love reflects the lover's estimate of the intrinsic merits of the beloved.¹⁸ If Lear had succeeded in humbling Cordelia, he might have destroyed what he loved most.

Lear never accuses Cordelia, as he does his other daughters, of ingratitude. Her love, or certain evidence of her love, is what he wants. He loved her most, he says, as if this gave him the right to command her to love him most. But even if love, or noble love, could be deserved, it cannot be commanded. There does not seem to be any court competent to grant compensation for the "pangs of dispriz'd love."¹⁹ Lear, it seems, needs Cordelia's love because it would be evidence for himself (and for others) of his own excellence. If he were a wise man or a philosopher, he would "know himself" and perhaps not need such confirmation.²⁰ But Lear is not a philosopher. Regan is not the best witness, but she is not entirely wrong when she says of Lear, "He hath ever but slenderly known himself" (1.1.294, cf. 1.4.238 and .260). In commanding, or expecting love where he could only rightly expect gratitude, in thinking that he could simply disclaim "Propinquity and property of blood," in expecting full honors of kingship, after having relinquished power and responsibility, Lear presumes upon an intrinsic authority and self-sufficiency that he does not, and perhaps no man could, possess.²¹

IV

"In none of the fifty or sixty versions of the Lear story in existence before Shakespeare's play does the old king go mad."²² Gloucester and Lear suffer most in this play. Reflecting on the madness of the king, Gloucester says to himself:

Better I were distract:
So should my thoughts be sever'd from my griefs,
And woes by wrong imaginations lose
The knowledge of themselves.

¹⁷ It may be that her fault is "small" only when compared with ingratitude, for, as Don Quixote says, "There are those who will tell you that one of the greatest sins man can commit is pride, but I maintain that ingratitude is worse." Part 2, ch. 58, Putnam trans., Viking, p. 889. See also Ulrici, in *Variorum Ed.*, ed. Furness, p. 456.

¹⁸ Cf. Aristotle *NE* 1159a 22-25, 1167a 11 21, 1170b 8-14, 1172a 10 14.

¹⁹ Cf. *Don Quixote*, Part 1, ch. 14.

²⁰ Aristotle *NE* 1177a 12-79a 32; and Jaffa, *op. cit.*, pp. 133 ff.

²¹ Jaffa suggests that "In proclaiming love of himself as the principle of distributive justice," Lear was "pretending to the attributes of divinity," *op. cit.*, pp. 132 and 133. Cf. George Anastaplo, *The Constitutionalist: Notes on the First Amendment*, Southern Methodist University Press, 1971, p. 791; and 2.4.252.

²² Kenneth Muir, Arden Ed., Introduction, p. xliii, n. 1.

And yet the contrast between the two shows rather how much more pathetic Lear's suffering in the mind is:²³ The loss of eyes—the way-finders for physical movement, the conditions for independent action—is not so pathetic as losing the light of reason, the intellectual guide that lets us grasp the general meanings of things.²⁴

There is a connection, it has been observed, between pride and madness.²⁵ Proud men do not like to justify and explain themselves. Their rectitude, they feel, should be taken for granted. They balk at the inferiority, or equality, implicit in being required to explain themselves, for example, Lear before Albany, Kent before Cornwall, Gloucester and Regan, and Cordelia before the court (1.4.248 ff., 2.2.61 ff., and 1.1.87 ff.). The proud see or feel themselves to be within a definite hierarchical order. They prize their place within the order and, accordingly, the order itself. They are most sensitive to insult and most prone to the passion most consequent upon insult, anger. Anger, unlike grief, contains within itself a desire to strike back. And, most importantly for our argument, the desire to strike back for most men, if not for all men, exists even when there is nothing to strike back against. Men derive relief from cursing the table or bench they have knocked against. When loved ones suffer some grave and irremediable illness or misfortune, men can speak, not of misfortune, but of "affliction," thus, as it were, striking back in speech against the causes of the suffering. All the affections of what is poetically called the "heart"²⁶ may tend to personify, and thus obscure, the difference between the living and the dead, but anger seems peculiarly prone to personification. Something similar often happens in love. It seems that men desire what they love, or what they think they love, to love them in return, whether such love is capable of being returned or not. Hope rises from desire. Hope and desire find fulfillment in fact or in fantasy.

²³ Cf. 3.4.6-25.

²⁴ Cf. 4.1.27-28.

²⁵ Cf. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ch. 8, Everyman's Library Ed., p. 59, and *Elements of Law*, ch. 10.9-11; and G. W. F. Hegel, *Enzyklopädie d.p.W.*, III, *Die Philosophie des Geistes*, § 408, Zusatz, $\beta\beta$), "die eigentliche Narrheit." Cf. *inter alia*, Sophocles *Ajax*; and Euripides *Herakles*.

²⁶ The word heart occurs rather often in *King Lear* (about fifty times). In general it seems to refer to what is responsible for coordinating men's appetites, passions, desires, thoughts and wills, their loves and hates. Cp. Dante's "animo" in *Purgatorio*, Canto 17. The word heart enters into Thomas Aquinas' discussion in the *Summa Theologica*, usually when citations from the Bible or Church authorities need explication. Sometimes he interprets it as practical reason or conscience (e.g., II-I Q. 94, A.6. Cf. A.5 ad 1, A.2, and I, Q. 24, A.1) and frequently as will (e.g., II-I, Q. 4, A.4; Q. 6, A.4 ad 1; Q. 19, A.8 ad 1, A.10 ad 1 sed con; Q. 24, A.3). Nonmetaphorically he speaks of the heart as that organ that initiates all bodily, all vital movement, the "instrument of the soul's passions" (e.g., I, Q. 20, A.1 ad 1; II-I, Q. 17, A.9 ad 2; Q. 37, A.4; Q. 38, A.5 ad 3; Q. 40, A.6; Q. 44, A.1 ad 1; Q. 48, A.2-4). Cf. Plato *Republic*, the discussion of $\Theta\upsilon\mu\acute{o}\varsigma$ 439e-442d; and *Timaeus* 69d end-72c 1.

In some of its extreme forms this personification is what is called madness. Lear insists that it must have been the unkindness of Poor Tom's nonexistent daughters that brought him to such lowness (3.4.48 ff.). He will take a joint-stool for his daughter and Poor Tom and the Fool for Justices, if that is the only way he has to bring his daughters before the bar of justice (3.6.20 ff.). Lear's pride, his self-respect, his sense of where he belongs in the hierarchical order of things, is, so to speak, the point of origin for his orientation in the world. As his self-respect is assailed, he finds it increasingly difficult to be objective, as Edgar says to Gloucester, to "Bear free and patient thoughts," that is, thoughts free from the presumption that everything that happens in the world has been personally directed with a view to its effect upon himself. His pride and his love of justice lead him to refuse to accept the existence of the world where his worth is denied. He will try to see the world as it is only if the world makes place for his pride. And yet one of the measures of his worth is the intensity with which he struggles to save his sanity. If his pride did not have some basis in truth, even his own love of truth and justice, his madness could not be as significant as it is.

V

In the early acts of the play Lear swears by those specific divinities, the sun, the night, Hecate, Apollo, and Jupiter; he also calls on the heavens and calls nature goddess. He seems to see himself and his kingdom as part of one grand natural and divine order, a just hierarchical order, with the heavenly powers, the gods, especially Jupiter, at the summit of the cosmic hierarchy and himself correspondingly at the summit of that subordinate order, his kingdom. When his daughters, his fool, and his shame, the correlate of his pride, destroy his self-respect, "abuse," "subdue," "oppress," "ruin," and "bemad" his nature, what is bemadding is that at the same time they are destroying the basis of his orientation in the world, driving his soul into a storm of questions, doubts, and partial insights too heavy for his patience and judgment to bear.²⁷

The disorder in the moral and political world is associated in Act 3 with tumult in the cosmic order, the rage in Lear's soul with the raging

²⁷ Cf. Robert B. Heilman, *This Great Stage, Image and Structure in King Lear*, University of Washington, 1963, pp. 72-74. Cf. also Laurence Berns, "Aristotle's Poetics" in *Ancients and Moderns, Essays on the Tradition of Political Philosophy in Honor of Leo Strauss*, ed. Joseph Cropsey, Basic Books, 1964, p. 82. In that essay the division on p. 82 should be marked "Epilogue"; part II begins on p. 72 and part III on p. 79; p. 70, last line, first paragraph, "man" should read "men" and "his" should read "their"; p. 72, eighth line from bottom, "Book" should read "chapter"; p. 80, 11.7 and 23 should each have a comma after "for the most part"; p. 85, n. 16, 1.6, "flow" should read "flaw"; p. 86, 1.14, in n. 16, "what lies beneath" should be inserted between "civilizing" and "politics"; p. 86, n. 23, 1.2 "*Politics*" should read "*Poetics*."

of the heavens. The gentleman who meets Kent speaks of how the “impetuous blasts with *eyeless* rage” catch Lear’s white hair in their fury. But for Lear lightnings are “thought-executing fires,” and the elements are addressed as seeing and thinking beings. At first he bids them, “Let fall your horrible pleasure.” They owe him no subscription. However, that soon changes:

But yet I call you servile ministers,
That will with two pernicious daughters join
Your high-engender’d battles ’gainst a head
So old and white as this. O, ho! ’tis foul.

His outrage seems to turn toward the gods themselves. But his faith is not yet entirely destroyed. He realizes that patience is what he needs. Perhaps his suffering is some divine affliction, later to be redeemed? He calls out as if the storm were herald to a day of judgment when justice and honesty will prevail and he will be revealed as a man more sinned against than sinning.

Let the great Gods,
That keep this dreadful pudder o’er our heads,
Find out their enemies now. Tremble, thou wretch,
That hast within thee undivulged crimes,
Unwhipp’d of Justice; hide thee, thou bloody hand,
Thou perjur’d, and thou simular of virtue
That art incestuous; caitiff, to pieces shake,
That under covert and convenient seeming
Has practis’d on man’s life; close pent-up guilts,
Rive your concealing continents, and cry
These dreadful summoners grace. I am a man
More sinn’d against than sinning²⁸ [3.2.49-59].

Later, after he has agreed to enter a nearby hovel, he says, “I’ll pray and then I’ll sleep.” But he does not pray, if praying means addressing divinities.²⁹ He directs his words not to the high, to the gods, but to the poor, the wretched and the low:

Poor naked wretches, whereso’er you are,
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,
How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,
Your loop’d and window’d 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 [3.4.27-36].

²⁸ Cf. Kent’s speech preceding and *Mark*, 13, esp. 13.12; see Variorum Ed., ed. Furness, p. 339; cf. Sophocles *Oedipus at Colonus*, 11.266-67.

²⁹ Cf. 1.5.47-48, 2.4.192, and 2.4.273-80.

Like thoughts are expressed later by Gloucester, as he gives a purse to the man he believes to be Poor Tom:

Here, take this purse, thou whom the heav'ns' plagues
 Have humbled to all strokes: that I am wretched
 Makes thee the happier: 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 power quickly;
 So distribution should undo excess,
 And each man have enough [4.1.64-71].

Lear's statement goes further: The very justice of the heavens is called into question.³⁰

The decisive point in this process is reached when Lear strips off his royal garments, after he has encountered Poor Tom, the exemplar of human wretchedness in the extreme.³¹ Gratitude, its bonds, its cosmic and divine implications, have proved snares and delusions for Lear. Here, with Poor Tom as his model, undeceived by a groundless reliance on gratitude and the flattery of pomp and majesty, he thinks that he can see the truly fundamental situation of man.

Is man no more than this? Consider him well. Thou ow'st the worm no silk, the beast no hide, the sheep no wool, the cat no perfume. . . . Thou art the thing itself; unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art. Off, off you lendings! Come; unbutton here [3.4.105-12].³²

Tom owes the worm no silk because he has no silk, the sheep no wool because he has no wool. Lear takes Tom, the unaccommodated man, as the "natural man." But does Tom have nothing? He has his life and he has his misery; and as gratitude is one of the chief roots of natural piety, so fear and wretchedness can theologize and moralize as well. Tom has his catechism:

Take heed o' th' foul fiend. Obey thy parents; keep thy word's justice; swear not; commit not with man's sworn spouse; set not thy sweet heart on proud array [3.4.80-83].

Each of these six commandments corresponds to one of the Bible's Ten Commandments: the last most tenuously to the Bible's Tenth, Tom's fifth to the Bible's Seventh, his fourth to the Bible's Third, his third to the Bible's Ninth, and his second to the Bible's Fifth.³³ Lear has proclaimed

³⁰ "And show the Heavens more just" is the last line Lear speaks before madness overcomes him. See 3.4.48. In Aristotelian terms this is the point at which the reversal, or peripety, occurs in *King Lear*; *Poetics* 1452a 21-52b 13. Cf. also Lawrence Berns, *op. cit.*, n. 27 above, pp. 75 and 82.

³¹ The extreme must include madness.

³² Cf. 2.3.7-9.

³³ Tom's replacement of the Fifth Commandment's "Honor thy father and thy mother" by "Obey" corresponds to a replacement of gratitude by fear.

twice in this play that "nothing can be made out of nothing."³⁴ If nothing comes from nothing, everything that does come to be must come from something, something which itself does not come to be, that is, is unchanging. It is not altogether unreasonable for Poor Tom and anyone who would take him as the man himself to regard what most men call God, the ultimate source of his misery, as a foul fiend. Tom's first commandment corresponds to the Bible's First Commandment: "Thou shalt have no other gods before me."³⁵ The question about filial gratitude, about what children owe to their parents, to the sources of their being, is here extended to the limit: What is owed, or due, to the guiding principle, or principles, of life as a whole, to the sources, or source, of all being?

When Lear strips himself of his royal garments, those "lendings," he tries to strip himself of every vestige of royalty. When Kent asks him, "How fares your Grace?" he does not even acknowledge that the term could be meaningful and replies, "What's he?" His divestment of his royal garments is the outer sign of his soul's divestment of its former protections and supports, of those beliefs and convictions that heretofore had sustained and guided his activity in the world. He thinks that now he is in a position to come to know man, to know himself, to philosophize (1.4.238 and .259). But the conditions required to make him want to philosophize are those that he declared earlier would make a truly human life impossible. "O! reason not the need," he replies to his daughters' questioning his need for attendants of his own:

our basest beggars
 Are in the poorest thing superfluous:
 Allow not nature more than nature needs,
 Man's life is cheap as beast's. Thou art a lady;
 If only to go warm were gorgeous,
 Why, nature needs not what thou gorgeous wear'st,
 Which scarcely keeps thee warm. But, for true need,—
 You Heavens, give me that patience, patience I need!—³⁶ [2.4.266-73].

Not only does Poor Tom become the representative of humanity for Lear, but because he of all men is least likely to have been blinded by gratitude or flattery, he becomes after Lear's divestment the philosopher for Lear. "First," before accepting fire, food, and shelter, "let me talk

³⁴ See 1.4.134-39, 1.1.90, and 1.2.31-35. Shakespeare's presentation of the "Angstphänomen," Lear's "eye of anguish" (4.4.15), seems to have been unnoticed by Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, Niemeyer, 1957, p. 190; cf. n. on 199.

³⁵ *Exodus* 20.1-17, *Deuteronomy* 5.6-21, and *King Lear*, 3.4.80-83. The statement following the Second Commandment tells of God visiting the iniquity of fathers upon their children; Shakespeare, less mysteriously with a view to considerations of justice, visits the iniquity of children upon fathers. See 3.4.74-75. Cf. A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, Macmillan, London, 1961, pp. 222 ff.

³⁶ Cf. 3.6.4-5. Edith Sitwell suggests that these lines were written under the influence of Plato's *Phaedo* 64d-e 1; *A Notebook on William Shakespeare*, Macmillan, 1965, pp. 75-76.

with this philosopher," he says. His first question is: "What is the cause of thunder?" Shortly before divesting, he apparently had no doubts about the cause of thunder, that is, Jupiter.

I do not bid the thunder-bearer shoot,
Nor tell tales of thee to high-judging Jove [2.4.229-30].

But now such questions have become open. He never addresses a god by a personal name again. During all the time of his madness he speaks of the divinities ("Gods," 4.6.128) only once. Lear seems now to be in a position to see deeper into the nature of things than he ever was before.

The word nature and words with nature as their root are used fifty times in what has come to be the generally accepted text of *King Lear*. The word unnatural occurs seven times, more than twice as often as it occurs in any other play of Shakespeare. Lear uses words with nature as root more than twice as often as any other character in the play.³⁷ These usages could be classified under five, not always clearly distinguishable, headings. Nature sometimes means (1) the general order of the social, political, and cosmic whole within which the activity of any one person or group can only be a part; (2) the constitution, or character, of an individual as a whole, that is, the unity arising from both endowment and habit; (3) the original endowment of an individual with the powers directed, though not necessarily compelled, toward definite ends, or purposes. This is the meaning expressed most often by Lear. Nature also means (4) the original endowment of an individual with powers supplied to be used howsoever their possessor wills. This is the meaning expressed most powerfully by Edmund. (5) Nature is twice personified as goddess: once by Lear conflating meanings 1 and 3, and once by Edmund conflating meanings 1 and 4. The play has often been understood as presenting the world as a great arena where the principles of ethical and unethical nature contest for dominion over the whole.³⁸ The disagreements of the commentators are just one more reflection of the fact that Shakespeare has been far more explicit about raising the question of nature,

³⁷ Nineteen times. Gloucester is next with nine times. (Unnaturalness occurs once.)

³⁸ Cf. G. Wilson Knight, *The Wheel of Fire*, Meridian, p. 179; E. K. Chambers, *Shakespeare: A Survey*, Hill and Wang, pp. 240 ff. and esp. pp. 215-16; D. A. Traversi, *An Approach to Shakespeare*, Sands, revised and enlarged ed., p. 185; John F. Danby, *Shakespeare's Doctrine of Nature, A Study of King Lear*, Faber & Faber, 1949, pp. 15-19; and esp. Robert B. Heilman, *op. cit.*, n. 27 above, chs. 4 and 5, and pp. 115, 133-34, and 179-81.

Heilman's careful work is a fundamental book, perhaps *the* fundamental book, for any serious study of *King Lear*. By carefully and searchingly tracing out and relating the amazingly intricate patterns of imagery in the play, Heilman lets Shakespeare's philosophy speak for itself. The book's deficiencies, deficiencies generally shared by critics of pre-nineteenth-century literature, stem from an insufficient understanding of certain key notions of classical philosophy, especially the notion of natural right (see Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, Chicago, 1953, chs. 3 and 4) and the notion of "intuitive reason," that is, *nous* (see Jacob Klein,

raising the question about the relation between nature and morality, than he has been about presenting any definite solution.

There is more clarity, however, about who is wrong: The transgressions of Edmund, Goneril, Regan, and Cornwall lead ultimately to their own destruction. Nature repels simple viciousness. And about the meeting of Lear and Gloucester in Act 4, scene 6: "What could better point the transcendent issues Shakespeare has developed . . . than this encounter of the sensual man robbed of his eyes, with the wilful man, the light of his mind put out."³⁹ Royal Lear's understanding of how morality is effected within nature is certainly not adequate. He conceives of the relation between morality and nature as being more organic than it is (3.4.14-16); he overestimates the power of law; he is insufficiently attentive to the limits set by nature to what authority and law can command. He relies overmuch on divine enforcement of nature's directives, and consequently is unaware of the extent to which the accomplishment of nature's purposes is left to chance and, on the basis of the conditions provided by nature and chance, to human prudence. In other words, the substitution of divine intervention for chance leads to an underestimation of the possibilities for evil and an insufficient awareness of the need for prudence. Lear's faith in the rightness of the divine and natural order is shattered by his suffering. But what does his shattering experience open him to?

VI

In his madness Lear becomes estranged, not only from the divinities he swore by before, but from nature as a whole, especially from nature as the source of generation.⁴⁰ From the outset in Lear's mind the themes of generation, gratitude, and justice are intertwined. In his first great storm scene he bids the thunder, as if it were a divinity with authority and power over nature, to:

Strike flat the thick rotundity o' th' world!
Crack Nature's moulds, all germens spill at once
That makes ingrateful man! [3.2.7-9].

Destroy the world's pregnancy, he cries: Destroy nature's means for producing man, who shows by his failure to appreciate rightly the sources

"Aristotle, An Introduction," *Ancients and Moderns, Essays on the Tradition of Political Philosophy in Honor of Leo Strauss*, ed. Joseph Cropsey, Basic Books, 1964). Thus Heilman tends to identify "reason" with calculation, so that insight and the perception of "value," that is, the good according to nature, are attributed to a "non-rational" imaginative awareness. See pp. 161, 170, and *King Lear*, 4.6.132-33, .177, n. 13, and pp. 30-31 above.

³⁹ H. Granville-Barker, *Prefaces to Shakespeare*, quoted in Edith Sitwell, *op. cit.*, n. 36 above, p. 47. In later editions Granville-Barker has apparently substituted, less aptly in our view, "despot" for "wilful man."

⁴⁰ Cf. 4.6.115-16.

of his being how undeserving he is of the gift of life. What Edmund can speak of as "the lusty stealth of nature" is, for Lear, associated with:

hell . . . darkness,
 . . . the sulphurous pit—burning, scalding,
 Stench, consumption; fie, fie, fie! pah, pah!
 Give me an ounce of civet, good apothecary,
 To sweeten my imagination [4.6.129-33].

Mad Lear comes to a view of nature somewhat similar to Edmund's, nature as the primitive, undeveloped beginnings of things. But his anguish and revulsion indicate how much more he originally expected from nature: He feels and suffers the absence of what he can no longer believe in.

Like Jesus he speaks against the Old Testament sentence for adultery.⁴¹ He goes to extremes and, as if all possibility of redemption were lost, declares: "Let copulation thrive." Jesus was more sober: After delivering the adulteress from condemnation, his last words to her were "go and sin no more" (*John*, 8.1-11). Lear, however, condemns women generally, confounding sex with Biblical, mostly New Testament, images of hell.

In his condemnation of the world's justice, Lear cries:

Thou rascal beadle, hold thy bloody hand!
 Why dost thou lash that whore? Strip thine own back;
 Thou hotly lusts to use her in that kind
 For which thou whipp'st her. The usurer hangs the cozener [4.6.162-65].

Again we are reminded of the New Testament: "But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart" (*Matt.* 5.27-28) and "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her" (*John* 8.7).

Yet universal sainthood failing, decency requires that offenses be punished whether the intentions of the punishers be pure or not. Should thoughts and actions be equally punishable? Do men have as much control over their thoughts and desires as they do over their actions? Are others harmed by thoughts directed against themselves when those thoughts are neither divulged nor acted upon? If in the New Testament, as some would claim, these are deliberate rhetorical exaggerations, Lear seems to have lost the capacity to make the required qualifications.

In a farmer's dog chasing a beggar, Lear says:

There thou might'st behold
 The great image of Authority
 A dog's obey'd in office.
 . . .
 Through tatter'd clothes small vices do appear;
 Robes and furred gowns hide all. Plate sin with gold,
 And the strong lance of justice hurtless breaks;

⁴¹ *Lev.* 20.10. He "pardons" an adulterer rather than an adulteress. Cf. 2.4.129-33 and .233-35.

Arm it in rags, a pygmy's straw does pierce it.
None does offend, none, I say, none; . . .

If none does offend, and consequently none can rightly accuse, at least none who are not themselves spotless, perhaps none could ever rightly accuse: "Judge not, that ye be not judged."⁴² Edgar's commentary on this speech is: "O! matter and impertinency mix'd; / Reason in madness." An attempt should be made to separate some of the reason from the madness. The farmer's dog does often chase away the thief, but the dog cannot, unfortunately, distinguish between villainous and innocent, not to speak of undeserved, lowness.

Authority and law are usually more rigorous with the poor and weak, partly because they are less capable of protecting themselves, and partly for less simple reasons. Wealth, power, and authority usually go together. And just as the unsuccessful can exaggerate the part played by chance and accident in human affairs, so the successful can flatter themselves by exaggerating the extent to which their good fortune is owed to their merits. By reasoning obversely about the misfortunes of others, they can allow themselves to become obtuse and callous to the miseries of the unfortunate, smothering charity in self-complacent rigor.⁴³ Such is the man "that will not see / Because he does not feel . . ." When Gloucester in the fourth act asks the disguised Edgar who he is, Edgar replies:

A most poor man made tame to Fortune's blows;
Who, by the art of known and feeling sorrows,
Am pregnant to good pity.

The sufferings of Lear, Gloucester, and Edgar would seem to be the remedy for this, the occupational disease of greatness.⁴⁴ Yet if suffering of such magnitude is required, the price of sufficiently educating authority in mercy or equity is hopelessly high. Few can do as much, perhaps, as the educator Shakespeare, who by his art, his presentations of feigned experiences, has made it possible for some to feel, without fully suffering, what they might need to feel in order to see.

Lear's suffering, however, and the perspective he has come to adopt, have not prepared him for governing more responsibly, but rather for a renunciation of the "world." His suffering has completely destroyed him as a political man. Perhaps the most poignant expression of Lear's death as a political man is his reception of Kent in the last scene. Kent's affection for Lear is never severed from a political context. He always approaches Lear, even in defiance and in death, as servant to master, never simply as man to man.⁴⁵ At the end, although other explanations are possible, Lear's

⁴² *Romans* 3.1-18; cp. 3.10-12 with *Psalms* 14; and *Matt.* 7.1-5. Lear is open to the charge the Apostle Paul said was made against himself, *loc. cit.* 3.8.

⁴³ Cf. Laurence Berns, *op. cit.*, n. 27 above, pp. 75-77.

⁴⁴ For another approach to the problem see *I Henry IV*, 1.2 and 3.2; and *Henry V*, 4.1.

⁴⁵ Cf. n. 10 above.

cold reception of Kent indicates that Kent and what he stands for have faded into almost complete insignificance for Lear. Yet his renunciation of the world is not complete. The desire for vengeance remains: "And when I have stol'n upon these son-in-laws, / Then, kill, kill, kill, kill, kill, kill!" (4.6.188-89).

VII

When Lear awakes after his long sleep, "Our foster-nurse of Nature" (4.4.12), "the great rage," the doctor reports, "... is kill'd in him" (4.7.78-79). Clad in new garments, the images Lear uses are resurrection from the grave and entry into a new life, a life characterized by the interchange of blessing (from Lear) and forgiveness (from Cordelia) and mutual love.⁴⁶ After the battle and their capture, Lear is given over almost entirely to love, the love of Cordelia.

Come, let's away to prison;
 We two alone will sing like birds i' th' cage:
 When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down,
 And ask of thee forgiveness: so we'll live,
 And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh
 As if we were Gods spies: and we'll wear out,
 Talk of court news; and we'll talk with them too,
 Who loses and who wins; who's in, who's out;
 And take upon 's the mystery of things,
 As if we were God's spies: and we'll wear out,
 In a wall'd prison, pacts and sects of great ones
 That ebb and flow by the moon.

...

Upon such sacrifices, my Cordelia,
 The Gods themselves throw incense. Have I caught thee?
 He that parts us shall bring a brand from heaven,
 And fire us hence like foxes [5.3.8-23].

Lear seems to be perfectly fulfilled. He has no lingering regrets. The worth of being reconciled in love with Cordelia is beyond price: It cannot be measured by any of the measures Lear used in the first scene. No sacrifice, be it rule, extent of territory, honor, even freedom itself, seems too great, or even comparable with what Lear has gained. And with his love and the prospect of love's joy that he holds before himself has come patience. His patience and his love go together with his renunciation of the world. His desire for revenge is as dead as his pride. When Cordelia proudly says:

For thee, oppressed King, I am cast down;
 Myself could else out-frown false Fortune's frown.
 Shall we not see these daughters and these sisters?

Lear answers, "No, no, no, no! Come, let's away to prison." And at the

⁴⁶ Cf. also 4.6.33-80.

moment of his death, with the dead Cordelia before him, it is clear that Lear can live no longer in the world where even these last hopes are dashed. He dies in a vision of reunion with Cordelia living once again.

There has been extensive debate about whether these scenes are to be understood in a Christian sense or not.⁴⁷ Was Lear's moment of joy at his death "based on an illusion"?⁴⁸ Or, was it the triumphal culmination of his purgatorial, his redemptive suffering, a loving glimpse into that better world to come where all righteous hopes will be fulfilled?

What we have been describing is the development of attitudes and a perspective that Shakespeare has presented in terms that are recognizably Christian.⁴⁹

This development in *King Lear*, however, is presented as a natural development. What was Shakespeare's perspective, as distinct from Lear's? The dramatic poet does not speak in his own name. His perspective can be inferred only from the play as a whole. "Hard were it for me, as if I were a god, to tell of all these things," says Homer.⁵⁰ The poet stands as a god over the world of his play, but a god limited to what nature leaves to possibility and to chance: For nature, or the poet's understanding of nature, provides the framework. "Is there any cause in nature," Lear asks, "that makes these hard hearts?" (3.6.78-79). Shakespeare seems to have asked: "Is there any cause in nature that makes these Christian hearts?" Nature, or the problem of nature, as articulated by classical philosophy, we suggest, provides the framework for *King Lear*.⁵¹

The major classical philosophers, Plato and Aristotle, of course, never elaborated an answer to what we suppose was Shakespeare's question. This could be due to historical accident. The serious question is: Are the principles and the framework they first articulated adequate to comprehend such an account? Must not the rise and triumph of Christianity be explained? Can the decision about the best way of life be compelling unless all fundamental alternatives have been examined? It is incumbent upon classical philosophy to try to see whether the revealed religions and the souls formed by them can be rendered intelligible to natural reason. Shakespeare seems to have been exploring this possibility, especially in *King Lear*.

Yet, it could be argued, nature has its place also within the Christian

⁴⁷ See K. Muir, Arden Ed., pp. lv ff.; Barbara Everett, "The New *King Lear*," in *Shakespeare: King Lear*, Casebook Series, ed. F. Kermode, 1969, pp. 184 ff.; G. W. Knight, *op. cit.*, pp. 187 ff.; and Susan Snyder, "King Lear and the Prodigal Son," *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Autumn 1966.

⁴⁸ K. Muir, *loc. cit.*, p. lix.

⁴⁹ Cf. Heilman, *op. cit.*, p. 78; n. 11, p. 309; and esp. n. 1, p. 331.

⁵⁰ *Iliad* XII, 1.176.

⁵¹ Aristotle *NE* 1134b 18-35. Cf. Leo Strauss, "The Law of Reason in the Kuzari," *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, Free Press, 1952, pp. 95-98; Allan Bloom, *op. cit.*, n. 12 above, Introduction; and Howard B. White, *Copp'd Hills Towards Heaven: Shakespeare's Classical Polity*, Nijhoff, 1970.

cosmos. Could not Shakespeare have been showing rather how God's invisible law might, "from the creation of the world," have been written by nature in men's hearts? Might he not have been showing what would have to be endured by a "natural man," that is, a man with no knowledge of Jesus Christ and the Bible, for that law to begin to become visible to him?⁵²

If the issue were to be put in terms of the primacy of compassionate love as compared with the primacy of insight, Shakespeare may have provided a clue to his own opinion in Act 4 of *King Lear*. An unnamed gentleman describes Cordelia's tears while she reads of her father's sufferings as "pearls from diamonds dropped." "Tears of compassion are pearls; eyes are diamonds . . .": Tears of compassion are compared to rare and precious stones, but eyes, that is, insight, are more precious still.⁵³

"Hath not God," wrote the Apostle Paul, "made foolish the wisdom of this world?"⁵⁴ For Paul the "foolish" of faith possess a wisdom far deeper than anything accessible to natural reason. Is this what Shakespeare suggests by echoing this language about wisdom and folly in his articulation of the problem of morality and justice in *King Lear*? The Fool tells Kent:

That sir which serves and seeks for gain,
And follows but for form,
Will pack when it begins to rain,
And leave thee in the storm.
But I will tarry; the Fool will stay,
And let the wise man fly:
The knave turns Fool that runs away;
The Fool no knave, perdy [2.4.78-85].

In this play the word fool moves through a range of meanings.

The official Fool in motley is "foolish," funny, and privileged because he seems, or is licensed to pretend, not to know the most ordinary conventions.

In general, a fool is a man who does not know what every man is expected to know. Somewhat less generally, assuming that in everything a man chooses to do, some benefit to himself is intended, a fool is a man who does things that harm himself, who lacks judgment about what benefits himself. This is the elementary meaning of the word in the play that is presupposed by the four meanings following.

The honest fools, best exemplified by Gloucester and by Edgar of the

⁵² Cf. *Romans* 1.20, 2.14-15; and *I Cor.* 2.14.

⁵³ Heilman, *op. cit.*, pp. 155-56. Cf. *King Lear*, 5.3.189-90 and 1.1.56.

⁵⁴ *I Cor.* 2.20 and *ibid.* chs. 1-4. But cp. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 4.1.10-26; and cf. *ibid.*, 4.1.218-21 with *I Cor.* 2.9: *ibid.* 1.2.22-99 with *I Cor.* 9.22: *ibid.* 1.2.8,15; 3.1.1-81; 4.2.30-end with *Galatians* 2:11 ff.: also *ibid.* 5.1.195-96, 311, and 360-62.

early scenes, are overtrusting and, as in Gloucester's case, overcredulous about heavenly influences on human actions. They fail to understand people unlike themselves, to understand vice and malice. They are easily gulled by those clever and unscrupulous enough to exploit and betray their trust.

The loyal and dutiful are "moral fools." So Albany is regarded by Goneril and Kent spoken of by the Fool. The same could be said of the servant who mortally wounds Cornwall and is killed by Regan. Lear in acting on the expectation that his elder daughters would be bound by filial gratitude and duty is another kind of "moral fool." The moral fools tend to act as if moral laws were as inviolable as natural laws, as if moral laws were natural laws. They are regarded as fools by the "worldly wise" for not appreciating sufficiently the arbitrary and conventional factors in morality, the bestial elements in human nature, and for not appreciating sufficiently how self-seeking usually masks itself in moral guises. For the worldly wise self-seeking is the only kind of seeking sanctioned by nature. What the moral fool senses or sees and the worldly wise are blind to is the extent to which the humanity of any one man's life is a function of the larger moral, social, and political orders of which that individual life can only be a part.

Examples of what we might call the "noble fool" are France, the Fool, Edgar, Cordelia, and Lear: those capable of being touched and moved by noble love, by "inflam'd respect."⁵⁵ By their willingness to risk themselves and everything that could be subject to calculations of worldly success, they exhibit their own conviction, and rouse admiration and hopes, in those capable of appreciating them, that mankind is capable of attaining states of being that are simply good in themselves. The worldly wise are blind to this possibility.

In the light of what the moral fool and the noble fool see, the knavery of the worldly wise reveals itself as the final folly. By their blindness to what raises man above the beasts, the "wise" knaves finally bring themselves down with those whose justice they violate. By their blindness to what directs men toward the divine, to what is good in itself, they are deprived of nature's graces, the love and friendship of the noble.

But do the love and insight that Lear and Gloucester attain fully redeem what they have suffered? What is to be inferred from the disproportion between their sins and their terrible suffering?

"We glory in tribulations," wrote the Apostle Paul,

knowing that tribulation worketh patience; and patience experience; and experience, hope. And hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us. [*Romans* 5.3-5].

And from the Apostle James:

Be patient therefore brethren, unto the coming of the Lord. Behold the husbandman waiteth for the precious fruit of the earth, and hath long patience for it, until he

⁵⁵ Cf. section II above.

receive the earlier and the latter rain. Be ye also patient; stablish your hearts: for the coming of the Lord draweth nigh.

It is Cordelia, her love, "The holy water from her heavenly eyes" (4.3.31), that near the end sustain Lear's patience. The gentleman describes how she read Kent's letters recounting Lear's ordeal:

Ay, sir; she took them, read them in my presence;
And now and then an ample tear trill'd down
Her delicate cheek; it seem'd she was a queen
Over her passion; who, most rebel-like,
Sought to be king o'er her.

"O! then it mov'd her?" Kent asks.

Not to a rage; patience and sorrow strove
Who should express her goodliest. You have seen
Sunshine and rain at once; her smile and tears
Were like, a better way; those happy smilets
That play'd on her ripe lip seem'd not to know
What guests were in her eyes; which parted thence,
As pearls from diamonds dropp'd. In brief,
Sorrow would be a rarity most belov'd,
If all could so become it [4.3.12-24].

Later Cordelia prays:

All bless'd secrets,
All you unpublish'd virtues of the earth,
Spring with my tears! be aidant and remediate
In the good man's distress! [4.4.15-18].

In the reconciliation scene, Lear asks, "Be your tears wet?" He answers himself, "Yes, faith." These scenes too are often taken as argument that "*King Lear* is a Christian play about a Pagan world. . . ."⁵⁶

Sunshine and rain, however, suggest natural growth, that Cordelia's smiles and tears were nature's means for curing Lear's abused heart. It does seem, however, to be a most Christianlike use of nature. But, unlike Lear, Cordelia, whose patience is so movingly described, is proud to the end. She never asks for forgiveness. She is prepared to "outfrown false Fortune's frown." Is she prepared to live out her life "in a walled prison"? She has not renounced political life: She calls Lear king and queenlike puts down her rebel passions. She is ready to confront her sisters: "Shall we not see these daughters and these sisters?" Yet what is perhaps most significant, though obvious, for the question of Christianity in *King Lear* is that there is no promise or expectation "for the coming of the Lord."

The word patience is ambiguous. In the Christian sense it seems to mean bearing tribulations in the loving faith that their promised miraculous reversals will surely come to pass. In the classical, or stoic, sense of the

⁵⁶ J. C. Maxwell, quoted in Muir, *op. cit.*, p. lvi.

word it seems to mean endurance: endurance that does not anticipate miraculous change, that accepts evil in the world as a necessity, that bases itself only on rational hopes and the conviction that what is itself good deserves loyalty whether that loyalty receives any other reward or not. The unforeseen mischances of the world that bring down the just and innocent too often with the guilty, in the classical view, engender the wish for particular providence at the same time that they constitute evidence for its absence. It is not incompatible with the love of truth to respect the love of justice that is the father to that wish.

VIII

Who is the paradigm of virtue in this play? The gentleman says, addressing himself to absent Lear:

Thou hast one daughter,
Who redeems nature from the general curse
Which twain have brought her to.⁵⁷

Why then was Cordelia killed? Cordelia's honesty, her proud refusal to join her sisters in their demeaning hypocrisy, precipitated the catastrophe of this play. Her death raises the question about what the moral limits of proud honesty in an imperfect world might be.⁵⁸ Pisanio and Cornelius in *Cymbeline* avert tragedy by, as they put it, being false (to the bad) in order to be true (to the good) (1.5.43-44 and 4.3.42). In Sonnet 94 those "who rightly do inherit heaven's graces / And husband nature's riches from expense" are also those "that have pow'r to hurt and will do none, / That do not do the thing they most do show." This last line could never apply to Cordelia.

Edgar is the character in *King Lear* who most of all does not do the thing he most does show. He successfully assumes six different guises in the play. During the play from

a brother noble,
Whose nature is so far from doing harms
That he suspects none; on whose foolish honesty

the practices of a confirmed villain ride easily, he develops into a model of virtue armed and resourceful.

Edgar seems to be a mean between his father and his bastard brother. Their opinions about heavenly influences over human affairs are at opposite extremes. The father is overcredulous, Edmund undercredulous.

⁵⁷ Does this indicate that ingratitude more than prideful disobedience is chiefly responsible for the "general curse"? See n. 17 above.

⁵⁸ Cf. Ulrici, *Variorum* Ed., ed. Furness, pp. 456-57. See also Gervinus, *ibid.*, pp. 459-60, on the significance of her leadership of the invading army for the question of her death. Cf. H. Granville-Barker, *Prefaces to Shakespeare*, Botsford, 1970, pp. 23-24 (277-78) and 51 (305) on Cordelia's silence.

Both are perhaps equally at fault intellectually, but the moral fault is clearly more the son's.⁵⁹ In Shakespeare's world he who scorns all idea of heavenly influence on human affairs rarely comes to much good. Edgar's speech to his dying brother gives the last word of the play on the adultery theme and constitutes an answer as well to Gloucester's "As flies to wanton boys, are we to th' Gods; / They kill us for their sport."

The Gods are just, and of our pleasant vices
Make instruments to plague us;
The dark and vicious place where thee he got
Cost him his eyes [5.3.170-73].

Edmund replies, "Th' hast spoken right, 'tis true. / The wheel is come full circle; I am here." Edgar spoke of the gods, but Edmund speaks of fortune's wheel. Lear preaches to Gloucester, drawing lessons from man's beginnings:

Thou must be patient; we came crying hither:
Thou know'st the first time that we smell the air
We wawl and cry. . . .
. . .
When we are born, we cry that we are come
To this great stage of fools⁶⁰ [4.6.180-85].

Edgar preaches to his suicidal father on the same theme:

Men must endure
Their going hence, even as their coming hither:
Ripeness is all [5.2.9-11].

This sermon is more adequate because it is more comprehensive. It considers not only the beginnings but the middle and the end as well.⁶¹ Man's chief concern, the image suggests, should be not with what happens when the fruit falls and dies, nor especially the beginnings, but rather with coming to fullest maturity in the world.

IX

King Lear is based on two stories, the Lear story and the Gloucester story. Critics have long been concerned by the apparent lack of complete unity between them.⁶² The unity of *King Lear* comes to sight on the level of reflection, reflection on the one philosophic theme underlying both stories, of which both stories are necessary and complementary parts:

⁵⁹ Cf. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B 857-58.

⁶⁰ All the world's a stage in Shakespeare for him who, like Lear, Jaques, and Antonio, is coming to feel himself to be an "exile in 'this' world." *Macbeth* (5.5.25) is a special case.

⁶¹ I am indebted for this observation to Hilail Gildin of Queens College, N.Y.

⁶² Cf. Bradley, *op. cit.*, pp. 118 ff.; Heilman, *op. cit.*, p. 32 and n. 28, pp. 298-99; and "The Unity of *King Lear*" in *op. cit.*, ed. Kermode, n. 47 above, pp. 169 ff.

namely, that nature, while constituting the ground and limits of convention and law, requires in man the cooperation of law and convention for its fulfillment.

Lear in trying to command love and gratitude fails to see that the natural growths of noble love and gratitude are beyond the control of law and political authority. The Lear story illustrates the natural limits of legal and political authority and the tensions that arise between nature and law when those limits are not rightly observed.⁶³ The Gloucester story, the adultery theme, and the stories of Lear's elder daughters illustrate the other side of the same coin: how certain natural passions and powers, most manifestly the power of procreation, need to be controlled by conventions, laws, and authority.⁶⁴ Ordinary love and passion, not to speak of base love and passion, need to be controlled by law and authority. Being conceived outside the "order of law" (1.1.19), Edmund was banished from the family circle. He is, not altogether "unnaturally," devoid of family feeling. As the bodies of Goneril and Regan are brought in, the dying Edmund exclaims, "Yet Edmund was below'd: / The one the other poison'd for my sake, / And after slew herself." Goneril and Regan as well as Lear seem to have died for "love."

How would nature and convention, or law, be related when cooperating harmoniously? Nature provides the materials, the human materials and powers, and ordains, or manifests to natural reason, what purposes and ends would perfect the materials and fulfill the powers. But the accomplishment of nature's purposes is left to chance and to men: On the basis of the conditions provided by nature and chance, the responsibility for forming the materials and developing the powers so as to function in accordance with those ends is left to men themselves through custom, habituation, training, law, art, and education.⁶⁵ Human nature is so constituted as to require the formation of conventions and laws for its fulfillment.

Edgar does represent the natural man in this play, not as the poor, bare, forked animal Lear saw, but as he is in himself, the man of many disguises, the educable man, whose heart does not enslave his mind and whose mind does not silence his heart,⁶⁶ whose heart and mind remain sound no matter how his outward trappings change. He is the natural man, not in that sense of nature that means only primitive beginnings, but where "nature" includes fulfillment, "ripeness."⁶⁷

⁶³ Cf. Jaffa, *op. cit.*, p. 131.

⁶⁴ The control is, of course, guided by other natural powers, such as reason and judgment. France, the king, acknowledges the law's authority even over his noble love for Cordelia (1.1.253).

⁶⁵ Cf. Plato *Meno*, esp. beginning; and Aristotle *NE* Book ii, ch. 1.

⁶⁶ Cf. Leo Strauss, in Jason Marvin Aronson, *Three Funeral Addresses*, University of Chicago, University College, December 6, 1961, p. 8.

⁶⁷ Cf. Aristotle *Physics* Book ii.

The same consummate irony that led him, correctly, but for the wrong reasons, to be called "the thing itself," that is, the natural man, by Lear may be at work also in his being called "philosopher."⁶⁸ Edgar, though not the most tragic, nor the most pathetic, character in the play, is the true hero of patience in *King Lear*.

⁶⁸ This is not contradicted by the fact that Edgar is the only major character in the play who never uses the word nature or any word with nature as its root. Cf. n. 1, above.