

ANNUAL SHAKESPEARE LECTURE

‘UPON SUCH SACRIFICES’

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*Read 28 April 1976*

Upon such sacrifices, my Cordelia,  
The Gods themselves throw incense.

THE words, and those coming before and after, are familiar. It is my hope to make them a little less so, by setting them in a variety of perspectives, some spacious and some narrow, and by casting upon them a changing, polarizing light. We have reached an imaginative crux of the play, and a critical moment in the story of Lear’s senility. Consciousness—Lear’s and ours—is, to adapt Regan’s phrase, on the very verge of its confine. Where we might have expected a cry of pain, the language, out of defeat and desolation, seems to be generating immense heroic solace, and the scene grows rich in unparaphrasable discoveries that will not stay for rational questioning. It is one of the great movements of European tragedy and these words, spoken in a kind of madness, are its climax. ‘Have I caught thee?’, we ourselves ask of the play, wondering what haunts its elusive speculations, what we are meant wholly to see and what only to glimpse. What does Lear mean by ‘such sacrifices’ and is Shakespeare’s meaning co-extensive with the King’s? We need to persist with such questions because the processes of tragic sacrifice are not primordial merely; in raw, masked, or sublimated form they are still active and still need to be understood. ‘It is certainly victims that move humanity forward’, said Trotsky, and his own tragic history was to vindicate him.

Bradley’s eloquent account has persuaded many to see in ‘such sacrifices’, ‘that serene renunciation of the world, with its power and glory and resentments and revenges’ expressed in the speech before, ‘Come let’s away to prison’.<sup>1</sup> Others have supposed Lear to respond to Cordelia’s, ‘For thee, oppressed king, am I cast down’. In a choice of ways we could abbreviate the dialogue and win in clarity what is lost in evocative obscurity, but we would discover that the disjunctions and lapses are

<sup>1</sup> A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (London, 1905), p. 289.

essential to the expressive effect. Shakespeare is compelling us to undergo the central tragic experience of the play through the language of a demented consciousness.

Looking upon these prison speeches with the cool and alien eyes of some critics, we see the 'radical incoherence',<sup>1</sup> the desolation and the impotence; but to an eager eye the signs are brighter and open upon 'a new world'<sup>2</sup> and 'a most delicate music'.<sup>3</sup> Any attempt to anatomize such fragile mysteries must move in the difficult territory which joins and divides the literary critic and the psycho-analyst, and I wish in particular to keep in mind Lacan's claim that 'the unconscious is structured like a language'. Lacan, it is said, 'supposes an unconscious discourse interfering with the conscious discourse, and responsible for the distortions and gaps in that discourse'.<sup>4</sup> He supposes much else; but since Shakespeare was ignorant of Lacan, I prefer to recall from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that 'The lunatic, the lover and the poet, / Are of imagination all compact'. *Antony and Cleopatra* proclaims the compact of the lover's imagination and the poet's; in *King Lear* it is the lunatic's and the poet's. The vulnerabilities and incapacities of the distressed and senile mind are enlisted into the service of the poet's art. Theseus's writ runs even on the battlefield of *Lear*'s Dover: 'The best in this kind are but shadows; and the worst are no worse if imagination amend them'. *Lear*'s shadowing thought, at once expressing the mind's decay and the poet's insight, puts our amending imaginations to a severe test.

The scene, the play's last in the Folio text, opens with the voice of repression:

Some officers take them away: good guard,  
Until their greater pleasures first be known  
That are to censure them.

Edmund speaks as a minor officer of state, disposing of delinquents to be dealt with later by the top brass on a day of judgement—a 'doomsday' we might be surprised into saying, noticing his appropriation of the language of sovereignty to debased purpose.<sup>5</sup> Cordelia's response may be taken as a sententious

<sup>1</sup> H. A. Mason, *Cambridge Quarterly*, 2 (1967), p. 222.

<sup>2</sup> B. McElroy, *Shakespeare's Mature Tragedies* (Princeton, 1973), p. 200.

<sup>3</sup> Francis Fergusson, *Shakespeare, The Pattern in his Carpet* (New York, 1970), p. 235.

<sup>4</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Language of the Self*, translated Anthony Wilden (Baltimore and London, 1968), p. 262.

<sup>5</sup> For the importance of doomsday in the play, see Mary Lascelles, '“King Lear” and Doomsday', *Shakespeare Survey*, 26 (1973), pp. 69–79.

vaunt,<sup>1</sup> its rhymes carrying it a little above the flux of events:

We are not the first  
Who, with best meaning, have incurr'd the worst.  
For thee, oppressed King, I am cast down;  
Myself could else outfrown false Fortune's frown.

In a less active and complex dramatic context the stoic solace would seem conventional enough, and indeed the last line is remembered from Neville's translation of Seneca's *Oedipus*. Seen under the polarizing light of the play's imaginative evocations, these plain words will disclose hidden structures, but they do not immediately do so. In the passing moment it is enough that they declare Cordelia's invincible independence of spirit and lead easily into a sharp and live challenge to Edmund's insolence: 'Shall we not see these daughters and these sisters?'

Lear himself neither protests nor acquiesces. By an effort of language he dismisses and apparently transcends all possibilities of resistance:

No, no, no, no! 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  
At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues  
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, packs and sects of great ones  
That ebb and flow by th'moon.

(V. iii. 8-19)

A reductive paraphrase makes clear the embarrassing inadequacies of Lear's reaction to a human and political situation that is too much for him: 'Let us go to prison where we can bless and forgive one another, tell stories, pray a little, laugh at the butterflies, and chat with the other prisoners about the ups and downs of the world.' The space between the poet's

<sup>1</sup> I suppose Cordelia to mean that she has suffered defeat and been cast down by Fortune in Lear's service. But it is possible to confine her meaning to, 'Only for your sake did I consent to be taken prisoner—otherwise I could have got away'. The figurative sense, making Cordelia downcast or dejected on Lear's account but defiant on her own, is improbable at this date (see *O.E.D.* s.v. *downcast*).

accomplishment and its reductive travesty is more readily recognized than explained and charted.

Among the many testaments and metaphors that find a kind of freedom in the prisoner's condition I know of none which makes a greater claim on our attention than this. The language of the play and of the king seem liberated at the moment of incarceration, with Lear's simplicities keeping pace with Shakespeare's complexities. Thus, 'Come, let's away' is an easy, light invitation to freedom that itself is released from impalement between the precipitating negations, 'No, no, no, no!', and the terminal word 'prison'. In the same transport the words 'alone' and 'will' are lifted upon a movement that translates the bird's privilege of flight into a privilege of song, taking freedom into the cage. Shakespeare then remembers the scene in the old play where Lear and Cordelia kneel to one another in ecstasies of forgiveness. Rapturous mutuality becomes the tenor of life itself, carried on the equable tide of the syntax: 'so we'll live, And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh At gilded butterflies'. If those butterflies at once surprise and delight us as an image of inconsequential freedom, they do so because subliminally they have been prepared for in the quick, wayward flight of Lear's *psyche* and Shakespeare's. Knowledge, says Sidney, can 'lift up the minde from the dungeon of the bodie, to the enjoying his owne divine essence'.<sup>1</sup> *Psyche*, we may remember, was the Greek word for 'breath' and a word for the soul and for a butterfly. Laughing at butterflies is like praying and singing and the telling of old tales—all are the breath of life, and what Keats bid farewell to when he read *King Lear*, 'golden tongued romance', is here recalled to the centre of the play's ordeal. In the setting of the whole *œuvre* we may think of the last plays—of *The Winter's Tale*, *Pericles*, and in particular of *The Tempest*, where the banished father tells his daughter the story of their afflicted lives. The old tale, we are persuaded, is all that Sidney claimed it to be, a vehicle of truth. Lear's and Cordelia's lives themselves become a remote old tale of fluctuating fortunes that might bring comfort to men in cages. Sidney's own *Arcadia* supplied many others, including the tale of Leonatus which Shakespeare used in his story of Gloucester. Lear and Cordelia are 'not the first/Who, with best meaning, have incurr'd the worst'.

'The poet's eye in a fine frenzy rolling/Doth glance from

<sup>1</sup> *Works*, ed. A. Feuillerat (Cambridge, 1923), vol. iii, p. 11.

heaven to earth, from earth to heaven'. The glance from 'gilded butterflies' to 'poor rogues' changes the sense of 'butterflies' and suggests fly courtiers down on their luck. The solace is not now in song but in talk: 'hear poor rogues/Talk of court news'. In *King John* the Dauphin speaks in scorn of the culpable innocence,

That never saw the giant world enrag'd  
Nor met with fortune other than at feasts,  
Full warm of blood, of mirth, of gossiping.  
(V. ii. 57-9)

The immunity of the feast, at which mirth and gossip can make light of the instabilities of the world, is in the later play carried into the prison. The walls momentarily seem a protection against mutability, a state of maximum security. But by the implications of the moon metaphor a kind of power is still exercised in the imprisoned state. Shakespeare once made Falstaff and Hal share a joke about night-robbers, 'minions of the moon' that 'ebb and flow like the sea'. In *Lear*'s fantasy the conceit and its precision are lost to the larger resonance; their triumphant, freshly renewed intimacy ('We two alone . . . we'll live . . . we'll wear out') will have power to outstay and exhaust the moon that, in Yeats's aptly renaissance phrase, 'pitches common things about'.

For all its tenderness and intimacy, however, *Lear*'s 'fine frenzy' retains something of the Orphic ambition of the storm-scenes, looking for power outside Edmund's dominion, derived from a kingdom not of this world. He looks for a kind of ecstatic detachment that hovers between the penultimate catastrophe—imprisonment, and the ultimate one—death. 'God's spies' was supposed by Johnson to mean 'angels commissioned to survey and report the lives of men', and most editors have followed, preferring that to Warburton's more worrying notion that they are 'spies placed over God Almighty to watch his motions'. But both 'angels' and 'God almighty' are alien to *Lear*'s discourse. If its effect is to be fully felt, 'spies' must call back the talk with 'poor rogues'; *Lear* is stuck in a cell finding things out from the other political prisoners. But the 'spies and speculations intelligent of our state' reported by Kent in Act III are the servants of France, while these are God's servants, intelligencers of a divine order.

At much the same time that *Lear* was written, William Perkins wrote his *Commentary on Galatians*, published in 1604.

He distinguishes three ways in which we can be 'spies of the better sort':<sup>1</sup>

First, we are to be spies, in respect of our owne sinnes and corruptions, to spie them out. *Lam.* 3. 40 *Let us search our waies, and inquire, and turne againe to the Lord.* Againe, we are to play the spies in respect of our spiritual enemies, that we may find out the temptations of the flesh, the world and the diuill. Thirdly, we must be spies, in searching of the Scriptures, *Ioh.* 5. 39 that we may understand the words of the Law of God, and find comfort to our soules.

I am not claiming that Lear read Perkins or that Shakespeare did, or even that I have, more than a little. But Perkins reminds us that the spy's vigilance could be commended as a spiritual virtue. Shakespeare would have known too the text in *Galatians* that Perkins allegorised and adapted:<sup>2</sup>

For all the false brethren that crept in: who came in prively to spie out our libertie, which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage.

Again, there is no allusion. But the connection can be made at some level of awareness between the 'liberty' which is a divine privilege, the bondage inflicted by 'false brethren', and the treacherous function of the spy, transformed by Perkins and by Shakespeare into a creative one. There is no need to suppose with William Elton, therefore, that the speech at this point carries 'presumptuous or blasphemous overtones'.<sup>3</sup> And with or without the help of Perkins we may glimpse 'god's spies' in Shakespeare's theatre, in the figures of Prospero and of the Duke in *Measure for Measure*, metaphors of the playwright's art.

At this point Edmund, frigid spectator to the scene, says 'Take them away'. The gaoler's imperative arrests the flight of affirmations; but they break free again:

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. Wipe thine eyes;  
The good years shall devour them, flesh and fell,  
Ere they shall make us weep; we'll see 'em starv'd first.  
Come. (V. iii. 20-6)

Kenneth Muir tells us that he found 'in an old notebook'

<sup>1</sup> *Works* (London, 1617), vol. ii, p. 192.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 191 (*Galatians* 2: 4).

<sup>3</sup> *King Lear and the Gods* (Huntington, 1966), p. 250.

(belonging to God's spy?) 'the suggestion, perhaps based on T. Carter's *Shakespeare and Holy Scriptures* . . . that underlying Lear's speech there are echoes of several Old Testament stories—of Jephthah's daughter, who was sacrificed, and of the destruction of Sodom by a brand from heaven, of Samson and the foxes, of Pharaoh's dream of the good and bad years.'<sup>1</sup> Northrop Frye, writing on Blake, picks up the same range of references (perhaps from the same source) and hazards an explication:<sup>2</sup>

Here the word 'sacrifices,' the central idea which the Old Testament deals with, has suggested something in it to Lear, probably the story of Jephthah's daughter. From there he jumps to the story of Sodom and the story of Samson and the foxes, thence to Pharaoh's dream of the lean kine who ate up the fat ones or 'good years'; and the meaning of the whole chain is: the world shall burn and the golden age come back before our enemies can triumph over us. Of course these are the uncontrolled associations of a vague and wandering mind, but after all *King Lear* is a play, and Shakespeare must have expected from his audience something of the allusive agility that the reading of Blake demands.

Northrop Frye is himself something of a divine intelligencer, but I am not confident that Shakespeare was expecting an 'allusive agility' from his audience. The process and effect of the art are more obscure; the poet takes us into recesses of language and significance that cannot be probed by the sort of vigilance that recognizes allusions. 'There is an unconscious subject,' as Lacan has it, 'seeking to address itself to another unconscious subject',<sup>3</sup> and an audience alert to the effects of the art is not necessarily aware of its imaginative genesis.

Had William Perkins, however, been at Whitehall when the play was first presented before the king, he could have entertained all Northrop Frye's allusions, and more. But about the first—that to Jephthah's daughter—he would have felt uncomfortable; for he is nervous of the old tale in Judges which tells of the king keeping his vow by making a burnt offering of his daughter when she is the first to welcome him home from victory. Dismayed by a God who could demand such sacrifices, Perkins works to prove that 'Iephthe did not offer up his daughter in sacrifice, but only set her apart, to live a single life, to the honour and service of God'.<sup>4</sup> Resistance to the ancient cult of sacrifice is an important and necessary strain in both humanist

<sup>1</sup> *King Lear* (Arden Shakespeare, 1963), p. 201.

<sup>2</sup> *Fearful Symmetry* (Princeton, 1947), p. 374.

<sup>3</sup> *The Language of the Self*, p. 262.

<sup>4</sup> *Works* (1617), vol. ii, p. 98.

and Christian tradition; and Bradley is in the same tradition as Perkins when he chooses to find in 'such sacrifices' only the renunciation of the world, with Cordelia 'set apart' in prison.

Once we know the play, however, and these words have become part of its total design as well as of its unfolding process, we are keenly aware of the continuities between this catastrophe and the next. Kenneth Muir speaks of 'an underlying suggestion of human sacrifice, which looks forward to the murder of Cordelia'. The 'underlying suggestion' could be no more than a metaphor, 'In being cast down for my sake you offer to the gods a sacrifice they approve'; but if we allow the words to look forward to the murder of Cordelia, the consolatory metaphor yields to the barbaric fact. Spoken over the dead Cordelia they would be intolerable. For her murder is an atrocity. What gods would throw incense on that?

The answer must be that Shakespeare expected us to. For it is he who contrives the sacrifice of Cordelia. Geoffrey and Holinshead tell of Cordelia's victory, and say that after Lear had been restored two years, she reigned for five before being deposed by men who resented the regiment of women.<sup>1</sup> In a sense, at this moment of the play, Shakespeare was still free to end it without sacrifice. But the chronicles go on to tell of Cordelia's being cast into prison where, 'being a woman of manlie courage, and despairing to recover libertie, there she slue herself'. Spenser tells us she hanged herself. In *King Lear* the despair and self-destruction are diverted to the Gloucester story, but it is the poignant after-history of Cordelia that presumably impels the playwright to kill her in Lear's lifetime, to the playgoer's great awe and satisfaction. Lear at this point may mean what Bradley means by 'sacrifices' but Shakespeare means more.

In almost all its two dozen contexts in his work 'sacrifice' signifies not 'renunciation' but blood sacrifice and burnt offering, and in probing this mystery we are not perversely far from Shakespeare's own preoccupations in, for example, *Titus Andronicus*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Othello*. A sacrifice, these plays tell us, cannot but be a murder and is apt to be an atrocity, in which the cruelty of the crime is an element in its motivation. Shakespeare's probings are both psychological and anthropological: what kind of society, with what values and religious traditions, found a central place for sacrifice? Answers about Lear's Britain, as for Cymbeline's, were to be found in William

<sup>1</sup> See Geoffrey Bullough, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, vol. vii (London, 1973), pp. 316, 319.



Harrison's *Description of Britain*, printed in Holinshed's *Chronicle*. The ancient religion of Albion, says Harrison, offered 'mankind' to some of its gods 'in lieu of sheep and oxen'; offenders, prisoners 'and also their owne children' were consumed to ashes and reputed to be 'the most acceptable sacrifice that could be made unto their idols'.<sup>1</sup> Lear and Cordelia were by this account liable to be made 'acceptable sacrifices', and a plain chronicle-play, seeking to re-create what Harrison calls the 'great decaie'<sup>2</sup> of the realm of Albion, would make that the theme of Lear's exclamations—'Let's away to prison and be sacrificed to the gods'. Shakespeare could have known of similar practises among the Carthaginians, from Plutarch,<sup>3</sup> and among the Mexicans, from Montaigne; Montaigne even tells of the ecstatic delight of the victims.<sup>4</sup>

But *King Lear* is not a plain chronicle, it makes little of the formalities of the religion of Albion and requires no priest to preside at the murder of Cordelia, seeking atonement and propitiation of the gods. Edmund, its instigator, has motives remote from Brutus's ('Let's be sacrificers, but not butchers, Caius') and from Othello's ('thou . . . mak'st me call what I intend to do/A murder, which I thought a sacrifice'). 'Know thou this,' he says to Cordelia's hangman, 'that men/Are as the time is.' The 'time' is not that of 'Druiysh and Bardike ceremonies' which Harrison speaks of, it is the perennial time of malignant political importunity. Shakespeare knew it from his staging of the slaughter of the boy Rutland at Wakefield, or he could have known it from Ulysses' hounding to death of the boy Astyanax in the *Troades* of Seneca, and it is of little consequence that the one is naked atrocity while the other pretends to be a sacrifice. He could have known it too from contemporary outrages, such as the Darnley murder, which Lilian Winstanley thought *King Lear* to be about. The play's perennial time reaches to our own. When Edmund disposes of Lear and Cordelia the pretext—to pre-empt any rallying of forces under the spell of their names, is much the same as Lenin's and Sverdlov's for the murder of the Tsar and his family: they would not 'leave the Whites a live banner to rally round.'<sup>5</sup> Still more recently,

<sup>1</sup> *Holinshed's Chronicles* (1587, 1807), vol. i, p. 39.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *Lear*, V. iii. 298.

<sup>3</sup> *Plutarch's Morals*, translated Philemon Holland (London, 1603), p. 268.

<sup>4</sup> *Essayes*, translated John Florio, ed. T. Seccombe (London, 1908), vol. i, p. 252.

<sup>5</sup> *Trotsky's Diary in Exile* 1935, translated Elena Zarudnaya (London, 1959), p. 80.

the eight-year-old son of Sheik Mujib was gunned to pieces at Dacca.<sup>1</sup> In such perspectives, talk of 'sacrifice' can seem at once sentimental and barbaric, but it need not be so, and there are other perspectives.

Ancient Albion, as described by Harrison, numbered amongst its idols the play's Jupiter and Apollo and also the god Hercules. Having already shaped out of Ovid and Seneca the madness of Titus Andronicus, Shakespeare, with or without the cue from Harrison, could have made his way back to the *Hercules Furens* where Hercules casts incense upon the burning remains of the tyrant Lycus, and speaks words that were to be quoted and translated by Milton, when he was justifying the Christian sacrifice of King James' son in *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*:<sup>2</sup>

there can be slain  
No sacrifice to God more acceptable  
Than an unjust and wicked King.

If Shakespeare were alluding to that, Lear's words would look back upon himself; he would be the unjust and wicked king about to be sacrificed. Can we be quite sure that he is not? The sense would stretch that way under pressure, but there is no pressure. While it is true that *King Lear* seems to come appropriately in English history at a time of approaching crisis for the monarchy—the play does little to increase our confidence in the British governing class<sup>3</sup>—the focus is not at this point upon the king's failures. If there is in the speech a relationship with Seneca, it is where we hear still some stirring of purging wrath in Lear's distraction. 'Purgare terras propero', cries Hercules, clubbing to death his wife and children, 'I am in haste to purge the earth.' Lear's 'I shall do such things,/What they are, yet I know not, but they shall be/The terrors of the earth', and his, 'Let the great gods that keep this dreadful pudder o'er our heads/Find out their enemies now', are not derived from Seneca but they are in the same temper as the invocations of the *Hercules Furens*—titanic and retributive rage taken to a point of madness under the sway of Jove the Thunderer.

<sup>1</sup> The murder of the Sheik and certain members of his family was acclaimed by the new president as an 'heroic act'; see the *London Times*, 16–19 August 1975.

<sup>2</sup> *Prose Works* (Yale, 1962), vol. iii, p. 213.

<sup>3</sup> See Rosalie L. Colie, 'Reason and Need: *King Lear* and the "Crisis" of the Aristocracy', in *Some Facets of King Lear*, ed. R. L. Colie and F. T. Flahiff (Toronto and London, 1974).

The Seneca recollection, however, would not consort with the intimacy of Lear's cry. To find those that do we can look again to the New Testament and the Old. Among the opening injunctions of Hebrews 13, is one to 'Remember them that are in bondes, as though ye were bonde with them.' There is prison 'bondage' and there is the human 'bond'. So in the prison scene of *Lear*; there are bonds about the king and his daughter and there is a bond between them. 'In burnt offerings,' says the text, alluding to bulls and goats, God has 'no pleasure':

To do good and to distribute forget not:  
for with suche sacrifices God is pleased.

Obeey them that have the oversight of you, and  
submit yourselves: for they watch for your soules,  
as they may do it with ioye, and not with griefe:  
for that is unprofitable for you.

'With such sacrifices God is pleased', 'Obeey them that have the oversight of you', 'for they watch for your soules', 'do it with joy'—it is not hard to receive these phrases (from the Geneva version) to an honoured place in the theatre of Lear's mind, to keep company with 'upon such sacrifices', 'let's away to prison', 'God's spies' and 'wipe thine eyes', but they are not allowed unambiguously to take command of Shakespeare's play. Other insights and energies are active too, and in detailed application there are ironies. 'Obeey them that have the oversight of you' comes in the play to mean, 'Do what Edmund tells you', while the other half of the text, 'for they watch for your souls', unexpectedly chimes with 'God's spies'. This excursion into the New Testament could bring Lear's meaning closer to Bradley's 'serene renunciation of the world': 'Let us go forth therefore out of the camp . . . for here we have no continuing citie: but we seke one to come'. But in Edmund's plot and in Shakespeare's imprisonment is a move towards murder, towards the 'human sacrifice' that the text from Hebrews finds needless.

Thomas Adams in *The Sacrifice of Thankfulness*, first published in 1616, takes his text from Psalm 118, 'God is the Lord, which hath showed us Light: bind the Sacrifice with Cordes, even unto the Hornes of the Altar.'<sup>1</sup> He distinguished 'expiatory' and 'gratulatory' sacrifices. The first is either 'to acknowledge *Peccati stipendium mortem*; that Death was the wages of sinne; due to the Sacrificers, layed on the Sacrificed', or 'Mystically and symbolically to prefigure the killing of the *Lambe of God*, that

<sup>1</sup> *Works* (London, 1630), p. 82.

taketh away the sinnes of the world.' 'But', says Adams, quoting *Hebrews*, 'those sacrifices are abolished in Christ who offered our Sacrifice for Sinnes for ever.'<sup>1</sup> A full account of Christian sacrifice in relation to the history of theatre would enable us to make the same point in a different way. In the N. Town cycle, for example, Abel's sacrifice of a Lamb prefigures that of Christ, and versions of the Abraham and Isaac story agree in taking comfort from the fact that God on this occasion did not, after all, require a human sacrifice but provided himself with an animal one; it is the arrested human sacrifice, nevertheless, that in some of these plays prefigures the sacrifice of the son of God. Ultimately God required the sacrifice of the word made flesh.

If we think of the play's final scene as, in Helen Gardner's words, 'a secular *Pieta*',<sup>2</sup> Christian assumptions about the nature of Sacrifice are at hazard. For, although it belongs to the fictional pre-Christian past of the chronicles, we do not see Cordelia's death as a prefiguration, we experience it as a representative event of human history. Later contemporaries of John Foxe, watching *Lear*'s first performance on the day of the first martyr (at whose stoning Paul himself assisted) could reflect on the many that had been stretched, squashed, mangled, boiled, burnt, and hanged for Christ's sake. But not, it may be objected, *sacrificed*. Here, do what we will, certain ambiguities persist; but before returning to the play, there is a need to recognize a point of convergence in Christian and classical understanding of sacrifice.

The crucifixion of Christ, the stoning of Stephen, the burning of Thomas Cranmer, and the execution of Thomas More (to name two of direct interest to Shakespeare), unlike Abraham's offering of Isaac, were not acts of piety and devotion, but judicial murders.<sup>3</sup> In each case, where sanctity and devotion are to be found, it is in the heroic submissiveness of the victims. Where sacrifice moves us as a tragic event it is because the victim has made himself fit to die and dies for something greater than himself. From Greek and Latin tragedy we could take many instances—Iphigenia, Polyxena, Amphitryon, to name three that Shakespeare could have known from Seneca. But for Christendom, the history of sacrificial humility finds its source

<sup>1</sup> *Works* (London, 1630), p. 89.

<sup>2</sup> *King Lear* (John Coffin Memorial Lecture, London, 1967).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *Winter's Tale*, II. iii. 113-14, 'It is an heretic that makes the fire,/Not she which burns in it.'

most often in the figure in the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah, 'taken from prison and from judgement, cut off out of the land of the living'. There, we may think, is Cordelia's history. 'For the transgression of my people was he stricken', says the old God in the old book. Does the playwright say otherwise in the new play?

Thomas Adams advises us that 'gratulatory sacrifice' is symbolic and spiritual in character: 'Christ is our *Altar*, let ourselves be the *Sacrifice*: the Fire that kindles it, the love of God, the Smoake that goes up, the consumption of our sinnes.'<sup>1</sup> Adams writes in a religious tradition that finds one of its fullest early expressions in Psalm 51, which finds deliverance from blood guiltiness in the sacrifice of 'a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart'. Tragedy too invites imaginative identification with the victim. For Adams, a true sacrifice consists not only in doing ('*Faciendo*'), but also in dying, in suffering ('*Patiendo*') for Christ, without 'gall of bitterness' or 'honie of self-complacencie'. This too is capable of a kind of translation into Shakespeare's theatre: 'For thee, oppressed King, am I cast down', is not a quotation from St. Paul to the Corinthians, 'Persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed . . . for we which live are always delivered unto death for Jesus' sake', but it is under the same dispensation. Adams could without blasphemy have commended Cordelia's sacrifice of herself out of love for an 'oppressed king', even if he did detect in her character a taste of honey and a touch of gall. Desdemona dies, in spite of Othello, by the same feat of self-sacrifice: 'Who hath done this deed?—Nobody. I myself. Farewell.'

If the play were not conspicuously about father and daughter I doubt if any thought of Jephthah's sacrifice would come to mind, but for those sufficiently familiar with bible story the association may be prompted by the spectacle, for this can play a significant part in the scene's shadowing of the catastrophe to come. Between the more violent invocations, 'such sacrifices' and the 'brand from heaven', comes the strangely tantalizing phrase, 'Have I caught thee?' The eagerness and perhaps the tenderness of it a little make against the banal possibilities of significance, such as, 'Have I caught your meaning?', or even, 'Have I got you into this?'. But because Shakespeare once had Falstaff quote in the *Merry Wives* the second song of Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella*, and because the poetry of *Lear* has made our associative processes so active, our amending imaginations feel

<sup>1</sup> *Works* (1630), pp. 89–90.

free to follow, 'Have I caught thee?' with 'my heav'nly jewel'. It is the more likely if Lear at this point takes Cordelia in his arms. Were she to swoon—and she does not speak through Lear's declamations—the next line of the song may haunt us too, 'Teaching sleepe most fair to be?' But, whatever the importance of the song, there is an advantage in having Lear leave centre-stage with Cordelia live but relaxed in his arms, later to return with her dead, in a double image of the father's solicitude and distress. The narrative and imaginative continuity between the apprehended sacrifice and the murder would be accented by the symbolic tableau. We may think of the two great Bellini images in the *Accademia* at Venice, the one a Madonna and sleeping child, the other a *pietà*, each reflecting the dispositions of the other.<sup>1</sup>

After the thought of sacrifice, Lear's imprecations retreat into elusive allusion. What fragments, to borrow Eliot's phrase, does the King shore against his ruins? Sodom was destroyed by fire, the commentaries remind us, Samson tied firebrands to the tails of foxes, 'the thinne eares devoured the seven good eares' when, in Pharaoh's dream, the Egyptians are threatened with famine.<sup>2</sup> It is characteristic of all these associations that none is necessary but none, once entertained, can be quite dismissed. In this speech, as distinct from the last, there is no opportunity for song. 'After ye were illuminated', says the Epistle to Hebrews, 'ye endured a great fight of afflictions'.<sup>3</sup> Lear's fragments are glimpses of afflictions: the purging wrath of the Lord, the violence and cunning of God's servants, the catastrophic instability of the harvest. The Old Testament is called to witness that divine interventions in human history have left its stress and pain undiminished. But it does not help to apply the allusions too specifically; it is the errant, straying mind that is losing and finding its way. Joseph, we may or may not remember, was in prison when he was called on to interpret the King's dream, but Shakespeare is not testing our 'allusive agility'. Lear is a fond father—mad, affectionate, and protective. He is reverting to childhood, to Cordelia's greatest vulnerability and to the sources of his own simplicity. His talk here can as well take us back to the nursery as into the commentaries of Cambridge divines. The word 'good-year', says the *O.E.D.*, delightfully, 'came to be

<sup>1</sup> Giovanni Bellini: *Madonna col Bambino dormiente, La Pietà*. See *Gallerie Dell'Accademia di Venezia*, di Francesco Valcanover (Novara, 1955), pp. 34, 43.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 19, 41, Judges 15.

<sup>3</sup> Hebrews 41: 32.

used in imprecatory phrases as denoting some undefined and malefic power or agency.' Beyond the voice of apocalyptic terror can be heard the voice of the father comforting the child, 'Don't be afraid . . . I won't go away . . . Stop crying . . . Don't worry about those nasty people, the bogey-man will eat them all up.' But such ingenuous tenderness would not in itself suffice; the obscurity, the scale, and the terror are necessary to keep alive another range of implications. For the Senecal God of Thunder meets the God of Hebrews in the play's final images of doom: 'Yet once more I shall shake, not the earth onely, but also heaven . . . For even our God is a consuming fyre.'<sup>1</sup>

It may be supposed that my many appeals to the Bible and to biblical exegesis are attempts to subdue the playwright's art by priestcraft. But the relationship I wish to gloss between Shakespeare's poetry and Christian metaphor and understanding is not of that kind. Leon Trotsky, whose own history I earlier called 'tragic', says of Shakespeare's tragedies that they 'would be entirely unthinkable without the Reformation'.<sup>2</sup> 'As a result of the Reformation', he says, 'religion became individualistic. The religious symbols of art having had their cord cut from the heavens, fell on their heads and sought support in the uncertain mysticism of individual consciousness. . . . But in every one of Shakespeare's dramas, the individual passion is carried to such a high degree of tension that it outgrows the individual, becomes super-personal, and is transformed into a fate of a certain kind.' In pursuing connections between the play and the Bible I do not mean to return Shakespeare's art to pre-Reformation times when, again to quote Trotsky, 'the Christian myth unified the monumental art of the Middle Ages and gave a significance not only to temples and the mysteries, but to all human relationships', and when a great art was made possible 'by the union of the religious point of view on life with an active participation in it'. I assume rather that the experience of both the Reformation and the Renaissance in England made possible, through a fuller and more direct personal access to the Bible, a recovery of the imaginative inheritance of Hebraic and Christian literature as distinct from its institutional, doctrinal, and ritual inheritance; and I would contend for the view that in the Middle Ages there is a dominant movement out of imaginative truth towards doctrine, while in the Renaissance the movement is the other way. My account of *Lear* is meant in part as a contribution

<sup>1</sup> Hebrews 12: 26-9 (Geneva).

<sup>2</sup> *Literature and Revolution*, translated Rose Strunsky (London, 1925), p. 242.

to that contention. Many theologies are voiced, tested, and found expendable within the arduous imaginative experience of the play. The God of *Deuteronomy* and *Hebrews*, like Lear's, bringing a brand from heaven, is a consuming fire. A 'consuming fire' is what Keats found the play to be, and I shall now turn aside from the imprisonment scene to ask more generally about the play, what is consumed and how.

Keats saw himself submitting to a process of self-destruction and self-renewal which, remembering Psalm 51 ('Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean'), might again be called sacrificial:

Adieu! for, once again, the fierce dispute  
Betwixt damnation and impassion'd clay  
Must I burn through; once more assay  
The bitter-sweet of this Shakespearean fruit.  
But, when I am consumed in the fire  
Give me new Phoenix wings to fly at my desire.

Keats's phrases 'consuming fire' and 'impassioned clay' are themselves generated in the poetry of the play, which we now recall from Act I scene iv, when Lear rages upon Goneril about fifty of his followers gone 'at a clap':

Life and death! I am asham'd  
That thou hast power to shake my manhood thus,  
That these hot tears, which break from me perforce,  
Should make thee worth them. Blasts and fogs upon thee!  
Th'untented woundings of a father's curse  
Pierce every sense about thee! Old fond eyes,  
Beweep this cause again, I'll pluck ye out,  
And cast you, with the waters that you loose,  
To temper clay. Yea, is't come to this?  
Ha! Let it be so: I have another daughter,  
Who, I am sure, is kind and comfortable:  
When she shall hear this of thee, with her nails  
She'll flay thy wolvisish visage. Thou shalt find  
That I'll resume the shape which thou dost think  
I have cast off for ever. (I. iv. 305-19)

The habit of command is still behind the sway of the verse, but the 'power to shake' has recoiled upon his own self, his trembling body, his 'manhood'; his hot tears, owed to hurt pride, inflict a moral distress which feels like a physical one; frustrated retributive malice turns first upon his daughter's senses then back upon his own. 'If thine eye offend thee, pluck it out'; the text characteristically goes astray, for it is the eyes' capacity to



betray feeling that offends Lear. The plucked eyes and their tears cast to 'temper clay' (Keats's 'impassioned clay') will be remembered later when Gloucester fears for Lear's eyes and then loses his own, and the hot tears return with a changed significance when Lear wakes from sleep at Dover, supposing himself resurrected to judgement. The deep wound and the piercing of every sense also have their subliminal after-life in the play. The word 'pierce' which here relishes pain inflicted, will later register pain endured ('a pigmy's straw doth pierce it') and find its apotheosis in Edgar's cry when he sees the king crowned with nettles, 'O thou side-piercing sight'. Lear's vertiginous oscillation between his love of security and his passion for vengeance breeds in his imagination the morally grotesque 'kind and comfortable' daughter who will 'flay' her sister's 'wolvish visage', manifesting one of the huge fluctuations of mood that ultimately bereave Lear of his senses. The last cry threatens a resurrection of the thunderer-self, absolute monarch, uncompromising father. But in senses that Lear is not yet ready to understand, that shape is indeed cast off for ever. 'If the whole of the individual's being cannot be defended,' Laing writes in *The Divided Self*, 'the individual retracts his lines of defence until he withdraws within a central citadel. He is prepared to write off everything he is, except his "self"'. But the tragic paradox is that the more the self is defended in this way, the more it is destroyed'.<sup>1</sup>

The closeness of some aspects of art to case-history registers very clearly in Shakespeare's treatment of both Lear and Gloucester. Lear has been formally diagnosed as 'a case of senile dementia' by practising psychiatrists in our own time,<sup>2</sup> and by Goneril in ancient Britain:

The best and soundest of his time hath been but rash; then must we look from his age, to receive not alone the imperfections of long-engrafted condition, but therewithal the unruly waywardness that infirm and choleric years bring with them. (I. i. 295-9)

Gloucester has invited less professional attention, but in Act IV, Scene vi, by the acting-out of what Harsnett called a 'devil play',<sup>3</sup> he is exorcised of his suicidal despair. Spectators to the plight of Lear and Gloucester, we may wonder what connection

<sup>1</sup> R. D. Laing, *The Divided Self* (London, 1960), pp. 80-1.

<sup>2</sup> John G. Howells and M. Livia Osborn, 'A Case of Senile Dementia—King Lear', *History of Medicine*, Oct. 1973, pp. 30-1.

<sup>3</sup> Samuel Harsnett, *A Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures* (London, 1603), ch. I and ch. V.

there is between 'self-destruction' and 'self-sacrifice'. Shakespeare invites our wonder. 'Selves' are precipitated by Lear's initial self-promoting love plot, and more selves are generated in the course of the play in response to domestic and political circumstance. A 'character' may have more than one 'self', and the purging of selves is at once a psychological and a social process. I cannot hope to establish the truth of such an ambiguous and ambitious generalization, but only to catch glimpses of its operation.

Ideas of self-sacrifice often take their inspiration from the New Testament: 'our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed'.<sup>1</sup> St. Paul's metaphor is a terrifying one for all who are, as it were, exposed to it. 'Exposed' is prompted by the metaphor of the play. Lear and Gloucester are shut out of the castle, with all its false securities, to undergo the 'tempest of the mind' and a 'blind pilgrimage'. Thus exposed they are, in a sense, crucified. Yet had they been wiser and better men they would not have so suffered. Lear would have kept his kingdom, taken Albany for viceroy, and spent his holidays hunting in Burgundy. Gloucester would have dabbled in astrology and let his legitimate and only son run the estate. That would have been prudential virtue of the kind that Edgar as the Bedlam beggar prescribes:

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. Tom's a cold. (III. iv. 80-3)

The price for breaking the commandments is exposure to the weather, and in mockery of his father's history, Edgar assumes the afflictions of a self-indulgent court parasite (a gilded butterfly) who has lost his place for want of rectitude; the moral imperatives protect the securities of the society. Prudential wisdom has a treacherously complex life in this play, as we also find when we catch ourselves thinking Goneril's or Regan's thoughts about their father.

The other possibility is folly; for folly disdains security, puts the self at risk, and often destroys it. The word and the condition are richly polarized (to use the optical metaphor again) throughout the play, but I am concerned to see them only in the light of 'such sacrifices'. There is a complex of imaginative links between Cordelia's, 'For thee, oppressed King, am I cast down',

<sup>1</sup> Romans 6: 6.

and the Fool's advice to Kent in the stocks:

Let go thy hold when a great wheel runs down a hill, lest it break thy neck with following; but the great one that goes upward, let him draw thee after. When a wise man gives thee better counsel, give me mine again: I would have none but knaves follow it, since a Fool gives it.  
(II. iv. 71-7)

Cordelia, Kent, the Fool, and Edgar all fail to let go of the great wheel running down hill and, as Lear reports in a line of uncertain reference, 'my poor fool is hanged'.

Erasmus and Montaigne were among those who, like Shakespeare, gave fresh life to the old insights into the nature of folly. The fool puts himself in jeopardy, goes where things are to be known; he does not stay in the castle.<sup>1</sup> That is not true of every kind of fool, but of the play's kind, and of those that Erasmus and St. Paul admired, who are 'fools for Christ's sake.'<sup>2</sup>

The transition from folly to madness is an easy one, in the language and in fact, in the play and outside it. From Montaigne many commentators on *Lear* have caught up passages about madness, folly, and the loss of the senses. According to Montaigne's highly sceptical account of moral growth—sceptical because it allows so slight a validity to human reason—man moves out of a state of self-deception through a state of madness into a state of vision:<sup>3</sup>

Dares not Philosophie thinke that men produce their greatest effects, and nearest approaching to divinity, when they are besides themselves, furious, and madde? We amend ourselves by the privation of reason, and by her drooping. The two naturall waies, to enter the cabinet of the Gods, and there to foresee the course of the destinies, are furie and sleepe. This is very pleasing to be considered By the dislocation that passions bring unto our reason, we become vertuous; by the extirpation which either fury or the image of death bringeth us, we become Prophets and Divines.

In another dimension of his thought, Montaigne teaches us the treachery of our senses. He imagines a philosopher suspended from a tower of *Notre Dame* in an iron cage. 'He shall, by evident reason, perceive that it is impossible he should fall downe out of it; yet he cannot chuse . . . but the sight of that exceeding height

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *Moriae encomium*, 'A foole in jeopardyng, and goyng presently where thynges are to be knowne, gathereth (unles I am deceived) the perfect true prudence'. (Translated Chaloner, London [1549], 1900.)

<sup>2</sup> 1 Corinthians 4: 10.

<sup>3</sup> *Essayes*, ed. Seccombe, vol. ii, p. 349.

must needs dazle his sight and amaze or turne his senses.<sup>1</sup> And Montaigne confesses his own horror in face of the 'infinite precipices and steepy downfalls'<sup>2</sup> of the Italian alps. The senses, runs the irony of the argument, 'do often master our discourse' and force us to receive impressions we know to be false. Turning from Montaigne to the cliff-scene at Dover we recognize that Shakespeare is indeed taking us to the edge of an abyss, creating new insecurities. The marvellously simulated vertigo contrived by Shakespeare and by Edgar has a blind man as its auditor. Nicholas Brook finds that the 'leisured expansive rhythm and detailed imagery all enforce the sense of an ordered world, whose petty strifes are ridiculous if not invisible to the distant viewer'.<sup>3</sup> But these are precarious serenities. The diminutions which accent the spaciousness of the scene testify to its mocking unreality: 'Methinks he seems no bigger than his head'; the 'murmuring surge,/That on th' unnumber'd idle pebble chafes', so richly evoked to Keats's delight, 'cannot be heard'; the fishermen look like mice. It is not an ordered world but a fading one and the senses give a false account of it:

and yond tall anchoring bark  
Diminish'd to her cock, her cock a buoy  
Almost too small for sight.

(IV. vi. 18-20)

Montaigne has his own way of touching the same range of experiences. He quotes a Latin description of the Alps, which Florio translates, 'So as they cannot look down without giddinesse both of eyes and mindes', and follows it with a glance at a 'worthy philosopher' who 'pulled out his eyes, that so he might discharge his soule of the seducing and diverting he received by them'.<sup>4</sup> Montaigne with ruthless good humour, of the sort he keeps for philosophers, says that he 'should also have stopped his ears, which are the most dangerous instruments we have to receive violent and sudden impressions to trouble and alter us; and should, in the end, have deprived himself of all his other senses, that is to say, both of his being, and life. For they have the power to command our discourses and sway our mind'.

From the start of the cliff scene Edgar has worked to disable Gloucester's senses. 'Look how we labour'—'Methinks the

<sup>1</sup> *Essays*, ed. Seccombe, vol. ii, p. 389.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. ii, p. 390.

<sup>3</sup> *Shakespeare: King Lear* (London, 1963), p. 43.

<sup>4</sup> *Essays*, ed. Seccombe, vol. ii, p. 390.

ground is even'—'Horrible steep'; 'Do you hear the sea?'—'No truly'—'Why then your other senses grow imperfect/By your eyes' anguish'—'So it may be indeed'. The growing imperfection of Gloucester's senses is a delusion artificially contrived by Edgar, with the explanation,

Why I do trifle thus with his despair  
Is done to cure it.

Gloucester rehearses for himself a stoic death, meant to keep intact the citadel of his being, in dignified submission. But he is exorcised of his Epicurean confidence—his trust in the senses, and preserved for a different death. Edgar persuades his father that back upon the cliff top from which he has 'fallen' he has left a phantasmagoric thing: 'methought his eyes/Were two full moons; he had a thousand noses,/Horns whelk'd and wav'd like the enridged sea'. Compounded of bits of demonic superstition, and images of the sea, the figure is a fantastic projection of the old Gloucester, the old self, that Edgar is exorcising. Another kind of contextual inquiry could take us back to Thomas Adams who said vertigo was the bodily infirmity corresponding to the 'disease of the soule called Inconstancie'.<sup>1</sup> But our most convenient farewell to the episode is Harry Levin's comment that the ultimate meaning of Gloucester's fall 'is its symbolic gesture of expiation'.<sup>2</sup>

Guilt and expiation are elements of the sacrificial order—offence, guilt, expiation, atonement, renewal; it is also, commonly, the tragic order. For tragedy is goat-song, as Walter Burkert has reminded us, in a paper, 'Greek Tragedy and Sacrificial Ritual',<sup>3</sup> which has done much to refresh and to vindicate many of the insights of Nietzsche and some of the findings of Gilbert Murray. The recognition that sacrifice persists as an elemental if not inescapable process of human consciousness may find many witnesses, from Aeschylus, St. Paul, and Shakespeare to Lawrence, Freud, and Laing. But it is Shakespeare who does most, for those in touch with his poetry, to internalize the tragic-sacrificial experience, to realize it in the hidden structures of language and consciousness. The tragic *anagnorisis* is at once circumstantial and inward, for those caught up in the tragic process discover its validity and acknowledge the imminent destruction of the old self.

<sup>1</sup> *Works* (1630), p. 443.

<sup>2</sup> H. Levin, 'The Heights and Depths', *More Talking of Shakespeare*, ed. J. Garrett (London, 1959).

<sup>3</sup> In *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies*, vol. vii (1966), pp. 87–121.

'I know that voice', says Gloucester, listening to Lear at Dover. 'I know' comes back to Lear as 'ay' and 'no' in the active obscurities of his moral awareness:

Ha! Goneril, with a white beard! They flattered me like a dog, and told me I had white hairs in my beard ere the black ones were there. To say 'ay' and 'no' to every thing that I said! 'Ay' and 'no' too was no good divinity. (IV. vi. 97-102)

This is an inexhaustible recognition scene, from Edgar's 'side-piercing sight', by way of Gloucester's, 'Is't not the King?', to 'I know thee well enough; thy name is Gloucester'. To see Goneril in a white beard is another kind of recognition, making one phantasmagoric image from a complex of insights. Gloucester is associated with the conspiracy of flattery which Goneril's treachery literally brings home to him. The conspiracy is provoked by the very institution of monarchy, requiring total obedience to a commanding ego which is not allowed to mature, become other than itself, saying 'Ay' to 'I'.<sup>1</sup>

The nausea provoked by his 'pelican daughters' extends to the whole process of generation itself, 'But to the girdle do the gods inherit, beneath is all the fiend's.' In a kind of second abdication, of the kingdoms of the old *polis* and the old self, Lear releases the self-destructive passions of the whole society—'Let copulation thrive.' Although in the society and in the psyche it is an abdication of reason, yet the habits and ferocity of command again persist, together with a purgative irony, learned from exposure, that can gape at the mangled face of Gloucester the old lecher and call him 'blind cupid', can move from the farmer's dog barking at a beggar to the 'great image of Authority—a dog's obeyed in office', and return again to Gloucester's sockets with the prescription, 'get thee glass eyes;/ And like a scurvy politician, seem/To see the things that are not'. It is a comprehensive yet intensely personal indictment of the society.

In its last stage, Lear's recognition of Gloucester, the prophetic role of preacher is acknowledged:

<sup>1</sup> Those interested in Shakespeare's imaginative history will find in Wilson's old play, *The Three Lords and Three Ladies of London*, that the lady who claims, 'I love you more than tongue can tell', is checked by Lady Conscience, 'I know that tongue, Lucre beware of Fraud'. Shakespeare's 'Fraud', Goneril, also speaks other hyperboles ('dearer than eyesight, space and liberty') which find new significance in the scene at Dover.

thy name is Gloucester;  
 Thou must be patient; we came crying hither:  
 Thou know'st the first time that we smell the air  
 We wawl and cry. I will preach to thee: mark.

The mind slips from wawling to preaching, finds itself a text that Solomon himself would have been proud of, 'When we are born, we cry that we are come/To this great stage of fools.' Then, I suspect, Lear slips again from preaching to blessing, lays his hand on Gloucester's eyeless head and finds 'This' a good 'block',—good for shaping a hat on. The generation of the mutilated man from the crying child is a frightening glimpse of the nature of growth and evolution in the play. Lear's distress takes a tactical evasion, 'It were a delicate stratagem to shoe/a troop of horse with felt', but it gathers again its retributive violence, 'And when I have stol'n upon these sons-in-laws,/Then, kill, kill, kill, kill, kill, kill!' An element of tragic ritual has found its indirect way into the inner consciousness—the *bacchenein*, the 'intoxication of killing'.<sup>1</sup>

In the 'heaviness of sleep' Lear has (like Joshua) 'fresh garments' put upon him and awakens to music and to his daughter's love. It is an essential element in the sacrificial experience that life should be renewed, refreshed, reawakened, resurrected. St. Paul is strict on the point: 'If after the manner of men I have fought with beasts at Ephesus, what advantageth it me, if the dead rise not?'<sup>2</sup> In his own 'phantasma and hideous dream' Lear at first awakens to a delusion of judgement: 'You do me wrong to take me out o' th' grave;/Thou art a soul in bliss; but I am bound upon a wheel of fire, that mine own tears/Do scald like molten lead.' The 'wheel of fire' and the 'molten lead', along with the rack, are not only instruments of torture in Lear's old kingdom of avenging wrath, they are also hallucinations precipitated in the mind by the hotness of his tears of contrition—the deceptive senses are at work again. The wheel of fire burns also in the Apocalypse of St. Peter and the Second Book of the Sibylline Oracles, but those images of damnation must ultimately be owed, one feels, to experiences like Lear's. The play creates that experience and we keep watch on it. The scene acknowledges the senile vulnerabilities, 'I will not swear these are my hands', 'I am a very foolish fond old man', before they reach their climax in the triumphant naming of Cordelia. His punitive, retributive moral logic, however, is not only

<sup>1</sup> Burkert, *op. cit.*, p. 116.

<sup>2</sup> 1 Corinthians 15: 32.

spent in weakness, it is foiled in its workings by Shakespeare's felicitous tuning of the word 'cause':

If you have poison for me, I will drink it.  
I know you do not love me; for your sisters  
Have, as I do remember, done me wrong:  
You have some cause, they have not.

No cause, no cause.

Lear asks, 'Am I in France?', and Kent answers, 'In your own kingdom, Sir', and Lear responds, 'Do not abuse me'.

In the old play Kent's answer would have been free from ambiguity, the old Lear is not mad and has, in modern jargon, no ontological insecurities, and had Shakespeare stuck to his sources the King would have been restored to power in his own country. But it is Lear's fitness for death that is finally tested, not his fitness for life. There can be no reversion to the kind of authority once exercised but now played out—that shape is cast off for ever. One response to Kent's 'In your own kingdom, Sir', is that, after the visionary madness at the cliff, the King is no longer in his kingdom, the kingdom, in all its fearful disorder, is in the King. Another might be, 'my kingdom is not of this world'. The defeat of Lear's party is a tragic imperative, not a political one, although I have no doubt that the first court audience could have been as dismayed by a play ending in a successful invasion as they were by one which began, 'Know I have divided in three our kingdom.'

The playwright is presiding over a sacrifice; and the playwright, in the span of the theatre's few hours, is himself the clearest god who makes honours of men's impossibilities. I find the scene between Lear's exit and his return much exposed to the strain of Shakespeare's complex commitments, and I cannot find it wholly satisfactory. In particular I would wish away some moments in Edmund's dilatory ineptitude about his pardon of Cordelia—not to save her, but to make her death more obviously owed to a process of human malice which has passed a point of no return. When Lear enters with Cordelia dead in his arms, however, the poet's art is at its most assured. I welcome the suggestion that Kent's question, 'Is this the promis'd end?' should read, 'Is this the premis'd end?', as in Clifford's doomsday speech at St. Albans.<sup>1</sup> 'Is this the premis'd end? . . . Or image of that horror?' The image is all we can have, for none can speak in knowledge of death and resurrection, only

<sup>1</sup> Lascelles, *Shakespeare Survey*, 26 (1973), p. 79.



in shadows and metaphors. But Shakespeare takes art and language as close as it will go:

She's gone for ever.  
I know when one is dead, and when one lives:  
She's dead as earth. (V. iii. 259-61)

But how can Lear know? On waking at Dover he had thought himself dead, 'I feel this pin-prick. Would I were assur'd of my condition'. The impulse to test his bereaved senses comes upon him again; he calls for a looking glass, watches for the feather to be stirred by Cordelia's breath, listens for her voice. By such touches the desolation is articulated and the prospect of resurrection dulled as he peers at his servant Caius. 'Dead and rotten' but now alive again as Kent. The failing senses and imperfect mind make their final effort—I'll see that straight—to reach a last paroxysm of affliction and wonder:

Thou'lt come no more,  
Never, never, never, never, never!  
Pray you, undo this button: thank you, Sir.  
Do you see this? Look on her, look, her lips,  
Look there, look there! (V. iii. 307-11)

We are probably mistaken to ask whether Lear dies in ecstasy, believing Cordelia alive, or in exhausted disappointment, recognizing another delusion. For among the possible performances, none can dispense with the courtesy and solicitude of the last three lines; it is the tenderness that prevails. Lear's waking words at Dover may come again, 'I should e'en die with pity/To see another thus'. Lear dies 'with pity', and that access of pity, which in the play attends the dissolution of the senses and of the self, is a condition for the renewal of human life.

If, believing with Albany that 'All friends shall taste/The wages of their virtue', we wish that Cordelia could get up and walk away, we may have that solace too; for this is, after all, not a primordial sacrifice but a play. The boy who played her part no doubt survived to enjoy a Christian burial 'in hope of the resurrection to come'. If his voice had not cracked in the interim he might have played Hermione or Marina. But the success of the later plays does not diminish the tragic truth that, as Christopher Smart has it, 'man is between the pinchers while his soul is shaping and purifying'. Cordelia's death is an aspect of Lear's ordeal to which she is ready to submit. There is no need to associate with those who convict her of pride or perversity;

for this is what is known in the old rituals as the 'comedy of innocence', when the goat was made to gnaw the vine so it could be held responsible for its own death.<sup>1</sup> Cordelia's innocence, we find in the theatre, and her readiness to put herself in jeopardy, are precisely what make her a fitting sacrifice.

<sup>1</sup> Burkert, *op. cit.*, p. 109.