I. SOME PRELIMINARY REMARKS

The originality of *King Lear* in the history of drama could be summed up in one phrase: "From Aeschylus to Beckett". Or in another phrase, "Play and display", containing a sort of pun, in keeping with Shakespeare's own style. Indeed *King Lear*, which, from the Restoration to the beginning of the nineteenth century was not performed in its original form, but considerably edulcorated and adapted to so-called classical standards, more French than Latin or Greek actually, seems on the one hand to look back to Antiquity, and on the other hand to look forward to modern drama. This tragedy might have been popular during the romantic age, since it contains all the requirements regarded as characteristic of the romantic drama; it inspired painters and musicians, but as a matter of fact the general public continued to feel squeamish about it and the complete revival of the play took place only in the twentieth century.

As a play *King Lear* shows a double visage. It is a play indeed, with dramatic continuity, suspense, perfect perspicuity in the succession of events, a set of characters not too numerous and drawn with a fair amount of psychological consistency, clearly differentiated from each other and easily recognizable by the audience. The eponymous hero is present on the stage in eleven scenes out of twenty-three, an average number by Shakespearian standards. There are two plots, but owing to their similitude and the fact that they soon meet together like two confluent rivers, the second plot does not distract the public's attention. Besides they are extremely simple, based on elementary situations familiar to everyone. The dramatic mainsprings are based on errors, but not on artificially contrived misunderstandings, as often happens in melodramas. Even when those situations reach a state of crisis or climax, they cannot be called *knots*, a term used to describe awkward entanglements, sometimes as difficult for the audience to understand as for the fictitious people on stage to solve and escape. There is indeed no complication about them, especially as the dramatic themes of the play are hammered with repetitive

insistency. At a pinch the tragedy could be performed on a small stage, in a mood of intimacy. As in classical tragedies the military battles are fought off stage, contrary to what usually happens in Shakespeare's historical dramas. Some scenes indeed take place in the open air, and to make the storm passages credible the company must provide some son et lumière effects. This would not be impossible in a small theatre, with a production focused on the inwardness of the tragedy, but that is not what the public nowadays expects from a production of *King Lear*.

Indeed the conception of *King Lear* described in the previous paragraph does not tally with the reputation that it has acquired in our time, as a play reaching a high degree of theatrical stylization, a kind of laboratory in which Shakespeare performed all kinds of experiments that four centuries afterwards prove prophetic of modernity. The spectacular scope of this unusual tragedy might suggest that it is made for the screen even more than for the modern theatre. Moreover, the succession of the scenes, shifting from one place to another while ensuring the chronological continuity, yet with occasional effects of simultaneity, suggests the cinematographic technique of montage, but this comparison should not be carried too far, not only on account of the anachronism, but mainly because *Lear* appears as an essentially theatrical work fully exploiting all the conventions and possibilities of the stage, that would find itself like a fish out of water if transposed into another medium. Setting aside the principle of *mimesis*, that is to say the imitation of reality, the author has introduced what is called, after Bertolt Brecht, *alienation effects*, reminding the spectators that they are attending a play, that is to say an artificial show, and that the people on the stage are not the persons that they pretend to be. *King Lear* teems with anachronisms. The action is supposed to take place in Antiquity, in Celtic Britannia, but the names are mostly Anglo-Saxon, the King of France and the duke of Burgundy, countries which did not exist in those days, have come from the Continent to court a British princess, etc. a buffoon addressing the audience to tell them, among other incongruities,

> This prophecy Merlin shall make, for I live before his time.
>
> (3.2.95)

could have been heard on the Elizabethan stage in a comedy, but was unexpected in a tragedy. The disguises adopted by Edgar and Kent to pass unrecognized even by people who know them intimately also

belong to the stock-in-trade of comedy, and witness to the author's utter disregard of verisimilitude and credibility. Yet he manages to obtain the support of the public, since drama is an art which relies on a sort of active connivance between the author and the audience, happy when they are allowed to take part, even if just passively, in the building up of the theatrical illusion. As regards its general form, the play looks like a patchwork in which all the styles, all the genres cultivated by the theatre are represented, in such a way that the public seems to be debarred from any emotional involvement.

Yet the statements laid down in the first paragraph of this introductory chapter should not be forgotten. A person reading *King Lear* or attending a performance of it on the stage for the first time may be baffled by an impression of heterogeneity and artificiality. How can an audience be moved by a tragedy whose author has ostentatiously made use of all the tricks ordinarily belonging to the art of comedy and entertainment? But once the paraphernalia of theatrical conventions, whose presence is inescapable on the stage anyway, is accepted, the spectators may allow themselves to be carried away by the sheer emotional appeal of those conflicting situations that everyone is acquainted with in one way or other. the outward form of the play may look as motley as the Fool's costume, but the singleness of purpose and the visionary profundity evinced by the author must also appear in full view.

Shakespeare as a poet and dramatist – Shakespeare the man escapes all investigations – was both an extravert and an introvert. The outward world is always present in his works, and so is the inward world of man. What we call Nature – not quite the equivalent of what Shakespeare himself designates by this word, as will be explained in the third chapter – is entirely captured by the author's perceptivity, appropriated by his creative imagination, and transfigured into a unified vision. But this vision is interiorized, associated with the most intimate regions of sensibility. It merges into the language, through the use of metaphors, which most often express abstract notions in terms referring to objects perceived by the senses. This process of symbolization extends itself to the play as a whole. Beyond the parallel stories of Lear and Gloucester, betrayed by the children they loved, and saved – morally if not physically – by the children they rejected, looms a more general vision of the human condition, a tragic one, if not hopelessly pessimistic. What is particularly poignant in *King*

Lear is the way the common theme of death is treated. It is natural that people meet death in a tragedy, concluding some destinies, sometimes as a deserved sanction for their misdeeds, or as a cruel injustice inflicted on them. But in this play death is more than a dramatic event; Shakespeare ruthlessly reminds everybody of mankind's mortal condition. When Lear says that his hand smells of mortality (4.6.129), he does not refer to his status as a former king reduced to misery, he speaks as a man, as Everyman, the representative of mankind in the famous morality play. And when he weeps over the body of Cordelia, noticing with dismay that she does not breathe anymore, he does not expatiate on the iniquity of the judgment that sent her to the gallows, he just expresses his horror at the bare reality of physical death. The spiritual scope of *The tragedy of King Lear* extends to the tragedy of man in general, which explains why it makes so many readers and spectators uneasy.

Is there a lesson to be drawn? Human creatures are unhappy, even when they enjoy all the material means of ensuring material happiness. Why? Is it because the human species has been thrown into an inexorably hostile universe, or because mankind itself, endowed with an insanely self-destructive nature, invents oppressive institutions, believes in delusive ideologies, perverts its own language and finally transforms its own environment into a hell? No answer is given, because Shakespeare is a poet, not a preacher. There remains, offered to the meditations of readers and spectators, a play whose literal components are haloed by a vast and general vision. It would certainly be misleading to try and decipher the play as if it were just a parable with a moral at the end, or a symbolic piece of work whose diegesis, to use the phrase invented by the American painter Washington Allston and popularized by T.S. Eliot, who by the way took *The tragedy of Hamlet* as an example, constitutes an *objective correlative*. A *diegesis*, in the language of modern criticism, is the name given to the succession of events taking place in a narrative or in a play, what, roughly speaking, corresponds to the story in a novel or the plot in a play. An *objective correlative* is a particular story from which a general meaning can be induced. But *Lear* cannot be construed as a symbolic fable, if only because the style and mood of the play smack of the earth, of physical realities. Its existential impact is undeniable, the adjective *existential* referring to those elementary sensations, – anguish, despair, nausea, fear, cold, hunger – that seem to be conveyed to the

audience in their rawest state, not easily transposed into abstract concepts. What is undeniable however is that the whole is greater than the parts, and that as the text of the play constantly comments upon itself, the curious reader or spectator is tempted to look for significances beyond the immediate cause-and-effect progress of the drama. As Hugo said in his reveries about the ideal drama, above the down-to-earth mixture of the sublime and the grotesque taking place on the stage, there hovers something great, that is to say something that aims at opening up vistas towards the invisible and the infinite.

II. MORAL AND POLITICAL ISSUES IN *KING LEAR*

Coleridge said that Shakespeare was the most philosophic of all poets, and he certainly felt comforted in his opinion by the reading of *King Lear*. The intimidating notion of philosophy applied to such a play does not mean that the author proposed a thesis or pondered upon metaphysical mysteries to provide the spectators with some sort of revelation. But in it some of the fundamental questions to which mankind is confronted, especially in the ethic and political field, appear in full light and are expressed not only through the mere enactment of a dramatic plot, but also in abstract and conceptual language. These questions may not receive answers, as was already hinted in the previous chapter, but at least they are presented with all their dialectic ambiguities and their subtly intricate complexity.

At first sight the moral theme in *Lear* seems simple. The whole play, through the medium of drama, represents a battlefield in which Good and Evil wage their eternal war against each other. Yet if on the whole it is easy for the audience to recognize which are the champions in each of the two armies, the notions of good and evil are not so easy to define and situate. The moral standards upheld by the people on stage are not necessarily the same as those in which the spectators believe, and the dramatist himself may consider contemporary tenets with a critical eye, but one may begin by examining the ethical assets put forward by the characters themselves, at least by those who pretend to speak and behave in conformity to the values of the community, those who judge and run the risk of being judged in their turn, at least by the public of the play.
In order to escape the discomfort of intellectual uncertainty, men have invented the idea that institutions such as the family and the state embody and perpetuate moral assets. The two plots of Shakespeare's tragedy are founded on a conflict between Authority and Rebellion. At the beginning

of the play Lear lives in a world morally and intellectually comfortable. When he banishes Cordelia he suffers no pangs of conscience. He does not feel that he is taking revenge on her, or that he indulges in giving free rein to a fit of choleric and tyrannical passion. He believes that he is acting righteously and fulfilling a duty, a painful duty as a matter of fact, as he knows that he will be a victim of his own decision. He has sacrificed his own happiness on the altar of moral principles.

> I loved her most and thought to set my rest
> On her kind nursery. Hence and avoid my sight.
> So be my grave my peace, as here I give
> Her father's heart from her. (1.1.124-7)

He knows that he will not find any peace before his death, but does not know that he will some day repent for what he has done, and that consequently his ethical set of values will change. Thus at the beginning of the drama Lear appears to the audience as an all-powerful judge imbued with his authority, who cannot conceive that he has committed a moral fault or an act of injustice, all the more so as he is the victim of his own decision. He believes in his own integrity and self-denial. Yet not only the audience in the theatre, but also the people on the stage feel that there is something wrong in this decision. If this judge is himself judged by criteria other than his own, he may appear as a supporter of the theocratic delusion. Maybe he imagines that he applies the law of God, as His anointed representative on the earth. This can explain why he hands his power over to those who express the official doctrine in the ritual words, and banishes the heretics, Cordelia and Kent. He commits on moral grounds an action that the author makes appear immoral to the public. Shakespeare indeed gives Lear the awe-inspiring stature of a Great Inquisitor, capable of sending his own friends, brothers and children to the stake while taking Heaven to witness that he suffers a deep sorrow. The kind of relationship that looks like a confrontation between an inquisitor and his victim recurs several times in Shakespeare, for instance in *Othello* (5.2), or in *The Winter's Tale* (2.3), in which the man who assumes both the functions of prosecutor and judge presents himself as the mouthpiece of the highest authority. Incidentally those men committing iniquities are not self-appointed judges. Othello as a general and a husband, Leontes as a king and a husband, like Lear as a king and a father, exert a power that

has been legitimately conferred on them by society. They are deluded, but whereas the jealous husbands, Othello and Leontes, are deceived by a mixture of pride in themselves and false appearances or lies coming from the outside, the case of Lear is different. He is led to a tragic error by the very system which he embodies at its highest degree. Thus his fatal delusion gives him the prominence of a tragic hero, a victim of his idealism, even if this idealism appears objectively perverted. He is an absolute King in every sense of the word, he is detached from reality and in quest of the unattainable absolute. Besides, this view situates *The Tragedy of King Lear* on its real plane, which is more ethical than psychological. "When I became a father, I understood God", says Old Goriot in Balzac's novel. The problem with Lear is that he also takes himself for a god.

Later on in the play, by slow degrees, through a painstaking effort of his conscience, Lear understands that he is only a man, not a god, that the veneration he received from his court in the time of his power was founded on fear and interest, not on love and piety. He also understands that what is called nowadays the Establishment does not embody the moral values. The social and political message conveyed by the play does not sound very original nowadays, but it must be taken into account, if only to recognize Shakespeare's audacity on this point in his time, and also to escape the narrow-minded view that *King Lear* is only a tragedy of old age.

> Thou hast seen a farmer's dog bark at a beggar?
> GLOUCESTER Ay, sir.
> LEAR And the creature run from the cur – there thou mightst behold the great image of authority: a dog's obeyed in office. (4.6.150-55)

This passage is taken from the bitter denunciatory phase of the play, when Lear, like Timon in the second part of the eponymous play howls that the laws of society, behind the make-believe later on in the history of language called *ideology* since Destutt de Tracy coined and introduced the word, are only at the service of the vilest instincts of mankind, especially selfishness, cupidity and concupiscence, morality being synonymous with hypocrisy.

Did Shakespeare intend to make his public conclude that Evil is always associated with authority, and Good with rebellion? This would be too