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POETRY AND ETHICS: THEIR UNIFICATION IN THE SUBLIME

I

The tradition provides us with a variety of different ways of talking about the relationship between poetry and ethics. Positivism, for instance, would link them very closely by distinguishing them both from the realm of real science. Science provides us with knowledge, but does not satisfy our feelings. Our feelings and appetites crave satisfaction. What we imagine might satisfy us constitutes the realm of values. But because our feelings and appetites are in flux, and because our imaginings are so untrustworthy, there can be no scientific knowledge of this realm. It can be articulated, if at all, only through "poetry," whereby the poetic connotes an image of a murky world that can be suggested or evoked, but never precisely determined and clearly articulated. This position denigrates both poetry and ethics by the way in which it links them together, even when it begins with the insistence that the realm of values is what is really important, what gives life real meaning. If values cannot be objectively determined, what we are left with is "mere poetry." And in a world governed by the objective sciences what this in fact means is that it becomes impossible to establish real limits to the competitive struggle of interests, to the at times savage play of power. This fact does not change when the very absence of objectively determinable values is used as a rhetorical defense of the value of toleration and pluralism. For a value thus grounded floats in mid-air. It is impossible to tell whether it enjoins us to tolerate intolerance or not to tolerate it. Either way, one faces problems.

Poetry and ethics have also been starkly contrasted. One might consider Kierkegaard's juxtaposition of the aesthetic and the ethical lives. Here ethics is elevated by its distinction from the aesthetic—the latter is the hedonistic pursuit of satisfaction; the former is the selfless conformity to universal law. One advantage of approaching the ethical through this kind of contrast is that it makes clear a point that is almost completely obscured in the contemporary setting: ethics does not have as its subject "values"—it is concerned not with what people want to do, but with what they ought to do.

Kant, of course, represents the classical formulation of this point of view. He also provides a more fruitful way of conceiving the relation between poetry and ethics. It is of course true that poetry is robbed of

its full autonomy when distinguished from an ethical realm that is elevated above it. But it regains something of its luster insofar as it can render service to the ethical. For Kant, this service is not delivered by versified moralizing. Morality demands its own language. Instead, the service is both more subtle and more essential. It is the function of poetry to heal the rifts between the theoretical and the practical realms, between necessity and freedom, the "is" and the "ought."¹ Morality has freedom and responsibility as its condition. The theoretical or scientific point of view, on the other hand, systematically excludes the possibility of freedom. It is the place of poetry and art in general to represent freedom as a real possibility; to provide one, despite the contrary claim of objectivity, with a justified hope that a truly moral deed can occur. It is not far from this thought of Kant to Schiller's *Aesthetic Education of Mankind*. If poetry is not itself the highest, it is the path to the highest. For that matter, it would not be far-fetched to mention Plato in this connection. His denigration of poetry in the *Republic* is thoroughly ambiguous. For once its position subordinate to philosophy is clearly recognized, it is reinstated as a necessary instrument of governance. The education envisioned in the *Republic* is itself an aesthetic education. Indeed, there are hints that poetry is more than propaedeutical. For finite human beings, at any rate, philosophy can never free itself entirely from its own poetic origins. It is not an accident that Plato himself wrote philosophical dramas.

Whether one has in mind philosophers who explicitly use poetic devices, as Plato does in some of the more literary dialogues, or whether one has in mind simply the poetic quality of philosophical language, for instance, as it repeatedly breaks forth in the German tradition, it is noteworthy that philosophy in general stands in an uncanny proximity to poetry, despite all of its attempts to adhere strictly to the rules of rational argumentation. In at least two instances this moment was carried far enough that philosophy was actually made subordinate to poetry. I have in mind the conclusion of Schelling's *System of Transcendental Idealism*, which claims the superiority of aesthetic over intellectual intuition, and virtually the entire work of Friedrich Nietzsche. With regard specifically to ethics, Nietzsche's case is especially illuminating. For his thought is permeated by a clear ethical intent—that is, he is intensely concerned with the way we live our lives. His entire philosophy can be regarded as a protracted call to authenticity. Yet, he regards traditional morality as the greatest barrier to be overcome. Authenticity demands a vigilant transvaluation of values, the essential point of which is not to forge a new and better moral code, but to enter fully into the poetic spirit that gives birth to values in the first place. Poetry confronts the demon and

teaches us how to hold him at bay. Those who follow the teachings without discovering for themselves the demon have turned their backs on life. Poetry is thus not merely a means for communicating values—it is itself the highest value.

With just this much of the tradition before us, we discover that it confuses even as it clarifies the issue. The tradition does not embody a clear consensus about the nature of the highest things. I thus propose a systematic discussion that will throw light on the relationship between poetry and ethics. I will then try to delineate my findings by considering briefly two authors whose works have a clear ethical import, William Shakespeare and Jane Austen. These two steps should not, however, be understood to imply any rigid separation between systematic analysis and literary exposition. There may indeed be more poetry in the first step than in the second.

II

I would like to begin the systematic consideration of the relationship between poetry and ethics with a distinction that Schelling makes in his *System of Transcendental Idealism* which will help justify my unconventional understanding of poetry. Schelling refers to works of artistic genius as products that unify a conscious with an unconscious activity. They are products simultaneously of both nature and freedom. The free and conscious moment he refers to as the "*Kunst in der Kunst*"; the unconscious moment, which he regards as a "gift of nature," he names the "*Poesie in der Kunst*."² This corresponds well to a never observed, but etymologically correct distinction between the English words *art* and *poetry*, whereby art derives from the Greek *artunein*, to arrange, and poetry derives from the Greek *poiein*, to bring forth. Only pre-existing elements can be arranged. Art is thus grounded at the outset in the form-matter distinction. Its primary meaning implies the modification of a naturally existing matter by human intervention. It thus stands on the *techne* side of the *physis-techné* distinction. It refers, in a word, to the artificial as opposed to the natural.

Poiein, on the other hand, and this is contrary to common opinion, stands on the *physis* side of the same opposition.³ It does not refer primarily to an artificial "making," but to an organic act of generation, whereby a form is not thrust on matter from the outside, but arises simultaneously with the matter it differentiates. It is this sense of *poiesis* which Heidegger, for instance, has in mind when he writes that "*all art, as the letting happen of the advent of the truth of what is, is, as such, essentially poetry.*"⁴

Returning now to Schelling, we can see the justification of his claim that *Kunst*, or art, represents what is teachable and learnable in the production of artistic works. It is a technique or series of techniques that can be described by a determinate set of rules and appropriated by meticulous practice. Poetry refers, on the other hand, to the wellspring of inspiration, to the moment which crystallizes of its own accord, infusing works of art with an inexplicable beauty that cannot be produced by the application of aesthetic rules. After clarifying this distinction, Schelling goes on to say that works of true beauty are achieved only when these two principles are unified.⁵ We speak of "genius" when an absolute master of technique is elevated to transcend even his own prolific ability in order to utter words that no mere mortal could speak. Inspiration without technique, poetry without art, is confusion, and, in the worst instances, madness. In the words of the poet Hoelderlin, "*Das ist das Mass Begeisterung, das jedem Einzelnen gegeben ist, dass der eine bei groesserem, der andere nur bei schwaecherem Feuer die Besinnung noch im noetigen Grade behaelt. Da wo die Nuechternheit dich verlaesst, da ist die Grenze deiner Begeisterung.*"⁶ Translated rather freely, this says: "What provides the measure for the degree of each individual's enthusiasm is that some are able to maintain the necessary degree of consciousness by a raging fire, while others lose themselves at the smallest flame. At that point where you begin to lose your sobriety, you have discovered the limit of your enthusiasm."

Let me return now to my main point: poetry, as I understand it, refers not simply to verse, but to the moment of inspiration that infuses the greatest works of literature in general, and of music, painting, sculpture, and the whole of what are usually designated the "arts." I distinguish it from art, roughly as the genuinely creative might be distinguished from products of a well-schooled technique. The distinction is, however, not an absolute one. Poetry without art is as inferior as art without poetry.

My decision to focus on the poetic is presumably a decision to focus on that which emerges spontaneously, rather than that which can be produced through the application of fixed rules. With regard to my general theme, which concerns the relationship between poetry and *ethics*, one might guess that I intend to divorce them entirely, for surely ethics is primarily concerned with determining the proper set of rules for guiding human action. The need for ethics, moreover, arises precisely because spontaneous behavior is, for human beings, so often contemptible behavior. The state of nature is anarchy; civilization has created at least a modicum of order.

This is, however, clearly not the last word with regard to ethics. The state of nature has also been deemed to be paradise, civilization a disease and corruption. With this in mind, one might now anticipate that I intend to reject classicism and argue for romanticism, or reject absolutism, perhaps, to argue for historicism and relativism. My romanticism seems implicit in my insistence that true poetry has roots in nature rather than human consciousness. My relativism might be deduced from my frequent claim that the poetic is not subsumable under a set of rules. Consequently, the realm that it creates will display a multiplicity of forms that are reducible one to the other. It will be filled with such a variety of different meanings that the very idea of turning towards it for ethical guidance will appear ludicrous.

My point is, I hope, not so simple-minded. First of all, I recognize that a high priest of relativism might just as well conclude by recommending, for *ethical reasons*, an education in the classics. "Turn to the great poetic works," he or she might say, "and learn from them that there are many conflicting and incompatible ways of perceiving reality. You will then be cured of dogmatism, you will learn tolerance, you will learn to be good." If one sees clearly that objective values are not embodied in the great works of culture, one will be cured of looking for them. Thus liberated from idolatry, one will enter the inner sanctuary of healthy skepticism.

The problem with this position should be evident, although, given its wide acceptance, it clearly isn't. It is the problem of the real existence of evil. In terms of the religion of relativistic pluralism, evil might be defined simply as intolerance, a rather widespread phenomenon. One either tolerates intolerance or one doesn't. In either case, one has already lost the game. The dilemma is in fact much older than contemporary forms of relativism. The Christian doctrine of universal love faced similar paradoxes, though with a good deal more sophistication. "Love thine enemy" had a clear enough meaning. One was called upon to convert him.

Here one might begin to be surprised. Why do I insist upon the priority of the poetic in culture, using a sense of the term that is detrimental to classicism or aesthetic absolutism, if I am not comfortable with the diverse range of meaning that flows out of such a principle, that is, if I am uncomfortable with a radical pluralism?

To understand my enthusiasm for the poetic, it might be beneficial to give closer attention to the other side of the paper's thematic opposition. What is ethics? Is it the study of absolute moral rules, or is it the study of *ethos*, which means in Greek habitual ways of acting? When Aristotle insisted upon the latter, he made it clear that good habits must be formed

precisely because there are no self-evident rules that govern good behavior. If moral rules were anchored in the self-evident, then good behavior could be taught and would not have to arise through the slow and at times painful process of forming good habits. The ethical leader must say "follow my example" precisely because there is no set of self-evident principles to be disseminated.

To justify the notion that the *ethos*-orientation of ethics is incompatible with the formulation of immutable moral laws, I can give a quick critique of the rational ideal as it received its most rigorous formulation in the moral philosophy of Kant. According to this philosophy, a person has a duty to conform to the universal law of reason alone. Morality is not realized in the realm of loyalty and obedience, except insofar as these are directed towards the rational law, which has its locus within each of us and is embodied only in an accidental way in a leader or an institution. Against Aristotle, the goal is not to condition and change our inclinations until we incline towards the good. The goal is rather to subordinate our actions to the principle of reason and to do so in defiance of our inclinations. One should live in accord with the law that would bind together the community of all rational creatures and not in accord with the conventions of the society into which one is born. Obedience to rational law even takes priority over obedience to the will of God. The point of the Old Testament story about Abraham and Isaac would have been lost entirely to Kant. According to his understanding, God simply could not have tested Abraham's loyalty by commanding him to sacrifice the life of his son. All wills, including the divine will, are subordinated to the one standard of rationality.

The problem, though, is that in concrete terms it turns out to be impossible to live solely in accord with the commands of pure rationality, which Kant refers to as the categorical imperative. There will, for instance, be situations in which the imperative to respect universally the lives of other rational beings will conflict with the imperative to universally and in all imaginable circumstances tell the truth. I may be forced to decide whether to resort to a lie to save someone from assault. Indeed, the imperative to respect the lives of others can even come into conflict with itself. I may have to decide whether I myself should assault someone who is prepared to throw a grenade into a crowded train. The examples of such moral dilemmas could easily be multiplied. They are generated by the real existence of evil in the world. Rational imperatives would, of course, never come into conflict if we lived in a totally rational community. The very structure of rationality assures that this is the case. They will, however, constantly come into conflict when we live in a world in which

they are constantly transgressed. The result is that we form loyalties and commitments to representatives of the good rather than to the good itself. These loyalties can then come into conflict. The result is the stuff of tragedy, as all readers of Sophocles' *Antigone* will recognize.

It is here, I argue, that the parallel between the poetic and the ethical realms is grounded. The true poet does not just follow rules but creates them. He is compelled to do so because the purpose of poetry is not simply to delineate an ideal, but to reconcile us with what is. It is the confrontation with irrationality that necessitates the continual renewal of poetic vision. Indeed, the greatest poets do not even follow their own rules, but continually give birth to new ones. Shakespeare's art, for instance, is always a *different* art.

In the same fashion, the truly good person does not permit rules abstracted from a multiplicity of experiences to interfere with the authentic response to the uniqueness of each and every aspect of what he encounters. If a lie is the only way to save a life, one tells a lie. If working on the Sabbath is the only way to free the ox that has fallen into a ditch, one works on the Sabbath. To carry the parallel a step further, I might add the parenthetical remark that the best *thinker* is not one who systematically applies the rules of either logic or rhetoric to a given subject, but one who, out of love for the truth, gives full attention to language and experience, and thus nurtures *insight*.

We can get to the same point by considering another kind of parallel between the aesthetic and the ethical realms. The aesthetic act involves witnessing something as absolute, that is, as it stands in itself, unrelated to anything surrounding it. We do not witness the tree in an aesthetic way when we view it as a potential source of firewood, or as a ladder leading into the second-floor window. In other words, to view something aesthetically is to recognize its beauty, that is, its completeness in itself, its intrinsic goodness. It is to pause in our intuition of reality without racing forward or going backward. What sustains such a pause is, presumably, something good.

This view masks a problem, however. The identification of the good and the beautiful may be convincing from a classical point of view, but it is questionable from a contemporary vantage point. Jane Austen may write with an alluring elegance that is inseparable from the moral conception she conveys—her good characters evoke our sympathy, her bad characters our outrage. Her aesthetic intention and her ethical intention fall into one. But what of Baudelaire, Otto Dix, Picasso, or Samuel Beckett? What of the literature produced by the Holocaust? Do the portrayals of isolated cases of persons who maintained their dignity in the midst of

such horror serve in any way to offset the horror itself? Indeed, is it not the case that the grotesque can also be captivating? Consider the observers of a bad car accident who are not in a position to help, but who want simply to watch the mangled bodies being removed. Are they not, by our previous definition, partaking in an aesthetic experience?

With regard to this last question, I want to quickly give a negative answer. A morbid fascination must be distinguished from an aesthetic fascination. The grounds for such a distinction should be evident—the former deadens the soul, the latter enlivens it. But once this is stated, we still face the problem of the aesthetic portrayal of the grotesque. I do not see how the problem has any possible resolution apart from the classical appeal to the idea of tragedy, whereby finite powers assert themselves as absolute and then pay the price of their hubris. The destruction of the finite functions as an affirmation of the infinite, which alone has a claim to absolute right. This is the crux of the idea, presented somewhat in the manner of the German Idealists. It seems to do justice to Nietzsche's understanding as well: the tragic hero is destroyed that Dionysus might live. Thus conceived, tragedy fulfills a redemptive function. Evil itself becomes the measure of the depth of the divine and as such its ground. As Nietzsche might say, tragedy presents the highest possible affirmation of life, for it affirms not simply that which is easy to affirm, what is unequivocally good, but that which resists affirmation and by doing so casts a shadow over life. Life is not truly affirmed until its painful side is acknowledged and affirmed as well.

Tragedies fail in fact to convey a truly *tragic* effect if this affirmation does not occur, for it is impossible to bemoan the destruction of an evil that is merely evil. The tragic hero is as noble and commendable as he is flawed and contemptible. Tragedy thus reveals the profound ambiguity that permeates the ethical dimension. Aristotle, it seems, was right in pointing out that a tragic hero cannot be all good, for his destruction would then evoke only outrage, nor can he be all evil, for his destruction would then evoke applause. He must instead have strong traits of strength, nobility and goodness—and yet still be flawed, but, and this is what makes a tragedy truly "tragic," the flaw should occur *through no fault of his own*.⁷ Tragedy is the most profoundly ethical form of poetry; yet the ethics it discloses is permeated by profound ambiguity. Its actors are not clearly and simply responsible for what they do. This is true particularly for the heroes of tragedy. They embody the principles of good and evil, but never in a pure and uncontaminated form. If tragedy discloses the true good, then it does so only as a sign pointing beyond itself, that is, only in the

guise of complete transcendence. For its own actors are ensnared in the web of moral and ethical ambiguity.

III

To introduce my remarks on Shakespeare and Jane Austen, I would like once again to refer to Schelling's distinction between art and poetry. Schelling insisted that either principle alone is not sufficient to produce works of genius; they must be unified in one and the same work. This makes a good deal of sense to me, yet I believe that the unification can take place under the clear priority of one moment or the other. In this spirit I would like to designate Shakespeare as the fully consummate poet, Jane Austen as the consummate artist.

With regard to Shakespeare, I have in mind many of the characteristics that led the Germans, from Herder to Goethe, to regard his dramas as embodying the quintessential form of modernity. He was thus judged to be romantic rather than classical. His plays did not conform to the classical rules of drama and were apparently not written according to a tightly conceived formula. Evidence for this is first of all the freedom with which he moves from comedies to tragedies and indeed lets the two often coalesce within one and the same work. As Plato suggests at the end of the *Symposium*, this fusion would be unthinkable from the vantage point of the ancient world. In the same spirit, one might consider the enormous diversity of characters that make their way into Shakespeare's plays: he is familiar with all forms of life, young and old, peasantry and royalty. The baroque range of his vision necessarily ruptures any close commitment to preconceived form. We are not presented with a narrow cast of actors. We are treated instead to double and triple plots and presented with an enormous array of supporting and at times merely ornamental roles. The world he presents is not an idea; it is the real world and, like reality, it is grounded in an unsublatable *prima materia*; it cannot in any way be deduced from a central conception, but always gives free reign to the imagination. Even the verse form is varied and free and at times (for instance, when Lear seems to degenerate completely into madness) gives way fully to prose.

Jane Austen, on the other hand, is fully classical. Both time and place in her works are much more compressed, much more manageable, than in Shakespeare—an observation which is all the more significant given the fact that she has at her disposal the generous medium of the novel, while Shakespeare wrote plays. While it is true that she makes use of double plots, she is in most other regards Shakespeare's antithesis. Her

novels might all be described as comedies and all of them offer variations of a single theme: a talented but vain young woman gets herself entangled in difficulties by relying too much on her intelligence and wit, and undergoes, through the difficulties themselves, a painful process of education, until she emerges in the end wise and more humble, ready for marriage to a genuinely good man from an appropriately higher social class.⁸ Her characters stem entirely from the rural and small town gentry, share the same preoccupations with class and propriety, and are magically free from real-world concerns. By the time her heroines are prepared for entry into the real world the novel draws to a close. Austen writes pure fiction; each action is balanced by the appropriate consequence. If a reward or punishment is due to a character, the author does not hesitate to resort to the most implausible coincidences in order to have justice rendered. In this way, her novels disclose a fully ideal world.

This contrast between the forms of writing in Shakespeare and Jane Austen, which I have related to the distinction between "poetry" and "art," corresponds to a similar contrast between the ethical content of their work. For both writers the ethical dimension is pronounced. Moreover, they would presumably have agreed on virtually every important ethical question. Yet such agreement hides a fundamental difference that has important ramifications for the way their works can be regarded as embodying an ethical content. Jane Austen is a moralist; that is, she uses her art to communicate a clear conception of the good. This is not the case with Shakespeare. His plays depict the struggle between good and evil.⁹ Moreover they communicate a sense that the cosmos is an ordered and, ultimately, a just whole. Yet they are wrought with sufficient ambiguity to make it impossible to form a determinate conception of what that justice is. The force that rules over his world embodies a reason that no mortal could ever comprehend. This need not lead to moral despair. Just as the genuine poet must suffer the loss of a determinate form to be artistically executed, and precisely thereby gains admission to the ineffable *source* of form, so there is a particular goodness that can be attributed to those who despair of ever having the answers the moralist commands so easily, but whose actions nonetheless have an unmistakable value, arising as they do not from an idea of the good, but from the good itself.

A genuinely inspired imagination gives birth to fully determinate forms; in the inexhaustibility of its productivity, it is, however, related in a highly positive manner to the indeterminate. Morally, this corresponds to the possibility of pacifying the demonic and indeed exploiting its power through the agency of love and affirmation. In good English, there is a kind of moral imagination that operates through rather than against the passions.

God himself has been reported at least on occasion to convene with Satan. This is incomprehensible to the prudish. Unlike Shakespeare, Jane Austen tends towards prudishness. There are very many things that she is too polite to talk about, even if they lurk close beneath the surface. Her respect for Samuel Johnson is significant in this regard; one will recall the latter's insistence that the blinding of Gloucester in *King Lear* is too savage a scene not only to witness on stage, but to read. In Jane Austen, it would even be excessive to portray characters with seriously raised voices.

What remains, her famous "two inches of ivory," is extraordinarily beautiful. Yet I cannot suppress the thought that what is missing is what is truly significant. I recognize, of course, that the underworld of violent passion is not excluded from her novels entirely; it is clear that the courtship ritual masks a crude quest for physical survival and at times even a glimmer of erotic attraction. In *Emma*, an indigent band of gypsies makes a brief appearance. But the refusal to explore this dimension has consequences. The ethical life becomes identified with the life that excludes passion and is ruled by the intellect. One result of this is that, though her characters do "fall in love," they do so with a noticeable degree of calculation and virtually without passion. On occasion this leads even to structural flaws. Because an attraction or lack thereof has to be justified intellectually, we find that the heroine must at first be "blinded"—by her impulsive nature, of course—to the charms of the man she is ultimately fated to love. But in at least one case, the reader, who always enjoys the benefit of seeing more than the characters, is likely to be as blinded as the heroine herself. Mr. Darcy at the end of *Pride and Prejudice* seems irreconcilable with Mr. Darcy at the beginning. This is necessary, for Elizabeth is morally the most laudable of Austen's heroines and thus could never make the mistake of "thinking with her feelings." The only possible resolution was to let her encounter two different Mr. Darcys.

I want, however, at least to suggest another interpretive possibility. In *Emma*, the heroine's project with Harriet, her attempt to remold reality and make a lady of an ill-begotten girl, is not unlike the project of writing fiction. When the project shatters and Harriet is married to the farmer she should have married at the beginning of the novel, reality has won its victory. What then of the project of writing fiction? The ironical texture of Austen's novels reflects their moralizing intention, for they seek to show the danger of illusion and self-deceit in heroines like Emma, and, more generally, they relentlessly seek to disclose hypocrisy wherever it occurs. The vehicle for accomplishing this is the tension between reality and appearance. The joy of reading these novels consists largely in the

fact that the reader sees so much more clearly what is best for the characters than they do or indeed can themselves. Things hidden to them are manifest to the reader. One *knows* the necessary outcome of the courtship long before those who are intimately involved in it. One delights in the progressive unveiling of reality to those stumbling through the hallways of appearance. But, granted the reading pleasure this creates, one must still ask whether it isn't strangely incongruent for a *novelist* to denigrate appearance so unambiguously and insist upon the intelligent appropriation of reality. For a novelist is, after all, a writer of fiction.

Now Shakespeare clearly faces no such dilemma. For him the world itself is a stage, life the stuff of dreams. Reality itself is as profoundly ambiguous as appearance—as such, it *is* appearance. The consequence of this in ethical terms is tremendous. While one can often clearly distinguish between good and evil, this distinction becomes more difficult in his primary characters. I have already mentioned that Macbeth does not seem to be unambiguously evil. As for Hamlet, he is made to live the ambiguity itself. His irresolution in his fight against evil is the very center of the play and itself leads to the murder of innocent actors. It would be useless to try to draw from this a moral by asserting, for instance, the virtue of quick action. For the tragedy is that Hamlet, a strong and heroic man, is incapable of the necessary action. One is left without a moral, but squarely facing an important and *incomprehensible* dimension of truth.

This is even more dramatically the case in *King Lear*. One could, of course, read it as a morality play. It opens with the picture of an old and apparently just king, who has equitably divided his kingdom among his daughters. He falls victim, however, to his desire for flattery, decides to apportion the divisions according to the degree of love of his daughters, and falls into a rage when the youngest, whom he most loves, won't play the game. He is consequently punished. What *Lear* *should* have done was act in accord with Cordelia's imprudently stated but very real wisdom. He should have recognized the impossibility of "heaving the heart into the mouth" and the moral necessity of acting in accord with duty. If he had done the former, he would not have sought flattery. If he had done the latter, he would not have divided the kingdom in the first place and would have saved himself a lot of trouble.

Such a reading is, of course, barbaric. It trivializes everything. Lear is old and no longer capable of acting in accord with rational precepts. Moreover, his punishment far exceeds his crime. In the course of the play, he is stripped first of his royalty, turned out with his fool to face a torrential storm, coupled with a beggar, stripped then even of his clothes and finally of his sanity. His cry of anguish is loud and persistent and

animal-like. A penchant for flattery catapults him into the abyss of irrationality above which we humans dangerously hover.

Moreover, the terrifying violence wrought upon Gloucester as his eyes are ripped out of his face is violence wrought upon an innocent. His only crime was his gullibility. Even if the villains are destroyed in the end, a balance is not attained, for the two tormented old men and Cordelia herself are dead as well. The word that recurs throughout the play is "nothing"—the work appears to be a work of pure nihilism. The gods are evoked from time to time but do nothing and in the end are justifiably cursed. A blind and savage nature rules over all.

And yet the play has enormous ethical significance. First of all, a kind of justice does prevail, although clearly not the justice sought by the moralist. The villains are destroyed by their own evil. And Gloucester and Lear do not die until they are reunited with Edgar and Cordelia, whom they should never have renounced. Indeed, it seems that they even died happy, though the claim that they died *redeemed* goes too far. The wrongs they wrought upon their children were not righted. Moreover, if Lear himself did die happy, then it was not because he finally viewed the truth. It was, indeed, a lie that excited him into his death: his belief that Cordelia was still alive, when in fact she was, sadly and wrongly and fully dead.

The effect of all of this is enormously distressing. And yet, as I said before, a kind of justice prevails in the end. It is the justice of finitude itself. It is all a dream, at times a nightmarish dream. But the dream vanishes. What remains, what stands above all of this, what alone is truly good and in its goodness truly is, is not to be named. It is the mystery that can be disclosed only *as* mystery. As such, it is disclosed in a play like *King Lear*, a play that reaches beyond the beautiful into the sublime. Those who follow its full scope will be rewarded with an unqualified affirmation of what is. This is the revelation of the essential goodness of reality, a goodness which affirms and thus grounds evil itself, not the appearance of evil, but an evil that is real enough that it must constantly be fought. It is an uncanny goodness that cannot be "heaved into the mouth." It can grant calm and sobriety even in the midst of sheer insanity; its recognition is the highest gift that poetry can offer.

NOTES

1. See sections 2 and 3 of Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, in which Kant first refers to the gulf separating the sensible realm of nature (in which all events are regarded as determined) from the supersensible realm of freedom (the condition for moral action), and then asserts that the faculty of judgment (as exercised in the aesthetic realm) accomplishes the task of mediating between these two realms. This is, indeed, related to the old Platonic idea (articulated in the

- Symposium* and the *Phaedrus*) that beauty is the form through which the supersensible shows itself in the sensible.
2. Schelling, *System des transzendentalen Idealismus*, (vol. 3 of the *Saemmtliche Werke*), p. 618.
 3. See Martin Heidegger, "Die Frage nach der Technik," *Vortraege und Aufsaeetze* (Pfullingen, 1978), p. 15. Heidegger is commenting here on Plato's *Symposium* 205b. Plato himself explicitly makes the point (that poetry is not a *techne*) in *Phaedrus* 245a.
 4. See the "Origin of the Work of Art" in the anthology (translated by Albert Hofstadter) *Poetry, Language and Thought* (New York, 1971), p. 72.
 5. Schelling, *op. cit.*, pp. 618f.
 6. Hoelderlin, *Werke und Briefe*, vol. II, (Frankfurt am Main, 1969), p. 602.
 7. Aristotle, *Poetics*, section 13.
 8. I thus agree completely with Darel Mansell's assertion that Jane Austen's art is "fiction that has been slightly tempered, and thus made somewhat brittle, by a preconceived intellectual scheme." From the preface to *The Novels of Jane Austen: An Interpretation* (London, 1973), p. x.
 9. My reading of Shakespeare owes a debt to A.C. Bradley's classic work, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (London, 1929).

Paul Kennedy Mueller

TEA WITH TERRORISTS

In Jordan, where Trajan built a circus,
fierce men accost me,
insist we take tea.

Doves peck trash at our feet
as we sip. The men clench hands,
shake heads, fold arms like cradling rifles,
explain their fire, their grief, sketch
with wet lips a dream of Zion
bleeding into the sea,
and we taste, between tirades, the fragrant tea,
replenished by bored boys
until the courtyard and cafe are dark
and the mourning doves fly to the stars.