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by any purpose, but by blind forces and laws.⁹

Or the shock of Bertrand Russell:

Such, in outline, but even more purposeless, more void of meaning, is the world which Science presents for our belief. Amid such a world, if anywhere, our ideals henceforward must find a home. That man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving, that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave . . . —all these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain, that no philosophy which rejects can hope to stand.¹⁰

Indeed, how like Hamlet's view is Russell's (the literal view of science). Undoubtedly, in intellectual terms to a greater or lesser extent, every man must wage Hamlet’s struggle, and for this reason alone Hamlet is perhaps the most compelling of all Shakespeare's plays for the modern reader.


An Existential Examination of *King Lear*

James V. Baker

I

The central preoccupation of existentialist philosophy is a concern for man's being in reality, or for human reality as it is present in this world. Its business is, in part, at least, descriptive, that is to describe the experiential structure for all human beings. Existentialism is the philosophy of human existence.

If one looks closely at the human condition, one notices that severe limitations are imposed upon it; it is extremely bounded. It is bounded by birth and death. Not only that, but each one of us is, if I may be permitted the expression, "in a fix," situated, at this particular time, at this particular place. We cannot escape time and space. Time and space are our jailers in the elementary jail. Man is a time-bound creature. He has only a very limited amount of time in this world.

It will be necessary to define the term *category*, because it is a very useful term under which the human condition can be studied. I define a category as an instrument for inquiring into a problem. The basic existential categories are as follows: First, being born into this world and finding ourselves here. Secondly, being towards others and finding ourselves existing among other people who are similarly bounded as ourselves; this is the whole realm of intersubjectivity, of our relations with others. Third, experiencing certain elementary emotions, such as fear, love, or hate; the existentialists have made particular capital out of the study of an emotion which is called anguish. Anguish is experienced

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in difficult decision or choice, but existentially anguish is defined as one's feeling in the face of existence as a whole, being distinguished from fear, which is fear of some specific object or ordeal. Fourth, the human experience of time and of being headed towards death. And, finally, the possibility of transcendence of these space-time limitations. Space-time limitations may be overcome in three ways: through art, through love, and through religion.

Unquestionably existentialism is a philosophy that has ethical implications. It is a philosophy of full self-responsibility for the individual. One of the most valuable of Sartre's ethical concepts is that of "bad faith." Bad faith is defined as a lie to oneself within the limits of one's own single consciousness. The supreme example in literature of a person living in bad faith is the Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale in Hawthorne's Scarlet Letter. In actual life, it is probably true that all human beings in greater or lesser degree live in bad faith at least part of the time. It is a human, all-too-human, weakness. Sartre, at one climactic point of his description of the human condition known as Being and Nothingness, says:

the for-itself [i.e. the human consciousness] apprehends itself in anguish; that is, as a being compelled to decide the meaning of being . . . most of the time we flee anguish in bad faith.1

The great existential virtue, on the other hand, is authenticity. To be an authentic person is to be one who faces the human condition, resolutely accepts his finitude and his death, creatively responds to life, manfully assumes responsibility for all his decisions.

By putting literature, a poem, a play, or a novel, under the existential lens, I mean to study it closely through the instrumentality and by the light of the categories, the play itself being regarded as symbolic construct which may perhaps throw illumination upon the human condition. Let us then, without more ado, focus our attention upon King Lear.

II

King Lear has a mythical, folk tale, fairy tale element. Freud noticed its primitive features and compared Goneril, Regan, and Cordelia to the caskets of gold, silver, and lead in The Merchant of Venice.2 Cordelia is a Cinderella figure; there are two sisters, selfish and mean; the third is not only beautiful, but good. Yet, though it has its ritual and mythical elements, like all Shakespeare's major tragedies, it has a large measure of political reality.

The first existential category, Heidegger's Geworfenheit and Befindlichkeit, our being hurled into this world and finding ourselves here, we find in the great scene where the two protagonists, Lear and Gloucester, confront one another. Lear then says:

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

This last remark, while it is excellently in character and exactly appropriate to the bitterness of King Lear's condition, sets up reverberations and echoes of other passages about fools who strut and fret their brief hour upon the stage.

The second category of being towards others is so richly explored in this play that the fabulous wealth of the theme can only be suggested. The play is basically about the relations of parents

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1Being and Nothingness, tr. Barnes, p. 556.

to children, a foolish father's relation to his three daughters, a second foolish father's relation to his two sons. Lear is singularly inept in his management of his relations to others. A tyrant—"When I do stare see how the subject quakes"—he had never had to practice tact. A large part of the play is Lear's education in humanity. He has, for one thing, to unlearn court flattery. "They told me I was everything," he says; "'tis a lie; I am not ague-proof." He begins to have a concern for others, for "poor naked wretches." But his education is more than an education in humanity; it is an education in the bare fundamentals of the human condition. When he sees poor Tom with nothing but a blanket around his middle, he says: "Unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare forked animal as thou art." Lear learns to strip off appearance and to face reality.

Lear's initiation into humanity is a rough one. He has never slenderly known himself. He learns through suffering to have concern for others. He sees with penetrating insight into the injustice of the social order. He wakes to the undeserved but nonetheless miraculous reality of Cordelia's love. He starts by being inauthentic; he ends by being authentic. It is a new and spiritually reborn King Lear who asks little of life except to be with Cordelia:

Come, let's away to prison.  
We two will sing like birds in the cage.  
When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down,  
And ask of thee forgiveness.  
(V, iii.)

The new humility is in remarkable contrast to the old arrogance.

Under this general rubric of human relations, the tragedy of King Lear can be seen as a profound study of the nature of evil. When a critic solemnly makes an assertion of this sort, it sounds as though Shakespeare sat down to compose a moral treatise, and this he never did. But unquestionably King Lear is, besides being a mimesis praxeos, the imitation of an action, with suffering human beings caught and caged in their situations, giving vent to exceedingly alive and vivid feelings, a profound study of the nature of evil. R. B. Heilman, in his admirable thematic study of the play, This Great Stage, points to the regrettable ineptitude of the "good" characters, the superior worldly shrewdness of the "bad." The "good" characters have a moral laziness in their conservatism; one wishes that they had little more of the wisdom of the serpent. Yet King Lear, though never a sermon, demonstrates the self-defeating nature of evil, as unmistakably as does the exemplum of Chaucer's "Pardoner's Tale." In the power-scramble and the rivalry for Edmund's hand, Goneril poisons Regan. But the whole play is a web of human relations whose suggestibility is almost infinite.

Coming, then, to the category of experiencing certain elementary emotions, such as fear, love, hate, and anguish, there is no doubt about the violent expression of hate in this play. We have, for example, Lear's terrible curse on Goneril:

Into her womb convey sterility and his calling Goneril a boil in his own flesh (the very name Goneril has unpleasant associations; it has suggestions of gonorrhoea and venereal disease). Hatred explodes in the quarrel scene between Albany and Goneril; Albany is itching to get his hands on Goneril, to throttle the life out of her body:

Were't my fitness  
To let these hands obey my blood,  
They are apt enough to dislocate and tear  
Thy flesh and bones. Howe'er thou art a fiend,  
A woman's shape doth shield thee.

This is pretty strong, coming from Goneril's "milk-livered man"—note the association of milk with mildness, as
in *Macbeth*, “the milk of human kindness.” Goneril and Albany’s marriage is one of mutual exacerbation; the milk has curdled.

No doubt *Lear* is a play of extremes; the love is as uncontaminated as the hate. Cordelia’s devotion to her father, though at first stubbornly dumb, but latterly shown in few words and eloquent acts, is love in its purest form. Love does not seek to alter that which it loves, as Max Scheler points out in *The Nature of Sympathy*; it loves the loved one, faults included. Robert Frost’s “we love the things we love for what they are” is a profound phenomenological insight. Waking to Cordelia’s kisses and to music, Lear is, literally, “a soul in bliss.” He does not have to deserve that love; he has it.

Lear as human being is not filled with ghastly, sweaty, Gethsemane anguish; to compare his anguish with Christ’s would be extravagant. It is not a decision-making anguish: “Let this cup pass from me.” Rather it is a terrible anguish due to an experience of ingratitude and betrayal. As G. Wilson Knight observes in *The Wheel of Fire*: “As we feel Lear’s anguish, we know it to be the central thing in the play, the imaginative core and heart of the rest.” 1 Images of torture are so significant to the play that they rate as symbols; the two central torture images are the wheel of fire and the rack. It is clear, too, that the anguish of the blinded Gloucester is hardly less than the anguish of Lear; it is supplementary to it, and buttresses it, the secondary plot being at all times ancillary to the main one. In fact, the anguish, which is so very evident in this tragedy, opens out into pure existential anguish, the anguish in the experience of being *per se*.

Fourth, is the category of time or of being headed towards death. This is an implicit theme in all of Shakespeare’s writing, especially in the sonnets and in *Hamlet*. In the Lear play, the theme is enforced by such a remark as Lear’s (in reply to Gloucester’s “O let me kiss that hand”): “Let me wipe it first, it smells of mortality.” It is present, too, in the suicide motif. One notices also the pitifully short time that Lear and Cordelia have together, after Lear wakes up to discover Cordelia’s love. From that moment till the stage direction: Enter Lear with Cordelia dead in his arms, the play races to its catastrophe. This is paralleled by the even shorter time that Edgar and Gloucester enjoy together; indeed recognition, being over-sudden, brings death from the shock of joy, so that death and recognition are simultaneous. Death awaits nearly all the major characters, good and bad alike. A roll-call of the dead includes the names of Oswald, Regan, Goneril, Edmund, Gloucester, Lear and Cordelia, an unusually high mortality rate even for a tragedy by Shakespeare. Death becomes so commonplace that when Edgar’s death is announced, Albany says drily: “That’s but a trifle here.”

Fifth among the categories is the possibility of the transcendence of space-time limitations. A. C. Bradley pointed out that “references to religious or irreligious beliefs and feelings are more frequent than is usual in Shakespeare’s tragedies.” Numerous references are made to the gods and their great opposeless wills. The celebrated lines

*As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods,*

*They kill us for their sport*

cannot be taken as the basic philosophy of the play; the words are uttered by Gloucester in a fit of despair. In the main a stoic acceptance is recommended. Edgar’s

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men must endure
Their going hence, even as their coming
hither
derives probably from the Stoicism of
Seneca. Negatively this is perhaps the
highest that the play rises to; positively
the supreme value of the play is love.
Under the imminent shadow of death
Lear and Cordelia experience a love that
transcends time and space. One feels
the presence of transcendence more in
Lear than in Hamlet.

Recent commentators favor the ex-
istential approach. For instance, L. C.
Knights writes, "Exposure is the very
essence of King Lear, which is one of
the most profound attempts in the litera-
ture of the world to reach some bed-
rock certainty of affirmation concerning
what it is that gives meaning and sig-
nificance to human life." 5 But what is
that bedrock certainty? Professor L. C.
Knights does not affirm it. It cannot be
immortality and the Christian hope of
heaven. It is rather that whatever kind-
ness is shown, whatever reality is un-
covered, whatever value is created is up
to man and up to him before death cuts
him short. No man knows the day or
the hour; ripeness is all, the readiness is
all.

"King Lear and the Great Tragedies," Pen-
guin Guide to English Literature: The Age

Many commentators remark on the
theme of seeing and blindness and the
attendant ironies which run throughout
the play. When Gloucester meets Lear
in the scene with the direction, "Enter
Lear fantastically dressed with wild
flowers," Lear, with his usual tone of
command, says to the blinded Glouces-
ter, "Read." Gloucester replies, "How
can I, since I have only eye-sockets and
not eyes?" Then Lear says:

O, ho, are you there with me? No eyes
in your head, nor no money in your
purse. Your eyes are in a heavy case,
your purse in a light. Yet you see how
this world goes.

Glou: I see it feelingly.

There we have the very essence of the
play. To see feelingly, to see with the
sense of touch, to see as the blinded
Oedipus feelingly sees his children; more
than that, to see tactfully, to see with
empathy, with sympathy, to see intu-
itively—this is what Lear learned when
he learned to see feelingly what "naked
wretches" are exposed to. Literature is
an existential art and to see feelingly
is not only what King Lear is about, but
it is what all imaginative literature is
about. The conclusion, then, to which
this examination leads is that King Lear
is an infinitely rich play since in it
Shakespeare deals profoundly with the
existentials of the human condition.

The Shackling of Accidents

Antony and Cleopatra

ELIAS SCHWARTZ

I

As the play begins, an almost anony-
mous Roman tells us that we shall see

Mr. Schwartz, an assistant professor at Notre
Dame, has published a number of articles on
Chapman, Shakespeare, and literary theory in
SP, MP, JEGP and CE.

in Antony "The triple pillar of the world
transformed/Into a strumpet's fool." A
moment later, that is just what we do
see:

Cleo. If it be love indeed, tell me how
much.