Regi Siriwardena

# The Pure Water of Poetry

*A newly rewritten and extended version of the author's most important critical study*

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# Preface

This critical study has had a long and rather complicated history. It began its life as a memorial lecture for E.F.C. Ludowyk, given under the same title at the British Council auditorium in 1988. In 1990 I reworked the text of that lecture, incorporating some new ideas, omitting parts of the original text and developing and expanding others. It was privately published as a pamphlet in a very small edition, offset-printed from my typescript; and in that form it was picked up by *Navasilu* and reproduced (though with some unconscionable errors) in Nos. 11-12 of the journal in 1994.

I now return to the study, nearly a decade after I last revised it. In the present version, the essay has been substantially rewritten and extended, further clarifying and strengthening, as I believe, its argument. I hope those readers who have acknowledged the interest and stimulation they found in the earlier versions will find reading this one fruitful too.

# 1

Let me begin with a memory - one that goes back nearly sixty years. I was sitting one morning in Lyn Ludowyk's honours class in English, in that small building adjoining Reid Avenue that was known as Sampson's Bungalow. Ludowyk was lecturing that day on Wordsworth, and he was trying to define the essential quality of Wordsworth's best poetry. He said a critic by the name of Ian Jack had described that quality better than anybody else. 'The glass seems empty,' Ian Jack had said, 'because it is full only of pure water.' Ludowyk quoted that sentence with evident rapture, and perhaps that is why it made an immediate impact on me, and why it survives in my memory across the lapse of over half a century. I have never come across Jack's sentence since; I don't even know in what book or essay it occurs, but I am as sure of the words as if I had heard them yesterday. 'The glass seems empty because it is full only of pure water.'

Why is that such an excellent representation - as Ludowyk recognised - of what Wordsworth's best poetry is like? Let me remind you of a poem of his titled 'Michael'. It's a narrative poem about an old shepherd and the son he sends out into the world in the hope that he will make his way in it. Before they part, the shepherd asks his son to lay the first stone for a sheepfold he is building, so that it should be a covenant between them. But the son goes away, falls into dissolute ways, and has to flee abroad because of a crime he has committed. The old man endures the blow with a stoical strength; he still goes out every day among the hills and tends his sheep; he strives to build the new sheepfold that his flock needs, but - and here are the climactic lines:

> 'tis believed by all
> That many and many a day he thither went,
> And never lifted up a single stone.

'And never lifted up a single stone.' It's a line you can pass over, if you read it carelessly, as a mere prosaic statement of fact. But pay attention to it, and you will realise that Wordsworth has charged these seven simple, familiar words with the utmost fullness of meaning. Nothing other than this bare austerity of language would have done. There is no overt expression of emotion in Wordsworth's line because the shepherd doesn't display his feelings either; they come out, in spite of himself, only in the act itself, or rather in the absence of the act. This is poetry from which all excess has been purged, poetry distilled to its transparent essence, so that to the superficial eye it appears not to be poetry at all. The glass seems empty because it is full only of pure water.

It's a mark of Matthew Arnold's sound critical sense that in his essay on Wordsworth he picked out this line from 'Michael' to represent 'his true and most characteristic form of expression', and said:

> There is nothing subtle in it, no heightening, no study of poetic style, strictly so called, at all; yet it is expression of the highest and most truly expressive kind.

In the line from 'Michael' it is, of course, the feelings of a character, not, in the first instance, of the poet himself, that we apprehend. But the stoical endurance of the shepherd is one with the emotional discipline, the expressive restraint, of his creator. However, to anticipate a possible objection: it may be argued by some that the shepherd's endurance is, on the poet's part, an inducement to acceptance of and resignation to suffering. It may even be urged that this submission was part of the process of transformation of the former revolutionary enthusiast into the conservative supporter of the established social and political order of his later years. But there are crucial distinctions to be made between different poems of the post-revolutionary phase: for instance, important

differences between 'Michael' and the verse tale 'Margaret, or the Ruined Cottage' (which, with revisions, became Book I of *The Excursion*). In 'The Ruined Cottage', indeed, the tragedy of the lonely wife, the victim of socially created loss and pain (her husband has gone away to the wars and never returned), is distanced by the contemplation of tranquil nature and the resignation it brings:

> She sleeps in the calm earth, and peace is here.
> I well remember that those very plumes,
> Those weeds, and the high spear-grass on that wall,
> By mist and silent raindrops silvered o'er,
> As once I passed, into my heart conveyed
> So still an image of tranquility,
> So calm and still, and looked so beautiful
> Amid the uneasy thoughts which filled my mind,
> That what we feel of sorrow and despair
> From ruin and from change, and all the grief
> That passing shows of Being leave behind,
> Appeared an idle dream...

Here human grief and suffering become merely 'passing shows' and 'an idle dream', erased by the image of the tranquility of nature. There is no such denial of suffering in 'Michael'. The shepherd does strive to bear his loss with fortitude; there is no crying out loud against it; but in the line on which I focussed, the emphasis is on the incompleteness of the subduing of his grief. And the poem closes, after the record of all the changes that have taken place in the landscape and the lives of the people, on the unfinished sheepfold - not a 'passing show' but a surviving memorial to human love, heartbreak and pain.

# 2

Wordsworth's good poetry is only a very small part of his output. It's an interesting question why the genius of the first generation of English Romantic poets should have declined so precipitously in middle age - Wordsworth into empty rhetoric and garrulous banality, Coleridge into opium-haunted sterility and silence, Blake into the smoky obscurity of the private visions in the Prophetic Books. Almost as if some stage-manager had arranged a dramatic contrast with the fate of the second generation that was to follow: Byron, Shelley and Keats, blowing up like rockets at the zenith of their early brilliance. But taking that small group of Wordsworth's best poems of one decade as all of him that is worth reading, I want to ask: Where do we place that mode of poetry, that quality of language, in the English tradition?

When I was in my last years in school, I was taught by a teacher who was passionately devoted to English literature. For him one of the heights of English poetry was Milton's lines on the fallen angels, lying prostrate in hell:

> Thick as autumnal leaves that strew the brooks
> In Vallombrosa.

My teacher used to declaim these lines in his large, booming voice, and the sensation was undeniably thrilling. But when I came up to the university, I gathered that this kind of sonorous verbal music was something rather disreputable for Milton to have indulged in. Dr. Leavis had spoken, and said there were two traditions in English poetry. One was the great tradition of Shakespeare, Donne, Marvell, Pope, the later Keats,

Hopkins, Eliot.[1] What they all shared, he said, was the Shakespearean use of English, which was for Leavis the authentically English use of English (for there was a strong element of cultural nationalism in his thinking). That meant verbal density, rich metaphorical life, keen sensuous intensity, the muscular vigour of the rhythms of speech. This was also poetry that was so complex that it lent itself to being taken apart in critical analysis; and that was regarded as a virtue, for it was the heyday of practical criticism.

For Leavis there was also a lesser tradition in English poetry - the line of Spenser, Milton, the early Keats, Shelley, Tennyson, Swinburne. This for him was poetry of facile verbal melody, diffuseness and imprecision of language, images that were decorative rather than organic. The climate of the English department of the Ceylon University in my time was strongly Leavisian; and I soon learnt to be properly condescending towards Milton and Tennyson. But the question I didn't think of asking was: Where in these two traditions did one place the pure water of Wordsworth's best poetry? It was at the opposite pole from Milton's latinised, highly wrought language. On the other hand, it was also far removed from the intricate metaphorical clusters, the dense sensuous imagery, the syntactical complexities that we had been taught to think of as characteristically Shakespearean. 'Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds.' That was a model of the Shakespearean use of language, and you could spend a lot of time and space on unravelling its complexities. But what could you do with 'And never lifted up a single stone'? In its very limpid simplicity it defied analysis.

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1 I am not endorsing Leavis's categorisation of English poets in citing it: in particular, Hopkins's rhythms seem to me to be muscle-bound rather than to possess the natural vigour of speech; and his whole manner of using language is, in its own way, as remote from living English as Milton's..

It didn't occur to me to raise these questions till very much later in my reading life. I believe what set me thinking about them were two remarks of T.S. Eliot, both of them made in the course of the same lecture. Here is one:

> Of some great poetry one has difficulty in pronouncing just what it is, what infinitesimal touch, that has made all the difference from a plain statement which anyone could make.[2]

And here is the other:

> Some great poets can teach others some of the things to avoid. They teach us what to avoid by showing us what great poetry can do without - how *bare* it can be.[3]

When I read these two statements of Eliot, I think I found them profoundly significant because I had already been prepared for them by Ludowyk's quotation - Ian Jack on Wordsworth.

But I wasn't yet ready to find in these critical observations a clue to a whole new way of looking at English poetry. In Eliot's eyes the great master of poetry pared down to its essentials - the bare bones of poetry - was Dante. At one time of my life I embarked on reading *The Divine Comedy* with the rudiments of Italian and the help of a prose crib. I believe I did begin to see what Eliot was driving at. But I gave up part of the way through the *Inferno* because the naked power of Dante's language didn't quite make up for the aversion I felt for his content. I couldn't condone the idea of eternal damnation, and the thought of Dante gloating over the lost souls in hell (some of whom were his personal enemies) turned

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2 T.S. Eliot, *On Poets and Poetry*, p. 154.

3 Ibid., p. 155.

my stomach.[4] My flirtation with Italian, however, was soon superseded by a love affair with Russian that has proved enduring, and will probably remain so till death do us part. It was then I discovered a poet whom Eliot had never read, who was much more congenial to my temperament than Dante, but who showed, just as much as Dante, 'what great poetry could do without, how bare it could be'. This was Pushkin, the supreme Russian poet.

Dare I try to suggest at this point what Pushkin's poetry is like? It isn't possible really to achieve this, not without quoting him in his own language. But perhaps I can bring you some echo of it by offering a passage of dialogue from his play *The Stone Guest*, in translation. This is a conversation between Don Carlos, a Spanish nobleman, and Laura, a courtesan. The translation is mine:[5]

DON CARLOS

Tell me,
How old are you now, Laura?

LAURA:

I'm eighteen.

DON CARLOS

You are still young, and will continue young
Some five years more, or six, perhaps. Around you
For six more years they'll cluster, pamper you
With caresses and gifts; with serenades
They'll entertain you nightly; for your sake
Nightly they'll kill each other on the street.

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4 Eliot once remarked that Ezra Pound's hell was 'for other people'. It doesn't seem to me that Dante's, in this respect, is different. Chaucer has some of the same poetic virtues that Eliot found in Dante, with a broader humanity.

5 Quoted from my *Two Plays of Aleksandr Pushkin,*

But time will pass, your eyes begin to sink,
Your eyelids, wrinkled, will begin to darken,
And in your hair the silver show its gleam,
And all men speak of you as old - what then?
What will you say then?

LAURA

Then? Why think of that?
Your talk is strange. Are these the thoughts you're used to?
Come here, open the balcony. So calm
The sky, the warm air motionless, the night
Lemon and laurel-scented; the bright moon
Gleams in the dark deep blue. With long-drawn cry
The watchmen call, 'All's well.' Oh, far away,
Perhaps, in Paris, in the north, the sky
Is grey with clouds, a cold rain falls, and wind
Blows chill. What's that to us? Listen, Carlos,
Smile! I demand it. That's it!

There is no single line or phrase here which, removed from its context, would seem immediately impressive poetry - like Shakespeare's 'lilies that fester' or 'light thickens'; or Donne's 'a bracelet of bright hair about the bone'; or Keats's 'embalmed darkness'; or Hopkins's 'O the mind, mind has mountains'; or Eliot's 'In the juvescence of the year / Came Christ the tger'.[6] And in case you think this may be because my translation is wanting, I can assure you that *in this respect* the original isn't different. The poetic life of the passage - whether in Don Carlos's evocation of old age or Laura's affirmation of living

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6 In the 1990 text of this study, I quoted these lines of Eliot as he wrote them, but when it was reproduced in *Navasilu*, somebody 'corrected' both Eliot and me by printing *'juvenescence'*. There's no standard English word *juvescence* (my computer has just reminded me of this fact by putting a wavy red line under it), hut that's what Eliot wrote.

in the present - is wholly absorbed into its dramatic meaning, into the context of situation and character. There are no lyrical or decorative flourishes or superfluities: the language observes a strict economy of means, in its lucid simplicity, its austere purity and its unadorned strength, in serving its dramatic purpose. For me, reading Pushkin has been an illuminating discovery of certain possibilities of great poetry - in Eliot's words, 'how bare it can be'.

This quality is characteristic not only of Pushkin but also of much of the greatest Russian poetry. Russian is a highly inflected language, with a flexible word order, and it offers certain expressive possibilities that can't be paralleled in a language with a different structure, such as English. There's a poem of Pushkin titled 'The Upas Tree' (*Anchar*) weaving a story round the legendary poison-tree and a prince who sends a slave to bring him resin and leaves from it. The slave obediently does so, but after his return dies from the deadly infection of the tree; the prince steeps arrows in the poison and equips his army with them so that they might spread terror and death among the neighbouring lands. The emphasis in the poem is on the human sacrifice of the slave for the prince's ends of power, so that upas tree and prince are ultimately identified. The central lines of the poem read in Russian:

*No cheloveka chelovek*
*Poslal k ancharu vlastnym vzglyadom.*

Literally: 'man sent man to the tree with imperious glance.' Or, as I have rendered it in English verse:

With imperious glance one man
Sent another to the tree.

But *cheloveka chelovek* - man-object and man-subject: the immediate juxtaposition of these two words, possible only in an inflected language, sharply counterposes the natural

equality of the two men against the power relations of domination and subordination with a brevity and force that English translation can't equal.

Anna Akhmatova was the Russian poet who was the true heir of Pushkin in the twentieth century. The four lines that follow are translated from her masterpiece, *Requiem*, the long poem she composed[7] over five years when her son was in prison, and when she waited seventeen months in the prison

[7] The word is exact, because Akhmatova could form the poetry in her mind, but dared not write it down, but had to rely on memory - her own and that of others - to preserve it.

queues in Leningrad, together with other mothers, wives and sisters:[8]

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[8] I want to take this opportunity to reply to a critical comment on my poem on Akhmatova and the creation of *Requiem* - 'To the Muse of Insomnia (2)' -- made by Ruvani Ranasinha in *Essays on Sri Lankan Poetry in English*, ed. Neloufer de Mel, pp. 169-170. Elsewhere in the essay she pays me a graceful compliment, describing me as 'a meticulous writer', and saying that in my work 'clarity and craft are emphasised as much as content'. It's a pity, therefore, that when she quotes from the poem on Akhmatova, the verse form, which is an essential part of the craft, is obliterated by the wrong division of the lines. Perhaps this isn't *her* fault; but when one has 'meticulously' shaped a poem's form, it's exasperating to find it ruined by carelessness and indifference.

But now to turn to 'content'. She says of my poem on Akhmatova: 'It is notable that the metaphor used to convey her heroism and creative powers is one of childbirth.' The implication in the context is that I am biased towards seeing a woman's role in terms of motherhood. Surely, male poets have used the metaphor of pregnancy and childbirth in writing of their poetic creativity (e.g. Sir Philip Sidney: 'Thus, great with child to speak, and helpless in my throes'); and I can assure Ms. Ranasinha that when I am gestating a piece of creative writing, I am accustomed to say, 'I'm pregnant'. But what is even more relevant is that I used the metaphor of childbirth quite consciously in the poem on Akhmatova because she wrote *Requiem* as a grieving mother sharing the suffering of other mothers (Mary at the crucifixion becomes the image of their lot). Perhaps Ms Ranasinha hasn't read *Requiem* (though it's one of the greatest poems of the century and accessible in several English translations), and she seems to know nothing about it because she speaks of 'revolutionary times' - hardly appropriate to the period of Stalin's great purges when the poem was created -, and even spells the poet's name wrong. But all this needn't have mattered because: the essential fact is there in my poem, where Akhmatova is said to have nourished her poem with 'heart's blood, agony, terror, tears / (husband in the grave, *son in prison*)'; and if only Ms Ranasinha had read these lines attentively instead of being swept away by an anxiety to convict me of perpetuating female stereotypes, she wouldn't have blundered.

I pray not for myself alone,
But for everyone who stood with me
In the cruel cold, in the July heat,
Beneath the blind red wall.

Even in the diminished echo of a translation, something of the power of those lines, enhanced by their spare economy of utterance, does, I think, come through. It is also possible even from the translation to apprehend the multiple meanings contained in the seemingly simple and familiar words: the wall is 'blind' both because it closes off the way, denies access, and because it is representative of the powers of the state, indifferent to personal suffering; and it is 'red' literally, emblematically and by visual association, since red is the colour of the regime as well as the colour of blood. But the original is much stronger because it draws on certain expressive resources inherent in the Russian language. Let me concentrate on the last line. It reads in Russian: *pod krasnoyu oslepsheyu stenoyu. Oslepsheyu* is not strictly 'blind' (which in Russian would be *slepoi*) but 'gone blind', which makes the blindness an active process. But the greatest difference between original and translation is in the texture of the sounds. Against the auditory feel of the climactic three words, polysyllabic and dense, the English monosyllables of 'blind red wall' must seem bland and weak. What is most striking is that Akhmatova has used the inflectional case-endings to enhance the polysyllabic character of the line. She could have written *krasnoi oslepshei stenoi,* and it would have meant the same thing as far as sense went. But in this particular case-ending Russian grammar permits the addition of an extra syllable, *-yu*, of which she takes advantage. What I get from the Russian is, therefore, almost a physical sensation of the mass and weight of the wall and, therefore, of the powers it embodies, necessarily absent in the English translation.

It's because Russian has at its command rich expressive resources other than those of metaphor that in the

poetry of that language what may seem on the surface plain and prosaic statement may be sensuously and emotionally alive. This is also one reason why English-speaking readers who have access to Pushkin or Akhmatova only in translation may find them 'flat', as Flaubert, reading Pushkin in French, thought him to be, and as a British writer recently described in the *London Review of Books* his impression of Akhmatova in English translation.

All this makes problematic the conventional distinction between 'form' and 'content' in poetry, which implies also a separation between the phonic substance of a poem and its meaning: that may have some validity in the case of lesser poets but breaks down when a great poet is writing at the full stretch of his/her powers. It also sets limits to the viability of translation.[9] Though I have practised the craft of poetic translation, I am aware that translation is often only a poor second-best, and I commend to others the example of the American writer Judith Hemschemeyer. In 1973 she read in a journal a few poems of Akhmatova in English translation, and was so enthralled by them that she decided to learn Russian in order to read her in her own language. The end-result was that sixteen years later she produced the most comprehensive edition of Akhmatova's poetry that we have, in two large volumes, with the Russian text of all the poems and English translations by Ms Hemschemeyer herself on facing pages.

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9 I have explored these questions in relation to a sequence of poems, 'Desk' by Marina Tsvetaeva, in an essay, 'The Excess of Language over Linguistics', in *The Thatched Patio*, Vol. 7 No. 3: May/June 1994.

# 3

To return to English poetry after this excursion into Russian, it must be observed that the critical trends which accompanied the rise of Anglo-American modernism in the twentieth century led to the establishment of one kind of poetry as the norm of poetic greatness. Eliot's early criticism was directed towards promoting the metaphorical complexity of the French symbolists, Donne and the metaphysicals, the Jacobean dramatists and Shakespeare (seen in a particular aspect) as the model of the poetic virtues he sought to recommend. Though Eliot in later years went on to praise the bareness of Dante, his own poetry, with its startling juxtapositions of discordant images and its reliance on an imaginative logic rather than on the order of expository discourse or narrative, was in keeping less with his admiration for Dante than with his recommendation of the symbolists and the metaphysicals. Thus the combined influence of Eliot's early criticism and his poetry set the bias of readers and critics of poetry for decades to come.

Eliot's innovations in style and form would in any case have made his poetry obscure and difficult, but its arcane character was intensified by his recondite erudition - the fact that he saw life, as was said of Milton, 'through the spectacles of books'. Reading him often involved tracking down the sources that provided the raw materials out of which he made poetry. But Eliot had a doctrine that provided the justification and excuse for what was in fact a peculiarity of his own sensibility - the doctrine (propounded in his early essay on the metaphysicals) that in a modern civilisation 'poetry *must* be difficult'. His practice and theory combined with those of Ezra Pound to create a tradition of poetry that was inaccessible to common readers: it either baffled or repelled them. Until Eliot and Pound, it had been assumed that if a poet failed to

communicate his meaning to a reader of normal intelligence and education, that was a failure on the part of the poet. When in Victorian times Browning wrote a poem titled 'Sordello' (obscure by Victorian standards, though child's play in comparison with *The Waste Land* or *The Cantos*), Tennyson remarked that he understood only the first line, 'Who will may hear Sordello's story told,' and the last, 'Who would has heard Sordello's story told' - and, he said, they were both lies. But after Eliot's establishment of difficulty as an essential ingredient of modernity in poetry, nobody could have articulated that kind of sturdy commonsensical reaction without being identified as a philistine.[10]

It was Leavis, in particular, who constructed, from the hints Eliot had thrown out, a map of English poetry that became, in a period extending approximately from the 'thirties to the 'sixties, the basis of a new academic orthodoxy. One of its tenets, whether expressed explicitly or implied in particular valuations, was that metaphorical richness and complexity were criteria of great poetry.[11] This insistence too often induced readers to concentrate on the striking individual phrase whose poetic strength could be felt even when taken out of its context. Just as Matthew Arnold offered a set of 'touchstones'

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10 I may be accused of inconsistency because I enjoy and admire Joyce's *Ulysses*, and even parts of *Finnegans Wake*, in spite of their difficulty. But I find the complexities of Joyce rewarding to grapple with because his are richly comic works, celebrating life in all its inexhaustible abundance and diversity. In *The Waste Land*, once one has penetrated beneath the impediments of the surface, what presents itself is a compound of class-snobbery, misogyny and sex-horror.

11 'The essentially poetic is certainly the Shakespearian,' Leavis said, and he defined this quality in terms of 'the peculiarly exploratory creativeness and metaphorical concreteness of Shakespeare's poetry'. (*Anna Karenina and Other Essays,* pp. 208 and 205).

- brief samples of great poetry against which other lines could be tested - Eliotian and Leavisian criticism propagated phrases of Shakespeare and Donne whose poetic quality could serve a similar function. But where Arnold's examples were characterised by their rhetorical sonority or their moral elevation, the new touchstones were identifiable by their metaphorical density, their sensuous fullness and their union of heterogeneous elements: Shakespeare's 'in her strong toil of grace' can serve as an exemplar.

But there's another kind of poetry in which words that are seemingly unremarkable, when isolated, take on an entirely different life in the full context of their poetic utterance. There are other kinds of 'concreteness', other ways of embodying specific states of consciousness, than those which come from metaphorical life. To recall Eliot's remark that it's sometimes difficult in poetry to tell 'what infinitesimal touch...has made all the difference from a plain statement', the difference often comes from rhythm and textures of sound. This is what I was pointing to in Akhmatova's *krasnoyu oslepsheyu stenoyu* (the blind red wall). But in dramatic poetry the difference is often made also by the context of situation and character, as we have seen with Pushkin, and shall see further with Shakespeare. This is true of poems that are based on narrative structures, too, as in the case of the line from Wordsworth's 'Michael', 'And never lifted up a single stone.' But let me cite an example from a poet who may be unexpected in this context. When Leavis made his critical assault on Milton in *Revaluation*, he picked out some lines from *Comus* to exempt from his destructive criticism because they exhibited a sensuous intensity that seemed to him Shakespearean in quality. But what are we to say of the concluding lines of *Paradise Lost?*

> The world was all before them, where to choose
> Their place of rest and Providence their guide:
> They hand in hand with wandering steps and slow
> Through Eden took their solitary way.

These lines aren't remarkable for any sensuous immediacy or for originality or complexity of metaphor (there is none); and the words are, unusually for Milton, simple and ordinary. But if we have to explain why the passage is so profoundly moving, we have to refer not only to the slow, subdued rhythms but also to the weight of the whole epic behind this conclusion, giving meaning to the equipoise between the divine promise and the human sadness of loss.

Leavisian criticism is now distinctly *passé*, to an extent that would have distressed another of my old teachers, Dr Passé, diligently peppering his personal copies of *Scrutiny* with colour-coded pencilled underlinings.[12] But I don't see that the newer orthodoxies that have cone to replace the old have made a difference to the valuation of surface complexity and difficulty as a mark of poetic superiority. It's true that since the heyday of Eliot and Pound there has been a reaction among some Anglo-American poets themselves to the intellectual esotericism of their work. The major Anglo-American poet of the generation after Eliot, W.H. Auden (first British, then American), began with poems that were replete with private references and highly idiosyncratic imagery, but these were balanced in another part of his work by verse that drew on popular forms - ballads, blues and jazz songs. His recognition that poetry need not be solemn to be significant, his interest in poetry as verbal play, his affiliations with the later Byron and with Brecht - all these served as a counterweight to the Eliot-

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12 There was much speculation among students who had access to these copies about what the colour-coding, in red, green and blue, meant. One plausible theory was that one colour denoted the passages that Dr Passé only used as material for his lectures, another those he dictated to his class, and the third those he had cyclostyled and distributed.

Pound influence.[13] Auden has been the most healthy fertilising influence in the Anglo-American poetry of the last half-century. But while poetry, at least in the work of some of its practitioners, has grown more accessible to the non-specialist reader, literary criticism, in the hands of its most influential representatives, has become more forbidding and rebarbative. Eliot's critical prose. in contrast with his poetry, was beautifully lucid; Leavis's, on the other hand, was most often weighed down by tortuous involutions and parentheses.[14] But it was always a pleasure to read Edmund Wilson, George Orwell[15] or Raymond Williams, for the quality as much of their prose as of their intelligence, even when one didn't agree with their judgments. Today, however, when I read the fashionable criticism that comes out of the western academies (which I

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13 His introductions to *The Oxford Book of Light Verse* and *The Poet's Tongue* as well as the selections in these anthologies should be read for their revelation of the breadth and catholicity of his conception of poetry. Auden's attitude to poetry was at that time shaped partly by his left-wing political allegiances of the 'thirties, but the former didn't change when the latter shifted. Such things as his later masterpiece, 'The Willow-Wren and the Stare', and the sailors' song in *The Sea and the Mirror* show the essential continuity between the popular strains in the early poetry and the later.

14 He could, however, especially in his polemics, be capable of the sharp, terse and cutting comment, as when he said of the academic construct of an English comic tradition running from Fielding to J.B. Priestley, 'Life is too short to devote much time to Fielding or any to Mr Priestley.'

15 Orwell, of course, never went to a university, and began his adult life not in a senior common-room but as a policeman in Burma, after which he was for a period a waiter in Paris, and then a tramp in London. A good deal of his literary criticism was first published in popular newspapers and magazines.

do less and less), I feel that I am trying vainly to hack my way through an impenetrable jungle of thick tree-trunks overhung by thorny intertwined creepers, with dense, impeding undergrowth. This, then, is an unpropitious time to uphold simplicity, clarity and lucidity, but things will change.

# 4

Twenty years ago I wrote in an essay titled 'Tolstoy the Artist'[16]

> Tolstoy is probably the greatest writer of creative prose. He achieved in his own medium what Pushkin had done in poetry - to bring to perfection the natural genius of the Russian language for the bare purity, laconic power and wiry energy of spare and concentrated expression - something very different from the Shakespearean and Dickensian prodigality and rich exuberance of phrase.

What I said there about Pushkin and Tolstoy I would stand by. But since I wrote those words, I have begun, returning to English poetry from Pushkin, to see Shakespeare with new eyes.

If you had asked Leavis to give you a representative passage of great Shakespearean poetry, he might have offered you this from *Macbeth* (he did once analyse it):

> If it were done, when 'tis done, then 'twere well
> It were done quickly; if the assassination
> Could trammel up the consequence, and catch
> With his surcease, success: that but this blow
> Might be the be-all and the end-all here,
> But here, upon this bank and shoal of time,
> We'd jump the life to come.

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[16] *Lanka Guardian*, 1 September 1978.

That, in its syntactical complexities, its crowding of metaphors, its swift imaginative leaps, has all the qualities that Leavis thought of as Shakespearean. But is all Shakespeare, even all great Shakespeare, like that? I suggest that Shakespeare is too diverse, too various - not only in his experience of life but also in his use of language - to be contained within one poetic mode. Later in the same play Macbeth contemplates with horror his hands, red with murder:

> Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood
> Clean from my hand? No, this my hand will rather
> The multitudinous seas incarnadine,
> Making the green one red.[17]

Consider the third line. If you didn'know where it came from, you could think it was by Milton. 'The multitudinous seas incarnadine': it's a sonorous, latinised phrase that my old schoolteacher might have rolled on his tongue like 'autumnal leaves that strew the brooks / In Vallombrosa'. But the line that follows is very different. 'Making the green one red.' Simple, homely, Anglo-Saxon words. And the power of the line is inherent in its very simplicity and starkness. The opposition between that line and the preceding one is at the heart of Macbeth's fantastic vision - his small familiar human hand now reddening the vast, multitudinous, polysyllabically roaring oceans.

It seems to me that at the height of his poetic and dramatic life Shakespeare was discovering the power of a bare economy and simplicity of language. But to appreciate the full significance of this development, we have to go back and trace Shakespeare's progress, which involves, as I see it, a growing distrust, on the part of this great master of language, of the dangers that language carries with it.

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[17] The last two words must be understood as the equivalent of 'all red', 'entirely red', and the speaking of the line accordingly spaced.

If we go to the play of *Richard II*, we shall find in the hero a figure who lives in a world of words. In the middle of the play, at a time when the reality of kingly power is slipping from his grasp, this is how he seeks to restore his self-confidence:

> I had forgot myself. Am I not King?
> Awake, thou sluggard majesty, thou sleep'st!
> Is not the King's name forty thousand names?
> Arm, arm, my name! A puny subject strikes
> At thy great glory.

There are critics who have called Richard a poet, though most spectators and readers of the play today would agree that if he is a poet, he is a bad one, sentimental and self-regarding. Confronted by the victorious Bolingbroke, he takes refuge in a self-pitying fantasy of renunciation:

> I'll give my jewels for a set of beads,
> My gorgeous palace for a hermitage,
> My gay apparel, for an almsman's gown,
> My figured goblets for a dish of wood,
> My sceptre for a palmer's walking-staff,
> My subjects for a pair of carved saints,
> And my large kingdom for a little grave,
> A little, little grave, an obscure grave;
> Or I'll be buried in the king's highway,
> Some way of common trade, where subjects' feet
> May hourly trample on their sovereign's head;
> For on my heart they tread now while I live,
> And buried once, why not upon my head?

Comparisons have sometimes been made between Richard and Lear. But beneath the superficial parallels of two fallen kings, the differences are considerable. Loss of power brings Richard

no social illumination, as it does to Lear. Lear's exposure to the storm makes him aware for the first time of the sufferings of 'poor naked wretches'. Richard's wish to retire to a hermitage is, in contrast, a piece of playacting, of verbal and emotional self-indulgence. In the studied antitheses of that speech, in the theatrical working up of emotion - 'a little, little grave' -, in the catch in the throat of the last phrase - 'why not upon my head?' -, language becomes a drug, intoxicating the speaker himself. For Richard words have acquired a separate life, displacing the realities they should mediate. He is Shakespeare's first great victim of the seductive power of language. The outcome of Richard's fascination with words and names is to bring him to a condition where he loses his own identity and becomes a nameless thing:

> I have no name, no title,
> No, not that name was given me at the font,
> But 'tis usurped. Alack, the heavy day,
> That I have worn so many winters out
> And know not now what name to call myself!

Richard's case, however, is relatively simple, his weaknesses of indulgence in the luxuries of language too obvious to escape attention. The more subtle examples of surrender to the temptations of language are to be found in the great tragedies. I should like to consider the cases of Othello and Cleopatra.

If it is easy to detect the spuriousness of Richard's self-dramatising and self-indulgent poetry, it is hard to resist the spell of the verbal magnificence with which Shakespeare has invested Othello. The ring of stately, orotund speech is there in the very first extended speech he utters - his address to the Senate - even while he is protesting that he is a plain, blunt soldier who lacks the gift of eloquence:

Rude am I in my speech,
And little blessed with the soft phrase of peace,
For since these arms of mine had seven years' pith
Till now some nine moons wasted, they have used
Their dearest action in the tented field,
And little of this great world can I speak
More than pertains to feats of broil and battle.

The poetic idiom of this corresponds to a real grandeur and stature, a heroic temper of mind and personality in Othello. Yet the very self-consciousness of his greatness, even while he appears to be depreciating it, shows an inner need to fortify his image of himself. It is a need that we may connect with the situation of a black man in a white society, who, though he has attained high office in the Venetian state, remains an outsider, as Othello discovers at the time of his elopement with Desdemona.

Othello's self-regard, then, conceals an inner insecurity, which manifests itself openly only later in the play, under the pressure of his personal crisis. And when in that situation his heroic idiom returns, it betrays a failure in understanding himself. As when he dedicates himself to vengeance against the Desdemona he believes to be faithless:

Like to the Pontic sea,
Whose icy current and compulsive course
Ne'er feels retiring ebb, but keeps due on
To the Propontic and the Hellespont,
Even so my bloody thoughts with violent pace
Shall ne'er look back, ne'er ebb to humble love,
Till that a capable and wide revenge
Swallow them up.

*He kneels.*

Now, by yond marble heaven,
In the due reverence of a sacred vow
I here engage my words.

The magnificence of the language is a potent intoxication for Othello. It permits him to cherish the reassuring conviction that murder born of jealousy is the execution of a sacred duty. It is thus that Othello is not merely deceived by Iago but self-deceived. But what I should like to emphasise is the poetic mode through which Othello's self-deception is projected. The younger Shakespeare had created the escapist flights from reality of Richard II through simple affectations of language. Richard's language was for Shakespeare the purgation of a poetic manner that he had uncritically used earlier but now outgrown. For Othello he creates a poetic mode that is new to him - an impressively sonorous idiom akin to the Miltonic and Tennysonian - before Milton and Tennyson. It's an astonishing achievement of creative intelligence, which, as it were, implies a critique of the Miltonic Grand Style in advance. It allows us to see what in that style can lend itself to self-dramatisation and evasion of sincerity. For that is what 'the Othello music', as Wilson Knight called it, helps him to sustain, even on the verge of death and face to face with his guilt. 'Speak of me as I am,' he says, but the harmonies and cadences of the last speech belong to a language other than that of simple truth:

Then must you speak
Of one that loved not wisely but too well,
Of one not easily jealous but, being wrought,
Perplexed in the extreme; of one whose hand,
Like the base Indian, threw a pearl away
Richer than all his tribe; of one whose eyes,
Albeit unused to the melting mood,
Drop tears as fast as the Arabian trees
Their med'cinable gum.

The musicality of these lines is consoling and, therefore, evasive, even as their judgments are self-defensive. Othello dies without really knowing himself.

Even more complex, however, than the case of Othello is that of Cleopatra - so complex, indeed, that I fully expect my reading of the play to provoke dissent. For I see the love of Antony and Cleopatra as commanding our admiration by its passionate energy and intensity, but ultimately revealed as a grand illusion. Without arguing the whole ground for this reading, I want to concentrate on two scenes. The first of these is Cleopatra's conversation with Dolabella after Antony's death:

> I dreamt there was an Emperor Antony.
> O, such another sleep, that I might see
> But such another man!

That Cleopatra should speak of her love-relationship as a dream is significant: it prepares us to receive her images of Antony that follow as a creation of the transforming imagination. Dolabella tries to intervene, 'If it might please ye,' but she goes on:

> His face was as the heavens, and therein stuck
> A sun and moon, which kept their course, and lighted
> The little O o'th'earth.

Dolabella again attempts to intervene - 'Most sovereign creature' - but Cleopatra ignores him; she speaks as if out of trance or dream:

> His legs bestrid the ocean; his reared arm
> Crested the world. His voice was propertied
> As all the tuned spheres, and that to friends.
> But when he meant to quail and shake the orb,

He was as rattling thunder. For his bounty,
There was no winter in't, an autumn 'twas,
That grew the more by reaping. His delights
Were dolphin-like; they showed their back above
The element they lived in. In his livery
Walked crowns and crownets. Realms and islands were
As plates dropt from his pocket.

The poetry is characteristic of the mature Shakespeare in its fertility and profusion of imagery, as generously lavished as the bounty of Antony. But the context allows us to see that this excess is idealising, and in that sense falsifying, creating an Antony of the imagination that is larger than the real figure we have seen earlier in the play. Dolabella again intervenes, 'Cleopatra', and she now turns to him with a question:

Think you there was, or might be, such a man
As that I dreamt of?

Dolabella can speak at last, and his answer is simply, bluntly:

Gentle madam, no.

Cleopatra's response is to shut her ears to Dolabella's sober, commonsensical voice. She clings to her fantasy by asserting that if there had been no such Antony, it would have been impossible to imagine him:

You lie, up to the hearing of the gods.
But if there be nor ever were one such,
It's past the size of dreaming; nature wants stuff
To vie strange forms with fancy, yet t'imagine
An Antony were nature's piece 'gainst fancy,
Condemning shadows quite.

'Nature wants stuff / To vie strange forms with fancy.' The thought is fathered by Cleopatra's need, in her desolation, of a sustaining myth. The poetry is in a different mode from that of Othello. But what it shares with Othello's is a magnifying, glamourising quality that is also a means of disguising truth.

I find something of the same quality in the final scene of Cleopatra's suicide. The poetry works together with the stage action: Cleopatra on her throne, being robed and crowned by Iras, as she prepares to meet death in the grand manner:

> Give me my robe, put on my crown, I have
> Immortal longings in me.

The spectacle is as deliberately conceived and staged by Cleopatra as her first parading of herself for Antony's benefit when 'the barge she sat in, like a burnished throne, / Burned on the water'. The parallel is underlined by Cleopatra herself: 'I am again for Cydnus / To meet Mark Antony.' But this aspiration is part of the induced illusion that supports her in carrying through the act. Here, as contrasted with the scene on the Cydnus, Cleopatra herself and her maids are the only spectators she is playing to. The potency of the poetry in these last speeches of hers is sustained by her intensely sensual and narcissistic feeling for her own body:[18]

> Now no more
> The juice of Egypt's grape shall moist this lip.
>
> Come then, and take the last warmth of my lips.
>
> The stroke of death is as a lover's pinch,

[18] For all these reasons I find it impossible to agree with those critics who have found in the last scene a Cleopatra purged of everything sensual and imperfect in her: this is to take the Cleopatra of the conclusion at her own valuation.

Which hurts, and is desired.

Dost thou not see my baby at my breast,
That sucks the nurse asleep?

The Cleopatra of the last scene is all too earthly body, in spite of her claim, that is part of her supporting illusion:

I am fire and air; my other elements
I give to baser life.

And so Cleopatra enters the darkness, under the influence of the spell she works on herself, persuaded that death is a lover and the asp the baby at her breast. Charmian survives long enough to applaud a grand performance:

It is well done, and fitting for a princess
Descended of so many royal kings.

# 5

As Shakespeare grows more aware of the possibilities of self-deception through language, he comes to recognise also that the deepest feelings sometimes don't find expression in words at all. To say this is perhaps to run counter to the critical presupposition so widely current in the twentieth centiury that in poetic drama language is all.[19] This is an error that it's easy to fall into when approaching Shakespeare exclusively through the printed page, and one to which we are probably all the more prone in our part of the world because we have such few opportunities to see the plays performed. But one discovery Shakespeare makes in his mature plays is that of the expressive powers of silence. When reading a play one may overlook the character who says nothing or little, but on the stage silence or near-silence can speak louder than words. There is Antonio in the last scene of *The Tempest* who says nothing when others who have wronged Prospero confess their errors. Antonio's silence gave Auden the structure for his *The Sea and the Mirror*, where Antonio remains the intractable element in the pattern of reconciliation. There is also Cordelia in the opening scene of *King Lear*, which I shall come to towards the end of this essay. But I should like first to point to the role of silence in that marvellous play, *Coriolanus,* which is unfortunately not as well known as the other great tragedies.

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19 Against the service rendered by the school of critics (Leavis, Knights, Traversi et al.) who approached Shakespeare's plays through his poetry, and so countered the excesses of nineteenth-century character interpretation, must be set the great damage they did in divorcing Shakespeare from the theatre. Leavis, as many people have testified, actually hated the theatre.

In Coriolanus Shakespeare has a central figure who, like Othello, is a great soldier, conscious of his greatness. But it's a sign of the variety and perennial freshness of Shakespeare's imagination that he creates for Coriolanus a kind of poetry very different from what he puts into Othello's mouth. For Coriolanus language is instrumental - a means of commanding and acting on others. Self-centred and single-minded, he is - until he approaches the end - entirely untroubled by divisions and doubts, by any uncertainty over the motives, the means or the goals of his actions. In *King Lear,* Cordelia, rebuked by her father for her refusal to flatter him with facile words of love, says, 'I cannot heave / My heart into my mouth.' Coriolanus knows no such reluctance because his desires and feelings are wholly directed towards the external life of action. Of him Menenius says (almost inverting Cordelia's words):

> His heart's his mouth.
> What his breast forges, that his tongue must vent.

The polar opposite to him in the play is his wife, Virgilia. In the scene where Coriolanus returns from his victory over the Volscians, his mother, Volumnia, is effusive over his triumph; but Virgilia stands by, shaken by feelings that are too deep for anything but tears. Coriolanus's response is one of incomprehension:

> My gracious silence, hail!
> Would'st thou have laughed had I come coffined home,
> That weep'st to see me triumph? Ah, my dear,
> Such eyes the widows in Corioles wear,
> And mothers that lack sons.

The reproach to Virgilia, half-playful though it is, is a sign of Coriolanus's emotional insensitiveness - just as much as his

unfeeling reference to the bereaved women in the enemy city. But at the end of the play, he who has lived in the shallows of emotion finds himself exposed to its hitherto unknown deeps. Banished from Rome, he has joined the Volscians with the aim of wreaking vengeance on his people by making war on them and ravaging their city. When other embassies from Rome have failed to move him from his destructive purpose, his mother, wife and child go to the Volscian camp to beg him for peace. Virgilia is again nearly silent in this scene; it is Volumnia who assails her son with eloquent appeals and reproaches. And Coriolanus, armoured in his pride and hate, discovers for the first time that he is vulnerable. Having resolved to stand 'as if a man were author of himself', he yet finds there are bonds he cannot break. The scene is Shakespeare's most masterly achievement in the use of silence. Throughout Volumnia's long emotional assault on him, running to nearly eighty lines, Coriolanus speaks only once - and that briefly, in the effort to disengage himself and leave. As the pressure on him mounts, he withdraws into muteness. 'Why dost not speak?' Volumnia upbraids him. He tries to turn away, and the women shame him by going down on their knees. Volumnia reaches her bitterly ironic conclusion:

> Come, let us go.
> This fellow had a Volscian to his mother,
> His wife is in Corioles, and this child
> Like him by chance. Yet give us our dispatch.
> I am hushed until our city be afire,
> And then I'll speak a little.

But it's Coriolanus who has really been hushed. He who had known no gap between impulse and speech is now torn by unfamiliar emotions that he can't really articulate. Before he surrenders to what he knows to be his doom, there is a pause,

a silence, as he struggles with his painful dilemma. *Holds her by the hand, silent,* says the text. It's one of those stage directions in the First Folio that are the record of stage performance; in this case the direction must have come from Shakespeare's hand or from his instruction to the actor.

As I have already suggested, Shakespeare at the height of his mastery of poetic language is keenly aware of its ambivalences - that its richness and power carry with them their perils. That is why in the play that is today by common consent agreed to be his greatest he engages in a radical stripping of language. I am referring, of course, to *King Lear.* It has been noted by several critics, since A.C. Bradley in 1904, that the language of *King Lear,* at its dramatic heights, combines bare simplicity and expressive power to a degree unparalleled elsewhere in Shakespeare. I should like, however, to describe the way in which this fact came home to me with the immediacy of personal realisation.

There's a translation by the Russian poet Boris Pasternak of six tragedies of Shakespeare, among which *King Lear* is one. It's a great translation, such as only a poet of genius could have produced - probably the finest rendering of Shakespeare into another language. Yet it is in some ways startling to the reader who comes to it with a knowledge of the original. For what Pasternak has done is to render Shakespeare into the poetic idiom of Pushkin - and Pushkin is, as I have already brought out, the poet of spare, lucid and economical expression. Over and over again in Pasternak's translation the metaphorical density of Shakespeare's poetry disappears, to be replaced by a naked austerity and simplicity of outline. Pasternak even thought that in Shakespeare great poetry alternated with 'undisguised rhetoric, piling up a dozen empty circumlocutions instead of the one word on the tip of the

author's tongue which in his haste he did not find'.[20] One may perceive in these strictures (which will seem shockingly iconoclastic to English-speaking readers) the reaction of a poet bred in the Pushkinian tradition of brevity and eloquent simplicity to the Shakespearean exuberance. Though this may again seem shocking to Shakespeareans, I must confess that there are occasions when I find myself preferring Pasternak's continence of language to the original. As when he renders Cleopatra's

> I am fire and air; my other elements
> I give to baser life,

as

> *Ya vozduh i ogon'. Drugoe vsyo*
> *Ya ostavlyayu prahu.*
>
> I am air and fire. All else
> I leave to dust.[21]

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20 Quoted from Henry Gifford, *Pasternak: A Critical* Study, pp. 150-151.

21 A revealing example of the touchiness of devotees of Shakespeare to any suggestion that a translator might excel him, even in a single line, was the reaction of an expatriate Sri Lankan specialist in Shakespeare to this comment. He wrote to me to object that 'I am air and fire' seemed 'flatulent in English'. As his published work shows, this scholar has a sharp critical intelligence, so it shouldn't have escaped his attention that I wasn't claiming my simple paraphrase of Pasternak to be superior to Shakespeare. In any case, the superiority I was claiming was not for the inversion of 'fire' and 'air' (required in the Russian by considerations of metre and rhythm) but for what follows. But evidently, he was so deeply disturbed by my blasphemy against Shakespeare that he made what was really an irrelevant objection. I must, however, add that the English paraphrase can't reproduce the weight and body of Pasternak's Russian.

But what is most relevant here is that there are several places where Pasternak's chosen idiom matches perfectly Shakespeare's own paring away of language in some of his mature writing. As Professor Henry Gifford has written, 'Where Shakespeare is most direct and luminous, Pasternak can meet him, with a purity of expression that seems almost the perfect equivalent.'[22] The play where such moments are most frequent is *King Lear* - a pointer to the quality of Shakespeare's poetry in it - and I shall offer later one extraordinary example from Pasternak's version.

It's well known that the pattern of *King Lear* involves a progression through loss and deprivation: Lear, losing power and luxury, driven out on the naked heath, tearing off his clothes in the hovel, deprived of reason; Cordelia disinherited; Kent banished; Edgar outcast; and Gloucester blinded. The stripping away of superfluities and pretences of language is the counterpart, in the poetic medium, of this process. It begins already in the opening scene of Lear's testing of his daughters. Lear, too, is a victim of the illusions that language creates. He is asking not for the reality of love but for the show of it in words - a false coin for which he is willing to barter the substance of wealth and power. Only Cordelia refuses to engage in this fraudulent transaction. To Lear's cajoling invitation to her to outdo the fulsome protestations of her sisters, she answers:

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22 Gifford, op. cit., p. 158.

Nothing, my Lord.

LEAR: Nothing?
CORDELIA: Nothing.[23]

The laconic simplicity of Cordelia's answer as the voice of honesty and truth finds its consummation in the later scene of Lear's reconciliation with her to which we shall come. In the interval Lear has to experience the intellectual and moral disorder of madness, in which language itself is thrown out of joint:

> Behold yon simpering dame.
> Whose face between her forks presages snow.
> That minces virtue, and does shake the head
> To hear of pleasure's name,
> The fitchew nor the soiled horse goes to 't
> With a more riotous appetite.
> Down from the waist they are centaurs,
> Though women all above.
> But to the girdle do the gods inherit,
> Beneath is all the fiend's.
> There's hell, there's darkness, there is the sulphurous pit; burning, scalding, stench, consumption. Fie, fie!

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[23] Nirmala S. Salgado thought the first version of this essay 'very Taoist' because of the water symbol and the concept of the emptiness that contains plenitude. This pleased me because I had long thought *King Lear* the most Taoist of Shakespeare's plays. Cordelia's 'nothing' which expresses the fullness of her love; the pattern of 'progression through loss and deprivation, to which I have referred in the body of the text; the setting of the naked heath against the court; Cordelia's non-acquisitive, non-dominating ethic against the fierce possessiveness and aggressive will of her sisters - all these make the spirit of the play close to that of Taoism. It is also close to William Blake, on whom Arthur Waley wrote an essay titled 'Blake the Taoist'.

> pah, pah! Give me an ounce of civet, good apothecary, sweeten my imagination! There's money for thee.

The insane sex-horror and the rage against womankind, the bizarre vision of a world consumed by lust, in which evil lurks concealed beneath every appearance, culminate in Lear's nauseated demand for an ounce of civet to sweeten his imagination. But even there the foulness remains under the surface, since the sweet scent of civet is extracted from the stinking secretion of a cat. The blank verse, breaking up and finally guttering into prose, enacts the disintegration of rational consciousness.

It is from this hell and darkness that Lear recovers in his reunion with Cordelia. But before discussing that scene, it's necessary to say something about the new illumination that has been brought to it by the textual revolution in Shakespeare of the last decade and a half.[24]

There are two original published texts of *King Lear* - the 1608 First Quarto and the version of the play included in the 1623 First Folio. These two texts differ from each other considerably. Until 1986 all modern editors of the play conflated these two texts, believing that they were corrupted variants of a single Shakespearean original. The Oxford editors, however, in 1986 established - conclusively, to my mind - that the two texts represented two distinct versions - the play as first produced and as revised by Shakespeare himself. Accordingly, the Oxford Shakespeare prints not one but two texts of *King Lear*. For my present purpose, the most important

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[24] Readers who wish to pursue this subject beyond the inevitably brief account given here are advised to consult The Oxford Shakespeare - *Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, edited by Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor -, *Shakespeare: A Textual Companion*, by the same editors, and Gary Taylor and Michael Warren, *The Division of the Kingdoms*. My essay, 'The Two Lears', appeared in *The Thatched Patio*, Vol. 8: Jan-Dec 1995.

difference between the two versions, as far as the scene of Lear's reunion with Cordelia is concerned, lies in their staging. In the earlier version (Quarto), at the beginning of the scene Lear was probably revealed (or, to use the technical language of the Elizabethan stage, 'discovered') asleep in bed by the drawing apart of curtains. There are on stage, besides Lear, Cordelia, Kent, a Doctor and a Gentleman. The Doctor manages the awakening of Lear from his restorative sleep with the command, 'Louder the music there!' Music is, of course, often in Shakespeare a symbol of restored harmony, and is used with that significance in the stage action of *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest.* No doubt, Shakespeare provided for a similar use of music for Lear's awakening in the first performances of the play.

In the revised (Folio) version there's no bed: Lear is brought on stage in a chair. This is effective because the chair reminds us of his throne, from which he started the tragedy in the first scene by his division of the kingdom. The Doctor is cut out, so that the audience's attention is wholly concentrated on Cordelia as the agent of Lear's recovery. And there's no music. There is nothing to distract the audience from the words in (as we shall see) their simple, unadorned strength and from the actions of the two principal characters on stage.[25] To sum up, the changes make for greater simplicity of staging, an elimination of superfluities, to parallel the economy and elemental strength of the language of the scene.

When Lear wakes, Cordelia addresses him with ceremonial reverence as king and father:

> How does my royal lord? How fares Your Majesty?

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[25] It is also possible that since *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest* had already been performed by the time Shakespeare came to revise *Lear,* he didn't wish to repeat an effect used in the other two plays.

For Lear, however, the hierarchies of power, and even of age, no longer have meaning: later in the scene he appalls Cordelia by kneeling to her. He has died and been reborn ('You do me wrong to take me out of the grave'), and his first utterances are like those of a child groping to make sense of an unfamiliar world. Earlier in the play, the Fool had found in Lear a case of infantile regression: '...e'er since thou mad'st thy daughters thy mothers; for when thou gav'st them the rod and put'st down thine own breeches.' In his madness Lear too had seen the suffering of life fixed in the image of the birth trauma:

> Thou must be patient. We came crying hither;
> Thou know'st, the first time that we smell the air
> We wawl and cry.

Now in the reconciliation scene Lear indeed takes on the voice of the child uncertain in a world that is new to him. The blank verse is halting and broken, as if language itself has to be reconstituted; yet it follows in those very tentative rhythms the movements of the seeking and exploring consciousness. And the movement is in the opposite direction from that of the mad speeches: here the language marks the striving towards purgation of hatred and pride and towards a humbling self-knowledge. Never before had Shakespeare written on such a scale and with such intensity poetry so austere in its simplicity and yet so compelling in its emotional truth:

> LEAR: Pray, do not mock me.
> I am a very foolish fond old man,
> Fourscore and upward, not an hour more or less;
> And, to deal plainly,
> I fear I am not in my perfect mind.
> Methinks I should know you, and know this man;
> Yet I am doubtful, for I am mainly ignorant
> What place this is; and all the skill I have

Remembers not these garments; nor I know not
Where I did lodge last night. Do not laugh at me;
For, as I am a man, I think this lady
To be my child Cordelia.
CORDELIA: And so I am, I am.

As Lear has abrogated the passions, so Shakespeare, in his own act of renunciation, has cast off complexity, verbal richness, metaphor - all the common appurtenances of poetry. All that remains is the pure, pellucid water of the deepest, most elemental wellsprings of human utterance. 'And so I am, I am' - what could be seemingly more commonplace than Cordelia's line? But it is part of its strength that she speaks to him in the tones of a mother soothing a troubled child, so that the parent-child relationship is reversed. And its very simplicity, its avoidance of all emotional ostentation (recalling, in its very different content, the manner of her first 'Nothing'), are the mark of the purity of Cordelia's love. Bearing as it does all the selfless generosity of her nature, and with the whole weight of the play, which has been moving towards this moment, behind it, the line is one of the peaks of Shakespearean poetry. One definition of poetry is that it is language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree. If so, then surely Cordelia's line is consummate poetry.

After I had originally made this claim in the Ludowyk memorial lecture from which this essay is derived, two members of the audience remarked to me that Cordelia's line wouldn't be so powerful but for its dramatic context. Of course. And the same thing might be said of Wordsworth's 'And never lifted up a single stone', which didn't prevent Arnold from calling it poetry 'of the highest and most truly expressive kind'. As Granville-Barker has said, 'Dramatic poetry is never to be judged apart from the action it implies.' The line remains a triumph of purification of language, which is what the situation,

and indeed the entire meaning of the play, require at this point; and that is the secret of the line's power.[26]

It's in the same scene that Pasternak achieves his greatest triumph as a translator. The whole exchange between Lear and Cordelia is rendered with marvellous fidelity into poetry of distilled transparency. But, confronting Cordelia's six monosyllables, 'And so I am, I am,' Pasternak audaciously outdoes them in brevity and simplicity by reducing the six to just two: *Da, ya* (Yes, me). The effect of Shakespeare's repetition is replaced by the echoing vowels in the Russian, *Da, ya*, which would also allow the actress to inflect her voice with the appropriately caressing intonation. Indeed, Pasternak surpasses Shakespeare in the harmony of sound and feeling in this line.[27] The last words of Lear are *ditya moyo Kordeliya*, and the final syllables of *dit-ya and Kordeli-ya* have their response in Cordelia's *Da, ya*.

Yet this scene isn't the end for Lear. In a play that takes us through the greatest extremities that life has to offer, he has still to endure the ultimate anguish of Cordelia's brutal and senseless death. Bradley noted sensitively that Lear's last speech on the verge of death presented 'an extraordinary contrast to the dying speech of Hamlet and the last words of Othello to the bystanders'. But I would add that Lear dies differently from any other of Shakespeare's tragic heroes and heroines - not only Hamlet and Othello but also Brutus, Macbeth, Antony, Cleopatra, Timon and Coriolanus. All of them

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26 In my two interlocutors' criticism, I discern a partiality for the kind of poetry which can be impressive in the single phrase taken out of its context - a preference on which I have commented earlier in this essay.

27 'What an outrageous thing to say!' I can hear a Bardolator protest. 'And *yes*, *me* doesn't go at all in *English*.'

are concerned to die fittingly, with dignity, as befits a hero, a warrior, a king, a queen; and their last utterances are consonant in their self-conscious maintenance of the stance of greatness. To Lear alone such considerations are irrelevant. His attention is wholly fixed on the body of Cordelia and engaged in the struggle between despair and hope, as he clings to the belief that she could still be alive. From his first animal cry of pain -

Howl, howl, howl! -

to his agonised recognition that she is gone for ever -

Thou'lt come no more,
Never, never, never, never, never -

we are left with the sense of the inadequacy of words to cope with the furthest limits of human suffering. Language becomes almost inarticulate, reduced to near-dumb reiteration. The rest is silence.

This monograph is a new and extended version of a study first published by the author nearly ten years ago. In it, Regi Siriwardena dissents from some of the critical assumptions about poetry that have been most influential in the twentieth century. Drawing on both English and Russian poets, he shows that great poetry doesn't necessarily require metaphorical richness and complexity. It can be found in some of the highest achievements of poetic expression in language that combines clarity, brevity and luminous simplicity - language that to the superficial reader may appear not to be poetic at all.

This study is the fruit of a lifetime's devotion to poetry by the author as teacher, critic, translator and poet.

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