Reviews

S. L. Goldberg, *An Essay on "King Lear"*, Cambridge University Press, 1974. ($10.30 cloth, $4.70 paper.)

Lear challenges ultimates in a way that makes *King Lear* perhaps the ultimate critical challenge; a man setting out to write at length on it had better have something in him to say. Professor Goldberg has.

He begins the difficult task of establishing the nature of the peculiar challenge the play offers—or compels us to face—with Dr Johnson, who "put his finger on the central difficulty it presents—the difficulty, that is, of accepting what it brings us eventually to feel". It is from that deceptively simple formulation that the whole book begins its exploration. What distinguishes that exploration is not only the penetration and care which goes to the developing characterization of what it is the play "brings us eventually to feel", but also the determination and courage with which the exploring critic maintains a sense that it is his own life which participates in the life of the play, his own self that helps give the play its identity, his own being that helps bring it into being. In the case of *King Lear*, that might seem to require more than mere determination and courage; it might seem to require the headiest and most intractable conceit not merely to ask, humbly, what a reader must know and be to discover what *King Lear* knows and is, but indeed to insist that what that is is irreducibly and immitigably related to what the reader knows and is. It is part of the achievement of this book not merely to show how necessary *in* the play, as well as to an understanding of it—though that word, mine, claims more than the book claims to provide—that sense of relation is, but also to demonstrate and enact, itself, modestly but forcefully, with a very lively awareness of where things can go wrong, that very relation.

Turning over, in the opening pages of the book, the first terms in which the largest issues of the play make themselves intelligible, Professor Goldberg comes back often to the work of Bradley, for whom he shows much respect, although if the respect is a way of acknowledging the extent to which Bradley's work makes his own possible, it is the inadequacy of that work that has made his own necessary. This inadequacy can perhaps be summed up as not so much any kind of misapprehension or misdirection as Bradley's incapacity to follow out to its fullest meaning what he apprehended, to follow out the full implications, for instance, of the notion of the "patience" he sees as part of what Shakespeare comes to learn the importance of in this play, or of the "law and beauty" he finds a sense of in what the play finally produces. It is Bradley's refusal to simplify, to reduce the human complexities of *King Lear*, the difficulties those admittedly merely suggestive large terms point to, that distinguishes him from many of his successors, in Professor Goldberg's view, who have tried to find the magical marvellous formula in terms of which all these difficulties suddenly form themselves into perfect crystalline arrangements of elements. But to smash these crystals is no part of this book's interest; indeed, its manner with previous work on *King Lear*—and, though scholarship does not lay a heavy mantle on its pages, a good deal of that work is touched on, one way and another—is to be admired for its care and generosity.

Very quickly, Professor Goldberg begins to show how his way of approaching the play distinguishes itself. Discussing Johnson's dictum that "all reasonable beings naturally love justice", he is soon saying:

> People can become so confused, so vulnerable, and so afraid of their vulnerability, that they hardly know what they want; and to add to the trouble, their desire for justice and their desire for love, even their need to love, can seem to betray weakness as much as exhibit strength, so that in the end they are hardly able to tell which is which. (p. 15)

If this seems, starting as it does with the inclusive "People", to claim a good deal, then so it does; it seems to me, also, to tell a good deal of truth, and it is one of the first statements in which the large terms in which Professor Goldberg's map of his explorations in the play is oriented appear. It is the desire and need for justice and love, and that confusion and vulnerability and weakness and strength, that both create the drama and are created by it, and in which—and here is what it seems to me is new in this book, again—we ourselves, reading it or watching it, are created, as it were, made to live, according to our own needs and desires and vulnerability. If my brief formulation of this seems not merely complex but indeed vague, then I must apologize; there is perhaps in fact a sense in which the whole book and nothing less than that is its meaning: that, perhaps, is what it has in common with its subject. But locally, certainly, nothing is vague; although this book's strategy not to take us line by line or even scene by scene through the play—it has a larger, much freer scope than that—there is nothing, even of what is expressed in the largest terms, that is not firmly located in lines and scenes. Early on, for example, we read:

> Lear's opening speech appears at first a perfectly natural beginning to a ceremony, even if rather a strange one. Regal, formal, authoritative, he simply wills the division of the kingdom, and prepares to bestow its riches upon his children. If this already disturbs us a little as a potentially dangerous act, it is after all the natural office of a king to will and of a parent to bestow. No resistant fact comes between self, authority, power, and deed; in truth, I doubt if anyone immersed in the immediate event expects any as yet, no matter what the Elizabethan World-Picture says about politics, families, or the behaviour proper to old men. In any case, Lear's reference to a 'darker intent' seems only to remind us that kings have their own good reasons for what they do—though it does evoke, very briefly, the hint of a mystery behind what we see. When he talks of "crawling towards death', the rhythms and tone hardly seem those of a man with his mind on Last Things: the phrase sounds rather too much like a mere rhetorical gesture, or at most an item of business merely to be noted here and dealt with later. At this stage we are far from asking the sort of question George Orwell raised, for instance—whether Lear is really renouncing the world or being self-indulgently irresponsible (though that particular way of putting the alternatives begs some important questions. (pp. 17, 18)

The tone and manner of that seem to me the tone and manner of the whole, characterized by—I think made distinguished by—an easy firmness that in no way limits the range of reference that a serious discussion of this play demands. And for a fairly crucial piece of analysis we have not long to wait.

> What Cordelia does, however, initiates a pattern that recurs throughout the whole play: reality shatters what the mind and feelings expect of it. For by bringing the sequence to an abrupt halt, disrupting the social and

> emotional order implicit in it, which no one has questioned, by insisting on a real identity on quite other terms, and by refusing to compromise her judgment and will—her individual freedom—in the slightest, Cordelia does more than make that order now seem a nasty form of constraint. By evoking another view of it, and wholly committing herself to that view, she also forces individual reality on the other characters as well—and, in another way, on us. They now have to act out of what they really are, rather than play the role Lear's ceremony had given them; we have to understand (which of course involves us in judging) for ourselves what they really are; and the reality put before us, and in terms of which we naturally respond, is their openness to and capacity for honest feeling and what then goes with that: the importance they attach to this capacity in themselves and in others. (pp. 18, 19)

That pattern is one the book makes much of. It is a simple one, of course —as the unaffected formulation of the large continuities always makes them seem simplicities—but Professor Goldberg never allows it to set firm, to lose its real life; continuing analysis continues to unravel complexities out of that simplicity.

This opening chapter gives close discussion to the whole opening scene in an extended piece of analysis, and comes back, at the end, to take up some of the issues that connect it with the reconciliation scene at the end of Act IV. The special appropriateness of this, of course, is that Professor Goldberg sees in Cordelia—as many other critics have seen it, too—a very decisive spiritual force, and sees one of the chief problems for a reader and critic the attempt to make out what, if anything, that spiritual force decides. This opening discussion prepares the ground for the later, more profoundly searching, investigation of that problem.

The second chapter strikes me as expressing as well, perhaps, as we'll ever need to have it expressed the way an informed modern mind must (I don't think that's too strong) approach reading Shakespeare. It is a chapter, mainly, about the critics. It looks principally at the contributions of Bradley, Sewell, Knights, and Wilson Knight, and in thirty pages it charts the changing emphasis each of those critics has given to Shakespearian studies. It seems to me never to underestimate the distinction and value of their contributions, and to make its demurrers never ungenerous.

> To put it another way: if behind Bradley there lay the achievement of the major Victorian novelists, with their stress on the determining force of specific moral characteristics, the achievement of the major novelists of the twentieth century as well as of the major poets—of Joyce and Lawrence, for example, as well as Yeats and Eliot (to mention only those writing in English)—with their more open, troubled, and problematic sense of human identity, was bound to make Bradley's seem too assured in some respects and too limited or vague in others. (pp. 39, 40)

There seems to me to be in that, and rightly, no derogation but only judgment, and a similar ready and welcoming interest characterizes the discussion of the other three critics' general approaches; if the compactness of this chapter is partly an acknowledgement that some of it is now common ground, there is much as well that is new and freshly formulated, and the compactness is also a sign of the clarity and thoroughness with which Professor Goldberg has thought his way through the issues here. What he suggests, basically, is that the achievement of post-Bradleyan criticism of the best kind has been to enlarge our conception of what we must take as being the substance of the drama, what makes up the play, what those

forces are that compel our response. In particular, what has become clearer is that—to sum it up, Professor Goldberg quotes Blake—"As a man is, so he sees", that, as the book puts it:

> ... if the relevant identity of a character, his 'self' as far as the play is concerned with it, exists for him in his conscious awareness of himself, it exists for us even more significantly in his awareness of everything *other* than himself—that is, in whatever he supposes (supposes even unselfconsciously) himself merely to see. (p. 52)

It is, indeed, to the full carrying through of this sort of view that Professor Goldberg commits himself, the refusal to settle—as he suggests that Knights, even, too heavily settles—on any even complex "view" or "reality" or "insight" as what *King Lear* finally amounts to, on anything that leaves out of account at all the process of discovery that leads to such finalities, or sees them except in terms of those processes of discovery.

This may summarily be characterized, I suppose, as an irreducibly relativist position, based on a refusal to sever any connections, in particular connections between "character" and "action" and "poetry" and "theme" and "response"—all the great separating words; and if there seem to be objections of a general kind to relativism—basically, the objection that judgment is imperilled and reduced by it, that the detachment which judgment presupposes is made impossible not just because all the elements involved in the dramatic experience (including the audience) are involved but because they are not even elements but indeed mutual processes, that *we* are at the mercy of Lear's experience just as he is—then Professor Goldberg embraces those objections gladly, and sees, indeed, the peculiar overwhelmingness of *King Lear* not only as a crucial and most powerful instance of a general challenge great art offers, but also as the (but even the definite article starts to seem too much of a fixative) gift the play has for us, the vantage-point it occupies for us, letting down its rope for those who will climb, the life and capacity it opens up before us. It is not the distinction of *King Lear* that it tells us, or even makes us feel, that no man is an island; rather, it is the Krakatoa that, destroying and re-creating under the observing geographer's very eyes, swamps his boat, and making him swim for it, tests more than his compass—or his ability to construct metaphors (though perhaps it is only another kind of poetry that can answer to the poetry of the play).

As if to show that in this small boat of relativism, he can still cross oceans—that perhaps indeed only that boat can shape its course to ocean currents—Professor Goldberg discusses, in his third chapter, the play's minor characters. Demonstration, that is to say follows declaration. And it seems to me that a great deal is demonstrated. Kent's special kind of simplicity is seen, it seems to me, in its exact relation to his aggressiveness towards Oswald, the attractiveness of his straightforward belief in moral order is its exact relation to his kind of egotism. The discussion of Edmund's self-concealment is, I think, very penetrating, similarly; and it is similarly offered in terms which keep before us the larger issues the play as a whole keeps before us. The connection between Gloucester and Lear is made very clear. About the blinding scene, we read:

> 'I am tied to th' stake and I must stand the course.' And so must we—which is surely the crucial dramatic point of the blinding scene. Even leaving the gods out of it, *this* is what the 'hearts' of men and women are capable of: the old brutality and the sadistic pleasure behind Cornwall and

> Regan's insistence on 'justice' declare both the point to which no justice or love of justice could be supported, and yet precisely the kind of deed we want justice for. The sheer fact of the blinding, and our sheer horrified rejection of it as unendurable, lie at the very centre of the play. (p. 82)

The limitations of the Fool are acutely noted:

> The total effect of what he says and what he is, qualifying each other as they do, is not to expose his 'handy-dandy' vision of life as simple 'moral bankruptcy' or 'moral panic'. That vision is rather the condition of the world to which, as *he* sees it, he has to answer with such resources of vitality and spirit as he has; and as *we* see it, part of his answer is indeed to see the world like that. (p. 91)

And the distinctions made between the other minor characters similarly show up their connections with the larger contradictions the play deals with, in which Lear himself, of course, is the chief actor.

Chapter Four is entitled "Lear and 'true need' ", and extensively examines the course Lear must run through the play. The immense energies that characterize this extraordinary man are, it seems to me, what often forces the reader and critic to the last words he can find, to the largest abstract nouns he can lay his little leverage on. And the formulations here also take on size—"It is almost as if the whole of life, natural and human, could realize itself fully only by proving on itself", and "He is clearly right in insisting on the difference between man and beast, life and mere existence. Human nature does need more", and "We often do see life as Tom sees it: dominated by powers of light and darkness that come and go unaccountably". But the discussion never, it seems to me, is *escaping* into largeness; the requirement, not only of general critical respectability but specially of Professor Goldberg's stance, that the text, the dramatic action, be both the immediate and final source of nourishment is never made light of. The title of this chapter suggests that, and the promise is made good.

Professor Goldberg would probably find in the words "will" and "identity" the poles upon which Lear's world shakes. That summary of course does infinite injustice to the complexity and penetration of the discussion in this chapter—and the words are not new ones, anyway: Lear's problems have always been problems. But the sense in which they are Lear's is never lost, and what is most impressive, in my opinion, here, is the inwardness with which their nevertheless being Lear's problems is understood. It is that, I think, that produces such suggestions as the one, only briefly canvassed, that Lear is moved towards madness as much by a "positive and vital impulse—actually to *become* the self-conflicting and thus helplessly vulnerable reality his conscious will refuses to acknowledge" as by anything more conventionally suggested. The modern psychological note that Professor Goldberg acknowledges and comments on in that suggestion is often not far away in his discussions; it is perhaps in some small degree because of it that the whole book has the quality—and it is especially powerful in this chapter and the remaining two—of establishing this play as (I might once have said "relevant") in the most serious ways a modern work. That psychological note as much tells that even before the industrial revolution people had psychologies, of course, that psychology did not create its own subject-matter when it created its language, as it tells what world and times the author of this book lives in. There is nothing anachronistically modern about this sort of analysis, however:

> And since his 'energy' is generated from holding his will both against his capacity to feel and against acknowledging that capacity as part of himself (his 'heart' in fact, which makes him as vulnerable, helpless, and demanding as a 'babe'), he inevitably twists wildly towards thoughts of plucking out his own eyes. (p. 109)

The generation of energy may be something we now know more about than Shakespeare did, but how to undo that clenched holding of will against heart is a problem we share.

It is in the discussion of Lear in Act III that the account of "true need" is at its most penetrating, naturally. Again, the emphasis is less on discovery than on process, less on what we might perhaps want to rescue as "what Lear comes to know" than on what the play shows us here of Lear's active ignorance, of the confusion and destructiveness that he both creates and cannot evade, that he uses and that uses him. At the height of that process, however, there burns like a lamp in darkness the irreducible fact of the human capacity to feel, that helplessness of the heart Professor Goldberg takes to be not only the source of the drama, not only the lock of relation, but also the distinctive human capacity, the capacity that establishes identity.

In Chapter Five, "Answering and questioning", we move ahead to Act IV, to what men now more aware of true needs can think and do about them. Beginning with the challenge Lear's madness makes to Edgar's capacity—a capacity that itself is the response, of course, to need—for reflection and detachment, the complex discussion of that madness and what it means in Lear develops, and soon comes to the force that Cordelia, in scenes iii and iv, brings into the play again. The temptation to see in Cordelia some kind of "answer" to all that Lear's experience questions has been very great for many readers and critics. She can easily seem to be the hand of God, the possibility beyond Nature that somehow is also the essence deepest within it, the road out; it is part of this book's insistence, however, that nothing in nature or in the play is in any serious way "beyond" it, and it follows that Cordelia takes her chances in the world with all the rest of them—of us—has her difficult needs, too, and suffers them, too. This, however, is not to reduce her, and not to reduce the sense in which the reconciliation scene marks an achievement both for her and for Lear; Professor Goldberg has no interest in undercutting the almost unspeakable poetry of their meeting, and indeed his discussion of it responds most delicately to its extraordinary emotional power. But part of the firmness that makes delicacy real lies in the recognition that the reality established in that meeting is not of a special kind that somehow extinguishes the realities, say, of Gloucester's blinding, that indeed the two are ineluctably parts of the same reality, as of course the death of Cordelia herself almost immediately declares.

The last chapter of the book, "Speaking what we can", takes up, principally, the last scene of the play. Does *King Lear* "finally" offer us a vision of emptiness and meaninglessness, perhaps mitigated by the strength of mind that can establish itself in the emptiness and find that meaning in the meaninglessness? Does it offer us something "finally" affirmative in Cordelia? Does it offer us Lear's continuing energy as "finally" what we can rest in? Professor Goldberg believes that something is affirmed, but begins by doubting the possibility of defining it. And to try to get the nature of the difficulty clear, he offers as an analogy the picture-puzzle of stairs

which at one moment seem to be leading up and at another to be leading down; they never lead both up and down at once, and they neither *really* lead up nor *really* lead down but *really appear* to be leading each way at different times. This of course is a way of putting *our* difficulty. To the characters in the play, the world is not ambiguous; although it is in a profound way incoherent, perhaps, it is utterly decisive.

I think it is in the discussion of this incoherence, the discussion taking its start from Lear's anguished "Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life, / And thou no breath at all?", that this book most richly confirms its command of the issues it has raised, issues that it has convincingly shown to be the play's issues. In this chapter we enter again, or enter further into, the complex, difficult terrain of character and reality creatively related, that the whole book has so extensively developed, and which, as it is carried on in these last pages, I think it could be only reductive to try to summarize. The commentary on Lear's speeches seems to me responsive as only the best criticism can be. And if this response and argument lead finally to an acknowledgement of the inadequacy of criticism itself, then that seems, even in the presence of this very distinguished criticism, right, too.

This book is clearly the product of many years' reading and thinking, and it would be impertinent, and even ridiculous, to try within the scope of a brief review to do more than trace out some of the paths it seems newly to open up, and give a first impression of the value and importance of the discoveries that await along them. There is, though, just one interest of my own that I should like to raise, and I suppose its relevance is somehow to the modernity I suggested earlier was a special quality of Professor Goldberg's vision of the play. I never read *King Lear* without having come into my mind this paragraph from Chapter V of *The Rainbow:*

> How did one grow old—how could one become confident? He wished he felt older. Why, what difference was there, as far as he felt matured or completed, between him now and him at his own wedding? He might be getting married over again—he and his wife. He felt himself tiny, a little, upright figure on a plain circled round with the immense, roaring sky: he and his wife, two little, upright figures walking across this plain, whilst the heavens shimmered and roared about them. When did one come to an end? In which direction was it finished? There was no end, no finish, only this roaring vast space. Did one never get old, never die? That was the clue. He exulted strangely, with torture. He would go on with his wife, he and she like two children camping in the plains. What was sure but the endless sky? But that was so sure, so boundless.

It seems very likely that memories of *King Lear* had something to do with the writing of that paragraph; they would not be something surprising to find in a mind as concerned with the difficulties of relation as Lawrence's is in this novel—or, indeed, as affected by a sense of sexual disgust as Lawrence's was, later, in *St. Mawr*. What reading that paragraph might give one idly to wonder, perhaps, is not only what Queen Lear may have been like (though we do, of course, at least know how many children she had), not only how it has come about that she has so completely disappeared from the world of the play, but what to make of the play's (as it seems to me) nearly unmitigated maleness. Lear and his roistering knights make an image that is more important than as a mere lever for Goneril to work. Wondering about this is rather more, I think, than want-

ing to find imagined in the play what might this week be casually derogated as a merely "bourgeois" marriage—something like, say, what Shakespeare's own began as—and more than merely affirming, in the face of *King Lear*, a contrary possibility. It is to ask, I suppose, about love. Not, of course, that that isn't a word that stands for much of what Lear "needs". Or what Tom Brangwen needs. But there seems to me to be something appallingly—and if not quite arbitrarily, or—inexplicably, then nevertheless perhaps limitingly—male in the sickening thrust of the effort this play makes, with such immense tragic power, to understand the failure of love. It sometimes, for me, does its own picture-puzzle stairs trick, and takes on the aspect of an effort to trace the source of feeling, as it were, in a limb that has been amputated. But perhaps I have begun to see not Lear but Ahab.

Professor Goldberg's book demands one last comment. There comes a stage, sometimes, when criticism—to use the cliché—becomes creative. Sometimes, a work of criticism, finding its first life in the work it is examining (as this one does) and always respecting and acknowledging that source (as this one does) nevertheless comes to take on a stature of its own—becomes, as it were, an epiphyte, drawing sustenance from its host but also sending down roots of its own into the common earth. This book is, in my view, that kind of criticism. It draws its life from a great work of art deeply rooted in a sense of our common humanity; what it has received it made clear in the powerful, sustaining connections it establishes, itself, with that sense.

—E. P. SHRUBB