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POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY AND POETRY

I

THE CIVILIZING and unifying function of the people's books, which was carried out in Greece by Homer, Italy by Dante, France by Racine and Molière, and Germany by Goethe, seems to be dying a rapid death. A Marlborough could once say that he had formed his understanding of English history from Shakespeare alone; such a reliance on a poet today is almost inconceivable. The constant return to and reliance on a single great book or author has disappeared, and the result is not only a vulgarization of the tone of life but an atomization of society, for a civilized people is held together by its common understanding of what is virtuous and vicious, noble and base.

Shakespeare could still be the source of such an education and provide the necessary lessons concerning human virtue and the proper aspirations of a noble life. He is respected in our tradition, and he is of our language. But the mere possession of his works is not enough; they must be properly read and interpreted. One could never reestablish the Mosaic religion on the basis of a Bible read by the Higher Critics, nor could one use Shakespeare as a text in moral and political education on the basis of his plays as they are read by the New Critics.

There has been a change in the understanding of the nature of poetry since the rise of the Romantic movement, and it is now considered a defiling of art's sacred temple to see the poem as a mirror of nature or to interpret it as actually *teaching* something. Poets are believed not to have had intentions, and their epics and dramas are said to be *sui generis*, not to be judged by the standards of civil society or of religion. To the extent that Shakespeare's plays are understood to be merely literary productions, they have no relevance to the important problems that agitate the lives of acting men.

But when Shakespeare is read naïvely, because he shows most vividly and comprehensively the fate of tyrants, the character of good rulers, the relations of friends, and the duties of citizens, he can move the souls of his readers, and they recognize that they understand life better because they have read him; he hence becomes a constant guide and companion. He is turned to as the Bible was once turned to; one sees the world, enriched and embellished, through his eyes. It is this perspective that has been lost; and only when Shakespeare is taught as though he *said* something can he regain the influence over this generation which is so needed—needed for the sake of giving us some thoughtful views on the most important questions. The proper functions of criticism are, therefore, to recover Shakespeare's teaching and to be the agent of his ever-continuing education of the Anglo-Saxon world.

The poetic, according to the modern argument, transcends the base public concerns of politics; the artist is closer to the antipolitical bohemian than to the political gentleman. As soon as one speaks of a political interpretation of poetry, one is suspected either of wanting to use poetry as an ideological weapon or of trying to import foreign doctrines—such as those of Marx or Freud—and making Shakespeare their unconscious precursor, all the while forgetting the plays themselves.

It is certainly true that the political teachings which underlie the modern state are prosaic—intentionally so. And, if the bourgeois, the man "motivated by fear of violent death," is the product of political life, the poetic must seek another field for its activity, since such a man, characterized only by the self-regarding passions, is not a proper subject of poetry. But political life was not always conceived in this way; it was classically thought to be the stage on which the broadest, deepest, and noblest passions and virtues could be played, and the political man seemed to be the most interesting theme of poetry. It is at least plausible that, by taking our present notions of politics as eternal, we misinterpret the poetry of the past. In that case, we would be guilty of a grave historical error, an error which could be corrected by an open-minded study of the plays themselves.

Shakespeare devotes great care to establishing the political setting in almost all his plays, and his greatest heroes are rulers who exercise capacities which can only be exercised within civil society. To neglect this is simply to be blinded by the brilliance of one's own prejudices. As soon as one sees this, one cannot help asking what Shakespeare thought about a good regime and a good ruler. I contend that the man of political passions and education is in a better position to

understand the plays than a purely private man. With the recognition of this fact, a new perspective is opened, not only on the plays but also on our notions of politics.

If politics is considered antithetical to poetry, philosophy is thought to be even more so, for poetry deals, it is said, with passions and sentiments, whereas philosophy bases itself on reason. The poet is the inspired creator, whereas the philosopher understands only what is. To this, again, it can only be responded that much of modern philosophy certainly seems to take no account of poetry, but it is not so clear that this is necessarily the case or that a poet cannot also be a thinker.

There is some question whether it would be possible for a man who had not thought a great deal about human nature to write a convincing drama. It is only an assumption that Shakespeare did not have a consistent and rational understanding of man which he illustrated in his plays; only a final and complete interpretation of them all could demonstrate that this is so. On the face of it, the man who could write *Macbeth* so convincingly that a Lincoln believed it to be the perfect illustration of the problems of tyranny and murder must have known about politics; otherwise, however charming its language, the play would not have attracted a man who admittedly did know. The contemporary antagonism between philosophy and poetry is a child of our age; it might serve most profitably to remind us of another kind of philosophy, one which could talk sensibly about human things, and of another kind of poetry, one which could unite the charm of the passions with the rigor of the intellect.

II

Shakespeare wrote at a time when common sense still taught that the function of the poet was to produce pleasure and that the function of the great poet was to teach what is truly beautiful by means of pleasure. Common sense was supported by a long tradition which had a new burst of vitality in the Renaissance. Socrates had said that Homer was the teacher of the Greeks, and he meant by that that those who ruled Greece had their notions of what kind of men they would like to be set for them by the Homeric epics. Achilles was the authentic hero, and his glory was that against which all later heroes up to Alexander competed. A man who knew Homer was a Greek. If we follow Herodotus, Homer, along with Hesiod, also invented the gods in the forms in which they were worshiped by later generations.

He was the true founder of his people, for he gave them what made them distinctive, invented that soul for which they are remembered. Such are the ambitions of the great poet. Goethe understood this:

A great dramatic poet, if he is at the same time productive and is actuated by a strong noble purpose which pervades all his works, may succeed in making the soul of his plays become the soul of the people. I should think that this was well worth the trouble. From Corneille proceeded an influence capable of forming heroes. This was something for Napoleon, who had need of a heroic people, on which account he said of Corneille that, if he were still living, he would make a prince of him. A dramatic poet who knows his vocation should therefore work incessantly at its higher development in order that his influence on the people may be noble and beneficial.¹

As Napoleon knew, it is *only* a poet who can give a people such inspiration.

Poetry is the most powerful form of rhetoric, a form which goes beyond ordinary rhetoric in that it shapes the men on whom the statesman's rhetoric can work. The philosopher cannot move nations; he speaks only to a few. The poet can take the philosopher's understanding and translate it into images which touch the deepest passions and cause men to know without knowing that they know. Aristotle's description of heroic virtue means nothing to men in general, but Homer's incarnation of that virtue in the Greeks and Trojans is unforgettable. This desire to depict the truth about man and to make other men fulfill that truth is what raises poetry to its greatest heights in the epic and the drama. Poetry takes on its significance, in both its content and its uses, from the political nobility of the poet. Poetry is not autonomous; its life is infused by its attachment to the same objects which motivate the best of acting men.

The poet's task is a double one—to understand the things he wishes to represent and to understand the audience to which he speaks. He must know about the truly permanent human problems; otherwise his works will be slight and passing. There must be parallelism between what he speaks of and the most vital concerns of his audience; without that, his works will be mere tributes to the virtuosity of his techniques. In the great work, one is unaware of the technique and even of the artist; one is only conscious that the means are perfectly appropriate to the ends. The beauty of the words is but a reflection of the beauty

of the thing; the poet is immersed in the thing, which is the only source of true beauty. And he must know what to touch in his audience. A photograph of a man does not usually convey his character; that is grasped in certain traits which may rarely be seen. The painter can abstract all that is not essential to that impression, and he knows how the eye of the viewer will see the man. Certain illusions are often necessary to see the man as he really is; the sense of reality is transmitted in a medium of unreality. So the poet, too, must know how to play on his audience, how to transform its vision while taking it for what it is. That audience is a complex animal made up of many levels. To each he must speak, appealing to the simple souls as well as to the subtle. Thus his poem is complex and has many levels, just as does the audience; it is designed first for the conventional order composed of aristocracy and commoners, but more profoundly for the natural order composed of those who understand and those who do not. The poet knows the characters of men from both looking at them and speaking to them. That is why the intelligent man takes him seriously; he has a kind of experience with men that the practitioner of no other art or science possesses.

The poet is an imitator of nature; he reproduces what he sees in the world, and it is only his preoccupation with that world which renders him a poet. He is not creator, for that would mean that he makes something from nothing; were he to look only within himself, he would find a void—a void destined by nature itself to be filled with knowledge of the essential articulations of things. What distinguishes a good poet from a bad one is whether he has seen things as they are and learned to distinguish the superficial from the profound. In particular, poetry imitates man, and this means—according to the classical tradition which I am elaborating—his virtues and his vices. A man is most what he is as a result of what he does; a man is known, not simply by his existence, but by the character of his actions—liberal or greedy, courageous or cowardly, frank or sly, moderate or profligate. Since these qualities produce happiness or misery, they are of enduring interest to human beings. Hence they are the specific subject matter of poetry. Passions, feelings, and the whole realm of the psychological are secondary. This is because feelings are properly related to certain kinds of action and to the virtues which control such action; they are formless when considered by themselves. Jealousy and ambition have to do with love and politics and gain their particular qualities from the particular objects to which they are directed and the particular men who feel them; therefore, the primary concern of the poet is with the various kinds of human action. The plot, the

¹Johann Peter Eckermann, *Conversations with Goethe*, April 1, 1827.

story of a series of actions which leads to prosperity or misfortune, is the soul of the play and that which guides all else, including the portrayal of psychological affections.

Human virtues and vices can be said to be defined primarily in political terms. Civil society and its laws define what is good and bad, and its education forms the citizens. The character of life is decisively influenced by the character of the regime under which a man lives, and it is the regime that encourages or discourages the growth within it of the various human types. Any change in a way of life presupposes a change in the political, and it is by means of the political that the change must be effected. It is in their living together that men develop their human potential, and it is the political regime which determines the goals and the arrangement of the life in common. Moreover, it is in ruling and being ruled, in the decisions concerning war and peace, that men exercise their highest capacities. There may be situations in which men have no chance to be rulers, but, to the degree to which they are excluded from political life, they are less fully developed and satisfied. In political life, not only are the ordinary virtues projected on a larger screen, but totally new capacities are brought into play. The political provides the framework within which all that is human can develop itself; it attracts the most interesting passions and the most interesting men. Hence, the dramatist who wishes to represent man most perfectly will usually choose political heroes. Because of his artistic freedom, he can paint his figures more characteristically, less encumbered by fortuitous traits, than can a historian.

What is essentially human is revealed in the extreme, and we understand ourselves better through what we might be. In a way, the spectators live more truly when they are watching a Shakespearean play than in their daily lives, which are so much determined by the accidents of time and place. There could be a theater dealing totally with the private life, the cares of providing for a living and raising a family. But men who never got beyond that life would be cut off from their fullest human development, and a theater which acquiesced in that view of human life would be only a tool in increasing the enslavement to it.

This is a popular account of the traditional view of the drama, that which was current in Shakespeare's time; it is more likely that he shared it than that he held anything like the modern view. It is not necessary to argue that he himself had reflected on it; it was in the air, and he would come naturally to think about things in these terms. But, in fact, it seems clear on the basis of the evidence provided

by the history plays that Shakespeare did, indeed, elaborate his intentions and consciously wanted his works to convey his political wisdom. In these plays, he tried to develop a sensible view of what the English regime is and how it should be accepted and revered by succeeding generations of Englishmen. He was successful in this attempt, for the English do understand their history and what it represents much as he depicted it. Here his intention was clearly political, and his understanding of what is both beautiful and exciting to his audience is based primarily on the concerns of civil society. Is it plausible to say that this was just a series of good stories? They are, indeed, good stories, but they are that precisely because of the kind of interest they evoke. Can one reasonably say that he dashed off the historical plays because he needed money or that he was ignorant of the essential facts of English history because he had never studied? This would be as much as to say that Jefferson, with no consideration of political principle, wrote the Declaration of Independence because he wanted to be well-known and that its success is due to its being an excellent Fourth of July oration.

What is so manifestly true of the histories could well be true of the tragedies and comedies, too. Shakespeare's humanity was not limited to England or to making Englishmen good citizens of England. There is a whole series of fundamental human problems, and I suggest that Shakespeare intended to depict all of them and that the man who, *per impossibile*, could understand all the plays individually would see the consequences of all the possible important choices of ways of life and understand fully the qualities of the various kinds of good soul. But that takes me beyond the scope of this introduction; I allude to it only to indicate the range of Shakespeare's genius. For the moment, it is sufficient to suggest the possibility that, for the other plays, just as for the histories, Shakespeare may have seen politics as, at the least, very important, that he had a pedagogic intention, and that his learning was sufficient to make him aware of the fundamental alternatives, theoretical and practical.

If this is so, political philosophy would be essential to our interpretation of his works. However wrong Shakespeare may have been about the real nature of poetry as discovered by modern criticism, in understanding him we would have to use his framework instead of trying to squeeze him into our new categories. Every rule of objectivity requires that an author first be understood as he understood himself; without that, the work is nothing but what we make of it. The role of political philosophy in Shakespearean criticism would be to give a discursive account of the goals of the passions depicted in the plays.

When Sextus Pompeius is given the choice of murdering his guests and becoming emperor of the universe or remaining within the pale of decency and being done away with himself, we are confronted with a classic problem of political morality, one that is presented with detail and precision in *Antony and Cleopatra*. We must recognize it as such, and we must further have some knowledge of the kinds of men who desire to rule and of what this desire does to them. It is only in philosophic discussion that we find a development of these problems, and from that we can help to clarify the problems of which Shakespeare gives us models. In our day, we are particularly in need of the history of political philosophy, for we are not immediately aware of the various possible understandings of the political and moral phenomena and must seek those which most adequately explain what Shakespeare presents to us.

Shakespeare has set his plays in many nations and at various times in history. This is a good beginning for the investigation of his teaching, for various nations encourage various virtues in men; one cannot find every kind of man in any particular time and place. Just the difference between paganism and Christianity has an important effect on the kinds of preoccupations men have. To present the various possibilities, the typical men have to be in an environment in which they can flourish. The dates and places of Shakespeare's plays were chosen with a view to revealing the specific interests of the heroes. It was only in Venice that Othello and Shylock could act out their potentials; they were foreigners, and only Venice provided them freedom and a place in the city. Only in Rome could one see the course of political ambition free of other goals which mitigate it. It would be a worthwhile project to spend a lifetime studying the settings of the plays in relation to the plots, trying to see what are the typical problems of what time and what nation. All this would be with a view to distinguishing what Shakespeare thought the best kinds of men and what advantages and disadvantages go with what ways of life. We are in need of generations of criticism—naïve criticism which asks the kinds of question of Shakespeare that Glaucon and Adeimantus once posed to Socrates. How should we live? Is it best to be a ruler or a poet? Can one kill a king? Should one's parents be disobeyed for the sake of love? And so on endlessly.

Schiller pointed out that modern times are characterized by abstract science on the one hand and unrefined passions on the other and that the two have no relation. A free man and a good citizen must have a natural harmony between his passions and his knowledge; this is what is meant by a man of taste, and it is he whom we today

seem unable to form. We are aware that a political science which does not grasp the moral phenomena is crude and that an art uninspired by the passion for justice is trivial. Shakespeare wrote before the separation of these things; we sense that he has both intellectual clarity and vigorous passions and that the two do not undermine each other in him. If we live with him awhile, perhaps we can recapture the fullness of life and rediscover the way to its lost unity.