Chapter IV

KING LEAR

(LEAR DISINHERITING CORDELIA)
The moral, social and political domain in Lear's body politic has already been threatened by the unnatural and irrational acts of several characters: though the normative pattern of Nature is reversed completely by Lear's impetuous and irrational acts only. The opening dialogue between Kent and Gloucester about Lear's impending division of his kingdom between the Duke of Albany and Cornwall, the disastrous results of which are abundantly clear at the end of the play suggests the impending political chaos. On the other hand 'the degrading and licentious levity' with which Gloucester reports his adultery suggests the upcoming disorder in the moral and social sphere. "Sex is used almost exclusively as a symbol of evil, of the animality that is .... a definition of vicious conduct." Gloucester says thus:

yet was his mother
fair; there was good sport at his making, and the
whoreson must be acknowledged.
(I.i.21-23)

But these are just initial breaches in Nature, the seeds of which undoubtedly bear bitter fruits. The actual deed from which the tragedy springs is "the violation of the duties of kingship" by the octogenarian king. When analyzed in the background of the cosmic order, Lear's irrational act of disowning Cordelia is the violation of the normative patterns of Nature. Hence when he says:

Here I disclaim all my paternal care,
Propinquity and property of blood,
And as a stranger to my heart and me
Hold thee from this for ever.
(I.i, 112-15)
He not only divides his kingdom he also sheds his divine right which a king is not supposed to do until he is relieved by death. Hence in his irrationality, he not only violates the primary law of Nature but transgresses the civil law as well. His reasoning is barricaded by his pride and power, thus he fails to observe “King’s duty to act as the servant of the law of Nature which is above him and whose percepts he exists to carry out.” Lear fails to understand Cordelia’s inwardness and hypnotized by the inflammatory Catholicism of Goneril and Regan. Overcome by his passion, Lear forgets that “king is not a despot who can independently do as he wants; he represents the universal principle of justice as firmly established as the order of heavens.” The moment Lear punishes Cordelia and Kent; he reverses this universal principle of justice. He boldly announces:

    for we
    Have no such daughter, nor shall ever see
    That face of hers again;
    (I.i, 261-63)

Blindfolded by his pride he rewards the “purposeful flatterers”:

    Cornwall and Albany,
    With my two daughters’ dowers digest the third;
    Let pride, which she calls plainness, marry her.
    (I.i, 126-128)

Lear, hence, not only transgresses the universal principle of justice but violates the order, the system which is the realizable core of meaning. He forgets that it is only by observing the existing relationship between man and his cosmos, and not by violating it, that man can survive.

    Hence, instead of contemplating the divine order of the created universe, instead of converging his reason with the supreme ‘Reason’,
Lear oversteps his ‘degree’, upsets the ‘Cosmic Order’. Instead of redeeming himself from his fallen state by contemplating the world-order and by contrasting his self with that, Lear becomes a law itself and this is his sin. Here, a king fails to provide guardianship and a father disowns his child. Apparently, this irrational act should not have such fatal consequences which Lear faces but when judged against the background of the Elizabethan age it is a violation of the ‘Cosmic Order’, this discord and ordeal which Lear passes through, is but inevitable. This can be better understood in terms of the following lines taken from Troilus and Cressida:

Take but degree away, untune that string,
And hark, what discord follows
(I.iii, 109-110)

Besides this, the wide-ranging chaos at cosmic and domestic level is inevitable because of the strong sense of ‘interconnexions’ between various links in the ‘Chain of Being’. The cosmic order is repeatedly violated at various levels in King Lear; it is constantly threatened by objective as well as subjective evil with dissolution.

Lear’s corrupt rationality is set forth in his decision to divide his kingdom and in his method of division where he sets off a competition among his daughters though unintentionally.

Which of you shall we say doth love us most?
That we our largest bounty may extend
Where nature doth with merit challenge.
(I.i.50-52)

Commenting on Lear’s hamartia, Kenneth Muir says that “at an age when he should renounce everything so that he can literally
“unburthen’d crawl towards death”; he retains the desire for love and authority.” Blindfolded by his sensual self, he fails to understand Cordelia’s inwardness and Protestant calm despite her honest explanations and Kent’s intervention:

Thy youngest daughter does not love thee least;  
Nor are those empty-hearted whose low sounds  
Reverb no hollowness.

(I.i.151-152)

Lear not only misinterprets Cordelia: he seals his doom too by investing his powers, pre-eminences and all the large effects in Albany and Cornwall. Despite Kent’s efforts, Lear fails to see the immediate consequences of his impetuous decisions.

be Kent unmannerly,  
When Lear is mad. What would’st thou do, old man?  
Think’st thou that duty shall have dread to speak  
When power to flattery bows?

(I.i.144-147)

Lear once again violates the law of Nature by reversing the master servant relationship – a subject of primary importance to the Elizabethans. He banishes Kent simply because:

That thou hast sought to make us break our vow,  
Which we durst never yet, and with strain’d pride  
To come betwixt our sentence and our power,  
Which nor our nature nor our place can bear,

(I.i.167-170)

For him, his nature is more important than ‘Nature’ itself. His pride is an obstacle in the way of his reasoning, thus he fails to see his folly. In a society where “each party was expected to perform his role in harmony with nature’s rule of order and degree,” Lear fails to perform
his role as a king and as a father. Hence, by not observing the laws of his ‘degree’ he disrupts the harmony and imposes chaos. His is no ordinary sin but a sin against Nature and its normative pattern. It is “this clash between man and cosmic order and the breach which king Lear is tirelessly intent upon defining.”

At an age, when Lear should be full of wisdom and experience, his reason, his judgement is virtually paralyzed or to speak in Elizabethan terms, his celestial self is dominated and overpowered by his bestial self. “The play never denies that man is an animal and that he is capable of falling back wholly into animal; in fact man’s animality is asserted again and again.” His irrationality transforms his rational soul into a sensitive soul.

What remains to follow is the discord -cosmic as well as domestic—which is but inevitable when the order is dissolved. Grave is the dissolution this time so the deeper are the consequences. This discord in Lear’s commonwealth is first taken up in the form of Goneril and Regan’s filial ingratitude, and then it is followed by physical and mental turmoil of Lear that corresponds to the cosmic chaos symbolic in the storm scene. This moral chaos is again taken up in the sub-plot in which Gloucester rejects his natural son in favour of the unnatural one simply because he fails to see. The discord is immediate when Goneril and Regan decide to hit such a kind father who in Lear’s words “gave them all”:

Pray you, let us hit together:
if our father carry authority with such disposition
as he bears, this last surrender of his will but offend
(I.i.302-305)
Time has started unfolding the hidden cunnings of Goneril and Regan. "Goneril and Regan not only violate natural law by their unnatural behaviour to their father, "they also violate their proper function as human beings by their lust for Edmund, a lust which ends in murder and suicide." Determined, not to be overruled, Goneril conspires to outplot his father:

I would breed from hence occasions, and I shall,
That I may speak; I'll write straight to my sister
To hold my very course.

(I.iii.25-27)

Goneril’s rationality inspires her not to be overruled by an idle old man that still manages those authorities that he hath given away. This time his children reverse the order: a king is denied his authority; a father is without his children’s affection. The reversal of order and the consequent discord is shown in a thankless and a cursing father. This is a complete dissolution of moral standards since both the parties fail to perform their duties in compliance with the order. As but obvious "human imperfections leads to human sufferings."

Again, speaking in Elizabethan terms, the inhuman acts of Goneril and Regan are spoken of in terms of animal imagery to show man’s descent to sensual level. This symbolic use of animal imagery "emphasizes the ferocity and bestiality into which human being can fall."

"Goneril is a kite: her ingratitude has a serpent’s tooth: she has struck her father most serpent like upon the very heart: she and Regan are dog-hearted." Not only Lear’s daughters but Lear too again transgresses the law by cursing:

Hear, Nature, hear! dear Goddess hear!
Suspend thy purpose if thou didst intend
To make this creature fruitful!
(I.iv.273-75)

Though it is true that the magnitude of his error is less recognized this time because “here the daughter excites so much detestation, and the father so much sympathy, that we often fail to receive the due impression of his violence. There is not here, of course, the injustice of his rejection of Cordelia, but there is precisely the same.”

Ironically, to a great extent, Lear fails to understand the truth of his daughters for whom he is no more “dearer than eyesight” rather “an old fool” and hence “must be used with checks as flatteries, when they are seen abused”. Lear’s knowledge of his children is no better than his knowledge of his self. Fool’s attempts to awaken in Lear a sense of his foolish behaviour are as good as water off a duck’s back. Neither his knowledge of his daughter nor of his improves. He thinks that his daughters have failed to observe:

The offices of nature, bonds of childhood,
Effects of courtesy, dues of gratitude;
(II.iv.176-77)

He thinks that he is a father more sinned and not at all sinning. Fool’s speeches suggest the reversal of order that has set in Lear’s body politic and refers to Lear’s foolishness as well.

The hedge -sparrow fed the cuckoo so long,
That it’s had it head bit off by it young.
(I.iv.213-14)

May not an ass know when a cart draws the horse?
(I.iv.221)

Though Lear can sense the wrong done to him, yet these are but vague, momentary lightening towards a better knowledge. Despite Fool’s
various statements Lear fails to learn that after dividing his kingdom, he is no more than an “O without a figure”.

This time the fool for not being witty openly condemns Lear. The paradox of a Fool and a king in the storm is reinforced in the following conversation: it foregrounds the idea of Lear’s foolishness.

If thou wert my Fool, Nuncle, I’d have thee beaten
for being old before thy time.

How’s that?

Thou should’st not have been old till thou hadst been wise.

(I.v.38-42)

Or this –

When thou
clovest thy crown i’ th’ middle, and gav’st away both parts, thou bor’st thine ass on thy back o’er the dirt: thou hadst little wit in thy bald crown

(I.iv, 156-159)

Besides this moral choking “the atmosphere of buffeting, strain and strife, at moments, of bodily tension to the point of agony, the mental suffering of Lear and picture of Lear, beating at the gate (his head) that let his folly in” suggests the physical discord in Lear’s body politic.

O! how this mother swells up toward my heart;
Hysterica passio! down, the climbing sorrow!

(II.iv, 54-55)

Lear’s world is not untouched by the political chaos too; it is referred in Curan’s reporting of trouble brewing between the Dukes of Cornwall and Albany, each of whom apparently wants to take over the entire kingdom of Britain. Lear again fails to save his country from the “future strife” which he had hoped in dividing up his kingdom. Besides
the chaos at several levels in the main plot, the pattern of sin, chaos and realization is taken up in the sub-plot that contrasts and reinforces the pattern of sin and redemption in the main plot.

The seeds of Gloucester’s evil past have germinated in the form of the illegitimate son Edmund who devises a scheme to disinherit the legitimate son of Gloucester from his due rights.

I see the business.
Let me, if not by birth, have lands by wit:
All with me’s meet that I can fashion fit.
(I.ii, 179-81)

Ultimately the moral, social and political discord is joined by the cosmic disorder as well. The storm represented the participation of macrocosm in the chaos of microcosm. The storm is reported by Cornwall in the following words:

Shut up your doors, my Lord; ‘tis a wild night:
My Regan counsels well: come out o’ th’storm.
(II.iv, 306-7)

“The storm and madness are tremendously real, but we are never allowed to forget the moral disorder of which they are both symbols.”

Owing to their irrational acts and passionate decisions, the characters associate their selves with evil and descend from the celestial heights to animal passions. One irrational act of Lear and his incapability to use his reason well, forces the domestic, political and cosmic world to participate in the moral turmoil.

Nonetheless, it is from this point onwards that “the play specifically charts Lear’s development from an egocentric, imperceptive, arrogant, old tyrant to someone with greater
understanding not only of himself but of others as well.”

Ironically Lear’s descent to damnation takes place amidst the harmonious cosmic order and his ascension to celestial self, to salvation takes place amidst all sorts of discord and chaos. Lear’s broodings on his daughter’s filial ingratitude leads him towards a better understanding of this world and of his self. In his journey from madness to recovered sanity, from blaming Gods for not punishing the guilty to his knowledge of his error “Lear learns the art of our necessities and so becomes aware of the common humanity he shares with the poor naked wretches.”

The tempest in Lear’s mind corresponds with that of the tempest in the cosmos and it churns out in Lear the knowledge of his real self. The shocking and terrible madness purges Lear of his egotistical self. “His madness marked the end of the willful, egotistical monarch. He is resurrected as a fully human being.”

It is amidst domestic and cosmic chaos and reversal of order at several levels that Lear gains “subconscious realization that he has committed a sinful mistake which gradually rises into his consciousness.” Out of this discord, Lear attains the knowledge of self and of his place in the cosmic order which is redemptive and this knowledge, this awareness of self, he expresses through a remedial love of man for man deriving from heaven’s own mercy towards its creature. Lear achieves his redemption through the discipline of suffering. His journey through madness to recovered sanity is a journey from damnation to salvation. The monster ingratitude of Goneril and Regan cuts Lear off his pride – the main obstacle in his way to see things rightly. The central paradox of the play ‘Madness in Reason: Reason in Madness’ is crucial to Lear’s redemption. It is true
that the breaches in Nature’s law are severe and many; the terrific chaos in several corresponding planes is but consequential, yet the hope for redemption is not lost at any point in the play, because the parallel course of good and evil, of wicked and honest, of disguises over reality and of reality behind disguises never allows the play to be in the complete grip of disorder.

It is also true that his journey towards redemption initially begins with a sense of injustice done to him by the two “Pelican daughters”. If he rushes out into the gathering storm, it is out of his helplessness:

A poor, infirm, weak and despis’d old man.
But yet I call you servile ministers,
That will with two pernicious daughters join
Your high-engender’d battles ’gainst a head
So old and white as this.

(III.ii, 20-24)

It is in the storm itself when Lear “experiences an emotion not purely egotistical when he argues the difference between the bare animal necessities and human needs.”^19

O! reason not the need; our basest beggars
Are in the poorest thing superfluous:
Allow not nature more than nature needs,
Man’s life is cheap as beast’s

(II.iv, 262-265)

In between his own humiliation and their horrible ingratitude, Lear “constrains himself to practice a self-control and patience so many years disused.”^20 If his agony at his daughter’s filial ingratitude pushes Lear to insanity: it later on cuts him off his pride. Once away from this impediment i.e. pride, one of the seven deadly sins, he is capable of a wider vision. It is in this “terrifying universe where any semblance of

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order is undermined till the end, and where agonizing facts of cruelty by
children towards parents, by guest towards hosts and by subjects
towards sovereign are commonplace²¹, he is purged of his pride, desire
for vengeance, for power and all other attributes of kingship. Lear
redeems his fallen self. If nature is ferocious, it is benignant as well.
True it is that the hellish storm is set off by his egotism and
imperiousness, by his fatal error of judgement: it is equally true that this
hellish storm enlightens his inner self. Despite the total disruption of
order, Lear explicitly undergoes transformation. His tragic journey is his
‘Purgatorio’. If “the madness is an expression of certain conflict within
Lear”²², it strips him of “his proud array, of everything except the basic
necessities.”²³ In his recovered sanity, he knows that “a dog’s obeyed in
office, all men are sinners, successful men cloak their crimes and vice
by the power of gold, that justice is mere an instrument of the rich and
powerful to oppress the poor and weak, since all are miserable sinners,
and all have an equal right to be forgiven.”²⁴

Though his tragic journey, purges Lear of his pride, stripped him
of his follies, yet Lear’s redemption lies somewhere else. It is neither in
the acquisition of virtues, nor in his wider vision of the world rather in
his realization of his place in the cosmic order. Acquisition of virtues
and knowledge of the sub-lunary affairs are but a step towards
redemption. He says:

   When we are born, we cry that we are come
   To this great stage of fools.

   (IV.vi, 180-181)
“Lear suffers for his blindness and comes at great most to see more clearly. He is stripped of worldly honour and rank by those whose outer form he trusted completely.” Lear for the first time learns his place in the chain of being. If man’s redemption lies in his learning of his place, of his celestial and bestial self that inspires man to attain greater heights in the cosmic order, Lear is redeemed in this sense and the following line hints at it:

Thou art a soul in bliss; but I am bound
Upon a wheel of fire, that mine own tears
Do scald like molten lead.

(IV. vii, 46-48)

You are a spirit, I know;

(IV.vii, 49)

Lear, who earlier refused to see Cordelia, realizes Cordelia’s celestial self as compared to the bestial nature of Goneril and Regan. In between the two, he learns his place he has been reduced to. If he kneels to Cordelia, it is because of his knowledge of Cordelia’s celestial self.

O! look upon me, Sir,
And hold your hand in benediction o’er me.
No, Sir, you must not kneel

(IV.vii, 56-58)

The following speech by Lear is crucial for his redemption.

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

(IV, vii, 59-65)
The moment Lear says that he is mainly ignorant; he is the most enlightened person. It is this realization of man’s ignorance, which inspires him to learn the better part of his self and motivates man to converge his will with the supreme will instead of diversion; and this is redemptive of evil.

Lear, when he says, “Thou art a soul in bliss”, learns Cordelia’s celestial, rational self: when he says, “for I am mainly ignorant” he learns his irrationality. This comparison between celestial and bestial aspects of human nature or that of irrational and rational is redemptive. Implicit in this acquisition of self-knowledge is the contemplation of the divine order of the created universe. Irrespective of the controversy, whether Gods are hostile or benevolent or just, for arguments can be drawn from the text itself in favour of each of the view, Lear’s personality undergoes transformation and thus is redeemed. Though Lear does not seek evil consciously, yet by the end of his tragic journey, he is conscious of his irrationality due to his evil self. Lear, by the end of tragedy, realigns his reason with that supreme ‘Reason’.

If for Swinburne King Lear is an emphasis on nihilism: for G. Wilson Knight, “mankind’s relation to the universe is its theme, and Edgar’s trumpet is as the universal judgement summoning vicious man to account.” And if Knight assumes King Lear “to be a purgatorial text wherein takes place the expiation of sins, in order to enable a purification through adversity in which those who suffer, awaking finally to a new consciousness of love, manage to find themselves more truly and in so doing, recognize the Gods’ mysterious beneficence, it is definitely a purgatorial text.”
If A.C. Bradley calls this tragedy “Redemption of King Lear” he is near to the truth, because irrespective of the gravity of chaos, Lear is redeemed and he expresses this knowledge in his contemplation of his place in the order. The play undoubtedly suggests the restoration of the violated order. If self-knowledge is redemptive, Lear is redeemed. He has learnt the nature of objective evil incarnated in Goneril and Regan as well as subjective evil.
References:


4. Ibid.


