Arts & Humanities

The Undying Animal

A critic reminds us why literature still matters.

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Sir John Gilbert's 1873 watercolor Cordelia in the Court of King Lear. (The Bridgeman Art Library)

Caught up in the rush of our ongoing lives, we rarely get the chance to step back and reflect on why we do what we do or, more important, why we love what we do. Working with literature as scholars, editors, and critics can become as habitual as any other form of work. Our criticism grows procedural or theoretical, betraying the spirit of the writers we admire. Slipping out of routine into reflection is part of the

discipline of literature itself, which pares away the casual and the incidental, the merely lifelike. Instead it concentrates impressions, ideas, and feelings into language that yields meaning. The poem is the poet's way of suspending time and attending to the minute vibrations of the inner and outer world. The demands it makes on us as readers are personal, not professional, or personal *before* they are professional. At a time when literary study is on the defensive, even in universities that once nurtured it, we need to raise the question why literature matters, hoping this will illuminate why the collective work of an organization of writers and scholars matters as well.

One of our goals is to keep our eye on literature itself, without getting bogged down in questions of theory or methodology, politics or social history, that have often pushed literary concerns aside. My initial idea was to look at literature briefly through the prism of a single poet, Wordsworth, whose work has often moved me deeply, and to explore how one poem, the celebrated "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood," can crystallize the qualities that give purpose and power to a literary work. If we think of literature as a way of taking stock, a constructed moment of self-recognition that also resonates with the reader, few poets do this with more emotional clarity than Wordsworth. In "Tintern Abbey," "Resolution and Independence," and the Intimations Ode, and ultimately in *The Prelude*, Wordsworth steps back from the flow of present time to contemplate the young man he was, the person he has become, and the man he is yet to be, measuring the losses and gains built into living a human life. Confronting inexorable change, the poet also feels intimations of death, most explicitly in "Tintern Abbey," written when he was only 28. In a long conclusion, he turns to his beloved sister to imagine his own absence and her feelings about him after he is gone. Other poets, beginning with Keats, made sport of Wordsworth's ego, but few denied how much his self-absorption had illuminated the dark passages in which we live our lives.

My Wordsworth project went awry when a larger figure intervened. If Wordsworth explored the ages of man, Shakespeare seems to have invented or at least named them. If Wordsworth made sense of life as a pattern of loss and recompense, a bumpy road from bright beginnings to ultimate extinction, Shakespeare put this at the heart of his tragedies. When I saw Trevor Nunn's production of *King Lear* with Ian McKellen last year, I knew I had to change course. It was a hot ticket, largely because of McKellen's fame as a movie star, but also because the play is not performed as often as the other major tragedies. It requires a great actor, but such

actors frequently put it off until late in their careers, when they may no longer be equal to the physical demands of the role. The play is so shockingly stark that for a century and a half it was seen only in a version bowdlerized by Nahum Tate, complete with a happy ending. Even Dr. Johnson, always sensitive about death, preferred it that way. Preparing his edition of Shakespeare, he found himself extremely reluctant to edit the play, even to reread it. Keats wrote a great sonnet steeling himself, but also consecrating himself, to reread it. In the 19th century, when Shakespeare's text was restored, it was seldom put on, thanks to the notion popularized by Charles Lamb, that it was too profound for the stage. I myself had not read or seen it for a long time, which heightened the shock of seeing it afresh. Yet it seemed I knew much of the play by heart, reciting lines under my breath just before they were spoken, which added to the dreadful sense of inevitability.

In place of the many elements of literature I planned to discuss here, this performance of *Lear* brought an unfashionable one to the fore: wisdom. Wordsworth had written of "the years that bring the philosophic mind," by which he meant not philosophy but stoicism, a hard-won knowledge wrenched from experience, a yielding to the ineluctable. Those old men so important to Wordsworth — Michael, Matthew, the Leech-Gatherer — are not so different from the abused protagonists of *Lear*, though their station is more humble. Their dwindling lives have become the sum of their losses, though the shaft of self-knowledge comes not to them but to younger men who encounter them, who try to plumb the secret of their lives, their strange endurance. Unlike Lear, they do not rage against the storm. Their condition comes through in what they *don't* say or do: the silent suffering of Michael, becalmed by grief when the child of his old age is gone from him; the numb rehearsal of routine by the Leech-Gatherer, when the poet beseeches him, "How is it that you live, and what is it you do?"; the glimmer of disappointment in the blithe Matthew, "the man of mirth," who, in a rare moment, blurts out how bereft he feels, and how unloved.

Have I made these aged men sound too much like the aged Lear? Michael has sent away his son, who falls into dissipation, despite the almost biblical covenant between them. Matthew has lost a daughter and recalls the shock of the moment he realized that she could never be replaced. Roaming the lonely moor, the Leech-Gatherer is a more symbolic figure, eking out a marginal survival, bent double under the weight of his life; he is Wordsworth's image of "unaccommodated man." Like Lear, these figures test the outer limits of the human condition. Their suffering yields

wisdom, less to them than for the poet and his audience. Using such language today, I know, feels laughably Victorian; the very word, wisdom, sounds archaic. We have come to believe that truth is a relative construction, that literature is conditioned by the contingencies of history, subjectivity, and language. Of all the books of the Bible, the so-called wisdom books, such as Proverbs, are among the least valued today. Their kind of wisdom makes little allowance for human difference. It claims to be timeless when it is merely sententious. We associate it more with Polonius than with Lear, a Lear who, as his head begins to clear, sees himself as “a very foolish fond old man, / Fourscore and upward, not an hour more or less” (IV, vii). The great writer, like Lear himself, is anything but a Victorian sage. The beset protagonist of tragedy lives out on the stage what literature is, its way of taking stock, of becoming aware.

Literature spurs such acts of recognition, but it can hardly be a source of timeless values. Like human nature, it changes from writer to writer, from one culture, one generation, one century to another. Literary works impart experiences, not doctrines. They are more likely to undermine certainties than to uphold them. Works like *King Lear* are rich with internal debate, spinning off contradictory ideas in situations fraught with feeling. The blind Gloucester, at his low ebb, concludes that “as flies to wanton boys are we to th’ Gods; / They kill us for their sport” (IV, i). But his abused son, Edgar, who has every reason to know this, will say just the opposite to his bastard brother, who viciously betrayed them: “The gods are just, and of our pleasant vices / Make instruments to plague us; / The dark and vicious place where thee he got / Cost him his eyes” (V, iii). The gentle and dignified Gloucester sounds like a Russian nihilist, the frantic Edgar like one of Job’s orthodox comforters. Shakespeare endorses neither view but allows us to entertain each in turn, not as abstractions but as something the characters — and, by extension, the audience — have proved on their pulses, to borrow Keats’s phrase. The wisdom of literature is therefore something special, not moral or metaphysical generalities, but piercing insight into relations between men and women, parents and children, figures of authority and their retainers, mortal beings and their universe. Though *Lear* may be one of the darkest plays ever written, it features characters of astonishing, almost irrational, fidelity — Edgar, Kent, Cordelia — who repay brutal rejection with unwavering loyalty.

My Shakespeare professor at Columbia, Andrew Chiappe ’33CC, made light of the Romantic idea that *King Lear* was too large for the stage; he insisted that it was

utterly theatrical. Yet the performance I saw in September 2007 was dramatic in a special way. It was played in two long acts, as if the first — made up of all the folly and betrayal that deprived Lear and Gloucester of their place, and drove them out onto the heath — were simply the ritualized premise of the action, while what followed, essentially Shakespeare's last two acts, was the horrific and overpowering consequence. The first half ended with something not in the play, the hanging of Lear's Fool, as prologue to the universe of death that envelops us in the finale. Shakespeare's genius was to take a domestic and dynastic quarrel, barely plausible, stripped of ordinary dramatic motivation, and transform it into a disruption of the whole moral order: the exigencies of nature, the betrayal of kinship, the confusions of old age, the inhuman cruelty, the ravages of vanity and sexual appetite, the caprice of the gods. This wide purview, affronting the ultimate, is what leads us to compare *Lear* to the book of Job and *The Divine Comedy* rather than to other Elizabethan or Jacobean plays. Yet it is only a more extreme example of what literature always does: to confer order and meaning on a chaos of memories, observations, and feelings, forcing us to "burn through" them, as Keats put it in his sonnet "On Sitting Down to Read King Lear Once Again," like an ordeal of fire.

We will never know what drew Shakespeare into this dark pit, nor do we need to know. It is enough to discover what he found there. The play itself proposes questions rather than answers:

LEAR: Is man no more than this? . . . a poor, bare, forked animal" (III, iv)

Or later:

LEAR: Is there any cause in nature that make these hard hearts? (III, vi)

And finally, when Lear enters with Cordelia "dead in his arms":

KENT: Is this the promis'd end? EDGAR: Or image of that horror? ALBANY: Fall and cease. (V, iii)

The play will answer none of these questions. But I was touched to the quick when Lear, whose madness witnessed not only his suffering but his want of self-knowledge, grows lucid:

I know thee well enough; thy name is Gloucester; Thou must be patient; we came crying hither: Thou know'st the first time that we smell the air, We wawl and cry.

And again:

When we are born, we cry that we are come To this great stage of fools. (IV, vi) Later this is picked up by Edgar in a different key: Men must endure Their going hence, even as their coming hither; Ripeness is all. (V, ii)

Taking this forward into our own century, how can we fail to hear the same note in the telescoping of birth and death in *Waiting for Godot*:

POZZO: They give birth astride a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more. VLADIMIR: Astride of a grave and a difficult birth. Down in the hole, lingeringly, the grave-digger puts on his forceps. We have time to grow old. The air is full of our cries. But habit is a great deadener.

Beckett has his own music, yet we hear reverberations of *Lear* in *Molloy, Krapp's Last Tape*, and especially in the comic repartee of *Endgame*, which echoes the strain of black humor in *King Lear*, as when the mad Lear meets the blind Gloucester on the heath, and asks, "Dost thou squiny at me?" Lear then goes on to pun on his sightless condition. In *Endgame* this terminal byplay on physical debility turns vaudevillian, at times even lyrical. Both works sound an apocalyptic note: The "promis'd end" of *Lear* becomes Beckett's more facetious "endgame" suspended between pathos and levity. Beckett seems to have learned from Shakespeare that the graver the vision, the more varied the ways of rendering it real. As Nell says, "Nothing is funnier than unhappiness."

In *King Lear* there is no stranger scene than the one in which Edgar, who is mock-mad, though he has reason to be mad, and mock-naked, as if parodying Lear's actual nakedness, leads his blind father, determined on suicide, to the edge of what he describes, in vivid detail, as a precipice overlooking Dover. By his own lights, he means to purge the old man's death wish — and perhaps his own unconscious need for revenge — in enabling him to act it out. "Hark, do you hear the sea?" he says, as he evokes the dizzying view from the heights of the cliff, all completely imagined. The passage haunted and inspired Keats; in a play so preoccupied with death, but also with blindness and misperception, especially between parents and children, it reflected Shakespeare's contrapuntal gift for echoing his own theme and rehearsing it in a minor key.

What does all this prove? Works that channel the vision of *King Lear*, including some poems of Wordsworth and Keats, plays of Beckett, even the late novels of Philip

Roth, especially *Sabbath's Theater*, confront our complacency with their dark knowledge. They express the blight or rage of the dying animal. They remind us that the journey toward self-understanding can be rough, that the world is a perpetual insult to our self-importance, that the examined life can only be lived under the sign of death. We cannot even know when we have hit bottom. As Edgar says, "The worst is not / So long as we can say 'This is the worst'" (IV, i). Less extreme works give us lesser helpings of the same chastening wisdom. We readers and critics do what we do because we love it, but also because it disquiets us, throws us off balance, unsettles our easy assumptions. No two readings of a genuinely significant book, no performances of a living play, are ever quite the same. When they work their spell, they enfold us in an action that is radically provisional, not easily paraphrased, open to interpretation — and therefore to the unexpected. Since literature resists closure, our work — which is not exactly work — remains open-ended, with no real endgame. Always provisional, never definitive, this wisdom is our special form of knowing.

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