POSTSCRIPT

THE TEMPEST

Almost all of the major subjects and themes that I have discussed in connection with earlier plays are brought together in *The Tempest*. This play encompasses the cycle of political rebellion and reconstruction, from the usurpation by Antonio of Prospero's office in Milan, to his proposal on the island that Sebastian similarly take violent means to supplant his brother, to Prospero's defense of the threatened Alonso, and finally to the drawing of a magic circle within which the traitors are forgiven, Prospero is restored to his dukedom, and the original order is re-established. In all this the play exhibits a benign providence, which originally brought Prospero and Miranda safely to the island, which now brings the others within reach of Prospero’s magic, and of which that magic itself is an instrument. Prospero's white magic is distinguished from the black magic of Sycorax by the ethical control with which Prospero wields its divine power; and this requires him at a crucial moment to renounce magic by renouncing revenge, forgiving his malefactors, and acquiescing in the impotence of divine magic to prevail against either the ignorance of his slave or the malice of his brother. Caliban and Antonio remain outside the final ring of reconciliation, reminding us that life will always breed outrageous fortune to be suffered, growing out of man's persisting sensuality and his all too corruptible reason. But Prospero's decision that "the rarer action is/ In virtue than in vengeance" reminds us too that it is possible to transform "Fortune" into "fortunes" through forgiveness, and, in the discharge of Ariel and the return to Milan, through a supreme magnanimity. The highest reach of Prospero's ethic is to give up his island Utopia and his God-spying magic and to submit
himself once more, in the perishable shape of his human frailty, to the uses of the world.

The play gives weight and momentum to this climactic action by its familiar series of parallelisms and antitheses all centered upon Caliban.¹ One incidental effect of these freshly conceived correspondences is to show the burgeoning multiplicity of human circumstance and the strong lines of difference among things ostensibly alike: Antonio’s civilized, and Caliban’s natural, treachery; Ferdinand’s high service and Caliban’s base servility. But their main function is to make Caliban the experimental measure of all values. Caliban is the “salvage and deformed slave” against whose darkness we may see better how the light of our civilized humanity shines out, especially in the love of Ferdinand and Miranda. But Shakespeare treats Caliban nevertheless with miraculous respect, and declines to make him the vehicle of any simple-minded antiprimitivism. For one thing, he has Prospero take upon himself the responsibility for Caliban: “this thing of darkness/ I acknowledge mine.” And in the same breath Prospero makes Alonso, King of Naples, responsible for Caliban’s civilized confederates in a conspiracy against order, justice, and truth: “Two of these fellows you/ Must know and own.” The drunkenness of Stephano and Trinculo is hardly preferable to the all but gracious deformity of Caliban; and neither is the malice of Antonio. Early in the play, when Prospero tells Miranda his history, he defies her to suppose that the treacherous Antonio might be his own brother. Miranda, who has never spent a day at court, replies:

I should sin
To think but nobly of my grandmother.
Good wombs have borne bad sons. (I.ii.118-20)

That knowledge which made Lear mad, Miranda possesses as a birthright; and she goes beyond Lear’s knowledge, to the discontinuity of Antony’s, by continuing to think nobly of her grandmother. Then at the end of the play, when Antonio stands mute and unrepentant, Caliban shows signs of amendment. He calls the Europeans “brave spirits indeed,” echoing Miranda’s

* 172 *
famous words; and of Prospero, against whom he has been consistently rebellious, he now says, "How fine my master is!" When Prospero admonishes him to look for pardon, Caliban replies, "I'll be wise hereafter,/ And seek for grace." I do not think we are meant to see a transformation in Caliban, but only the possibility that he may not remain always unregenerate. It is almost as if now that Prospero has abjured his divine magic, Caliban may be relieved of the effects of that dark power that has thus far determined his life in the world. Meanwhile, it is Antonio in his silence who remains unregenerate.

In Antonio a good womb has borne a bad son, and in Caliban Prospero must acknowledge the thing of darkness his. Miranda nevertheless thinks nobly of her grandmother, and Prospero renounces revenge and abjures his magic. The "nature-civilization" contrast centered upon Caliban finally shows no consistent difference between the two conditions; it shows all life to be of one piece, constantly subject to the several kinds of darkness within man, but also susceptible to light through a voluntary discontinuous maganimity. In Prospero, Shakespeare writes his most artfully elaborate variation on the answer to Hamlet's question about the character of human life; and in the process he concedes the necessary impermanence of political order. Horatio, who in suffering all suffered nothing, was nevertheless a peripheral character without leverage upon events. Cordelia's ability to outface fortune had a decisive influence upon events, but it required Cordelia to spend herself in a holding action that drew the sting from evil and thereby made possible a traditionally defined order. Antony's power to become his flaw and yet to earn his reputation had no required effect upon the structure of order; but by its voluntariness it made an increment of value in the world, a new virtue independent of the continuing system of order. Prospero's submission, in abjuring magic and returning to Milan, combines the powers of Cordelia and Antony. It re-establishes order in Milan, but not by drawing evil to its own destruction, in the manner of Cordelia. Rather, in Alonso and Sebastian it transforms evil into renewed good by forgiveness. This renewal is achieved in Antony's manner, not
by endurance, but by a voluntary surrender of utopia in exchange for the world. And it is a world still peopled by Caliban and Antonio, so that Prospero returned to Milan is a man who, having acknowledged the thing of darkness his, must still, like Antony, become his flaw. He must also submit himself anew to the endless possibility of disorder in the state.

Originally Prospero had neglected his public duty for his private pleasure. That, he told Miranda, made him vulnerable to the intrigues of Antonio, and eventually caused his exile from the kingdom. Then providence landed him safely on the island, leaving him free, unlike Antony, painlessly to choose the private life. But even without an equivalent of the opposed pressures of Octavius and Cleopatra to alert him to his need, Prospero voluntarily makes Antony's choice—despite the ever-threatened enmity of the world's Calibans and Antonios—of making his public and private interests conditional upon each other. That is of course the resolution appropriate to the genre of pastoral romance in which Shakespeare is working. But there is every reason to suppose that here as elsewhere Shakespeare employed his genre to suit his purpose. Prospero has enjoyed on his island all the security and comfort for which Lear yearned at the end. To exchange that now for the corrupt uses of the world, where, as Prospero says, "Every third thought shall be my grave," requires all the willingness to spend himself of which man is capable. But for Shakespeare at the end, nothing less will reconcile man to man and man to life. This magnanimity is the final step which transfigures man into the creator of his own brave world governed by its own benign providence.

The imagination of that world makes us capable of the amorality that I claimed at the beginning of this book is appropriate to Antony and Cleopatra—a vision in which friendship and enmity, like good and evil, are two sides of a coin, and therefore human brotherhood amidst human frailty is really possible. I think there is an episode in Antony and Cleopatra that goes far to capture the spirit of the play, when Dercetas brings the news of Antony's death to Caesar's camp:
Der. He is dead, Caesar,
Not by a public minister of justice
Nor by a hired knife; but that self hand
Which writ his honour in the acts it did
Hath, with the courage which the heart did lend it,
Splitted the heart. This is his sword.
I robb'd his wound of it. Behold it stain'd
With his most noble blood.

Caes. Look you sad, friends?
The gods rebuke me but it is tidings
To wash the eyes of kings!

Agr. And strange it is
That nature must compel us to lament
Our most persisted deeds.

Maec. His taints and honours
Wag'd equal with him.

Agr. A rarer spirit never
Did steer humanity; but you gods will give us
Some faults to make us men. Caesar is touch'd.

Maec. When such a spacious mirror's set before him,
He needs must see himself. (V.i.19-35)

Syntactically, rhythmically, and intellectually this is a single pas­
sage, as if written for the strings of a late Beethoven quartet. Dercetas begins by explaining how Antony’s suicide transcends
by its form of death Hamlet’s dichotomy between minister and
scourge, and, by implication, Hamlet’s corollary dichotomy
between to be and not to be: the stroke that split Antony’s heart
also repaid its invaluable loan of courage and thereby made
the heart whole again. And then these worldly Romans make
a series of variations in each of which opposites are contained
and reconciled, culminating in Caesar and Antony as two sides
of a mirror. Here finally Rome’s health is restored by the
magnanimity of Antony’s suicide, which cements Caesar to
him by showing Caesar an image of himself in its mixture of
taints and honors that makes us men. In that restoration nobody
is permitted the separate peace of a bird cage or a magic cell,
but neither must we wonder whether it is better not to be. The play reveals us to ourselves so implicated in each other, with all our taints and vices, that our deepest identity and our greatest hope can only lie in the power of magnanimity, whether in the dare to single combat or in the gift of suicide. All we can do, the play tells us, is to spend ourselves freely toward each other; so doing, Antony and Cleopatra create those rare and perfect circumstances when suicide can make a man immortal.