

I would like to hazard a guess that many people have, at one time or another, been labelled “weird”. It is supposed to be derogatory, I think (no matter how our parents might assure us) and a synonym for ‘strange’. I, for one, have been called it on a couple of occasions – most memorably by our very own chaplain exactly this time last week. (Incidentally, I hope that the nickname ‘Weird Max’ doesn’t stick). I’d like to think about what we mean when we talk about weirdness, and what books can do to illuminate the matter.

As if only to endorse my weird status, I gave a cursory glance at the Oxford English Dictionary in preparation for my sermon, and it clarified something I felt like I already knew: that the word ‘weird’ to mean ‘strange’ is a very modern phenomena. ‘Weirdness’ is a part of modern life, because evidently we hear it more than we ever have. I turn reassuringly to Terry Eagleton, who furthers the link between modern life and weird-speak: ‘The speech of American youth’, he says in his *Figures of Dissent*, ‘is gross, bizarre, wicked, scary, and *weird*’. One is reminded of the chillingly absurd teenager-chatter of Anthony Burgess’s *A Clockwork Orange*. The destructive teenagers he writes about have a speech so alien, so obscure, and yes, so *weird*, the most recent edition includes its own dictionary of the weird terms that Alex – Burgess’s protagonist – and his friends use. *Chelloveck*, gentleman. *Govoreet*, to speak. *Bezoomny*, crazy. It is indeed weird speech, so weird that Burgess’s invented language had to decisively shrink when Kubrick adapted *A Clockwork Orange* for the screen.

This is exactly what Eagleton describes as the ‘weird’ language of the modern American youth. Yet his further description surprises: the very weirdness of adolescent modernity – and how it speaks to itself – is, to Eagleton, ‘certainly the discourse of Gothic’. Interesting: ‘the discourse of Gothic’. By *Gothic* he invokes the world of castles, chimaeras, vampires and brooding looks of an earlier century: the nineteenth-century fiction that involves an older, decaying vision of colonial power and aristocracy. Interesting, that weirdness feels to Eagleton (and perhaps to us) like a

decaying building, a remnant of a lost civilization, an unintelligible form of a *passé* world. This is the weirdness we experience when squinting at obscure graffiti on a street corner or in a train tunnel: weirdness is our confused response to an alien world.

Let us wheel back our focus, then, from the weirdness of graffiti, to earlier, pre-modern forms of 'weirdness'. Even whilst the word 'weird' is being used in conversation more than ever, the word hasn't always had its modern meaning, and a glance at its etymology will afford us much insight. To the Anglo-Saxons, a *weird* (in the form of a noun) meant a prophet or a representation of Fate: someone who, like the witches in *Macbeth*, can 'look into the seeds of time / And say which grain will grow and which will not'. The Weirds disrupt the human world, the future-telling puppet-masters of earthly destruction that they wreak indiscriminately. The Anglo-Saxon poem *The Ruin* – an elegy which bemoans the destruction of an unnamed ancient city – begins with naming the culprit of the destruction: it the Weirds (in other words, *fate*) which has led to the ruin. Yusef Komunyakaa's translation of the Anglo-Saxon poem emphasises this sense of desolation left in the wake of Fate: 'Look at the elaborate crests chiselled into this stone wall / shattered by fate, the crumbled city squares, / and the hue and cry of giants rotted away'. Here is the same Weirdness of Terry Eagleton's description of the gothic – a strange world of things now passed. Modern translations, like Komunyakaa's, tend to replace the word 'weird' in Anglo-Saxon for a newer word like Fate, but some relish in the chance of keeping the Anglo-Saxon in its place, retaining the word 'weird' instead of finding some modern English alternative. For this reason, I enjoy Michael Alexander's translation of *The Ruin* because it refuses to obscure the original Anglo-Saxon. 'Well-wrought this wall: Wierds broke it. The stronghold burst ... Snapped rooftrees, towers fallen'. He keeps the word 'weirds' here – rather than referring to "the Fates" – as if to keep the weirdness of the word alive. Using 'weird' as a noun sounds strange and alien to us, a clever way of communicating their strangeness and alienness for a modern listener.

We have now established what weirdness meant in its Anglo-Saxon origin ('fate' or 'destiny'), and we began with what it means in contemporary life – strange. Let us try now to bridge these two senses, and turn to Shakespeare. I'm aware that already by using that surname I can see minds closing off, and I'm sorry to drag you back to the associations of drab GCSE English classes. But what is interesting about Shakespeare – and what is rarely mentioned in school – is how the historical moment he occupied was balanced carefully between the mediaeval and modern. This is useful for our purposes when thinking about 'weirdness': because the word carried both its Anglo-Saxon sense (as in fate) and also began to acquire its modern meaning (as in strange).

*Enter three witches.* This is the opening stage direction of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, a play preoccupied with ideas of fate and future-telling. It is also a very strange play. It begins with the entrance of three women, who look distinctly like no-one else in *Macbeth*, and perhaps like no-one else in Shakespeare. These witches are the anathema to the hierarchical social order of the Scotland Macbeth lives in, and they wreak havoc within it. Whereas the leading male characters of the drama are intent on jostling for promotion and securing their status, the witches represent a kind of fluidity (they vanish and rematerialise) that undermines the secure, masculine ideas of identity. To Macbeth and Banquo – and indeed to all those bent on hierarchical ascendance through the Scottish elite – these women are strange. They choose to opt-out of the establishment machine that produces murderous provocateurs like Macbeth.

Yes, they are strange. They are weird – in our modern sense. They refuse the normal. And yet, their positions as outsiders allow them to see through the warring power structures of the play. Because they are so distant from the action, the destructive conflicts of the play appear to them like a grain in an hourglass. And so – precisely because they can see this all, the brutality, the attrition, the 'sound and fury' – they spot the patterns. And here they gain the meaning of the Anglo-Saxon *weird*: they are the fate-tellers, the prophets, the seers. Strangeness is, for the

Witches, their source of prophetic power. Being on the margins allows them to see the full picture, the past, present and 'future / In the instant' – and this picture is bleak and brutal.

We are living through a series of crises that pose existential threats to the future of humanity. Like what is imagined in poetry of the Anglo-Saxons, our society is falling apart: our healthcare infrastructure gutted out for private enterprise, our schools crumbling over children's heads. We cling on to, as they did, a vision of past glories which we no longer recognise. And many of us feel powerless as a result. Like the world of Macbeth, there are only a few main characters in this game, the people who get to 'strut and fret their hour upon the stage'. They occupy a tiny minority who own most of the world's oil, water, land, politics, media and hard power. A new, technofeudal corporate class is thoroughly on the ascendance, and they are destroying us (and the planet) in a way that the Macbeths could only dream of. All in the heartless pursuit of power.

It's honestly hard to draw some consolation. But, at least for me, the radical capacity for weirdness is one small answer. If we embrace the 'Weird', the stranger, the alien – whose voices are obscured by institutional statistics or reductive media narratives – we can be afforded something close to a new way of seeing. Because the 'Weird' can see what no-one else can. We heard from Paul's letter to the Phillipians moments ago, where he speaks of Christ 'making himself nothing'. This is a very polite translation of the Hebrew *anawim*, which itself means 'the *scum* of the earth'. Christ's exhortation is, then, to embrace the strangeness of human community, to situate yourself on the outside, to look in on the friction and disarray as those most oppressed do. To be weird is not simply to be strange, different, alien – but to see the world through a new, dynamic, powerful, and yes, radically *other* way of seeing.